

Never underestimate your opponent!

Burning pain stabbed through his left thigh before he realized, in complete amazement, that she had actually sliced him. He stared at her as she assumed the most correct position of defense he had ever seen.

“Lesson number one,” she said, behind a triumphant grin. “Never underestimate your opponent. Especially me.”

L’Garn gripped the hilt of his sword more securely and acknowledged her hit with a slight tilt of his head. “Well done. Now let us see if it was luck or skill, shall we, Teela?” He lunged and attacked with the full intent to disarm her and get this farce over with in a hurry. Instead, he met a wall of steel defense backed up with a blur of offensive thrusts and parries that sent a shock of awareness racing through his body. He might actually lose this wager!

She advanced on him, and backed him toward the door and entry way. As he parried her attack, a part of him watched her skill with amazement. She did know how to use a sword. By the Jewels, she was magnificent! Her skin glowed and her eyes sparkled. Her teeth flashed white in a huge grin as she danced and parried, thrust and whirled as if she had done this deadly dance thousands of times before. She had grasped the skirt of her gown in her left hand, pulling it tight across her body to allow free movement with her sword arm. The material clung to her thighs and breasts in a way that was magical.

Before he could regain his wandering attention, Teela had sliced open the sleeve of his tunic, and cut a surface wound in his biceps.

“Lesson number two,” she laughed, dancing back to watch him. “Pay attention at all times!”

By the Jewels! She was enjoying this more than was seemly for a slave. “You are sorely in need of a lesson in manners, Teela.”

“Are you planning on teaching me, then?” She dropped her skirt and made a beckoning motion with her fingers. Teela flashed him a charming grin. “Bring it on, scum!”

What reviewers are saying about THE CHOOSING:

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~~ Marsha Briscoe, Former College English Instructor
at the University of Missouri and Eastern Kentucky University,
author of *A Still Point in Time*

THE CHOOSING

by

PhyllisAnn Welsh

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NovelBooks, Inc.
Douglas, Massachusetts

This is a work of fiction. While reference may be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the characters, incidents, and dialogs are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO:

The Best Children in the World—Mine!

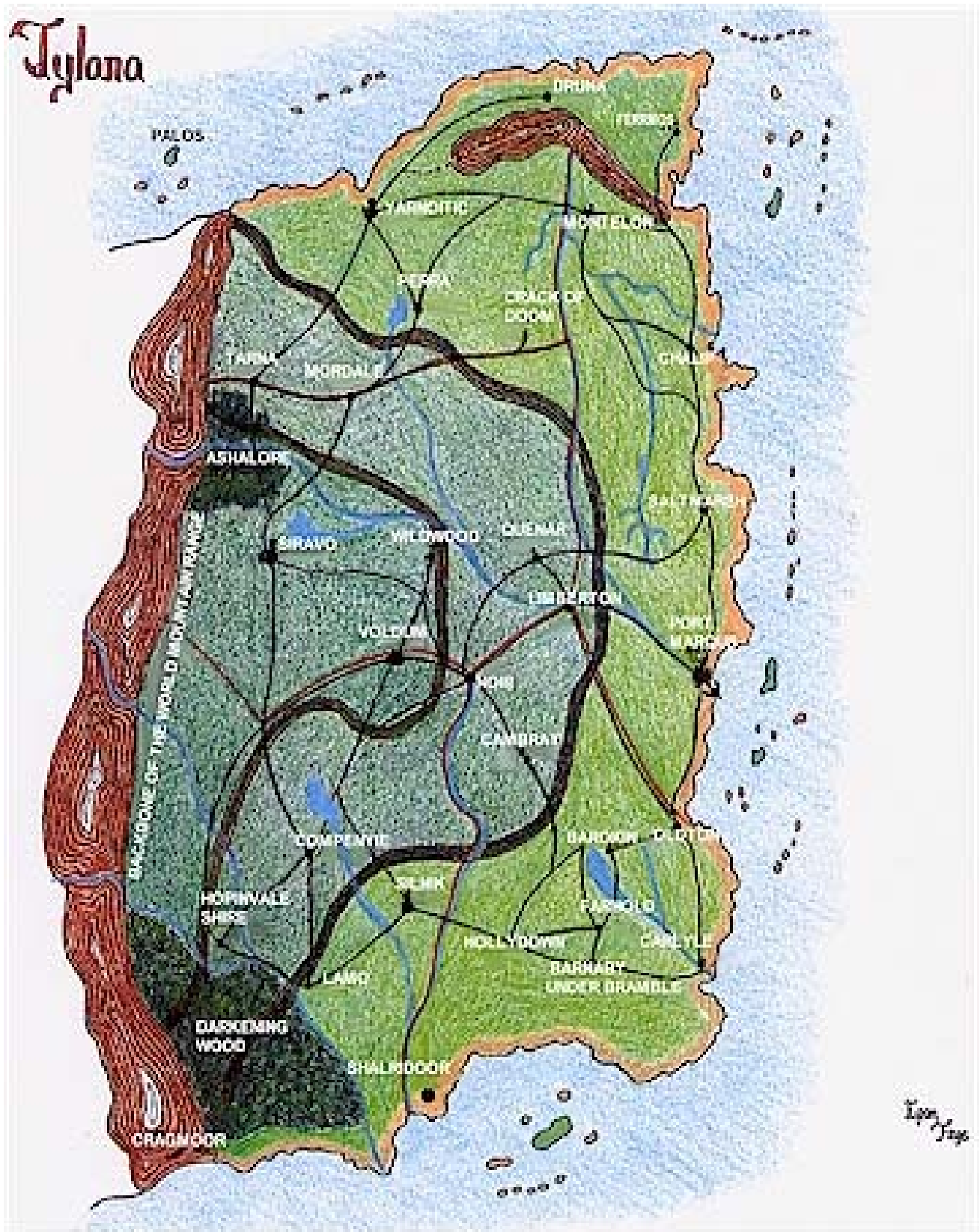
My Forever Friend & Lover, Georgie

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

All My Cyber Friends, My Supporters in the Town of Douglas
(You know who you are!)

Scott Cohen—Huff Puff! Thanks for the Inspiration!

Tylana



PROLOGUE

The sea god, Mac Lir, looked upon the lovers and was pleased. The Binding of these two races had been successful. His High Priest had found his soul mate, Korrene finally knew the truth of her heritage, and the Sea Elves had a new infusion of strong blood.

Thanks to his timely intervention—some would call it meddling—his children, the Sea Elves, had a good chance of survival. He smiled indulgently as he thought about how smoothly his arrangements had proceeded. Things were touch and go for a bit, but Mac Lir's will had triumphed.

However, his work was far from complete. His eternal enemy, Tuawtha, had sworn to eradicate all of Mac Lir's children from the Seven Cella Worlds. Already one world, Earth, was devoid of pure silvan kind and their magical kin: fairies, sprites, nymphs and more. Only rumors and legends—a few mostly forgotten songs and stories—remained of the elfin population that once flourished there.

The demon god had recently turned his malice to the silvan children of Tylana, and Mac Lir was determined his enemy would not succeed.

Mac Lir had successfully bound together his most powerful high priest with the sole part-silvan survivor of his children from Earth. Together, they would raise a race of beings more able to face the changes and deceit launched at them from Tuawtha.

His children of the sea now stood a good chance of survival. Mac Lir was ready to begin the next phase of his plan.

He cast his eyes to the north and west. The Wood Elves had been fighting their own battle for survival. They also must be brought to safe harbor before the demon god could be defeated. It would require cunning and skill. And an unlikely catalyst. However, the time was not quite ripe for the god's plans in that area. His children of the trees would have to hold on a bit longer while the tool of their salvation was readied.

Mac Lir again looked to the island of Sasheena and smiled. All was proceeding as planned, but there was a chance everything could still be lost. He had an unwilling servant in the human warrior woman, and she could be so contrary if she thought she was being controlled. But eventually she would do his work. Of that he had no doubt.

For a god's heartbeat, Mac Lir frowned and the clouds darkened. If this part of the plan did not go as envisioned, another Cella World would fall to Tuawtha's evil hold. Not merely the elves of the woodlands and the sea would die, but all magical kind—including selkies, unicorns and the like—on the world of Tylana would go the way of their brethren on Earth. The danger was great.

A twinkle returned to the kind god's eyes, and the sun broke through the clouds once again. He never left anything to chance...or the whim of a human. Even one as beloved by him as the warrior woman.

His keen eyes pierced many layers of rocks and minerals, crystals and ore. Despite the danger and the chance that his influence on this world could be as fleeting as a sunrise, Mac Lir shifted into a more comfortable position of observance. Anticipation broadened his smile.

He was going to enjoy the taming of Feenix of Port Marcus.

CHAPTER ONE

*Deep are the caverns of Cragimore
Dark are the souls found there
Lost is the hope of Shalridoor
Forever gone to Meedrion's lair.*

*The Helm of Souls upon his head
The Sword of Truth beside him
The light of dawn forever dead
All dark, all death betide them.*

*Deep are the caverns of Cragimore
Dark are the souls found there
Lost is the hope of Shalridoor
Once descended to Meedrion's lair.*

—Ancient song sung by Tylana children; origin unknown.

Feenix's head rose above the churning waves. She spat out a mouthful of salty water, struggled awkwardly to her feet and waded ashore. The water-worn rocks bit her bare feet and provided no purchase for her unsteady gait.

Dawn washed the coast in golden-red hues as it broke over the towering cliffs. The world was on fire with the sun's glory. Gulls wheeled overhead, screaming their hunger for the new day.

Feenix's belly rumbled in agreement.

Brushing the dripping hair from her eyes, she scanned the boulder-strewn beach anxiously. Time was of the essence, and she had none to waste. Many lives depended on her returning to Shalridoor before the noon meal.

"Where did that elf put my clothes?"

The sun's rays promised to blister her tender flesh if she didn't cover her exposed skin soon. The sea breeze was chilly, but it was no match for the power of the Tylana sun.

Searching the shoreline for a flutter of material, she couldn't find her belongings. She looked west and then east, noting the position of the sun and the cliffs. Rarely was her sense of direction wrong. Her irritation increased as she realized she was wasting valuable time.

"By the god's right toe, I'll fillet that priest and his brother as soon as I find my clothes, if I have to hunt them down forever!" She threw a fist-sized rock and it exploded against a boulder. "I have a war to lead, and I can't do it without my gear!"

The ocean breeze dried the sea from her naked body, setting goose bumps to chasing each other as she scanned the shadows. Her teeth chattered a counterpoint to the wash of the waves against the rocks.

The feeling of being totally vulnerable and assailable should an enemy happen along made Feenix jittery. Not that she couldn't protect herself, even in her state of undress. She was Feenix of Port Marcus, Captain of the High Priest's Guard of Sasheena, after all.

But by the god's left eye, she hated feeling so exposed.

She lifted her eyes to the cliffs then scanned the shoreline beneath, and could see nothing more dangerous than two gulls fighting over a bit of fish. Again her stomach rumbled.

“Why didn’t I eat that ocean carp when I had the chance?”

It was going to be a glorious day, but the sun hadn’t yet touched the boulders tossed across the beach. As she searched amongst the rocks for her missing gear, the shadows thrown by the cliffs made the area seem like twilight rather than day. She didn’t know which was worse, the chill of the shadows or the expected heat of the sun. Either way, she would combat the elements better if she had her blasted clothes on.

“Mac Lir, you son of a sea whore,” she screamed at the sea. “The very least you can do, since I had no choice in your cursed *Change*, is show me where those damned elves left my clothes!”

She thought she heard the god laugh at her, but it was merely the distant cry of the gulls. She picked up another rock and threw it at one of the birds dancing in the waves. The gull easily avoided the missile and flew away, screaming a protest.

Feenix hated every aspect of the *Change*, but especially this part when she was naked and exposed to the world while she hunted for clothing and weapons. The feeling of being out of control was intolerable. The fact that Mac Lir’s high priest, Rendolin, knew about the *Change* was almost more than she could endure. It seemed as if Mac Lir couldn’t wait to pass this little tidbit of Feenix’s weakness on to the elf.

Rendolin’s brother, Thelorin, also needed to know about her disability because he was the leader of the Sea Elves. But if they ever told another living soul, Feenix swore she’d have their livers for dinner.

She had no control over the *Change*. Once a month, during a waning crescent moon, the warrior woman would magically transform into the graceful shape of a dolphin. It happened regardless of where she was at the time, and that could be dangerous. And terrifying.

Some years back, when she had first been afflicted with the god’s curse, she’d been stationed in the middle of a desert training raw recruits when the warnings of the *Change* made themselves known to her. If she hadn’t stolen a teleportation medallion from the barracks’ priest, she’d be bleached bones right now. No one would have been able to explain a dead dolphin in the middle of a desert, or where the drill commander had gotten to.

“Blasted god,” she swore as she continued to search the crevices and rocks for her missing outfit. She turned and glared out to the sea and the wind whipped her long black hair around her like a legendary medusa come to life.

“You think you’re so damned smart, don’t you, Mac Lir? Just because I refused to bow down and worship you, you had to go and curse me with this *Change*. Well, it won’t work, you sorry excuse for a god!”

She shook her fist at the crashing waves, and it seemed as though the gulls mocked her with their cries.

“As soon as this blasted war with the Night Elves is over, I’m going to take my share of the bounty and find a magic user of great power to remove this curse!”

She turned her back to the sea and stepped heavily around the rocks tumbled in her path.

“Feenix of Port Marcus worships who and what she wants, and nobody—least of all YOU—is going to tell me differently!”

She tripped over a loose rock, but caught herself before pitching face first into the sand.

“To hell with you, Mac Lir! And to hell with your cause! If I ever get myself some clothes again, you and your precious silvan children have seen the last of Captain Feenix.”

Expecting no reply, she continued on with her task of locating her things. At least the effort of

the search warmed her muscles and kept the early morning chill at bay.

“Damned elves were supposed to leave my clothing and weapons in the crack of the largest boulder. They promised they would not fail me.” She shook her head in disgust. “That priest, Rendolin is probably still abed with his new bonded mate, Kory. If *she* has anything to say about the matter, I’ll be hiking home in nothing more than blistered skin.”

Panting a bit from her angry search, Feenix climbed up on a smooth boulder, hoping to spot something from the higher perspective. She gathered her long hair in her hands and tried to run her fingers through the wet tresses, but the sea water was sticky and the strands clung together in tangled black ropes. Twisting the strands, she wrung as much salty water as she could from the thick mass.

“Don’t even have a blasted pin to put up my hair. I must look like a damned Port Marcus whore.” Lifting her head, she again yelled to the silent sea, “And it’s all your fault, you miserable god!”

Feenix would rather face ten goblins with battle axes and pikes than admit to herself that she was on the brink of tears. That’s what the *Change* did to her. Reduced her to a blithering female idiot concerned about how she looked and who was going to see her. If she didn’t get a grip on herself, she’d start hoping for someone to come along and rescue her.

“Ha! That has about as much chance of happening as a Night Elf has of loving his mother.”

She shook out the long tresses and draped them over her back and shoulders. They made a sort of curtain that would conceal most of her body from the rising sun and any prying eyes. Not that there was anyone around to see, of course, she fumed. But the wet strands gave her a false sense of protection which was somewhat comforting.

She scanned the beach from her perch, hoping she had missed something. Not a flutter of cloth, nor a glint of steel met her gaze. Did she have the wrong cove?

“My sense of direction’s never failed me. Those elves are probably lost!”

By the position of the sun, morning was coming on fast, and she had to get back to the ruins of Shalridoor soon. It was dangerous to be out without her weapons, although the danger from the Night Elves was slim to none. They could not stand the light of the sun and only raided during the night.

For the past two weeks, Feenix and the band of Sea Elves from the magical island of Sasheena had been reclaiming the ancient, ruined city of Shalridoor from the wilderness and the encroaching sea, while simultaneously planning a war against the hated Night Elves. Preparations for the attack were almost complete, and she needed to be there to lead the offensive.

“By Mac Lir’s beard,” she swore. “I suppose I’d better get moving or my skin will burn to a crisp just sitting here waiting for those elves to show up with my gear.” She dusted a layer of fine sand from her hands. “Although I have half a mind to walk away and leave those high and mighty elves to their own incompetence.”

As she rose, she heard a soft whirling sound to her right. Her war-honed senses screaming a warning, Feenix crouched and reached for a sword that was no longer strapped to her side. She had time to see the face of her attacker before a rank fishing net dropped over her head.

Branded in her mind were ice-blue eyes glaring with an inner fire, a strong nose above firm lips pulled back in a sneer, and cropped black hair exposing ears tipped as only a silvan’s could be. But it was the lean, pale face that held her in shock. This elf wore a trim, dark beard along a jutting jaw line. No elf she had ever seen could grow a beard.

She raised her arms and ducked to ward off the entrapping mesh, but was caught fast in the

net.

“Oh, damn!”

~*~

L’Garn ordered his men back to Cragimore. The sun was due to come up shortly and they would be no use to him then. Night Elves could not survive long in the sun. He, on the other hand, was an outbreed, one who had human blood running through his veins, polluting his silvan heritage. While he did not like the sun, he could tolerate it for short periods.

His men obeyed without the usual resistance and slightly veiled disrespect that always accompanied an order from him. L’Garn knew their compliance had nothing to do with his authority. He was sure they wanted to be caught in the deadly rays of the sun even less than *he* did.

The only reason his men followed his orders at all, L’Garn knew, was because he was the royal prince. His grandfather would have them staked in the sun and whipped if their insolence ever came to his ancient, royal ears. L’Garn himself would rather be staked on his back, naked in the sun with his eyelids removed, than tell King Zimpher that his grandson could not control the few men in his command. No, L’Garn would continue to ignore his men’s defiance as long as they eventually obeyed him and did their jobs.

The dawn was just breaking, but the cove would be in partial shadow for another hour or so. As long as the rays of the sun did not touch him directly, he could survive the daylight without much inconvenience. He had plenty of time to do some reconnoitering before going home. He was in no hurry.

It was not often he was able to get away from the crowded conditions of Cragimore. Rarer still was the opportunity to be alone for any length of time. His duties as a royal prince prohibited the luxury of solitude. His allegiance to the throne was an effective chain, keeping him from leaving to satisfy his curiosity about his tainted blood. His human heritage.

He forced his mind away from such forbidden thoughts, and found a comfortable spot below the rim of the cliff, where he could watch the beach and ocean without being observed. While L’Garn did not expect to see anyone, it was always wise to prepare for the worst.

One of the scouting parties had returned yester eve to report that a band of Sea Elves were living in the ruins of Shalridoor, which lay east of Cragimore on the coast. Zimpher was almost insane with rage at the news, since he’d been sure that the sea scum had been eradicated all those years ago.

Many fine Night Elves had lost their lives during that time, including their great king, Meedrion. But L’Garn’s people had been victorious in the end, enslaving many of their enemies, and killing the rest. They had not had to deal with that menace for a long time. Not since before L’Garn’s own birth, in fact.

If the scouts’ reports were correct, it looked like another war was in the making. Perhaps he would be able to prove to his grandfather, and the rest of the people of Cragimore, that his tainted blood did not mean he was worthless and beneath contempt. After all, the blood of his royal mother Sembali flowed through his veins just as much as the hated human blood. That had to count for something.

His wandering thoughts were abruptly interrupted as a woman stood in the waves and scrambled out of the surf. Where had she come from? He had not noticed anyone swimming in the swelling waves.

The woman's long black hair picked up the rays of the morning sun and glistened like wet obsidian. The black tresses reached past her knees, completely blanketing her body from his gaze, but as she moved, attractive glimpses of smooth skin captivated him. Enticing mounds of creamy flesh, tipped with dusky nipples, peeked from behind the dark curtain of hair, and his loins suddenly responded.

All thoughts of war and Sea Elves left his head as he pondered this unusual sight.

At first glimpse, he thought perhaps she was a mermaid stranded on the shore. But as she made her awkward way out of the water, he could see that she had a pair of long and lovely legs, well muscled and strong.

Not a mermaid then. Perhaps a selkie? But there was no evidence of seals around the cove.

"By the Jewels! Could it be a damned Sea Elf, delivered into my hands by some fickle god?" He heard her shout and watched her throw a rock against a large boulder. The smaller rock crashed against the larger, exploding into tiny pieces and dust.

She certainly did not *sound* like a magical being. Or very silvan-like. She turned and scanned the feet of the cliff where he lay hidden, looking for the gods only knew what. It was the first clear glimpse of her L'Garn had. With his keen elfin sight, he could see that her eyes were a startling blue. Not the pale ice of his own, nor the deep, jewel tones of a fine sapphire gem. Rather, their color was something in between.

Her full lips had a petulant set to them, but he had no doubt they would be soft and sweet if he were to taste them. And he suddenly had a need to lick the salt of the sea from them.

The woman's square chin and full features disproved his Sea Elf theory. Even without seeing her ears, he knew this fire brand was a human. There could be no other explanation.

At the thought of the word *human*, L'Garn's heart lurched, and a deep ache he'd never felt before spread through his chest. He almost doubled over with its intensity.

What would it be like to talk to a human? To be able to observe one in close quarters? The need to know was almost as painful as the ache in his chest.

L'Garn watched her duck behind a boulder, then emerge on the other side, swearing and yelling at no one. She raised her fist and shook it towards the sea. His lips twitched. It was obvious she had been abandoned by her people, probably as some punishment for a crime. Her fit of temper showed she had no self control.

Perhaps she was an unfaithful mate and her male had dumped her here at the mercy of the sea and the elements. L'Garn had heard stories about humans and their strange customs of fidelity and morality, although it was obvious their loyalty did not include elves. His mother was proof of that. Yes, that had to be it. Abandoned and left to die. Why else would someone dump such a lovely female without a stitch of clothing?

He shook his head as if to clear it from so many unanswered questions. It did not matter why she was there alone on the beach. It did not matter whether she was a human or a Sea Elf. The only thing that mattered was that she could have valuable information which he, L'Garn, would use. His grandfather would be grateful.

L'Garn would enjoy interrogating her, even if she proved to be resistant to his questions. There were always ways of learning what one wanted to know. After he had picked her brain clean of any useful bit of information, perhaps he could find another use for her. Sembali would celebrate her birth night soon. A new slave would be a welcome addition to her household. His mother's household was conveniently close to his own chambers.

L'Garn licked his dry lips and began a silent descent from his hiding place to the beach below.

~*~

“Get this damned thing off me!”

Using her most intimidating tone, Feenix ordered the man as if he were one of her recruits. Trouble was, he didn’t respond like one.

Instead, her captor ignored her as he drew a thin cord from one of the many pouches around his waist.

“Did you hear me? I said release me, immediately!”

He shook out the cord and, using a thin dagger from his boot, cut off a length about as long as his arm.

Through the net’s mesh, Feenix couldn’t help but notice that the arm he used to measure the rope with was firm and very muscular. It looked like the arm of a warrior.

She watched as he tucked the unused portion of the cord back into his pouch, then calmly coiled the smaller length into a palm-sized circle. He looked up towards the cliffs and seemed to be measuring, or considering, some great problem. Still without a glance her way, he hunkered down, balancing on his toes. He reached down and began to draw circles in the soft sand.

“Hey! Are you deaf? What are you going to do with me?” she demanded, trying again to push the netting over her head. The more she moved, the more tangled she became in the cording. Bits of long-dead fish flaked from the net and fell on her shoulders and feet.

She jumped to the side to try to dislodge a crusty fin from her foot, fell and landed on her bottom. A rock protruding from the sand jarred her tail bone, causing agonizing pain to her lower back.

She screamed in frustration, anger and pain, and still the elf-man drew circles with his long fingers.

She managed to roll to her hands and knees, but the net was wrapped even more firmly around her, pulling her hair and rubbing against her unprotected skin.

“Are you just going to sit there all day, or do you have something in mind for me?” She saw that his finger never stopped its methodic circles. “Come over here so I can look at you before I kill you!”

He reached into his pouch for something blue and glowing, sprinkled it over the pattern he was making.

“If you were half a man, you’d release me and let me go!”

His pale blue eyes never left the sand in front of him.

“I’m no threat to you. What, by Mac Lir’s ears, do you want with me?”

“Much.” His voice seemed rusty and unused, as if he rarely spoke.

As he continued drawing in the sand, Feenix felt her anger reach a new high. “What the hell are you doing in the sand? Are you an idiot that you play like a child at the beach? Release me right now so I can knock some brains into your head!”

“Be still,” he ordered. “I must concentrate.”

“Don’t give me orders, fool,” she yelled, barely able to keep from toppling over again as she moved towards him. “Do you know who you are speaking to? Obviously not,” she answered her own question. “If you did, you’d understand the world of trouble you’re going to be in as soon as I get out of this damned net!”

“You speak too much. It is obvious that your mate abandoned you to the sea because he was tired of your grating voice.”

“By the god’s brass bells,” she sputtered. “Nobody talks to me like that. Give me a dagger. Your death will be swift and very painful.”

He finally looked up from the sand and gazed calmly into her stormy eyes. “Now who is the fool?”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Feenix couldn’t believe it. How could she have dropped her defenses long enough to have this...this male sneak up on her and capture her with a stinking net?

She took a faltering step towards him, trying to get out of the sun that was steadily taking over the entire cove. The only place of refuge from the burning rays was the shadows where her captor drew in the sand.

“Where did you come from and why do you have ears like a stinking elf and a beard like a real man?”

A change came over his face, etching more lines into his already stern and marble-like expression. He narrowed his icy eyes and a hood seemed to drop over them, as if he were trying to hide from her gaze. But she was rocked to her soul at the pain and misery she thought she saw there, a second before his expression went blank as a stone wall.

She lost her balance and landed with a plop in the soft, hot sand.

She tried to stand again, but the net wouldn’t let her, so she decided to try to get comfortable. Besides, she needed a moment or two to erase from her mind the tortured expression she was almost sure she saw in his face.

Fine. She would bide her time and when he came to release her from the net, she’d use some of the skills she’d learned over the years. Given half the chance, Feenix was capable of killing a man with her bare hands.

She flexed her fingers in anticipation of putting them around his throat. She looked to where he hunkered in the sand, and wondered if he was ever going to come close enough for her to get her hands on him.

She thought she detected a faint scent of pine as he returned to his scribbling in the sand. Her mind must be playing tricks on her. The only smell she was fully conscious of was the sun-dried fish from her corded prison.

Patience, girl, she cautioned herself. He’s giving you an opportunity to study your enemy. Wait. Watch. Learn where his weakness is. Then when the opportunity comes, kill him.

Forcing herself into the familiar battle-ready exercises, she slowed her breathing and watched, making mental notes of his slightest movement.

She had to look past the interesting face, past the wide shoulders and muscular chest, bare except for a leather vest, open to the ocean breeze and her gaze. She must ignore the trim waist and firm thighs where his arms rested easily, as if he were playing a childhood game and had all the time in the world. Ignore the fact that the thought of those ice-blue eyes looking at her again caused her pulse to race and her mouth to go dry. It was merely the bloodlust in her, preparing for battle.

She forced her brain to concentrate. Look. Learn.

The first thing she noticed was that while he gave the impression of ignoring her, he was in actuality acutely aware of her struggles and movements. The involuntary clenching of his jaw, the minuscule quirk of an eyebrow, even the slight flare of his nostrils when she moved, all told the story. He was watching her very closely.

What did he want? Was he waiting for her to tire herself out before lifting the net? Well, he could wait until Mac Lir stopped in for a bite to eat! Feenix knew how to conserve her strength.

She knew how to watch and wait. She had the patience of a great cat stalking its prey. The strength of ten fighting men and the stamina of a rock troll. She would just make herself comfortable here in the sand, with the sun's rays beating down on her, and she would show him just how strong and patient Captain Feenix of Port Marcus could be.

It didn't matter that the sand and pebbles were beginning to bite into her exposed flesh. She was a warrior and could put such annoyances far from her mind. Had she not trained for hours in the searing heat of the Great Tylana Desert, until her arms ached and quivered with the pain of wielding fifty pounds of iron, thrusting to the quintain over and over again? Had she not survived the attack of thirty hobgoblins in the marshes of Siravo, taking seven arrows and never once even murmuring at the pain?

He blinked once.

The smell of dead fish in the hot sun was stomach-turning. She forced her churning belly to obey her command and subside. Had she not headed up a burial detail to dispose of the bloated remains of a trader caravan in that same desert, and never once flinched at the flies and maggots, the smell of blood and exploded entrails?

Her elbow discovered a shell. A moving shell. A hermit crab crawled across her forearm, like a reddish-brown spotted spider.

"By the god's holy beard!" she screamed and doubled her efforts to stand. "If you don't release me at once, I will kill you where you stand!"

This time her struggles were rewarded. Pulling herself up beside the boulder, Feenix was able to gain her feet, although the net kept her from stretching to her full height.

The man took a great breath of air and released it in a long, steady sigh. He continued to mark the sand. Again the brief scent of pine wafted to her.

"Aaiiee!" she yelled. "You must be deaf, although with those ears I don't know how you could be!"

A soft sound came from between the man's lips, slow and melodic. The circles in the sand continued to multiply.

"Who are you?"

The sound from his throat grew a notch. The scent of pine intensified.

"*What* are you?"

The man's finger stopped. His body became still as a stone. As she held her breath, he raised his head and those ice blue eyes pierced her with a glare that brought to mind lightning.

Then she knew.

"By the god's left ear lobe," she mocked. The wind carried her words around the cove and to the cliffs. "You *are* half a man!" Her laughter made her stomach clench for some strange reason. "You're a damned half-elf!"

She watched his eyes flicker, and a deep pink flush rose from his neck to fill his face with color. She wasn't sure if it was from anger or shame. Slowly he stood, his left hand clenched.

"That tongue of yours will be the first thing to go, once you are inside Cragimore."

The timber of his voice touched a chord deep inside her, but she ignored the sensation, thinking it was a finger of dread racing down her soul.

"If I go into the stronghold of those filthy Night Elves, it won't be a social call, elf-man!"

He raised his arm. "You have no choice. You are now my slave." He tossed the sand in her direction and uttered a strange word.

"You bastard," she yelled, as the scent of pine reached her on the breeze. "Magic!"

Feenix of Port Marcus slipped to the ground in a lifeless heap.

L’Garn walked to the boulder and, with a quick flick of his hand and a Word of Power, easily released the woman from the net. Upon closer inspection he could see she was indeed a human, not an elf. No matter. His mother would still receive a new slave for her birth night. And perhaps this woman knew something of the Sea Elves.

Without wasting any more time, he bound her hands behind her back, then picked her up and flung her over his shoulder.

CHAPTER TWO

Feenix decided it was too bad the half-elf hadn't killed her. Too bad for *him* anyway. Merely rendering her defenseless and unable to move was not enough to dampen her bloodlust. Her body was as limp and supple as a pair of well-worn leather boots, unable to stand or function without support. But her determination was as firm as a steel sword; the elf-man would die.

She should have recognized the magic before it hit her. Hadn't she smelled the spell as he prepared it? Hadn't she known he was silvan?

Well, at least *part* silvan. That kind could never be trusted in honest battle; they never fought without some sort of trickery. Even the Sea Elves, with whom she had a contract and understanding, dealt more often with deceit and underhanded maneuvers than with honest, face-to-face warfare.

Although, to be fair, Rendolin's people did have a code of honor they adhered to, if humans had the wits about them to figure it out.

No matter. Because the half-elf had made the mistake of taking her captive rather than killing her, his death at her hand would be slow, painful and very, very satisfying.

The fact that she could not stir a muscle did not remove all feeling from her. Feenix was acutely aware of every bounce, jiggle and firm step the elf-man took. She could not help it. His bony shoulder dug into her stomach with the unyielding firmness of an iron rod. The man could do with some meat on his bones.

From her unique perspective, the rocky cliffs were her sky, and the only direction she could look was down his trim legs or through his muscular thighs. However, in order to get a clear view of those long legs, she first had to gaze past the firm mounds of his posterior. Quite a mesmerizing sight in itself as she watched, entranced, the large muscles moving beneath the thin layer of material that was only a tiny distance from her nose. She suspected he was carrying her to his stronghold, and she was determined to be ready for anything.

She wished she could shut her eyes for a moment. The motion of his strides, and the reversed position of her head and stomach, was making her nauseous. Vertigo was not usually something that afflicted her, but from this angle, every step caused her head to spin.

Her eyes burned with the need to close them. Her eyeballs felt as if they had been rolled around in the sand for a day or two.

Long strands of her hair trickled over her shoulders to drape past his calves and occasionally snag on a jagged rock or grasping bush. It was going to take hours to work all the snarls out of the tresses. Just one more crime to lay at the god's feet.

She wanted to scream and yell and run him through with her sword. How dare he abduct her in this manner! Just who in Mac Lir's back yard did he think he was, dropping nets on unsuspecting women and forcing them to go with him to who-knows-where? If she had her gear, this never would have happened. Rendolin and his brother had a hell of a lot to answer for, if she ever got out of this predicament.

No, *when* she got out of this predicament, she reminded herself.

This was not the first time she had been at the complete mercy of a man, but she had sworn never to be in such a situation again. Until now, she had pretty much kept that promise to herself. She was ten years old when she made the vow. Seconds later she had liberated herself and experienced her first taste of death engineered by her own hand. The beauty of slipping a deadly

dagger into an enemy's heart had been a sensation she had never forgotten. It wasn't something she took joy in, but it was something she was good at.

However, these days she used her skills for the benefit of her employers, rather than her own thrills. A girl had to work for a living, and she would be damned before she laid down and sold her body for money. That was just another way for a man to control her, and Feenix refused to give that control to any man.

Somehow she had forgotten her vow, had lost her instinct for survival there on the beach in those moments after recovering from the *Change*. The god's curse made her weak. She made a pact with herself to do whatever it took to have the curse removed.

The first thing was to survive this torturous journey on the elf-man's shoulder to the enemy's camp in Cragimore.

Blood pounding in her ears camouflaged the sounds that should have told her the ocean was left far behind. She could hear the man's breathing, but it didn't seem to be overly labored. He carried her as if she weighed no more than a sack of grain. A small sack of grain.

His pace did not slow and he never stumbled, although the rocks and the steep climb made the journey painful to her. His muscular arm held her legs firmly against his chest, like a wooden bar securing a criminal in the stocks. Her already flushed face burned at the thought of what she must look like—her bare backside protruding to the sky, dark hair flying wild like seaweed in the surf, and her captor looking like a pirate hero bringing home the booty.

Finally, just when she was beginning to wonder if her navel could actually make a permanent impression on her backbone, he stopped and rolled her off his shoulder, dropping her in a patch of grass. At least he didn't dump her on her head into a pile of rocks.

Since she landed on her side, she was able to watch him pull a length of cloth from one of his pouches. Then he bent over her limp body and patted her cheek. His ice-blue eyes scanned her body in an impersonal inspection that was more insulting than if he had tried to rape her. His face was smooth and unlined. It was as if his face had never held any emotion; no tiny wrinkles around his eyes from squinting in the sun, no hint of frowns between his ebony eyebrows, no laugh lines around his sensual lips. For a moment she almost wished to know if those full lips were as smooth and soft as the rest of his skin.

By Mac Lir's beard, she raged at herself, *you act like you haven't been with a man in years. He is your captor, woman! Show a little restraint!* Disgust at herself and anger at the half-elf for causing her body to respond to his masculinity made her brain burn.

She put all the anger, hate and intimidation she could muster in her gaze as he loomed over her. If she couldn't speak or move, she was determined to communicate her loathing for him in the only way she could.

He didn't seem to notice.

"I will blindfold you now, slave. Although you will never be free to see the entrance to Cragimore again, still it is a law that no outsider shall know our secrets."

By Mac Lir's baby teeth, if she could just get one finger to do her bidding, this half-elf would be screaming for her mercy.

If you were ever good for anything, Mac Lir, she stormed in her head, *just let me spit in his eye!* Her mouth remained slack and the elf-man completed his task without any hindrance from Feenix.

Damn, god! The only thing you're good for is causing trouble to poor, innocent women!

This time her captor picked her up in his arms and did not throw her over his back. Her head lolled over his arm, and he moved it to his shoulder into a more comfortable position. He smelled

of autumn leaves and pine. She was surprised to feel a little thrill of something slice through her belly. It was almost, but not quite, like the feeling she got when a new lover touched her for the first time.

That magic spell must have addled her wits.

She knew exactly when they entered Cragimore; the air was cool and damp and smelled like wet earth and fungus. It reminded her of a deep forest where the trees were dense and tall, and the leaves had been moldering on the ground for so long, entire generations of salamanders and small rodents had lived and died within their sheltering haven. It wasn't unpleasant, but it wasn't something she thought she'd want to live with forever.

The change in atmosphere was more than just the smell and temperature. There was something heavy and ominous in the air. Like a beast lurking in the dark, a starving entity drooling in its lair waiting to be fed. Even the hushed silence of the stone cavern echoed with a sluggish rhythm that brought to mind a panting monster, hot and hungry, existing on the life blood of the inhabitants of Cragimore.

How could someone choose to live buried in this place of death and decay?

"Halt!"

The command was delivered with a menacing tone Feenix felt was common in such a dismal place. The half-elf paused.

"Sorry, highness," the voice said. "I did not know it was you, Prince L'Garn."

"Carry on," her captor said. He adjusted her body and again swung her up over his shoulder. Her chin banged against his shoulder blade, and her teeth slammed together with skull-jarring force. Taking a firm hold on her legs, he trotted through the cavern, his hard-heeled boots ringing on the stone floor.

Prince. The guard had called her elf-man a prince. That would explain the proud bearing and the rude way he refused to answer her questions. Killing a prince of the Night Elves would do more than just appease her lust for revenge. It might even prove to be a deciding factor in the coming war between the Sea Elves and these foul creatures.

She became aware of another change in the atmosphere of the cavern. It had been growing increasingly warmer, and the humidity in the air caressed her naked body like a warm, damp blanket. It seemed the deeper they went into Cragimore, the more the chill melted away.

The blood pounding in her ears slowly gave way to the unexpected sound of chatter and laughter. Mocking laughter. The shoulder she was slung over suddenly became more tense and firm, if such a thing were possible. She felt him draw himself straight and stiff, as if he were preparing to face an enemy. But that was ridiculous. He was among his own people.

"What have you there, Prince L'Garn?"

"Look! Our prince has caught himself a large fish!"

"Out plundering without your mates, L'Garn? Is that why you sent us back without you?"

She couldn't see the scorners, of course, but she felt their malevolence and disrespect as keenly as if the words were sharp edged daggers thrust into her side.

By the god's left earlobe, what was going on here? Soldiers didn't speak to their leaders—let alone princes—in such tones. If she were in command, those voices would be silenced forever. That would prove an effective lesson for any others who thought they could get away with such disrespect.

"Back off, Karden, or I'll shove my fist down your throat."

The prince's words rumbled through Feenix's belly. At least he talked a good game. Somehow she didn't think he was bluffing.

“Threats from our prince, L’Garn?” the man snarled. “Have a care with your tongue. Your grandfather, Zimpher, is not here to protect you.”

Feenix listened to the snickers and snide whispers and wondered what her captor would do. L’Garn seemed to be oozing anger from every pore, but he remained mute to the taunts.

“I say we deserve a reward for keeping you out of harm by following you around and obeying your commands. No one should be forced to do the bidding of the likes of you, Outbreed. Even if you are a royal bastard.”

She could hear the footsteps of many men, and the cavern felt like it was filling with hostility as well as opponents, most of whom were murmuring agreement to Karden’s words.

“I say hand the female over to us and we will let you pass.”

The half-elf’s body became very still. She felt him tense even more.

Ignoring Karden’s demand, L’Garn spoke. “Where is the king?”

Although his words were not loud, they were spoken with a threatening, menacing quality that made the hair on the back of Feenix’s neck rise, despite her inability to move her muscles.

“He and the priests are on a pilgrimage,” a voice answered. She thought she detected a trace of unease in it.

“And the princess?” L’Garn demanded.

A harsh bark of a laugh echoed around the chamber. Feenix supposed it came from Karden.

“Your lady mother is in her quarters, sleeping off yet another bout of drunken *indisposition*.”

Feenix felt or sensed the speaker move himself into a more defensible position.

“One can only suppose another bastard such as you, our noble *prince*, will be the result since she couples with any male like a bitch in heat.”

L’Garn pulled his sword in one effortless motion, pivoted to his left and sliced at Karden with a smooth, clean back hand. Feenix couldn’t see it, but she had been in enough battles to understand what the ensuing sounds and movements meant.

Chaos broke out in the cavern like a din from hell. Her captor parried, thrust, stepped and lunged with a grace and speed she could only admire. And he did it all, thankfully, without dropping her or even allowing her to be nicked. She thought he fought two opponents, although it sounded like a thousand. Screams, chants, thuds and cheers accompanied the clamor of ringing swords and labored breathing.

The warm, metallic smell of blood was in the air.

Feenix herself began to have trouble breathing until she learned to gasp in time with his steps. Exhale on the down beat; inhale on the lope. If only she could raise her neck so her head would stop banging against his back as he parried and thrust.

Abruptly, L’Garn made a driving lunge, dipping down on one knee and thrusting forward and up. The cavern was suddenly silent except for an amazed groan. As she felt the half-elf withdraw his sword and stand, she heard a body hit the stone floor. For two full heart beats the cavern rang with an eerie silence.

“Clean this mess up,” L’Garn ordered. She felt him wipe his sword on a fallen body, then sheath it in its scabbard.

“What shall we do with the bodies, highness?”

Feenix noted that the voice held respect and a good measure of fear.

“Let the sun and the birds have them. Throw them from the cliffs.”

L’Garn adjusted Feenix more firmly on his shoulder, and resumed his journey deeper into the hold of Cragimore. Behind him, she heard whispers and chatter, but she didn’t doubt his orders would be obeyed.

During the melee, her hair had become even more wild and free. She felt him try to gather it and pull it back over her body. He tucked it under his arm holding her legs and continued walking as if he hadn't just killed at least two opponents and carried her for miles up steep cliffs and through stone caverns. All without working up more than a light sweat.

The man may be only a half-elf, but he had her attention.

She croaked an involuntarily chuckle, and was surprised that her stomach muscles obeyed her brain's command to tighten and bounce. She was thrilled to realize she could control the movement of her head against his back. Her mouth twitched in a sudden grin. She was beginning to regain control of her muscles. Now, if she could just find a weapon...

"I see my spell is beginning to wear off," L'Garn said as he moved even faster. "No matter. We will be in the slave hold soon."

Damn you, Mac Lir, she yelled silently. *Can't you even grant me the slim chance of escape?* In her imagination she heard a deep rumbling laugh. The god had a strange sense of humor.

Before she could regain control of the rest of her muscles, L'Garn stopped and swung her off his shoulder on to what felt like a pallet on the floor. She was still limp enough to offer no resistance to either the maneuver or the wall where her shoulder came to rest.

Without warning, he tugged the cloth from her eyes, and she blinked like an owl from the torch glare in the room. Feenix was mortified that her eyes decided to resume their complete function at that exact moment. Big, fat tears rolled down her cheeks, washing the sand away and easing the dryness. He wiped a pool of moisture away with the pad of his thumb.

"I will send someone in with clothing. I will be back later to instruct you in your duties."

The half-elf turned from her and left the room, closing the door behind him. She heard the boom of a heavy wooden beam as it dropped into place on the other side of the door, sealing her in the cell.

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The rage eating at L'Garn was slow to subside. He had been worried he would lose complete control as he carried his captive from the skirmish in the gathering hall. But he made it to the slave quarters without encountering anyone else who would challenge him.

Killing Karden had not appeased the beast inside. It never did. But while in the act of violence, the power and control over death was a sensual high. There was beauty in death; the graceful thrust of shining steel, the burning power of mortal muscles, the crimson flow of fresh blood. But the aftertaste of the rage left his head and heart pounding and a deep ache in his gut.

And then the guilt started.

He should not feel remorse at killing an enemy. He was the grandson of a king. The great grandson of the greatest king in the history of Cragimore—Meedrion! The warrior king who single-handedly slew the hated Leondrilik of Shalridoor. He was bred for strength, stamina and war. It was all he had ever known. To feel shame for the bloodlust in him only proved that Karden was right.

He was an Outbreed. His tainted human blood prevented him from being a true Night Elf, worthy of the title *prince* and the respect of his people. He would never measure up to his heritage, but he tried.

By the gods, how he tried.

L'Garn was surprised to find he had reached the main slave quarters without remembering how he got there. He ordered a set of house garments to be given to the woman in the cell, and

arranged for the old slave woman, Lala, to deliver them.

He enjoyed thinking about the naked spit fire waiting in the holding cell. The spell should be all but worn off by now. He did not envy Lala the greeting she would receive when she arrived with the garments for his captive. He was sure the woman's tongue would flay the white hair off Lala's head. But the new woman would soon learn obedience and how to keep a civil tongue in her head. It was merely a matter of training.

Of course, a name needed to be chosen for her. Something light and feminine, L'Garn thought, to fit her character. Something like 'Holi' or 'Teela'. He would see to it personally, so as to be assured of just the right name for her.

Sembali had no talent for names, and if he didn't name the woman himself, his grandfather would devise something. No, he would not leave it to chance, or to the king.

When he was small, he had captured a young rabbit and wanted to make a pet of it. Zimpher had allowed him to keep it, but insisted he, the king, would name it. L'Garn had agreed, anticipating the joy of having a pet, a friend, all to himself. He would have agreed to anything.

Zimpher named the animal *Roast*, and insisted everyone call the pet by the ridiculous name.

Roast was L'Garn's constant companion. It followed the young boy all over the caverns, coming when called, and even relieving itself in a special area that was easy to keep clean. It did not matter that the other boys ridiculed the young L'Garn for being odd and keeping a pet rabbit; it was worth the snide comments, insults and hidden punches and kicks. He had a real, living being that loved him, and relied upon him for protection and survival.

One day, Roast did not come when L'Garn called. He searched everywhere, but he could not find his friend.

That night, the royal cook served roast rabbit for dinner. L'Garn had vomited all over the china and crystal, in front of the entire court.

As the adult prince relived the humiliating memory, there outside the slave quarters, his palms became damp and his stomach clenched with dread. It had only taken three days of beatings for him to learn how to eat roast rabbit without regurgitating. It was merely a matter of training.

A royal prince should never disgrace his title, family or heritage. The young prince had vowed he never would again.

L'Garn shook his head to clear the old images, and hurried to his quarters. He had to clean himself before paying his respects to his mother. She would be expecting him to stop in and visit, no matter the severity of her illness. The drugs and spells had become second nature to her for the past hundred years, and only L'Garn could charm her out of her fitful moods.

The new slave and the choosing of her name would have to wait for a while. Sembali needed him.

CHAPTER THREE

“Take that rag away and bring me some decent clothes!”

Feenix threw the gray gown at the old woman who had entered the holding cell. She might be naked, but she was not going to wear rags.

“I am Lala, chief slave of the royal house. I have been commanded to prepare you for your duties. His highness has ordered that you wear this garment,” the woman said as she bent down and picked up the offending dress. “Save yourself a beating. Put it on.”

“I don’t care who ordered what! I refuse to put that thing on my back. It probably has lice and fleas living in it. Find me some clothes fit for a warrior. Something like your prince was wearing will do for now!”

Feenix stood with her fists on her hips and glared at the petite silvan slave. She looked to be about the oldest elf Feenix had ever seen. Wrinkles covered her face and hands, like the cracks of a riverbed in drought. Her wispy white hair was thin and fine, chopped to just below her pointed ears. A silver band, black with tarnish inside intricate carvings and runes, encircled her neck. Wrinkled folds of loose skin grew around the edges of the metal, and the collar looked to have been there for ages.

A large, well-armed guard stood at the door, blocking any chance Feenix had to escape. If she had her own gear, the guard would be no problem at all, but the way things were now, it was best to bide her time.

The holding cell was actually a small stone room, without windows of course, and with a ceiling that reached far above her head. There was a pallet on the floor, and a bucket in a corner. Nothing else. No table. No chair. Not even any straw on the floor. Feenix had lived in worse places.

“And what would you do with warrior’s clothing?” Lala asked. “Put the gown on and save me the trouble of dressing you.”

“Ha! You and that ox standing by the door couldn’t dress me in that rag if my hands were tied and my feet nailed to the floor!” She decided to take a gamble. “Come on,” she prodded, “I’ll bet the two of you together couldn’t dress a new born babe!”

“You are a foolish human,” the elf said. “Prince L’Garn is expecting you to be ready when he returns. I have never failed in any job given to me. I will not fail in this.”

“Prove it!” Feenix crouched with her arms held out to the side, ready to react to any advance or movement her captors might make.

The old elf motioned to the guard without taking her tired eyes off the warrior woman. The guard swept a coiled length of leather from his side in a movement that was a blur to Feenix. The stone room echoed with a pop of the whip that sent her ears to ringing.

Before Feenix could react, the tip of the whip reached out and flicked open a wound in her left thigh as long as her index finger.

Howling in pain and rage, Feenix clapped her hand over the blood and backed up, but not in time to avoid the end of the whip once again. This time it wrapped around her right ankle like a stinging clamp. The guard yanked the whip and Feenix fell to the floor in a heap.

As soon as she hit the ground, the little old elf woman was on her in a flash, holding a thin wire around her neck.

“Now,” she said to the fallen Feenix. “Let us dress you, shall we?”

Feenix put her hands on Lala's shoulders and pushed, kicked and hooked her right leg around the woman's waist, then rolled to the left. Suddenly Lala was pinned beneath the warrior woman, but the wire at Feenix's throat had begun to cut off her air. A trickle of blood dripped onto the face of the old elf.

Feenix put the heel of her palm under the elf's chin and pushed upward, baring down with as much pressure to the ancient throat as possible, trying without success to break the hold. Her other hand was busy trying to release the wire around her own neck.

Feenix straddled the woman and put both of her hands around her adversary's throat, intending to snap the old woman's neck before the wire strangled her. Damn that half-elf's spell! She still felt as weak as a kitten! Blackness crept over her eyes, as her lungs begged to be replenished with air. White and red dots chased each other across her vision, but still she held on to the wrinkled neck of the old slave. Just a little longer...

Crack!

Feenix screamed with agony as the whip landed on her bare back, cutting a line of fire from her shoulder to her waist. She let go of the woman and rolled to the right, trying to dodge another sting of the leather.

As she moved, another guard rushed into the room, tugged her hands behind her, and pulled her long hair so that her head bent back, giving Feenix a wonderful view of the ceiling. She was effectively pinned to the floor on her knees, although a voice from deep within exalted over the fact that it took two men to subdue her, even with the lingering effects of L'Garn's spell. Some time during the fight, the wire had fallen from her neck, and she gulped in great breaths of air.

"That was foolish of you," the old woman said, rising slowly and rubbing her injured neck.

"You'd be dead right now if I had my own gear," Feenix ground out through a burning throat. It was difficult to talk with much authority in the awkward position

"Put the slave necklace on her, and the chains," the woman ordered the guards.

"I'm no one's slave," Feenix yelled, struggling to break the iron hold of the guard.

"You are now," the old woman answered.

On her knees, with her hands bound and her hair pulled back so that her throat was open to any dagger, Feenix did not have a clear view of the room. She heard the guard by the door shuffle towards her, and watched in horror as an iron ring was lowered to her neck and then clamped in place.

A harsh shove from behind forced her on her stomach while the guard locked the collar behind her neck. Her breasts pushed into the hard stone and her cheek hugged a jagged crack in the floor.

"By the god's brass bells, get this thing the hell off my neck! Feenix of Port Marcus is no one's slave! I will kill you all!"

Her struggles were in vain. The sheer weight of the guards, combined with their strength, soon had her dressed and the slave ring in place. Her hands were manacled and a heavy chain was run through the necklace and attached to the iron bands on each hand. The length of the chain prevented her from extending her arms or lowering them past her waist.

"You scum! Do you know who you are dealing with here?"

She drew herself up as straight as she could and put as much command and intimidation as possible in her words. "I am Captain Feenix of Port Marcus! If you do not release me immediately, there will be so many warriors swarming through these caverns, you won't be able to turn around without impaling yourselves on a sword!"

"Quiet, slave!" The silvan woman did not seem to be intimidated at all by Feenix's threats. "I

do not care who you were before you came here. From this time forward, you are a slave of Cragimore. You will work and eat and sleep only when told. You will not rest without permission. You will not eat without permission. You will not even relieve yourself without permission. This is the first lesson you must learn as a slave.”

Feenix looked directly into the washed-out hazel eyes of the woman. The coloring was wrong. Night Elves had paler skin, and their eyes were not the color of woodlands. The old woman was silvan, but not a Night Elf.

“Go to hell,” she said and then aimed a great glob of spit at the woman’s face.

She had forgotten about the guard behind her. Her sight went black with colored spots before she felt the pain in her head. The stone floor was cold and hard and then she thought of nothing else.

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Pain exploding inside her head told her she was probably awake. The incessant voice speaking to her wasn’t making any sense, however, so she decided to ignore the pain and go back to sleep. Except the pain wouldn’t go away. Neither would the oddly soothing voice.

“Feenix! Captain Feenix!”

Damn elves, why couldn’t they leave her alone to enjoy a moment or two of rest? The war would wait.

“Wake up, slave!”

This time the words were accompanied by a series of stinging slaps to her face that made the pain in her head feel as if it would rip her skull from her neck.

“Damn,” she yelled, forcing her stubborn eyes to open, “get the hell away from me or you’ll find yourself with two black eyes and a broken nose!”

Feenix blinked to dispel the blurry vision standing in front of her. She must be dreaming. What the hell were all these elves doing in her quarters?

Another slap to her face restored her memory.

“Damn. Where’s your bloody prince?”

One of the guards jerked her up into a standing position, then pushed her back against the stone wall. It was then that Feenix realized she was chained to the wall from the back of her slave collar.

“Like a flea-bitten dog,” she mumbled.

“You will stand in the presence of your betters,” the guard growled.

“Right.” Since she didn’t have much choice, Feenix decided to humor her guests.

“Now that you have rested,” Lala spoke, “you will begin to learn your duties. You will come with me.”

As the guard unlocked the chain that tethered her to the wall, Feenix inquired, “When is dinner? I’m starved.”

“You will eat when your chores are completed. Follow me.”

“Look, Lily,” she said as the guard gave her a push from behind to start her feet moving out the door. “I haven’t had anything to eat in two days. I demand some food.”

The little old elf stopped and turned to give Feenix a look of disgust.

“You can not demand anything, human. You can only obey. I will not tell you again. And my name is Lala.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and resumed her walk down the stone corridor

outside Feenix's cell. Again the guard pushed Feenix from behind to get her moving. She gave the guard a dirty look, then followed Lala.

"Well, fine. But I work better with a full belly."

Her captors ignored the comment.

Feenix tried to memorize her location and where they were taking her, but without any distinguishing landmarks such as rooms, doors or windows, it was difficult. The corridor seemed to be one long hall carved from the living rock. The stone was pale gray with chips of quartz glistening from its hard surface.

The procession of elves and captive bore no torches, and there were none mounted on the walls. An eerie greenish-yellow light emanated from the floor, allowing just enough light to see. The entire corridor was like walking in a mist-shrouded twilight world. It gave her the creeps.

The same musty, forest floor smell she had noticed when L'Garn had first carried her into Cragimore was still present. She thought that a bit odd since the entire stronghold seemed to be made of rock, and it was swept free of any leaves, dirt or other debris, except for the stuff growing on the floor that made the weird light. Maybe that's what caused the odor.

"Where are we going?"

This obeying stuff was getting on her nerves. She didn't like walking into something she knew nothing about, and hated not knowing what to expect.

"Silence," Lala replied without a backward glance.

Feenix noted that Lala's clothes were of a better quality than the rag she was wearing, although both were a grayish-mud color. In fact, now that she thought about it, she hadn't noticed much color on anyone's clothes. No gold or brilliant blue; no bright yellow or deep red. Even the prince, L'Garn, wore no decorations or color on his clothes. It was as if the people were as washed out and bland as their surroundings. How boring.

Walking with her wrists chained to the ring around her neck was awkward. She preferred to have her hands free and swinging as she walked. Not being able to lower them further than her waist made her feel like she was waddling like a duck.

"How much farther?"

She stumbled to her knees as the guard behind her hit her with the handle of his whip.

Damn, at this rate her pounding head would never survive.

"No more talk, human," the guard growled. "Just walk!"

"Not much of a conversationalist, are you?" She was finding it difficult to stand without her arms for balance.

Again she was slammed in the neck by the butt of the whip. This time she fell to the ground completely, lying on the floor of the hall. Since her face was pushed into the light-giving growth, she learned that indeed the musty smell came from the fungus growing on the path. Close up, it stank!

"Get up," the guard growled.

Feenix wondered what they would do if she pretended to be unconscious again. She didn't have long to wonder.

"Pick her up," Lala commanded the guard.

Feenix felt her attacker grab the iron ring behind her head and haul her up without much trouble. The metal band bit into her neck, and it felt as though her wind pipe was going to snap in two.

She tried to stand, but her legs were wobbly, and her head so dizzy she had trouble focusing her eyes. The only thing that kept her from smelling the foul path again was the guard's hold on

her collar.

“Now, move,” the guard ordered.

As battered, sore and dizzy as she was, Feenix took no orders from any enemy.

“Make me,” she choked.

The guard lifted her off her feet and shook the iron collar like a dog with a bone. She thought the metal would sever her neck, and her head would roll right off her shoulders. A broken sound—half hysterical chuckle, half groan of pain—escaped her lips as she imagined the sight of her head rolling down the corridor, her long hair wrapping around it like a ball of yarn.

“Enough,” shouted Lala. “His highness will flay us alive if you kill her. Bring her.”

“I do not care a rat’s tail what the ‘Breed wants,” the guard holding Feenix replied. “I would like to have a go at this human myself.”

She tried to push his groping hand away as he squeezed her right breast painfully. The other guards agreed and someone made a comment about stopping and trying her out.

“Get your filthy hands off me,” Feenix croaked in a weak voice. That damned collar would be the death of her.

He merely shook her again and laughed.

“Holdert,” Lala spoke in a mollifying tone. “His highness wants this new slave in one piece. Let us bring her and have done with the job.”

The guard dropped Feenix to the floor and turned to the little elf.

“I am a member of the King’s Guard. I do not take orders from a slave.”

Lala bowed to him, casting a wan smile his way.

“Of course I would not presume to order you, Master Holdert. However, the prince gave orders to us both to see that the new slave is prepared.”

In a flash, his hand struck her across the face.

“I do not need you to tell me my duty, slave!”

Lala wiped a trickle of blood from her lip.

“The ‘Breed will get his slave when I have finished with her.”

“That would not be wise, master. The prince expects you to do your job, just as he expects me to do mine.”

Did the stupid woman not know enough to keep her mouth shut, Feenix wondered? She tried to sit up, bracing her back against the wall, but it wasn’t easy fettered as she was.

Holdert took a step towards Lala, and the old slave backed into the wall. “You may be the chief slave, Lala, but your rank holds no weight with me.”

“Easy, Holdert,” one of the guards said. “She holds high favor with the princess.”

“The royal whore, you mean,” he said without turning away from the cowering old slave before him.

Although he stood with his back to Feenix and the gloomy light in the caverns did not allow her to see his face, she knew how he must look as he intimidated his prey. She knew his kind; always ready to take out their inadequacy on the defenseless. The light of power would be gleaming in his eyes, lips pulled tight in a grimace of anticipation while intoxicating strength surged through his blood. With a flick of his wrist, he could kill an old woman like Lala in a second and enjoy the feel of brittle bones snapping. The fear and terror in the eyes of his prey would only fuel the power and prove he was strong and virile.

Feenix’s tired and battered body groaned in protest as she raised her right leg and kicked Holdert in the back of his left knee. Unfortunately she didn’t connect cleanly, and instead of breaking the bully’s knee, she merely bruised it. His leg gave out and he dropped to the ground.

Her victory was short lived as another guard drew his sword and placed the tip, none too gently, at the base of her throat. These elves seemed to have a fascination with her neck and throat.

“You will live to regret that,” Holdert said as he stood with the help of a guard. “Lala is right. You need to be taught the proper behavior of a slave. Pick her up and bring her,” he ordered as he limped down the corridor.

CHAPTER FOUR

“That was foolish,” Lala said softly as the guard dragged the prisoner along.

Again the collar around her neck prevented Feenix from saying very much. Which was probably a good thing.

They entered a large room lit by smoking torches. Unused to the amount of light, Feenix had to blink a few times before her eyes adjusted.

Unlike the rest of the caverns thus far, this room had sand packed on the floor. Arranged around the room were various types of manacles, chains in the walls and odd bits of metal devices. To her right hung two metal cages, one empty and one holding a mass of rags, flesh and hair. The mass did not move, but a faint moaning seemed to be coming from that direction.

In the middle of the room were three oaken posts with large iron rings imbedded high in the solid wood. The sand around the posts was of a darker hue than the rest of the floor, and the acrid tang of blood hung in the air to mix with the ever present forest mold smell.

Feenix’s empty belly rebelled, but she could do nothing.

She had been a warrior most of her life, and knew what a torture chamber looked like. Hell, she had spoken the orders to send many a man to a room like this, had even participated in the discipline of her men. But she never liked it much. She always believed she could get more effort and respect from someone by working with them rather than beating obedience into them. There were always the few, however, who no amount of reasoning or drills could persuade, and the torture room, or discipline area she preferred to call it, had to be utilized.

“Chain her to the post,” Holdert ordered.

“Master Holdert, this is not a wise decision. Think! His highness is expecting the slave to be ready for her duties in a few hours. If you beat her now, she will be worthless for many days.” Lala tried to coax the guard into changing his mind, but Feenix knew the only thing the old slave woman would get from him was a similar fate if she didn’t shut her mouth.

“If you beat me, scum,” she yelled, though her throat throbbed and her voice resembled nothing close to her own, “you better do a good job of it because I’m going to kill you the first chance I get.”

“Silence, old woman, or you will taste the whip yourself,” Holdert said as he pushed Lala aside and stormed to Feenix. “As for you, human, I will enjoy watching your skin peel away with every lash of my whip. How much blood does a human hold, I wonder? Shall we see?”

She tried to break free of the guards who held her, but in her weakened and fettered condition, it was no contest.

“Release me and fight me fair, pig scum! Even for an elf you are a sorry excuse for a fighter!”

He cupped her cheek in a parody of a gentle caress. “When I release you it will be to dispose of your body.”

She jerked her face away from his hand and tried to summon some moisture to her mouth.

“A shame really, as I would have liked to have given you a taste of my strength.” His hand streaked out and grabbed a fistful of her long hair and brought her face close to his own.

“Perhaps I will only use the whip lightly upon you, if you think you would like me to show you my personal lance.”

She nearly choked on the noxious fumes coming from his mouth. How could she have gotten herself into such a pot of trouble? It was all that damned god’s fault, of course! If he hadn’t

cursed her with the *Change* none of this would be happening. She would have made her entry into Cragimore as its conqueror, not as a captor!

"I'd rather mate with a dung beetle!"

The back of his hand caught her full in the face and split her bottom lip open. She sucked in the blood and the taste of it fueled her bloodlust. If there was only a way to get her hands on him, she knew countless methods to either kill him or render him so useless he would beg for death.

"Chain her!"

She was yanked to a post and her hands chained high above her head. At least it offered a new position for her arms, she thought as the tingle from them going asleep raced through her elbows and up into her shoulders.

"Master Holdert," she heard Lala's voice from somewhere behind her. Feenix could not turn her head far enough to see where the elf slave stood. "Please reconsider this. Prince L'Garn will not be happy."

"Tuawtha curse Prince L'Garn! This slave needs to be taught a lesson in respect, and I intend to be her teacher! Back away, Lala, or you will feel my whip also."

"You better kill me, Holdert," Feenix yelled, "because if I ever get free, I'll hunt you down and fillet you slowly over a hot fire!"

"Brave words, slave." She heard the whip snake across the sand as he played it out and loosened his arm. "Let us see how brave you are after I caress you with my leather beauty."

The whining whistle of leather in the air warned her that Holdert had unleashed the lash.

Crack!

The tip of the whip licked the post, inches from her nose. She felt the wind as it whizzed by, and a tiny splinter of wood flaked away from the stake. The guard's chuckles burned through her mind. He was toying with her.

"You missed, scum! Let me loose and I'll show you how it's done."

"Impatient, slave? Are you one of those women who enjoy pain?" The other guards joined in Holdert's laughter.

"Master Holdert, this is folly. Let me have the slave before Prince L'Garn learns of this."

"One more word from you, Lala, and you will share this one's fate!"

Crack!

Again the tip of the whip flicked out, this time on the other side of her head. She felt a slight tug at her hair as Holdert recoiled the length of leather.

"Another miss, scum." She turned her head to try to look behind her at her tormenter. "You shouldn't be allowed to handle weapons you don't know how to use."

"No miss, slave," a new voice spoke up. "Holdert is a master of the whip. You just lost a lock or two of hair!"

The guards laughed and slapped Holdert on the back.

By Mac Lir's blue nose, she swore to herself, her hair!

"Leave my hair alone and get on with the beating, if you're man enough to do it!"

"Oh, I am man enough, slave. Lala! Move her hair off her back. It is in my way!"

Feenix felt her hair gathered gently.

"Your tongue will get you more stripes of the whip, human," Lala whispered to her as she draped the long black curtain of hair over Feenix's shoulder. "Do not anger Holdert more and perhaps you will survive."

"I'd rather be dead than a slave to anyone!"

"So be it, then." The elderly slave tucked the gathered hair inside Feenix's left arm and

backed away. "It is done, Master Holdert."

Feenix concentrated on her breathing and tried to relax. Impossible, knowing at any second a lethal strip of leather was going to cut a foot long gash into the flesh of her back, and she was powerless to stop it from happening.

Crack!

An involuntary grunt of agony passed her lips, and the guards laughed at her discomfort. Pain, white hot and throbbing, erupted across her back.

"I did not miss that time, slave!"

Gasping for breath, Feenix turned her head and tried to focus on him. "Was that your whip? I thought a horsefly had landed and bit me while I was waiting for you to figure out how to use that leather!" She could feel blood crawling down her skin. By Mac Lir's chin, she would be damned if she would show fear and pain to this scum.

"A horsefly, was it? Perhaps this will feel more like a beating!"

Crack!

Again the leather bit into her skin, but this time she was prepared. She bit down on her bottom lip and swallowed the scream that demanded to be released. Her head buzzed and her breathing became shallow. If she didn't know better, she might think she was going to faint like a damned coward!

Before the agony of her back registered in her muddled brain, another lash ripped at her flesh. Her knees buckled and her vision blurred. Impossible to hold back the scream that ripped through her entire body and escaped past her bloody lips.

If she survived, she would take immense delight in killing this elf. Not merely because of the brutal attack on her body, but most importantly because he had forced her to scream in pain. No one did that to Captain Feenix of Port Marcus and lived to tell about it. All she had to do was survive this torture and heal. Survive and heal.

Again the leather whistled in the cavern, and Feenix braced herself for the lash. The smell of blood was pungent and hot in the air. She focused all her concentration on remaining alert. If she fainted and survived this ordeal, she'd have to kill herself for such weakness.

She gulped in some foul air and waited for the leather to fall. By all the god's holy blood, Mac Lir had a lot to answer for!

What was he waiting for? Why didn't he strike?

She ducked her head under her right arm and tried to turn her body to see why he was waiting.

"What's the matter, Holdert," she grunted. "Is that all you've got? Three taps with the leather?" It was probably a good thing she hadn't eaten in two days, she decided. To lose the contents of her stomach in front of her enemy would be the final disgrace.

Her sight was blurry and gray, and her head buzzed and felt so light she couldn't really see her attacker or the other people in the room. But it seemed to her that everyone was as still as death, and she was the only bit of motion in the entire cavern.

And then she was sure she was going to faint, and nothing, not even breathing exercises or curses to gods, was going to prevent her from the disgrace of it. Damned elves. She never should have gotten mixed up with them. Aw, hell. It was too late now.

"By the Jewels," said the voice that had started Feenix's present nightmare. "What do you think you are doing, Holdert?"

The silence in the room exploded as everyone spoke at once. Finally, her tormenter's voice rang above the others.

"This slave attacked me, Prince L'Garn. I was merely disciplining the creature."

“Is this true, Lala? Did the new slave attack Holdert?”

Lala hesitated before answering. “The slave kicked him, highness, when Holdert was not looking.”

Feenix’s vision was fading in and out, but she saw a figure emerge out of the darkness and approach her. She tried to turn to get a clearer view, but her wrists chained to the post would not allow it.

She sucked in a quick breath and groaned low at the touch of gentle fingers on her back.

“Four stripes, Holdert? Do you not think that a bit excessive for a female?”

“She is strong, prince. She nearly broke my knee. I have only given her three lashes; the other she earned when she would not get dressed. Even Lala agrees the slave needs to be taught some manners.”

“Scum. Hiding behind a female rather than take responsibility for your actions. Release me and fight me fair. I will show you how we discipline our guards in Port Marcus!”

Feenix’s voice was nothing more than a raw whisper, but it echoed around the cavern for all to hear.

“Peace, slave,” said L’Garn, coming to stand close enough for her to see clearly. “Did I not say your tongue would lead you into trouble?”

Turning from her, he motioned to one of the other guards. “Give me your whip. Lala, unchain this woman.”

He stepped away from the post and faced Holdert. The guard handed him a long, supple whip, the handle black from much usage. Feenix shuddered as Holdert uncoiled his own weapon and grinned hungrily at L’Garn.

Lala brought a box over to stand on while she unlocked the chains from the post. Feenix collapsed at the foot of the wooden stake before the old slave could catch her.

“Come. Let us get away from here before any more damage is done.”

“I can walk, old woman,” Feenix whispered, but she found she needed to rely on Lala’s strength to get her across the cavern to a safe place against a wall.

Feenix propped herself up, using her knees to rest her too-heavy head, and tried to concentrate on the scene in front of her. The agony of her back kept her from focusing clearly, but she forced herself to remain conscious. She had to know what the fate of the two Night Elves in front of her would be.

“I gave orders that the human was to be brought to the slave quarters to begin her duties.” Feenix felt the hair lift at the nape of her neck at the menace in L’Garn’s voice.

“I am sick of taking orders from a ‘Breed! It is time you learned your place,” the guard yelled.

Feenix watched the length of Holdert’s whip fly through the air to flick the side of L’Garn’s head. A trickle of blood ran down his cheek and mingled with the dark stubble of his beard.

“You dare question the Prince of the Royal House?”

L’Garn’s whip cracked sharply as the tip caressed Holdert’s left cheek, opening the flesh to the bone. The guard screamed and slapped his huge hand over the wound. Feenix understood the blind rage that took possession of the guard as he realized the prince had cut him.

Holdert suddenly began wielding the whip faster than Feenix thought possible. It seemed as if the length of leather was everywhere, attacking L’Garn. The prince countered and defended himself with his own whip with an expertise beyond anything she had imagined.

The cavern rang with cracks and pops as the whips alternated striking bodies and open air. The linen of L’Garn’s shirt ripped open in the right sleeve and across his chest. A red line of blood trickled steadily from his head and arm, but he never wavered.

Holdert stumbled, but recovered himself. He had to be tiring, Feenix knew, after his little session with her, but still he attacked the half-elf with a battle fury she knew and understood. His own leather vest was in tatters around his waist, and it seemed to Feenix that the prince was taking great pains in marking the guard with some sort of pattern across his stomach and chest.

Feenix watched L’Garn’s grim face. While Holdert was in the throes of total battle rage, L’Garn’s anger remained controlled and deliberate. She thought she would prefer to face Holdert’s uncontrolled rage rather than the cold, calculated brutality of the prince.

Some level of Feenix’s consciousness registered that the cavern was filling with guards, attracted by the noise of battle. The newcomers stood against the walls, well out of the way of the combatants, as they cheered and shouted encouragement to their companion. It appeared as if this prince had more enemies than followers, she thought.

Holdert grinned at his comrades’ encouragement.

“I have been waiting a long time to put you in your place, you Outbreed bastard.”

His whip sneaked out and, by some lucky stroke, wrapped around L’Garn’s thigh. The guard laughed and pulled the prince off his feet.

Feenix couldn’t help her gasp as L’Garn fell and landed on his back. He shook his head as if to clear it from the fall.

Before he could regain his feet, Holdert dropped the whip and drew his sword—a short, flat blade, Feenix noted—and advanced on the fallen half-elf.

“By Meedrion’s throne, I am going to enjoy slitting your throat,” he panted as he rushed to the fallen prince’s side.

L’Garn pulled the whip to him, grabbed the leather end of the hard handle and deflected the sword thrust to his chest. In a heartbeat he was on his feet, facing his sword-wielding enemy with nothing but his bare hand and the wrong end of a whip.

Again the guard thrust the sword, and again the prince parried, knocking the sword from Holdert’s hand with a stunning blow to the blade. In a blur, Feenix watched L’Garn smash the guard’s face with the whip handle, knocking his opponent to the sandy ground.

“You need to be taught a lesson in protocol and etiquette, my friend.” He backed up three paces. “On your knees before me, Holdert.”

The guard was slow to obey. L’Garn hastened the guard’s compliance with a quick flick of the whip. Part of the Night Elf’s ear flew to the sand, and the guard screamed in pain.

Holdert scrambled to his knees, holding his ear and whimpering.

“I am your royal prince, Holdert.”

The whip cracked again as another red gash appeared across the guard’s chest. His flesh hung from his ribs, very much as his vest hung from his waist. Feenix had never seen a whip carve a man so cleanly and precisely.

“My every wish is yours to fulfill.”

The whip lashed out and wrapped itself around the guard’s neck.

“Do you not agree, Holdert?”

“Yes, highness,” the guard mumbled.

L’Garn tugged gently on the whip’s handle, making Holdert waver off balance before he caught himself. “Ask me what I want, Holdert.”

L’Garn’s voice froze Feenix’s blood. His rage had turned from blazing heat to ice. His glacial tone sent shivers down her spine. But then again, it could be the shock of her own wounds, she knew.

“Wha... what do you want, ‘Breed?’”

The guard's question barely reached her straining ears. L'Garn kicked him in the stomach and Holdert doubled over. The leather of the whip grew taut as the prince used it to keep the guard from toppling completely over.

"Ask nicely," L'Garn growled, like a beast barely under control.

Lala made a small, frightened sound in the back of her throat.

Holdert slowly straightened and looked into the prince's face. "Wh...what. . ." he coughed and blood ran down his chin. L'Garn gave the whip another little jerk. "What does my prince want?"

The smile that stretched across L'Garn's face was the stuff of nightmares. It held no mercy, no compassion, no release. It held only a hungry thirst for violence. It was a smile of total power over an opponent, and Feenix recognized it for what it was, for she had experienced just such a rush of power and control over her own enemies many times.

By Mac Lir's ears, she didn't look like that just before a kill, did she? She was shocked and just a little thrilled at the thought. Power and domination were addictive drugs.

The entire cavern waited in silence for L'Garn's command to Holdert. It was as if everyone's breathing and heart rate had been suspended in time.

"I want you to clean my boots."

Feenix wasn't sure if she heard the correct words.

Neither was Holdert it appeared, for he shook his head and asked, "What?"

"I want you to clean my boots."

When the guard still did not seem to comprehend, L'Garn gave a fierce jerk to the whip and dragged Holdert into the sand, face first.

"Now!"

The sharp command whipped around the cavern, startling everyone who had been mesmerized by the proceedings.

Holdert coughed and choked as he tried to crawl to L'Garn's feet. The whip remained tight around his neck, and Feenix could see it cutting into the flesh. The guard managed to reach the toe of L'Garn's boot and began to weakly brush the sand and blood from it.

Again the prince jerked the whip, this time holding it high in the air, forcing the guard's head up. Holdert's face began to turn a deep shade of purple and his eyes were in danger of popping from his head.

"With your tongue, Holdert."

Even Feenix was shocked at the length of humiliation L'Garn demanded of the beaten guard.

The half-elf dropped the whip, and Holdert slumped to the ground, unmoving. After a moment, L'Garn kicked him with the toe of his boot, but the guard remained unmoving. He was either unconscious or dead.

With an impatient sound, L'Garn stepped over the body and directed a fierce glance at the nearest guard.

"Take him to the slave pens. If he lives he can spend the rest of his life chained to the water wheel."

"Yes, highness."

It was as if whatever force had been holding Feenix in the sitting position and conscious deserted her without warning. Her head felt as if it was going to float off her neck, while her back was a blaze of burning agony. Her stomach rebelled and she was afraid she would vomit all over herself.

She opened her eyes as a pair of dirty boots met her view. Lifting her head was the hardest task she had ever done, she thought.

“I do not believe you can walk...can you, human?”

L’Garn’s terse words warred with the concern Feenix thought she saw in his eyes. She was probably hallucinating, being so close to passing out.

Before she could summon the strength to reply, he picked her up with gentle hands and draped her over his shoulder. “I believe this is becoming a habit.”

She could feel his heart pounding and his lungs laboring as he fought to control his anger and rage. She knew the battle fever, once upon a warrior, took a while to be totally exorcized.

“Don’t worry, elf-man,” she muttered between clenched teeth as she tried to remain conscious. “I won’t let it become a habit you enjoy.”

“Too late,” he growled.

The old slave followed them out of the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I am afraid I will have to cut the garment off of her, highness. Her back must be cleansed and there are bits of cloth inside the wounds."

"Do it."

L'Garn watched as Lala examined the woman's back. The beaten slave made no noise, although he knew she was conscious still. Her blue eyes, glazed with pain, stared at a fixed point on the wall; her bloody lip had disappeared between straight white teeth. He did not know how she managed to keep from fainting.

L'Garn had seen seasoned warriors weep like little children under the lash. When he was young, he had watched a male slave whipped to death. He had kept his mother awake for many days with the terrible dreams. Another lesson learned courtesy of his grandfather.

"We should move her into the slave quarters, highness."

"No. You will tend to her here."

"Highness, there will be much blood. I can not keep your bed from becoming soiled. It is not fitting that such a one be here in your rooms like this. Let me have a couple of slaves remove her before we begin the healing process."

He knew the old woman was concerned about his dignity, and shocked at his command not to move the human. A half-dead slave in his quarters was unthinkable. He could see the old slave wondering how the king would take the news. It did not matter; he would not give up this chance to observe a human so closely.

"No. Go on with what you are doing. The slave needs to be attended to immediately. Proceed."

Lala hesitated but a moment more. "I will need to get some supplies from my room, highness. Hot water, salves and new clothing for her."

"Do so."

Lala hurried from the room, closing the door softly as she left. The only sound to be heard was the wounded slave's shallow and rapid breathing.

L'Garn moved to the bed and stood looking down on the woman. Red lines, oozing thick blood, left the gray gown in tatters across her back.

"Now what?"

The woman's voice, raw and husky from the pain, startled him. Though she had been beaten near to death, her spirit was unbroken.

"Rest. Lala will return soon to tend your wounds."

The woman picked her head up to look at him, and a sharp hiss of pain escaped her lips.

"Help me up."

"Do not be more foolish than you can help," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder to hold her down. He was surprised at how little force was needed. Her voice had made him think she was stronger than she was. "You must have your back treated before a fever sets in."

"Get your filthy hand off me, scum!" The movement of her arm to fend him off made her groan. He watched her squeeze her eyes tight against the pain.

"I have to kill that demon scum, Holdert, and then get back to my camp. They will be waiting for me."

"They must needs be disappointed, then," he said.

He did not release her, but instead forced her head back down into the softness of the bed's pallet. She moaned softly, but did not try to rise again.

"Would you like some water?"

He took her deep grunt to be an affirmative. L'Garn moved to a small table that held a stone pitcher and crystal glass, and filled the goblet with water.

"Here," he said, offering it to her. "Drink, but slowly."

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes before parting her lips in acceptance of the gift he offered. Without blinking or taking her gaze from his, she sucked down three large gulps before turning her head away. He watched as she licked her ravaged lips before laying her head back down.

"Why me?"

He could barely hear the whispered words.

"Why did you take me?"

He returned the glass to the table, taking the time to place it exactly where it had been, even wiping the side of the crystal of a lone drop of moisture. It would not do to mar the precious gloss of the wood's satin finish.

"Because I could."

She sucked in her breath and tried to rise from the bed. The effort tore a painful groan from her throat. He was amazed at her strength of will.

"By the god's left ear, the only reason you captured me, elf-man, is because I was without my weapons. Otherwise, your puny magic would never have worked."

The husky voice held little strength, but the determination and pride behind the words was easy to hear. He moved to the bed and reached out to stop her from sitting up.

"Don't touch me," she grunted between clenched teeth.

"You are in no position to give me orders. Lie back down. Lala will be here to dress your wounds."

Pushing his hand away, she growled, "I would rather take twenty more stripes of the whip than have one of you disgusting elfin types touch me."

But the effort to swing her legs around was too much. L'Garn watched the pain wash over her face in undisguised agony, and all color drained from her cheeks. He caught her as she fainted and almost slipped off the bed.

Holding her in his arms, an awareness of her as a female jolted through his soul. Her hair smelled of sea water and cinnamon—a combination he would have never thought would be pleasant. Her body was soft yet firm, and she weighed next to nothing, a fact he already knew from carrying her into Cragimore. The urge to bury his face in her neck to inhale a deeper taste of her scent was almost unbearable.

Forcing his muscles to respond to his commands, he laid her down gently just as someone knocked on the door. When Lala entered, the human woman was prone on her stomach, and L'Garn was on the other side of the room as if nothing had transpired during the old woman's absence.

"She has fainted from the pain, highness," Lala said, as she carefully examined her patient. "It is well that she has. This will be a painful job."

"Just get on with it, Lala."

The old slave took a pair of shears from the pocket of her dress and lifted the woman's hair, pulling it together into a bunch that she could hold in her hand. As she moved the scissors towards the mass of hair, L'Garn stepped to her side.

“Hold! What are you doing?”

The old slave cast a startled glance at him.

“I am going to cut this hair away. It will hamper my efforts to cleanse her back. It is unseemly that a slave has such long hair. It would have to be cut anyway.”

“No.”

“No?”

He could see the slave was surprised and curious, but she lowered the shears. He saw the questions she dared not ask in her eyes, and he scarce knew the answers himself.

“No. Leave the hair. It pleases me to have a house slave with such hair. The princess will be amused with such an unusual slave for her birthnight gift.”

“As you wish, highness.”

In silence, he watched Lala cut the rag from the back of the human, watched as she sponged the oozing blood from the wounds and then applied ointment to each sore. The entire process was finished in less time than he would have thought. But of course, as a prince, L’Garn had never observed such a thing, and he had no real conception of what was involved.

Lala’s surprise and unease that he was watching was a palpable thing. He could feel her disapproval echo in the silence of the room. He could see it in the stiff movements she made and the way she held her straight back. It should not matter to him that a slave disapproved of his actions; her only purpose in life was to serve and obey. His grandfather’s words should have been ingrained into his soul.

“A slave is not a being; a slave is merely a tool, a convenience, for one’s comfort and survival. A slave has no thoughts except those we care to allow him or her. Once a slave begins to think itself of value, mastery over him is lost and his usefulness is at an end. It is time to find another tool.”

By his grandfather’s reasoning, the human was too flawed, too damaged to be of much use, and therefore should be eliminated. The time spent repairing her ravaged back was wasted and could be better spent in other pursuits. But something inside L’Garn would not allow him to simply let her die. She knew things that he had to know. She was the key he needed to unlock the mysteries he had wondered about for so long. She would answer his questions and put his soul to rest, so that he could concentrate on becoming the prince and leader his king expected.

Yes. He knew that once this human had assuaged his thirst for answers about his human heritage, he would be free to put that contaminated part of himself aside and concentrate completely on his true self.

The human must live long enough for him to study her. Then, when her usefulness was done, he would get on with his life.

“It is done, highness.”

Lala had finished putting her remedies away and stood beside the bed, waiting for his pleasure. Here was a slave who knew her duty, he thought. Even though she had questions and concerns, she did not voice them, but did her work quietly and competently. She was the perfect teacher for the human.

As the head slave, Lala had certain privileges that the others did not. She had proven herself loyal and willing to please, and so had been awarded a certain position of freedom and trust. But even old Lala knew her position depended on the whim and favor of her masters.

He doubted this new slave, if she lived, would ever learn that lesson.

But, oh! How interesting life will be while he attempted to school her!

“I shall require a cot and bedding. Have it prepared while I am in the baths.”

“Highness, would it not be more convenient if we removed her into the slave quarters where she can be tended without disturbing you?”

“No, Lala. It would not be convenient. She will remain here until she is well enough to take up her duties.”

The old slave bowed in submission to his words. “Shall I have a female assigned to care for this one while she heals?”

“I prefer that you and I be the only ones this new slave comes in contact with until she is completely healed. How long do you expect that to take?”

She cast a quick assessing gaze over the woman’s back. “Without magic, she should be able to learn her duties in four or five nights. She will still be very sore and stiff, but she will be able to manage. That is, of course, unless the fever sets in.”

“You will make sure the fever does not set in, Lala. You will attend to her.”

Lala looked up with a startled expression. “You require me to sleep here?”

He walked to the bed, and looked down at the human. She was still unconscious, but her breathing seemed even.

“No. You will show me how to treat her when you are not here. You will, of course, take care of her more personal needs.”

Lala shifted her feet and looked unhappy. “Highness, it is not fitting...”

“Silence.” He cut off her protests with a glare. “You may go. I expect the cot to be set up when I get back. It has been a long night, and I require some sleep.”

“Yes, highness,” she said as she bowed and left the room.

L’Garn stood at the human’s side for a moment. Her skin was very tan. The urge to touch her to see if she was as smooth and soft as she looked was nearly unbearable. Instead, he pulled a light blanket up and covered her with it.

Sleep called, but first, a bath.

~*~

“Feenix, can you hear me?”

Her back was on fire and every muscle in her body felt like she’d been on a four-day run in complete battle armor, full pack and no rations. When was the last time she had eaten?

“Feenix, pay attention! Focus!”

Where in Mac Lir’s blue ocean was that voice coming from? And what was that god-awful stink? It smelled like some drunken demon’s breath. Had she passed out after a night of drinking and dicing? It wouldn’t be the first time. The stench was probably coming from whatever unknown lover she happened to drag home after the night of excess.

She opened an eye cautiously, not sure if even that tiny movement would cause pain. The room was dark and dim, with only a slight bit of light coming from somewhere near the floor. The bed was on the wrong side of the door, and, now that she thought about it, the door didn’t look like the one to her sleeping quarters. By the god’s eye balls, she wasn’t in the barracks. Nor was she in her airy room on Sasheena. Where in the Seven Cella Worlds was she?

A groan of pain tore past her lips, the noise surprising her as much as the agony of her back. Then she remembered. She was a prisoner, by the god’s left toenail, and the filthy night elf demon scum had whipped her. She dropped her head back down on the bed, too exhausted and hurting to explore her prison more closely.

“Feenix, can you hear me?”

“Where are you?” she asked, barely able to get the words past her dried and cracked lips. A movement to her right caught her attention. She tensed, not knowing what would come. “You are awake.”

She recognized the voice at once.

“Get away from me, elf-man,” she said, not bothering to turn her head to look at him. “You’ve done enough damage. Leave me alone.”

“You will eat. Lala has brought some soup for you.”

“How nice,” she sneered, looking at him at last. She must still be half out of her mind with pain, else why would he look so appealing to her? He wasn’t that much taller than she, maybe five or six centimeters, but his chest was wide and deep, with a flat stomach and narrow waist that tapered to sturdy hips. His legs were long and shapely, with strong thighs. The rounded but firm backside she had admired during her journey into the caverns.

“You will eat to regain your strength.”

She watched his mouth as he spoke. His lips were full and beautifully shaped. It was a mouth made for kissing.

“Focus, Feenix! I know you are alive. We must speak.”

There it was again! Where was that voice coming from? It was not the voice of the prince, and it seemed to be coming from inside her head. Strange. She didn’t remember being hit on the head during the course of events.

“Did you hear that?”

L’Garn moved closer, tilting his head to the side. She was rewarded with a clear view of his silvan tipped ears and the way his trim beard hugged a firm jaw. “What did it sound like?”

“Feenix, you must tell me where you are!”

“There! Did you hear that voice?”

L’Garn moved to the door and pressed his ear to the wood. “I hear no one.” He walked back to the bed and looked down on her. “You have been very ill. You must eat to regain your strength.”

He moved a stool over by the bed and placed a stone bowl and round spoon on it. “You will eat it all.”

“Keep your filthy slop, elf-man. I’m not hungry.”

Feenix’s stomach growled loudly, and L’Garn didn’t bother to suppress his quick grin.

“Perhaps not, but you have been fighting a fever for three nights, and your body needs nourishment. You will eat as I order you.”

“Three days,” she yelled and struggled to sit up. Her head felt as though all the blood suddenly drained from it, replaced by a wad of down feathers. “By the god’s beard, I’m late! They’ll be looking for me!”

“Feenix, where are you? Speak to me. I can not hear you.”

“They will not find you. Your life as you knew it is gone. You are now a slave of Cragimore. Eat and regain your strength.”

She was totally confused. Feenix didn’t know if it was the lingering effects of the fever, or lack of food, but her head felt strange and the voice’s whispered words seemed fainter than before. Without conscious thought, she picked up the bowl of fragrant soup and took a bite. The broth was flavored with some sort of spice, but the taste was pleasant enough. Certainly her belly welcomed the warm nourishment.

“I will try again...”

The voice in her head floated away, and she was again alone inside herself. Now, why did that

idea spring into her mind?

The half-elf watched her eat, but she ignored him. What ever was in the blasted soup, it made her feel stronger and warm inside. There was no doubt about it, she had needed to eat.

"Tomorrow you will begin to learn your duties."

"When trolls sing," she said around a mouthful of soup. "Tomorrow I will be taking my leave of your fine company, elf-man."

"You seem to forget that you are my captive. I have allowed you to live, and you will reward my generosity by serving me and my mother as a member of our household staff."

Feenix put the empty bowl down and glared.

"If you will not obey, you will be whipped. Again."

As much as she would love to force those words back down his throat, Feenix knew she was too weak to do so. She sat in stony silence, willing her body to heal quickly.

After assuring himself that she was not going to refute his words, L'Garn continued, "I have decided to name you Teela..."

"My name is Feenix," she said in a low growl. "Captain Feenix of Port Marcus."

"Captain?" He looked surprised as his gaze flickered over her body. The limp gray gown she wore didn't give much protection from his sharp elfin sight. It was as if she were naked under his gaze. "Do humans give their females a warrior's title for sport?"

"I earned that title, you sorry excuse for an elf." She watched his pale blue eyes deepen into an aqua green. "It was just your good fortune that you found me without my weapons, or you would be dead right now, and I would be home drinking wine and eating something more appealing than this slop!"

She had to admire his forbearance. If their places had been reversed, he'd be picking himself up off the floor right now.

"Your previous life is over. You will be named Teela. Now you will lie down so that I may dress your wounds."

"You?" She was surprised and a little bit wary. "Why would a prince stoop to dress the wounds of a slave? If you are in truth a prince," she added, questioning his title as he questioned hers.

He turned from her and walked to the far side of the room. For the first time, she noticed a small cot, a table and a chest. She assumed that was where her guard slept while she had been so sick. Why this elf-man was here instead of a servant, she had no idea.

"I am Prince L'Garn of the House of Meedrion. You are now my property. I take excellent care of my possessions." With his back to her, he continued, "Lala is sleeping, and your wounds can not wait for her. I will do it."

"No need to dirty your hands, prince. You'll probably do more damage than good."

A strange look was in his eyes as he walked back to her bed with a small stone jar in his hand.

"You will address me as *highness*, or *master*. Lie down."

"I will address you however I damn well please! And I will not lie down!" Even Feenix could hear the childish tone of her voice. She wanted to smash the laughter from his eyes.

He loomed over her sitting form, bending down so that his face was level with her own. His pale blue eyes peered deeply into her defiant sapphire ones. "I do not recall asking for your opinion, Teela. Lie down."

Without warning, the rage left her and a weary exhaustion filled its void. She was too tired to fight the force of his presence. Every good warrior knows the value of a tactical retreat, she reasoned to herself. She reluctantly rolled over and presented her back to him.

“My name is Feenix,” she said against the soft mattress. When he didn’t answer, she smiled at the tiny victory of having the last word.

That’s how wars are won, she reminded herself, one small victory at a time.

“Untie your gown.” His deep voice above and behind her startled her.

“Why?” She picked her head up and looked at him. He was standing beside the bed, holding the jar with his fingers dipped inside, waiting to slather the medicine on her back. The unpleasant odor she had noticed when she awoke was stronger.

Feenix could read no emotion on his face. “Why would a prince do this for a prisoner? Are you slumming, highness?” she gave him his title dripping in sarcasm. “Why dirty your royal hands on me?”

“Untie your gown,” he commanded again. “I can not reach your back unless you loosen it for me to pull down.”

“How did you manage when I was unconscious?” If she thought to embarrass him, she was mistaken.

“I simply did it myself, when Lala was not here to help. Unless you want me to remove the gown, you will bare your wounds for me now.”

“Why not,” she asked after a moment of silence. “The sooner we get this over, the sooner I can get out of here.”

She raised herself up onto her elbows, the muscles in her shoulders and back burning in protest. She could feel the skin of her back pull and tighten as her stiff fingers and arms worked the ties in the front of the gown. It felt like it took hours to loosen the little strips of material, but the silent half-elf seemed content to wait patiently for her.

“There,” she said with a sigh, as she collapsed onto the bed again in exhaustion. How could such a simple task rob her of all her strength? The fever must have been a fierce one.

Cool air hit her skin as he gently pulled the gown down and away from her back. She waited, muscles tense, for him to say something or wipe the cold paste into her flesh. When the contact came, it was nothing like she had anticipated.

“Your back will be scarred, of course.”

She snorted mentally. What was one more scar, more or less?

After the initial shock of his voice and touch—a shock that sent a rush of hot tingles all the way to her toes—his hands were light and tender.

“Where did you get the other scars?”

She almost smiled at the studied nonchalance of his tone. She would have bet her favorite sword that he never wanted to ask such a personal question.

“Here and there,” she answered vaguely. “A warrior picks up a few scars along the way. Better scars than death.”

His silence was full of disbelief.

His firm fingers must have been filled with magic, she thought, although the stench from the salve was strong enough to bring tears to her eyes. She was sure it was the medicine, for Feenix of Port Marcus never cried.

She felt her muscles relax into the warm rhythm of his strokes as he smoothed the paste into her closed wounds. Her body’s response to his touch was unreasonable. She was relaxing like a babe at its mother’s breast.

“This looks as though it should have killed you.”

She sucked in her breath as his fingers traced an old sword cut from the small of her back up and around the side of her breast. She could feel her skin pebble with arousal. She must be mad

and still out of her head with fever.

“I took the full swing of a bastard sword, but I was lucky.”

“Lucky? How so?” His fingers continued to smooth old scars, as if the stinking goo he was lathering on would have any effect after all these years. She bit her lips to try to keep her sexual instincts at bay. It wasn’t as if the half-elf was trying to seduce her, by the god’s ears!

“I ducked under the goblin’s arm, and before he could finish me off, my companion skewered him like a fish.”

“Still,” L’Garn’s palm moved over her shoulders, easing sore muscles and the sting of open cuts. “With a cut like that, most people would be dead.”

Feenix couldn’t remember when she had been so relaxed, so at ease in the presence of a stranger. An enemy, in fact! Mmmm, the elf-man’s hands felt good.

“He was a priest. Cast a Healing Spell...saved my life, damn him...”

“Your wounds are healing well, Teela. Tomorrow you will rise from the bed for a period of time.”

She was too tired and content to argue with him over that foolish name. Tomorrow, after a good night’s rest, she would put him straight. For now, she would take advantage of the soft bed and wonderful feelings the prince’s hands evoked. Why should fingers on her back make her hot all over?

Too long without a lover, she supposed just before sleep claimed her.

CHAPTER SIX

“The rebuilding of Shalridoor is going well, do you not agree, brother?”

Rendolin Hiloris looked at his older brother, Thelorin, and nodded his agreement. They were standing upon a high cliff overlooking the sea. It was a perfect place to view the reconstruction and activity of the ancient home of the Sea Elves.

Shalridoor had been nearly destroyed more than three hundred and fifty years ago, when the fiercely aggressive Night Elves waged a long and bloody war against their peaceful cousins, the Sea Elves.

In order for the People of the Sea to survive, a small band of warriors, led by the heroic Leondrilik, had staged a hopeless attack on the Night Elves in their home of Cragimore. Under cover of that battle, the remaining Sea Elves, mostly females, children and older males, had quietly left Shalridoor and escaped to the secret and magical island of Sasheena. For years, it was believed throughout Tylana that the entire race of Sea Elves had been destroyed, and none had survived the Silvan War.

They had lived in peace, rebuilding their strength, until the god, Mac Lir, had decided it was time for his children of the sea to return to Shalridoor and confront their mortal enemy once again. In order for that to happen, Mac Lir’s High Priest, Rendolin, had to Bind himself for all eternity to a human woman from Earth.

Korrene had been that human, with her spark of the silvan blood which was all but extinct on her home world of Earth. Together they had joined their souls and lives for the good of the Sea Elves. They would be the beginning of a new race of elfin kind, a race better equipped to survive in a world where all silvan kind seemed to be hunted and threatened.

Even by their own cousins.

When Thelorin had learned about the god’s plan to have Rendolin Bind to a human, he was completely against the idea. He believed that humans were inferior to silvan, and to encourage the mingling of the two races would only pollute the silvan bloodlines. So adamant was he against the plan, Thelorin had led a faction of the Sea Elves against his own brother in the hope that the Binding would be stopped.

Fortunately for all the Sea Elves, Mac Lir’s plan had gone forth, even after an attempt on Rendolin’s life, and the Binding had been successful. Korrene and Rendolin were connected for all time by a bond that was more than physical or mental. It was a link that transcended time, space and spirit.

“Rendolin, my love. Dreaming about our time together is not getting Shalridoor rebuilt.”

Korrene’s spirit touched his mind with a loving caress.

“What are you doing, Korrene? Your spirit sounds so joyful.”

“You know me well, Ren. I’m singing to the land around Shalridoor. The new seeds are awakening. I never thought I’d be happy in a garden! And here I am, singing, of all things, to seeds!”

He felt her joy and laughter through the Binding link. He would be forever grateful to Mac Lir for sending his soul mate to him.

“Is Mother with you?”

“But of course! I’m too new at this spell casting business to be trusted on my own.”

Elawae's afraid I'm going to goof and nurture a patch of Blades of Grass into the size of a football field instead of a postage stamp!"

Sometimes, his Mate's words confused him.

"What is a football and postage stamp?"

She chuckled in his mind; an odd sensation, not unlike warm honey running down his spine, causing every nerve to vibrate with awareness of her.

"Never mind, my love. Your mother says I must stop flirting with you and get back to work. I'll see you later."

He sent a kiss through the ether to her and resumed his concentration on the work before him, and his brother.

Rendolin was pleased with Thelorin's willingness to complete their demanding task of making Shalridoor habitable again, even though he would eventually return to the island of Sasheena to live with those Sea Elves who did not wish to return to Tylana's mainland.

He remembered how Thelorin had opposed the Binding, as well as the idea of returning to their ancestral home, when Thelorin had first learned that Rendolin must Bind with the human female, Korrene. All the Sea Elves had come a long way from only a few short weeks ago.

"You are right, Thelorin. It is a joy to see the ruins come to life. Mother was saying only yesterday how well Korrene has taken to her silvan talent. Mac Lir is pleased that she has the nurturing magic within, and is able to coax the earth to renew itself."

Thelorin put his arm around Ren's shoulders and gave him a brotherly shake.

"Your human has surprised us all, I think, Rendolin. I will be the first to say I was wrong. As *Glenowaeli*, she is truly the mother of the new silvan race." He gave the younger elf a gentle push. "You are not finding it too difficult, I trust, as her bonded mate? Living up to everyone's expectations?"

Rendolin blushed, but did not back down from his brother's teasing gray eyes.

"It can be a difficult task, I admit, but with Mac Lir's help, I believe I am equal to the challenge."

The brothers laughed comfortably, enjoying the relaxed relationship. In the past months, it had not always been so, but the sons of the House of Hiloris had worked through some mighty concerns and challenges and were now more sure and trusting of each other as brothers, as well as leaders of their people.

"Have you had any success in your search for the other human, Feenix?" Thelorin's question caused a cloud to settle on Rendolin's mind and soul.

"No. I feel she is alive, but in great distress." He led the way down from the cliff. "I can touch her mind with the spell, but she can not hear me."

"Or perhaps she only appears to not hear you." The suspicion in Thelorin's words made his brother uneasy.

"What are you implying, brother?"

"It seems strange that she would simply vanish as she did," Thelorin replied. "Why was she not at the beach when we brought her gear? The timing of her disappearance is most inconvenient."

"Any number of things could have happened to her, as you well know." Rendolin stopped and turned to face his brother. "The currents of the sea could have taken her far off course. While in her dolphin form, she could have been attacked and hurt by some sort of sea animal. Why must you be so suspicious?"

"Because she is human, and humans can not be trusted."

“I do not wish to debate this issue with you again, Thelorin.”

“Then tell me, little brother, why she can not be found, despite the fact that your god has assured you she is alive some where? My worry is that she is alive and well, and selling us out to our enemies.”

“Feenix proved her loyalty when she took an arrow meant for me,” the High Priest said. “I do not believe her capable of treachery, Thelorin. It is your own misguided distrust of everything human that speaks.”

“Perhaps, Ren, but I will rest easier when you have found her and she is back with us. We need her to lead the army, although I could do it.”

“We have been over this ground. You are needed here, directing the assault, while Captain Feenix leads the men. But worry no more. I am planning to use a Communion spell to transmit a Healing towards her in the event that she is injured and cannot respond to me. I do not know if it will work, but I believe Mac Lir approves of the idea.”

“It is dangerous to attempt to cast two spells together,” Thelorin warned with a worried glance.

“I am no longer a novice, brother,” Rendolin said with a smile. “I will be careful. Korrene will be there to monitor me, and I will insure I make every proper preparation before attempting it.”

There were times when Thelorin’s concern for his little brother bordered on the obsessive, the High Priest thought. However, his brother’s concern for him was preferable to his former active thwarting of Rendolin’s plans. This was another thing he would be eternally grateful to Mac Lir for; the love of his brother had not been destroyed during the civil unrest and trying time on Sasheena.

“When will you make the next attempt to contact Feenix?”

“This evening, after our meal. I need to be relaxed and with a full belly, as you know,” he said with a grin. “Maintaining a spell at great distance takes nourishment, even with a god’s help.”

“I believe I will come and lend my support.”

Rendolin gave his elder brother a thoughtful look. Thelorin did not feel comfortable when Mac Lir’s magic was being done. For him to offer to be there during a potentially dangerous spell casting went a long way to show his love for his brother.

“Thelorin, you need not be there. I know Mac Lir makes you uneasy, but by the god’s beard, I know not why.”

“I want to be there, Rendolin,” the elder said, ignoring the last part of Rendolin’s comment, “if for no other reason than to be proved wrong about the human.”

Rendolin made a mental note to question Thelorin further about his aversion to the god and all things of priestly power. The conversation would have to wait, however. For now, they needed to focus all their concentration on Shalridoor and the dangers of the Night Elves.

The two elves had walked down from the cliff and entered the great hall of Shalridoor. Or rather, what remained of the great hall. The natural arches of living stone had been broken and burned, killing the sentient soul of the living rock. This area, as well as others in Shalridoor, would have to be rebuilt and nurtured with newly quarried stone. Spells would be cast to ensure the transplanted rock would survive the move, and eventually grow and evolve into more than just a House, as on Sasheena. Shalridoor would be reborn. It would live to shelter and protect the Children of the Sea once again.

Crews of elves lovingly cleaned and repaired the walls, removing scorches and scars while casting Healing spells on the construction. Some areas, like the great hall, would have to be completely reconstructed, removing the diseased stone as a doctor removes infection from a

wound. Rendolin was grateful that his magic did not include knowledge of the living land, for he was sure he would not be able to stand the agony of Shalridoor's groans and pain.

Korrene's awakening magic had its source in earth magic, and she had cried herself to sleep the first night of their return. It was beyond her own ability to block from her senses the pain of the land. Finally, Rendolin had set up a camp a few miles away from the ruin, simply to allow his beloved an easing of the pain she and others were trying desperately to heal.

"I can feel it through the soles of my feet, all the way up my spine and into my brain," she sobbed in his arms. "It's like the very earth itself is crying in agony, Rendolin. What can I do to stop it?"

He had no words of comfort for her, other than they would do all in their power to bind the wounds and heal Shalridoor. Then he reminded her that the work would not be complete until the Night Elves were destroyed, as they had tried to destroy the Sea Elves and Shalridoor.

"If you can not locate Captain Feenix," Thelorin's words brought Rendolin back to the present, "how far back will that put our plans to attack Cragimore?"

"The loss of Feenix is devastating. She has the experience and skills of leading armies, brother. However, I can tell you that Mac Lir does not seem overly concerned about it. I have the feeling that the god had expected this crisis."

"I wish that god of yours would give you a straight answer, Rendolin. Do you think it would be too much to ask him directly where the human is?"

Thelorin's frustration with the slow process of the god's will made his words harsh.

Rendolin grinned, but he too wished the god would be more forthcoming.

"We can not rush a god, my brother."

Thelorin sighed deeply then cast a worried look over the crews working in the great hall.

"I need to get back to work. I will see you after dinner when you prepare to cast the Communion spell again. Perhaps you will have better luck tonight."

Rendolin watched him move lightly through the piles of rubble. He made a mental note to have the debris removed tomorrow. For now he would return to the chamber deep inside Shalridoor that housed the worship area. He would begin his preparations for the casting this evening.

While the huge chamber was deep inside Shalridoor, it was an airy place where one wall stood open to the sea. A panoramic view of the Tylana shoreline, with the sapphire blue sea stretching to the horizon, was balm to his soul. He watched as gulls and other sea birds swooped and dived, playing in the gentle swells. A soft breeze lifted his shoulder-length golden hair, and his nose identified at least four distinct scents of new vegetation growing along the now reclaimed beach area. Korrene and his mother were doing their job of landscape rejuvenation well.

A deep feeling of peace and welcome enveloped his mind and spirit. Shalridoor was not completely dead. Parts were still flickering with life, as here in the worship area. He could feel the House's presence and its desire to offer comfort and peace to his tired soul.

The Sea Elves might be preparing for the fight of their lives with their cousins, the Night Elves, but Rendolin knew deep within himself that this was where he should be. Where Korrene and he were needed to spearhead the god's plan of a new silvan race.

With Mac Lir's help, he would find Captain Feenix and the attack would go forward. They would be successful, and his children would be free to run and play on this pristine beach. This House would shelter and comfort unnumbered elves in the future, just as it had in the past.

However, it would not come to pass without Rendolin doing his duty. He would prepare

himself for tonight. He had a growing sense that this evening he would finally make contact, and Feenix would be well. Tonight, some of the answers would be made known to him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Feenix came awake without moving a muscle. Years of military experience, coupled with surviving on the streets of Port Marcus, allowed her to clear her mind of any residual dream. She didn't know what small noise woke her from her exhausted sleep, but her killer instincts were all active and screaming for attention.

She opened her eyes and peered around the dark room.

The small cot on the other side of the room was empty, as was the stool beside her bed. She was alone. Had it been the closing of the door that had alerted her? She didn't think so, and she remained still as she sent her senses questing into the room.

Her ears detected nothing; her eyes caught no movement; her reflexes did not tell her to move quickly. Except for a faint trace of rosemary overlaying the constant musty smell of mold permeating everything in Cragimore, all was as it should be.

Yet she knew something important had disturbed her sleep.

Slowly, as if moving in her sleep, she turned to her side to get a more complete view of the room. She sucked in a breath to keep a moan of pain from escaping, but that too would be part of a sleeping woman's act.

"Feenix, can you hear me?"

She stopped breathing, listening hard to the voice that seemed to come from within her head. She could almost taste the rosemary herb at the back of her throat. Was she dreaming?

"Feenix, wake up. We must talk."

"By Mac Lir's beard, who are you?"

Her whispered question barely carried to the foot of the bed. If the person was in the room, they could not hear the words.

"The god be praised," the voice answered. *"You can hear me."*

Feenix sat up and looked around the room.

"I hear you, but where are you? Rendolin? Is that you? How did you get here? Where's the army? Are you attacking? How in Mac Lir's blue ocean did you find me? And why are you talking in my brain?"

Her questions tumbled out of her like coins from a sliced pouch. She didn't know how Rendolin Hiloris, High Priest of Mac Lir, was able to speak to her from seemingly inside her head, but he was, and she wanted to know what had taken him so long to find her.

"Hold, Feenix! Be still, woman! By Mac Lir's ears, you don't need to yell!"

"Yell? You sorry excuse for a high priest," she whispered into the night, "I'll yell! Why didn't you leave my gear on the beach like we agreed? Do you know that, thanks to you, I've been made a slave of the Night Elves? I've been whipped and insulted and didn't even have a dull knife on me to prevent it. When I get out of here, elf, I'm going to kill you and your brother for this!"

"You are what?" Rendolin's voice asked inside her head. She barely had time to register the elf's surprise before he continued. *"This could not be better, captain! You are in a position to learn our enemies' secrets from within!"*

"What are you talking about? Get me the hell out of here! Now! And you better explain real fast why you can talk to me and not even be here. I suppose it's one of your filthy magic spells, isn't it? Why is it you elfin types all think you can cast spells on me whenever you want?"

In her agitation, she had thrown the covers from her and had begun to pace the room.

“Calm yourself, Feenix. The spell is tenuous at best, and all your distress is distracting me. Silence, and listen to me.”

She threw herself down on the edge of the bed and muttered, “This better be good, elf. I’m getting tired of being the object of elfin spells. When I get done with this war, I’m going to find a sorcerer who will get me some spell protection!”

She could feel him take a mental breath to calm himself. She had watched him cast spells long enough to know he was taking cleansing breaths which would allow him to deepen the spell. She wondered briefly who was monitoring his body while he was in the trance, but his voice broke into her thoughts.

“First, where are you? Answer slowly and quietly. You do not need to speak aloud for me to hear you while we are linked.”

“I don’t like all this spell casting, priesthood stuff, Rendolin, and well you know it! Just get me out of here.”

“Answer the question, captain. That is an order.”

Damn. Since he put it that way, she would have to obey. She was, after all, the captain of his personal guard. Even if he was ten leagues or more away, as a mercenary she had pledged her sword and service to him. His people depended upon her leadership skills, and Rendolin and his brother Thelorin were counting on her to lead their army against the Night Elves.

But more than that, he paid her bills.

“I was captured on the beach when I came ashore after the *Change*. I’m a prisoner in Cragimore.”

She could feel his excitement, and the control he used to dampen his distraction.

“Can you tell me where the entrance to Cragimore lies?”

“No. The prince cast a spell on me. He also blindfolded me so I wouldn’t be able to see. Of course, if I had my weapons, he would be dead right now.”

“Peace, woman. What prince?”

She felt herself blush in the darkness of the room. Fool woman, she thought, why should she blush at the mere mention of his name?

“Apparently, my captor isn’t just some common elfin scum. His name is L’Garn and he claims to be the Prince of the House of Meedrion.”

“Meedrion?”

She felt his shock.

“The House of Meedrion. That’s what he said. Does it have some significance?”

Rendolin’s voice was quiet, and she was beginning to think she had lost contact with him before he spoke again.

“Feenix, are you able to move around, or do they hold you prisoner in a cell or chained somewhere?”

“For now, I’m free to move around the room, but I don’t know about the rest of the place. I have a disgusting metal collar around my neck, but they haven’t chained me to the wall again. I was whipped, as I said, and have been sick. Apparently a fever set in. How long have I been in this hole?”

“A fever. Yes, I detected some infection and knew something was wrong. The reason it took so long to establish a link with you is because you were unconscious. And, too, the communion spell is not as effective when combined with a Transit Healing.”

“I don’t need all that magic mumbo jumbo, Rendolin! Just tell me how long I’ve been here!”

Feenix didn't know if she could hold on to her temper much longer. She wished the High Priest would just answer her questions without all the extra commentary.

"You have been gone for three days. Not counting the day you returned to the beach."

That confirmed what L'Garn had told her. She was surprised at herself for being pleased that the elf-man hadn't lied.

That didn't mean he could be trusted, she reminded herself, *so don't get all misty and weak in the knees.*

"What of the war?" she resumed her interrogation of the Sea Elf. "We are supposed to attack within the week. You have to get me out of here so I can lead the army."

"Even if you escaped today, you are too weakened to lead the army against the Night Elves. No, Captain Feenix. It is best you stay there. Mac Lir had you captured for a grand purpose, I am sure."

She jumped up from the bed and stormed across the room, ignoring the pain in her back.

"Do you mean to tell me that god arranged this little side trip? I might have known! Were you in on the plans, too, elf? Is that why my gear wasn't on the beach for me?" She was so angry she forgot she didn't need to speak out loud.

"Peace, Feenix. The spell is wavering."

"I don't give a damn about your blasted spell! Get me out of here! They plan to turn me into a household slave! Can you see me scrubbing floors or serving food to some demon scum of an elf?"

"I can not hold it much longer...do what you can to survive..."

The fragrance of rosemary was dwindling along with Rendolin's words.

"I will contact you again soon. In the meantime, Feenix, learn all you can about our enemy's stronghold. The god knows best. With you in the Night Elves' camp, we..."

Rendolin's voice faded away, and she was left standing in the middle of the dark room with nothing but her impotent fury and a feeling of deep loss.

How dare they leave her here alone? Didn't they know who she was? They couldn't possibly win the war without her. She had to escape as soon as she could. She needed a plan.

Without any warning, her body betrayed her with a wave of exhaustion that almost buckled her legs beneath her. She caught herself on the side of the table, knocking over the delicate crystal goblet. She watched in dismay as it rolled off the edge and smashed into hundreds of glistening shards against the stone floor. A feeling of dread blossomed inside her stomach.

She had watched L'Garn handle the glass with respect and care for the past few days. He had never said anything about it, but his very actions told her it was a possession he valued highly. She hated the thought of him finding it smashed into so many pieces on the floor.

She looked around her as if to find something to clean up the mess in clear sight. Nothing. By the god's right toe, what was she to do now?

Another wave of weariness washed over her, draining her like a day-long battle in the hot sun. All thoughts of escape, Rendolin, and future plans were replaced by the desperate need to climb back into bed and sleep. But first, she had to do something about the glass all over the floor.

She sank to her knees and began picking up the largest pieces of crystal. It wasn't an easy task since the goblet had shattered into tiny pieces. The largest was about the size of her finger. And where was she going to stash the tell-tale evidence if she did manage to pick all the pieces up?

"Mac Lir," she grumbled as she worked, "I'll bet you're laughing your miserable beard off

while I stumble around getting into more and more trouble! It was a sorry day for me when you saved my life!”

She swept the floor with the side of her palm, gently brushing the pieces into a tidy pile. Tiny slivers of glass pricked her skin, but she ignored the discomfort. She had to finish this task before she dropped from tiredness.

How could these people live without any decent light, she wanted to know? Didn't they believe in candles, or torches? How was a person expected to see what they were doing in the dark? The only reason she was doing as well as she was at finding the glass was because the floor had that strange stuff along the walls that gave off a faint glow. She sure wished she had a good torch right about now.

“What have you done?”

Lala's screech startled Feenix so badly, she jumped and sliced her palm open on one of the larger pieces of glass.

“Don't scream like that,” she yelled at the old slave. “You almost scared me witless! Now look what I've done,” she said as she held up her hand and blood ran down her wrist. “I just get to feeling better over one set of wounds, and you go and give me a whole new batch!”

She tried to get up from her kneeling position on the floor, but found she had no strength left to do more than wilt against the leg of the table.

“You foolish human,” the slave fussed as she dabbed at Feenix's hand. The cut wasn't very serious, but all the little bits of glass slivers in the side of her hand, combined with the new cut, caused her to suck in her breath in pain.

“How did you manage to do this? What are you doing out of bed?” Lala asked in a stern tone, as she picked slivers from Feenix's hand. “You should be sleeping.”

“By the god's left toe, don't fuss,” Feenix ordered weakly. “Help me get back to bed and I'll gladly go to sleep.”

The old slave helped the warrior woman back to bed, tucked her in, and then proceeded to clean up the broken glass.

“His highness will not be pleased at this, oh, no he will not,” she mumbled as she swept up the mess. “And who will be to blame, I ask? Lala, that is who,” she answered for herself.

Feenix barely heard the elf as she worked. Her thoughts were on Rendolin and the god leaving her in the hands of the enemy, and how she was going to get herself out of this latest bit of trouble. The last thing she remembered before drifting off to sleep was L'Garn entering, speaking quietly with Lala and then smoothing the blanket across Feenix's shoulders.

Why would he do that?

But her weary brain refused to find an answer before succumbing to sleep.

~*~

When she awoke again, Lala was waiting for her, along with two other female slaves. Together, the three of them convinced Feenix it would be in her best interest to cooperate with them. She ate in silence, pondering Rendolin's words and trying to decide the best course of action for her.

Clearly, she was in no state to fight her way free of Cragimore, even if she happened upon a sword. And, too, now that she had time to ponder Rendolin's plan, the idea to gather as much information about the inside of the enemy's camp and its workings, if possible, was a wise and sound one. Perhaps it was the best thing all around to go along with Lala and her master, just to

get a feel of the place.

While Feenix ate, Lala used the time to begin teaching her some of the things she needed to know in order to survive life as a slave to the Night Elves.

“Whenever a Night Elf gives you an order, you are to obey, quickly and without question. Once you have worked off the loss of Prince L’Garn’s goblet, you will be allowed one half night to yourself to use how you will, as long as you remain within the slave compound.”

“Was the goblet special?” she asked, remembering the way he had touched it.

“It was a gift from his mother, and priceless.”

Why should she feel so bad about breaking her captor’s goblet? She covered her embarrassment, ignoring the subject of the broken cup with her usual bombastic nature.

“How thoughtful of them to give us a half day all to ourselves.”

“You will do well to keep that sarcastic tongue in your head, Teela. And we count time by nights here in Cragimore, not days.”

“My name is Feenix.” She was beginning to lose her patience with the old slave and this sorry excuse for breakfast. “What is this stuff I’m eating?” She grimaced as she spooned an unappetizing globule back into the bowl. “And what in the god’s blue ocean are those chunky green things?”

“That is korsh. You will become used to it after eating it every night for breakfast.”

“Korsh?” She took a tentative whiff and stirred the gray-brown mass once. “What’s it got in it? It looks like something a raw recruit would puke up his first trip to a tavern. And it smells like wet dog hair.”

Lala finished straightening the bed and made a disapproving face before answering the warrior woman. “It is full of things that will keep you healthy and strong. That is all you need know.”

“I need to know more than that, if you expect me to eat this slop every day.” Feenix pushed the bowl away.

“You will soon wish you had eaten everything, Teela. But I see you are the type that will have to learn from experience. So be it. As I was saying,” Lala continued as she tidied around the room, “you are not allowed outside the compound, unless you are under orders from a master. Also, if you wish to keep that long hair,” Lala warned her, “you will be wise to keep it in a braid.”

Since Feenix usually kept her hair in a long plait down her back anyway, she made no comment. Why argue with someone when they wanted you to do something you normally did?

She was more interested in finding out the lay of the land, so to speak. How could she get Lala to tell her what she needed to know? Like, how could she get out of this dark hole and where were the weapons kept...and when would L’Garn make another appearance?

“So, what is the first thing we’re doing today? Am I going to the kitchens to learn how to cook, or to the laundry to wash these lovely garments?” She spread the hem of her gray gown out with both hands, as if to display the glories of the garment. The movement sent a dull ache through her back, but the pain was bearable this day.

The two young slaves that had come in with Lala looked at Feenix as if she had just uttered the vilest sacrilege. One actually looked behind her as if she expected to be hit for merely being in the same room with Feenix.

“You will soon lose that biting tongue, Teela, if you survive the caverns.” Lala’s voice was reprimanding, but Feenix thought she heard a trace of something else in the elf’s voice. Could it be that the head slave was not as tame and obedient as she would have them all believe?

“Well, if it isn’t to be the kitchen or laundry,” she said with a saucy grin, “why don’t you take me outside so we can pick some flowers for the prince’s dinner table?”

One of the young slaves actually threw her hands over her head and hid her face in her elbows. By the god’s left toe, these females were pitiful excuses for the sex. Where was their pride, their backbone?

“You will cease speaking such nonsense, Teela, or I will be forced to punish you.”

“You don’t have the nerve for it, Lala,” Feenix told her, looking the old elf in the eyes. Again she noticed the odd coloration and depth of expression in Lala’s gaze. Why did they seem so strange?

“Are you asking for another whipping, Teela?”

The young slaves backed towards the table, cowering by the wall. As if on cue, the door swung open and a large guard stood in the doorway. He carried a sword sheathed in a well-used scabbard and a dagger in his boot. Clutched lovingly in his hands was a short, wooden-handled whip.

He must have been listening through the door, Feenix thought.

Feenix stood to her full height and smiled a dangerous grin.

“I believe I’ll wait for my current set of stripes to heal completely before accepting your generous offer.” There was no way she was going to allow them to beat her senseless again, so soon after gaining her feet. Tactical retreat was the best form of attack. Sometimes.

Lala nodded to the guard, and he stepped to the side of the door and stood with his back to the corridor wall, watching and waiting for Feenix to make a wrong move. The two young slaves looked at the head slave with begging eyes. With another curt nod, she allowed them to leave the room. The guard closed the door slowly.

“Prince L’Garn has left orders that you are to remain in this room for now.” As Feenix opened her mouth to argue, Lala continued, “I am to teach you the order of things before you are given your work assignment.”

“You will answer my questions?”

Lala folded her arms across her chest. “I will tell you the order of things so that you will know what you may do and what you may not do. It is very obvious to me and Prince L’Garn that you do not know the way of the silvan people. I am to help you learn how to keep from causing yourself harm.”

She turned and walked over to the table. Feenix merely stood in the middle of the room, wondering if she was dreaming or perhaps in the middle of a fevered hallucination. This elf was going to tell her, Captain Feenix of Port Marcus, how to stay out of trouble?

“You may sit in my presence, Teela, but only after I give you permission to do so. Otherwise it is not proper for a new slave to take such liberties.”

Feenix blinked at the old elf. Lala settled herself in the room’s only comfortable chair and motioned to the stool. “I give you permission now to sit.”

By Mac Lir’s big thumb, the elf actually thought she could tell her what to do? Permission to sit down?

“Permission to sit down?” Her voice was pitched high in amazement. “You give *me* permission to sit down?”

Feenix kicked the stool across the room and it shattered against the stone wall.

“By Mac Lir’s ears, that’s very nice of you, Lala, to give me permission to sit down. However, I think I’ll pass right now because I’m just a little too agitated to sit.” She towered over the elf sitting calmly in the chair. Feenix forced herself to keep her fury in check and not

strangle the little elf. “Is it *proper* for me to tell you to take a flying leap into an abyss?”

“Whatever you were before coming to Cragimore,” Lala said to the glowering Feenix, “does not exist here. You are a slave, and if you hope to survive, you will learn to act and speak as one.” The elf stood and confronted Feenix’s rage calmly. “I know what it is like to be ripped from all you hold dear. What it is like to lose friends and family and be forced into labor that is alien and beneath you. But I survived, Teela, and you can too. With my help.”

“I am not like you, elf,” Feenix ground out between clenched teeth. “I will not survive as you do. I will escape.”

The look the old slave gave her was sad and weary. With a shake of her gray head she dismissed the woman’s words.

“How will you escape, Teela? You do not even know the way to the entrance. You were blindfolded when the Prince brought you in. You will never be given duties that will allow you to that part of the caverns.

“If you are lucky, you will find favor with the prince and he will eventually give you to a master who will not beat you too often and give you totally demeaning duties. If you are not so lucky,” she continued, “you will be beaten every day for your insolence. Then, the best you will be able to hope for is a swift death.”

Feenix ground her teeth and balled her hands into tight fists. By the god’s beard, how she wanted to punch someone’s face in! She had half a mind to pummel this old slave into a lifeless pulp, but she knew her present situation wasn’t Lala’s doing. It was all that elf-man’s fault. And the fickle god who claimed to have Feenix’s good at heart.

“You know nothing of me, slave. I am a warrior—a damned good one—and your elf-man prince will not hold me captive here forever. I *will* escape. And I will take great pleasure out of killing as many elves as possible as I leave!”

“You are a foolish human. Despite your brave words, you are only a female, after all.”

“Do you have such low esteem of our sex, Lala, that you do not think we can accomplish the desires of our hearts?”

“When the desire is to act as a male and to accomplish the impossible, I do not believe it can be achieved.”

Feenix raked the old elf with hard eyes. “I pray to the gods I never believe that my dreams are impossible. For the day I stop dreaming will be the day of my death. In the meantime, I do not lie. I am a warrior. I will escape, and when I do, Cragimore will not long remain standing.”

“Brave words for a female. Brave, false words.”

Neither Lala nor Feenix had noticed that L’Garn had entered the room during their heated words. Both women swung around and faced the handsome prince. Lala silently dropped in a deep curtsy, bowing her head and hiding her face.

Feenix took two long strides, pulled back her fist, and punched L’Garn full in the mouth.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She hit him! By the Jewels, the human hit him in the jaw. Pain exploded inside his mouth and he grabbed her wrist as she delivered another punch, this time to his stomach. She ducked as he tried to capture her with his free arm. She swung around and kicked out, using her foot in a totally unmilitary maneuver. Her heel caught him on the thigh, and for a second his leg wanted to buckle.

No female had ever dared to talk back to him, and certainly none had ever hit him. L’Garn fought his temper as he attempted to subdue the furious human. He did not want to hurt her, but he was beginning to think the only way to stop her attacks was to render her unconscious with a punch to the jaw.

They fought in silence; only their labored breathing and the occasional grunt of pain from a well-placed punch broke the stillness of the room. Even Old Lala stood back and watched the fight in shocked silence.

L’Garn could have easily pinned the human. The thought of grabbing a fist full of the long black braid and pulling her head back flashed through his mind, but for some unknown reason he did not want to use her own weakness against her. She was weak from her recent ordeal under the whip, and he knew she was tiring fast. He could bide his time.

In the meantime, he continued to evade most of her jabs. The ones she landed became less and less powerful. He saw the truth in her eyes. She knew he was just waiting her out.

“Come on, you scum,” she panted. He watched her try to ignore a stab of pain as she used her back muscles to throw another punch. “I’ll kill you for daring to make a slave out of me!”

L’Garn ducked a wildly thrown punch to his head, and finally caught her other wrist in an iron fist. Hooking his foot behind her leg, he pulled her off balance and into his arms.

Even in her weakened and exhausted state, it took a fair amount of strength for him to hold on to her. Wrapping his arms fully around her, he pinned her arms, one down at her side and the other trapped between their chests. She continued to struggle, trying to kick him, but her feet were pitiful weapons without hard boots. He maintained his hold on the struggling woman, waiting for her to tire.

L’Garn looked down into her face and absorbed a blast of hate and rage that rocked his soul. Their eyes locked in a war of wills that was just as desperate, it seemed to him, as the physical battle that held them both. In fascination, he watched as her eyes changed from deep blue and filled with rage, to a softer hue that swirled with confusion mixed with some unexplained emotion.

Rage and hate he understood.

This was something completely unknown to him.

Her feet came to a gradual stop. Her body grew softer and a little more pliable as she relaxed in his arms. Strange that, as her body became softer, his body became as hard as stone. He could not pull his gaze away from her eyes.

Unbidden, her human scent assailed his nose and the hairs on the back of his head stood on end as a wave of premonition or anticipation washed through him. His heart slammed against his chest as if he had just raced up a mountain. He felt her breath change and catch in her throat.

Why should this human affect him in this way?

With an angry growl, he filled his hand with the silky braid and jerked her head back.

Instantly, the long smooth column of her tanned neck, the beauty of its clean lines broken only by the silver circle of the slave collar, lay under his gaze; awaiting his assault. A low moan escaped the woman, but she remained acquiescent in his arms.

He had intended to force her to acknowledge his mastery, to feel his determination to have her as a slave, but he did not want to hurt her, only intimidate her. However, with the long expanse of her neck before him, he stilled. She swallowed, and he watched the movement in amazement. Such a slender neck. He could easily snap it with his hand.

Without conscious thought, he bent and placed his mouth on the base of her throat, exactly over the tiny pulse that he saw fluttering beneath her tanned skin. His tongue felt the faint beat of her lifeblood racing through her body. Her taste was exquisite, foreign and exotic. And forbidden.

The woman growled low in her throat. He felt it through his lips and the tip of his tongue rather than heard it. The taste became a need to sample more.

L’Garn nibbled and savored his way to her jaw and chin. As his lips progressed up her neck, his grasp on her hair loosened, and she slowly brought her head up. He nibbled her chin. She tipped her head and captured his lips with hers.

Again his heart slammed into his chest, and this time it felt as if it would burst. There was nothing timid and innocent about her kiss. This was a female who had been kissed often and knew exactly how to extract a male’s soul with the touch of tongue and lips. Need and hunger lay in wait for him as he explored the taste and texture of her mouth.

Unbidden, Lala’s presence made itself known to him. He broke the kiss roughly, although his instincts screamed for him to linger in the woman’s arms. He had to regain control of himself and the situation.

“Do not ever dare to hit me again, Teela.”

He could not seem to catch his breath, and as a result, his voice was rougher than he intended. He watched her eyes change yet again. The anger was back. Her body became rigid with rage and she moved with unexpected speed, jerking free of his relaxed hands.

She spit in his face, then wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her gown.

“Don’t ever touch me again, elf-man, unless you want to die.”

L’Garn pushed her roughly away, then wiped the spittle from his cheek.

“No amount of spitting will help, Teela. You will always have the taste of me on your tongue, and the knowledge that I am your master in your heart.”

Before she could reply, he turned to Lala and barked an order regarding the new slave’s duties.

Then he left the room before he did something he would regret for a very long time.

Why was it that at every encounter with the human, he became more confused rather than more enlightened? Perhaps he had made a mistake in capturing her? He hated to admit it, but he did not know how to school her into obedience without punishment and pain.

Frustration and anger made his head pound. He would throw himself into the preparations for battle with the Sea Elves. That should keep thoughts of the human at bay for a while.

~*~

Feenix stood in the room and watched the prince storm out in anger. What, by Mac Lir’s brass bells, had she been thinking? Had she actually kissed that insufferable scum? Again she wiped the back of her hand across her swollen lips. The taste and smell of him lingered on her lips and

in the air.

The room wavered before her eyes. Her muscles refused to obey her, and the nerves covering every inch of her body screamed in pain. Her brain decided that the best way to stop the clamoring of pain was to shut down her body functions. Feenix pitched forward.

Lala was there to catch her. She led Feenix to the side of the bed and helped her to sit.

“Are you determined to die, human?” The old slave checked the wounds on Feenix’s back and made annoyed sounds as she worked.

“He deserved a punch in the mouth and much more. I’ve been itching to hit him from the first moment I laid eyes on him!”

Lala smoothed some salve on a wound and continued her lecture.

“It seems to me you are begging to be killed. Was the whipping not enough to teach you obedience? Must you also hit Prince L’Garn and then kiss him?”

“I didn’t kiss him, he kissed me!” Feenix jerked away from Lala’s touch. “And it was the worst kiss I’ve ever had!”

Lala gathered up the medicine and stood. “It seemed to me that you enjoyed the kiss very much, Teela. If you have plans to become L’Garn’s concubine, you will have to refrain from hitting him. Males do not like it when a female hits them.”

“I don’t have any plans except to escape from this dank hole! And I will, just as soon as you let me out of this room!”

“You will be leaving this room soon, and then we will see how you will manage this escape of yours,” the old slave said as she put away the salve and picked up the chair that had been knocked over in the fight. “His highness has given orders that you are well enough to begin light duties. The guards will be here momentarily to replace your fetters.”

Feenix jumped up, ignoring the pain in her back. “By the god’s blue eyes, what fetters? I will not be chained again, slave! I will kill you before I let you put chains on me again.”

“As you killed the prince?” the slave asked as she opened the door to admit two large elves carrying swords and clubs.

Feenix backed up a step. If she could just get her hands on one of those swords, she knew she could fight her way clear of the room.

“And then what, Feenix?” a voice deep within her mind asked. *“Are you going to fight the entire Night Elf population all by yourself? I think not.”*

The smell of rosemary drifted to her senses, and she recognized the detached voice of Rendolin Hiloris.

“Cooperate for now, captain. Learn all you can and let us know. It will make your rescue certain.”

Damn elf! She hated it when he was right. She would cooperate—for now. But she wasn’t going to like it one little bit!

The guards grabbed her and forced her against the wall. The barely healed cuts on her back burned in protest. A chain about the length of two arms was threaded through the ring attached to her collar. Then each end of the chain was attached to metal bracelets on her wrists. The chain was not long enough to allow her to put both hands down at her side. However, the ring on the collar allowed the chain to slide so she could extend one arm to its full length, but the other arm was forced to remain bent to allow the length of the chain to accommodate the other arm. With each slide of the chain, a grating vibration banged through the base of her head, setting her teeth on edge and making her temples hurt.

The whole process took more time than the guards had expected, for Feenix was not about to

let them put the fetters on without a fight. The process was also painful. The guards saw no reason to be gentle, especially after one of Feenix's feet almost connected with one of the elf's most tender bits of anatomy.

Finally, the guards stepped back and Feenix steadied herself against the stone wall. The weight of the chain attached to the collar bit into the soft flesh of her neck. The manacles were already chaffing her wrists. The god had a lot to answer for, she fumed to herself.

"Now, Teela," the head slave said to her. "I will show you the main slave quarters. Your feet have not been shackled because his highness did not think you would be foolish enough to try to run. However, I will not hesitate to have the guards put them on, if you force me to."

"How considerate of the swine prince," Feenix said with mock pleasure. "Remind me to thank him the next time I see him."

"A slave does not indulge in sarcasm. Follow me, Teela."

For a moment, Feenix almost broke and ran. The panic of being below ground with her movements restricted almost overwhelmed her good sense. By the god's left toe, how she hated to be at the mercy of another being—especially an enemy.

"Peace, Feenix," said Rendolin softly into the turmoil of her mind. "You are not alone. We will do this together, captain. Tell me all that you see while I hold the spell. When this is over and done with, you and I will enjoy a tankard of ale and laugh about how together we fooled our enemy."

"You'll owe me a full hogshead of ale for this, and nothing less, elf!"

Feenix took a calming breath and fell in behind the head slave. Not to her surprise, the two guards closed ranks behind her.

The small parade left the room, followed the hand-hewn corridor for about thirty meters, and then entered the caverns of Cragimore. Feenix gaped at the huge expanse of the cave before her, but managed to give Rendolin an accurate description, through the mind link, of all she saw.

The cavern was full of noise and light. It took Feenix a moment to adjust her eyes to the brightness, after days of practically no light at all. The noise was harder to adjust to. It seemed to be coming from hundreds of voices, as well as machinery and a background roar that could only be the movement of huge amounts of water.

The air was warm and glistened with minuscule drops of moisture that gave the torch light in the cave an unusual glow. The smell of clean water and moist earth was welcome after the stench of the ever-present glowing fungus in the Prince's room and the hall.

The corridor from which they had just emerged had very obviously been hewn from the living rock. It was smooth and comparatively straight. However the huge cavern they had now entered was all natural. Torches blazed and smoked around the area, casting light upon a scene Feenix would never have been able to imagine, even in her dreams.

A great vaulted ceiling reached higher, in places, than the light from the torches could touch. A haze of smoke floated lazily above, looking like a layer of angry clouds. She estimated that the roof had to be well over fifty meters. In some places, large stalactites hung in graceful shapes. In other places, the ceiling was low and smooth but had odd, glowing fungus all over it.

On the far side of the cavern were massive columns of rock that had formed by water seeping through the ground to drip in endless monotony for eons. Feenix had seen similar formations in the Wilderness Caves, outside of Port Marcus, but nothing like these gigantic growths. These were so huge, she could see that the Night Elves had actually hollowed out some of them and used them for rooms.

To her right was a large open area where fire pits and cooking spits blazed away. The

tantalizing smell of cooked meat and other foods didn't quite reach her, but her imagination provided ample food for her mouth to water. How long had it been since she had a good meal? She couldn't remember.

She watched numerous slaves scurry and toil as they performed various duties. Some were cooking; some were preparing food; some, she was relieved to see, cleaned and scrubbed large pots and utensils. If she was put to work there, she vowed to steal a mouthful or two, merely to strengthen herself, of course.

Lala led Feenix to the left of the entrance. The ground was uneven and worn smooth from uncounted numbers of feet. However, it was evident that much work had also been done to clear stalagmites and other rock outcrops to allow a path or road of sorts leading to the various other areas of the cavern.

Without hesitation, Lala continued to lead Feenix to what turned out to be a laundry area. Huge vats of water were set atop large fire pits. Steam billowed up and mixed with the mist that was rising from beneath the floor. As they grew closer, Feenix was able to see that the floor of the cavern gave away and dropped to an opening displaying the most spectacular waterfalls she had ever seen.

The falls took up the entire south and eastern side of the hole, allowing millions of tons of water to cascade and drop to an unknown destination, deep within the bowels of Tylana. The edge of the drop had been fenced off to prevent a fall, but to Feenix's mind, it still didn't look all that safe. She certainly wasn't going to test its strength if she could help it.

"This is the laundry area, Teela." Lala had to shout to be heard above the roar of the falls. "You will be assigned to help with the Royal Family's garments. Kelma is the head laundress, and she will instruct you in your duties."

A female elf, younger than Lala, came forward and took stock of Feenix. By the look on her thin face, she was not impressed with what she saw.

Neither was Feenix.

The laundress was thin, but muscles on her arms looked like they could break a person in two without half trying. Her hair was short cropped, as was all the slaves', and her eyes were red-rimmed and tired. This slave also wore the ugly, plain gown that seemed to be the standard Night Elf slave uniform.

Feenix noted that most of the slaves working in the area were without chains, although all wore the ever-present slave collar.

"What is this?" Kelma's voice was nasal and high pitched. She held herself straight, but her shoulders were bowed with years of bending over wash pots, Feenix was sure.

"This is a new slave that Prince L'Garn has commanded be given the duties of the royal House. You will teach her how to clean and preserve the royal garments."

Kelma was taller than Lala, and Feenix thought she recognized the look of the Sea Elves, but she couldn't be sure in the half light of the cavern. Perhaps this one had the blood of Rendolin and Thelorin in her veins.

"You will do as I say, or you will be beaten," was all the comment that Kelma made to Lala's explanation. "Come. You will begin with the fire pits."

I hope you are paying attention, Rendolin, Feenix said in her mind. I haven't done anyone's laundry since I could hold a sword in my hand. You will owe me many favors for this, elf.

She followed the laundress to an unoccupied and cold fire pit.

"You will build the fire. The wood and fuel are over there," Kelma pointed to the back wall of the laundry area. "Take only as much as you need, and do not waste it, or you will be whipped.

Fuel is hard to come by.”

Not only was she to be a scumming laundry hag, she had to haul the bloody fuel, too? By Mac Lir’s beard, this was asking too much of her!

“Softly, Feenix,” Rendolin soothed. *“It is but for a short while. You have built countless fires in your life. It is not a difficult chore for you.”*

That’s easy for you to say, elf, she spoke into her mind. *You do not have to do this chore with a metal collar around your neck and your arms chained to it!*

“When the fire is burning well, you will put the laundry kettle on the pit. Fill it with water, so.”

Kelma showed her how to attach a sluice into the wall, which apparently tapped into the water flowing over the falls. The force of the falls pushed the water down the sluice and into the kettle. Once the kettle had enough water, the sluice was closed and the kettle detached.

“As the water heats, you will put in the soap and stir with this paddle.” Feenix noted the large wooden paddle that looked like a giant’s spoon, resting against the wall of the cavern.

“When the water is boiling, you will add this pile of clothing to it.”

The slave continued to instruct Feenix in the proper use of the laundry and how to tend the royal clothing. Feenix bit her lip continually, trying to keep her anger and frustration from flaring. If she was to find out the secrets of Cragimore, she would need to be silent and patient. It was a bit like reconnoitering, she thought. In fact, the more she thought of it in those terms, the easier it was to accept instruction, and even correction, from Kelma.

Almost.

“You are doing well, Feenix,” Rendolin spoke to her. *“I will break the spell now. However, I will be back again when you have more information.”*

Feenix almost screamed in frustration as she felt the elf’s presence leave her mind. Alone in the enemy camp, forced to wear chains and do menial labor, this was not what she had anticipated when she emerged from the water after the *Change*.

Mac Lir, you son of a sea whore. You will pay for this. Oh, yes, Feenix of Port Marcus will make you pay.

She bent her back to the labor before her. Perhaps it wasn’t as physically challenging as a day-long battle, but the muscles of her back and arms had been weakened from the flogging and her illness. She gritted her teeth and called upon her reservoir of endurance to get the job done. All she had to do was survive this, and she would be out of here soon enough.

Unbidden, the thought and taste of L’Garn floated through her mind. He was another who would pay for her humiliation and disgrace. Prince L’Garn of the House of Meedrion would soon be begging Feenix of Port Marcus for mercy and his miserable life.

She smiled grimly at the picture in her mind, and picked up the paddle to stir the clothes.

CHAPTER NINE

“Of all the plagues and curses that abound in the entire Seven Cella Worlds, you are the most misbegotten of the lot! What have I ever done to merit a bastard outbreed for my only blood kin?”

The king of the Night Elves, Zimpher the Golden, sat upon his high tiered throne of black-marbled crystal. A long, golden cloak had been thrown from his shoulders and spilled down the sides of the noble chair.

His bald head held the Crown of Meedrion at an awkward angle, for his agitation with his grandson had knocked it askew. The black crystal crown was laced with pure silvan silver, and studded with five flawless diamonds around the front.

Beneath the heavy emblem of power, Zimpher’s pasty face looked pinched and pulled into hundreds of tiny lines, giving him the appearance of an elf more than twice his age. L’Garn knew his grandfather had recently celebrated his six hundred ninety-eighth birthnight, but the king looked much older.

Rage compressed his mouth, causing his lips to all but disappear. An intense light of displeasure glowed from his pale eyes as he pinned his wayward grandson with a look of contempt. L’Garn wondered, not for the first time, if Zimpher would have him tossed into the deepest hole of Cragimore and forget about him. It would solve many problems, he knew.

As always, the large cavern seemed to vibrate with a deep, penetrating background hum that almost, but not quite, registered in his ears. Instead, every bone and muscle in his body thrummed with the dark resonance, setting his teeth on edge and his head to pounding. The air crackled with pent energy, red and throbbing, impatient for release.

Priest lights, those rare and impressive bits of luxury, were placed around the room, giving off a faint illumination and richly reflecting the glistening black crystal walls, ceiling, and floor which made up the royal throne room of Cragimore. The room, with its strange atmosphere and underlying drone of menace, had never ceased to intimidate L’Garn whenever he was called upon to enter it.

“How are you, grandfather?” L’Garn made a flawlessly correct bow, acknowledging his usual greeting from his royal grandsire. “I trust you enjoyed your pilgrimage, and are well?”

“How can I be well? I return from my monthly sojourn to the god’s altar, and I find that you—*tilsark* disgrace that you are—have made a pet out of a human! How dare you bring one of those unclean beasts into our presence?”

L’Garn was not sure if his grandfather was angry because a hated human was within Cragimore’s walls, or if the fact that L’Garn had shown a partiality for the slave was what drove the king to such great rage. Probably both, he conjectured.

“By all reports,” the king continued, “you can not even control the female. Why is a slave housed in the quarters of the royal prince? I am told she actually hit you! Why is she still alive?”

“Grandfather...your majesty,” L’Garn corrected when he saw the gleam of red rage glitter in the old eyes at his mention of blood title. “I believe I may learn much from the human slave, if I can but study her for a time.”

The king made a motion of disgust with his hand.

“What can you learn from such as that? Interest in this human is merely proof of the taint in your own blood.”

L’Garn ran his hand through his short hair in an attempt to relieve his frustration and calm his own growing anger.

“This taint of my blood—I have been trying to overcome it all my life.”

“With no noticeable success!”

“Your pardon, sire, but how can one defeat an enemy one does not know? If I can but study the human and see what makes her different; what her traits are, then I believe I will be able to purge these flaws from myself.”

The king stood, pulled his flowing cloak around him and hurried down the five steep steps that led to the imposing throne, like a great golden carrion bird.

L’Garn fought the urge to step back as Zimpher descended to launch a closer attack.

“I already know what your flaws are!” The old elf’s lips were covered with spittle that flew towards L’Garn and landed on his cheek like hot oil. “For years I have been telling you where you need to improve. You are soft! Your emotions are too easily engaged!”

L’Garn dared not wipe the saliva from his face, knowing any action on his part would merely provoke his grandfather into more fury.

The king poked the prince with a long bony finger. “By the Jewels! Just think on how you bungled the handling of the slave thus far! How did you punish her for the insolence of hitting you?”

“I did not,” L’Garn answered, “other than to send her to the laundry to work all day with the dregs. She has not completely healed from the whipping.”

The old elf turned away in disgust, his cloak snapping around his ankles as he motioned for an unseen slave to bring him a goblet of wine.

“That is exactly what I am talking about. How do you expect to control your men and even the slaves if you continue to show this type of weakness? The slave should have been executed on the spot!”

“I disagree, sire.”

Grabbing the goblet, the king whirled around to face his grandson yet again. He squinted in malicious concentration, eyes narrowed and distrustful.

“It shames me that you are the best the House of Meedrion can hope to leave on the throne of Cragimore. I should have taken you from your mother and raised you myself! I would have purged that human taint from you long ago!”

L’Garn drew himself to his full height and forced his hands to remain at his side.

“You tried often enough, grandfather. Or have you forgotten the beatings and floggings?”

Zimpher took a deep gulp from the goblet, holding his relentless gaze on the prince without flickering. He lowered the cup and belched heartily before answering.

“I remember trying to knock your foolishness from you, but you never did learn what was expected of a royal prince. I have given up any hope that you might improve with age.”

L’Garn slowly and deliberately ground his right fist into the palm of his left hand, as if trying to grind into tiny bits all the frustration, rage and feelings of failure he had endured his entire life. He would *not* show guilt and remorse in front of his grandfather. Such traits were what he was trying to overcome. He had to remain in control of his emotions, or the king would be at him like a dragon with a bad tooth.

A Night Elf did not allow such weakness to color his decisions and actions. His grandfather was right. He was too flawed to be an effective leader of his people. However, his was the only leadership the House of Meedrion could provide, and so he must overcome his tainted human blood.

Or die trying.

"I did not call you here merely to speak of the slave," the king said in a completely different voice. It was as if another person now looked at him through his grandfather's old eyes. "A company of Sea Elves is attempting to re-infest Shalridoor. The vermin seem to believe they can reclaim the ruins."

"So, the report is true," L'Garn said quietly. He was unsure of this new mood of the king's.

"True as Tuawtha's whip." Zimpher tossed his empty goblet over his shoulder without a glance, and a silent slave deftly caught it and retreated back into the shadows of the cavern. "Korrander will lead a company of fighters on a raid tomorrow night. We will test the vermin's mettle."

A sly, secret look had settled on the king's face, and L'Garn could not read anything on it except for the hate that blazed in his eyes.

"Korrander? Sire, he is too old to be leading a raid. Send me."

"Do not, in your youth and ignorance, think that we old men have lived past our usefulness!" Zimpher's eyes blazed with a haze that seemed maniacal.

When had his grandfather's sour opinions turned to such powerful hate?

"Korrander has some experience against the Sea Elves, if you recall. He was a captain during the glorious days of Meedrion, when we swept the enemy from Tylana's shores, as a fire cleansing the earth!"

L'Garn took a step towards his grandfather. "Yes, but that was over three hundred forty-seven years ago, grandfather. Korrander's old wounds have caused him to go blind in one eye, and he limps so badly he will not be able to keep up with his men on the forced march to Shalridoor. Such a march will kill him, for he will not allow himself to lag behind his men."

"If he can not keep up with his men, then he is better to be dead! He would tell you that himself, were he here!"

"Sire," L'Garn began, but Zimpher cut him off.

"Silence! The subject is not open for debate! Korrander will lead the attack—including a company of your own men."

His own men? He was to hand over his company to a sick old man, without a word? Knowing that they would probably all die because the leader of the raid was too old and broken to lead a command with any success? It was not to be bourn.

"Then I will go with them."

"No. You will stay."

"But, sire! My men and I have scouted that area and route for the past three years. I know every cliff and hillock, every possible ambush and every spot for defense. I will be able to advise Korrander so that the raid will be a success."

"Your men will advise Korrander. You will remain here."

L'Garn turned from the king and strode across the hall. He could feel the king's eyes boring holes in his back, but his frustration and anger prevented him from caring about the king's displeasure at his rudeness.

His men taken from his command and he himself ordered to remain in Cragimore! As if he were a child unfit to see a job through completion!

Unless...

He stopped his pacing and turned to his grandfather as a new, more humiliating thought entered his head.

"Did mother ask that you keep me out of danger?"

“As if I would listen to a female,” the old elf snorted with disgust. “No. I have a job for you.”

L’Garn should have known his mother’s wants and concerns would have no sway on his grandfather. He was amazed he had even thought of such a thing.

Zimpher smiled a wicked grin before turning to ascend the stairs to the throne. He took his time settling himself comfortably, and L’Garn knew this was all a game to the old elf, to put the prince on edge. He wanted to demand what the job was, but knew the king would only tell him in his own good time. If L’Garn asked for information, Zimpher would consider his curiosity as further evidence of L’Garn’s tainted human blood.

L’Garn folded his arms and tried to appear as if he waited patiently for his grandfather’s words. In truth, his hot human blood was screaming for an explanation.

“As I said, Korrandor will lead a raid on Shalridor. I do not expect the attack to be overly successful, but I do expect to learn the extent of the Sea Elves’ repairs, strength and perhaps a few of their long term plans.”

A slave stepped forward with a bowl of fruit, and the king picked up a clump of dark grapes, selected two plump specimens and popped them into his mouth.

L’Garn waited.

“The company will leave tonight, spend the day in the shelter of the cliff caverns, and then attack tomorrow night,” Zimpher said, his mouth full of the juicy fruit. “They will not take any captives, but merely be on an information gathering trip.”

L’Garn could not remain quiet any longer.

“And what will *my* duties be, sire?”

He hated the knowing smile that slide across his grandfather’s thin lips. As he suspected, the king took his question to be another weakness of his human blood heritage.

“I have issued orders that you will take over the command of the slave pits.”

“The slave pits? But, sire! Am I being demoted? Punished for something?”

He could not believe his grandfather would demean him in such a way in front of the entire Night Elf nation. The slave pits, by the Jewels!

The king tossed the bare cluster of stems to the floor and reached for another handful of the plump fruit.

“It is obvious to me,” the king said between grapes, “from your lack of appropriate handling of the human, that you have not learned the true value of a slave. Therefore, you will have command of the slave pits and the guards, where, it is hoped, you will come to a realization of the proper usage and maintenance of our property.”

To argue with the king would only enrage him and L’Garn knew his punishment would be extended and made more distasteful. However, he could not stop himself from asking, “How long does my liege require my services in the slave quarters?”

“Until such time as I feel you have learned your place, and the place of the slaves,” the old king screamed at his grandson.

He had risen to his full height, standing before the throne. His crown slipped even lower over one eye, and the spittle on his lips mixed with the juice of the grapes to run down his chin onto the golden cloth of his cloak. Deep purple pulp oozed through his fingers, as he squeezed the handful of grapes unconsciously in his rage.

“Your first duty will be to see to the extinction of all the Sea Elves we have in captivity.”

“Sire. They are some of our most hard working and useful slaves.”

“You dare to question your king?”

The old elf was working himself into a crazed frenzy, it seemed to L’Garn. He couldn’t

remember ever seeing him like this, and this change was making the prince very uneasy.

“No, sire. It is just that I do not understand why we would destroy perfectly good slaves without need.”

The old elf took a step down from the throne. His face was pulled into a mask of rage that was nearly unrecognizable to his grandson. The old pale eyes were so bloodshot, they almost appeared red. A large vein stood out from the king’s temple and ran down the side of his face to his neck. It jumped and throbbed with each word and breath Zimpher took.

“Use your head, you outbreed *tilsark*,” he screamed. “If the Sea Elves are back at Shalridoor, that means they are planning to attack us at some time. We can not have the enemy alive in our own stronghold! We will kill them now so they will not have an opportunity to harm us from within!”

Zimpher’s words made some sense to L’Garn, but to kill more than twenty elves in cold blood did not sit very well with him.

“Perhaps we could move them deeper into the caverns and double the guards...” His words trailed away as he watched his grandfather’s face become even more alien to him, if such a thing were possible. Never had he seen such rage and hate on his face.

Such evil.

While Zimpher had always been stern and merciless with his grandson, L’Garn had never thought him evil. Until this moment. The skin at the back of his neck felt as if it was crawling, and the hair on top of his head echoed the sensation.

L’Garn had the feeling he was not looking at his grandfather, but at some evil personage who had taken on the form of his king. The longer the idea stayed in his mind, the stronger it took hold of his heart. The being peering out of his grandfather’s eyes was not Zimpher the Golden, but some alien monster of unknown origin.

L’Garn’s heart began to pound, the blood rushing through his veins, throbbing in his ears. Throbbing in time to the dark thrumming of the cavern itself.

“Tomorrow night,” the beast inside the king said, “just as Korrandar attacks the Sea Elves, you will execute every Sea Elf inside Cragimore.” The red eyes drilled into L’Garn’s brain, burning away his resistance and compelling him to obedience. “You will see to it personally, or your human pet, as well as your mother, will never see another night.”

L’Garn swallowed the bile that threatened to erupt from his mouth, and bowed before his king.

“I shall serve my king.”

He straightened and then turned to leave the throne room. His instincts told him that this was not his grandfather sitting on the black crystal throne of Meedrion, but how to prove it?

As he strode from the room, deep demonic laughter followed him through the corridors.

The king was insane.

CHAPTER TEN

Feenix had no idea how long she was forced to slave away in the laundry before Lala sent for her and rescued her from the exhausting work. A century, at least, must have come and gone before she was allowed a small rest. Kelma expected the job to be perfectly executed after explaining it to the warrior woman only once. She kept her eyes on Feenix while the human slave worked, and only had to use her small stick three times to redirect Feenix's attention.

As the warrior woman worked, she noted the number of slaves in the laundry area, tried to estimate those in the kitchens, and most importantly, tried to count how many Night Elf guards were scattered about. This was not an easy chore, since Kelma's stick kept her from staring for very long, and the elves seemed to change watch often. While Feenix toiled away, she counted three watch changes.

Which only goes to prove, she thought to herself morosely, that I've been washing that elf-man's dirty clothes for far too long. By the god's left eye, my lower back and arms are ready to fall off!

She had determined that most likely the area over by the great rock formations, which had been hollowed out, was a military station. It was from that area that the guards came and went when the change was made.

The guards were all armed with swords, daggers and clubs of different types. Some carried whips. All seemed to enjoy using them at the slightest provocation.

Their uniforms were padded leather tunics and leather pants. These provided basic protection from an enemy, and had the added benefit of mobility, Feenix knew. She herself preferred leather armor over metal. She wondered if she could manage to find herself in that general vicinity some day soon so she could 'acquire' some new clothing. Of course, it went without saying that she would also need to decorate her new wardrobe. A sharp sword and dagger would do nicely.

During her break, a young slave handed her half a loaf of warm bread and a small crock of weak ale. She was surprised at the taste and texture of the bread. It was as good as the best baked breads to be found in Port Marcus, and that was saying quite a bit. Even Rendolin's people couldn't bake bread that fine.

So, she mused to herself, that meant these Night Elves had a steady, fresh supply of wheat and must be able to grind it very fine. Interesting. All she had to do was find the mill. That was the sort of information Rendolin would need to know.

While she ate, she watched the other slaves assigned to the laundry. One, an ugly male who seemed as old as the mountains and as broken and bent as an ancient oak tree, sat down beside her while she rested. He smelled like rotten fish and lye soap. His face and hands were brown and knotted with disease, and she wondered how he could perform any work with his deformed fingers.

"Hey, don't sit so close to me," she said to him. His smell was destroying her enjoyment of the bread. Instead of getting up and moving, as she had hoped, the creature sidled closer to her and gave her a hopeful look. His orange eyes were milky and vague, but she could sense some intelligence from them. The strange eye color gave her a bit of a shock.

"Go away! Leave me alone to enjoy my rest."

Actually, now that she was paying closer attention to him, she realized he wasn't an elf.

Neither was he a human. In fact, he looked as if he were related to a troll.

By the god's left toenail, he was the smallest troll she had ever heard of! Could he be part troll and part something else, she wondered as she peered at him closely. Was it possible?

"Are you a troll?" she asked before her better sense took over from her ingrained curiosity. How many times had she found herself in trouble because she didn't think before putting her hand into the dragon's mouth?

At the word *troll*, the creature's face broke in half in what Feenix hoped was a friendly grin. He pulled a piece of meat from within his dirty tunic, moved a little closer and offered Feenix his prize. "Good."

The word rolled off his tongue like a groan from the living earth.

"No, I don't want it," she said with a shudder when he continued to hold the meat to her.

The smile slipped from his face, to be replaced by a questioning, intent look. He dropped the meat on the bench between them, and proceeded to grope about his tunic, obviously looking for another morsel to tempt her with.

"No, go away. I don't want anything from you, by Mac Lir's beard!" She moved down the bench as far as the seat would allow. She eyed the laundry paddle, wondering if it would be an effective weapon against a troll person. She knew real trolls had tremendous strength, and their claws excreted a poison when cutting flesh. But she also knew that real trolls weren't as small as this, and didn't have brown skin. Usually. At least none that she had ever encountered.

She glanced at his hands again and was relieved to see broken and dirty finger nails, not claws.

Damn, but she was too tired to fight a troll. If she ever got out of this dank hole, she was going to hunt down a particular couple of elves and fry their hides over a hot fire! She thought she heard the god laugh.

After a flurry of patting his sides, chest and even his groin area, the creature pulled an object from the back of his tunic, sniffed it once, then held it out to Feenix.

"Good. Give to pretty."

Resting against the cracked and ruined palm of his hand was a pale blue, delicate flower that Feenix recognized immediately.

"Where did you get that Kestrel?" Without thought, she reached out and took the offered flower. "And it's fresh! By the god's left ear, where did you get this?"

Feenix hadn't seen a Kestrel flower in years. She knew they only grew in meadows and they could not be transplanted. Where would a person find Kestrel inside a cavern? She put the delicate, daisy-like petals to her nose and inhaled the pungent odor. Its fragrance took her back to the last time she smelled kestrel.

She had been leading a small merchant caravan from Port Marcus to the town of Timklin in the northeast. It was her job to get them through some rough and dangerous country unmolested. Five days out of Port Marcus, the party had been attacked by a small band of roving marauders. One person, the merchant himself, had been badly injured as he had defended his wagonload of goods. That night when the caravan made their camp, they had stumbled upon a small patch of the blue flowers. Feenix supposed the god had been smiling upon the group, for the flowers were comparatively rare. But most importantly, the flowers could be used to heal sickness and wounds.

Feenix brewed a batch of Kestrel tea and had the injured man drink it. The tea could produce a deep sleep full of happy dreams, and the sleeper would afterwards awake refreshed. In this case, the man woke up with his wounds almost completely healed. In fact, due to Feenix's tea, he

was back on his feet in record time. He was very grateful. She smiled as she remembered just how grateful he had been. For the remaining nights on the road, they shared the same bedroll.

While the interlude was pleasant, the memory of L’Garn’s kiss now overshadowed all images of the merchant’s caress. When it came time to part company, he had given her a beautiful gold handled dagger, engraved with hunting cats, to remember him by. Funny. She remembered the dagger in great detail, but the man’s name was lost in time.

“Pretty,” the troll person said, interrupting her thoughts.

Feenix moved a little closer to the creature, and in a friendly voice asked, “Where did you get this?” Perhaps this slave had access to freedom! She became excited thinking her escape was only hours away, provided she could charm him into divulging the exit to this hole.

Without warning, reality crashed down on her. Even if this slave knew the way outside, where did he get the Kestrel? They were in the bowels of the earth, buried beneath leagues of mountain range. How could a flower that only grows in a meadow grow on the side of a mountain?

But the flower was fresh, she reminded herself. The petals, although bent a bit from the creature’s pocket, were smooth and supple. This flower hadn’t been picked more than two hours ago. Where did it come from? If she could convince her new friend to show her where he got it, or if he had more flowers she could persuade him to give to her, she could then make a tea to get over the lingering effects of the beating, and repair her strength and stamina. Then she would be strong enough to fight her way free, when the time came.

She swallowed her growing excitement and focused on making this creature her best friend.

“Feenix,” she said slowly, smiling like an idiot and patting herself on her chest. Then she motioned to him, “What’s your name?”

“Eagnad,” he said, pointing to himself. She was surprised he understood her, for he certainly didn’t look like he was very bright.

“Egg-gnat? Your name is Egg-gnat?”

“Yes. Eagnad. Pretty Feenix,” the creature answered, patting her on the arm. She wasn’t sure she wanted him to actually touch her, but at least he seemed friendly enough.

“Do you have more of these flowers?” She peered over her shoulder, hoping Kelma wouldn’t choose that particular moment to send her back to work.

“Pretty flowers,” he said, motioning to the Kestrel in her hand.

“Eagnad, do you have more pretty flowers?”

Again he began patting his body, searching for the gods knew what in his pockets. With a triumphant grin that rather looked like a hole had just opened on the side of a large oak tree, Eagnad pulled a handful of crushed blue flowers from the left side of his tunic. The tangy smell of Kestrel wafted to her, and she smiled as her new friend’s eyes began to droop. Too much sniffing of Kestrel blooms could cause a person to nod off.

“May I have the flowers, Eagnad?”

She held her hands out to him, hoping he would give them to her without much trouble. She just wasn’t up to arguing and pleading right now. In fact, the only thing she was up to was a long nap. The smell of the Kestrel must be getting to her, too, she thought. Although, after all the things she’d been through since that blasted *Change*, a little nap was in order, she was sure.

“Eagnad,” she tried again, shaking her head against the desire to lie down, “Can you show me where you got these pretty flowers?”

“Atop,” he answered with a look of mischief. “Eagnad go atop. Tricked Looker.”

With a feeling of having just fallen off of a galloping horse and knocking herself senseless, Feenix tried to understand the troll’s words.

“Where is Atop? Can you show me?”

The troll put a dirty finger on the side of his nose.

“Secret, shhhh. Very much danger. Looker get she.” Then he threw his head back and stared at the cavern’s vaulted roof.

Feenix looked up, but all she could see was the rocky ceiling through a smoky haze. This was getting her nowhere.

She touched Eagnad’s sleeve, wondering what type of vermin were living in the rag. “Eagnad, can you take me Atop?”

He looked at her with his strange, orange eyes. She must be imagining things because she would have sworn she saw pity reflected from their milky depths.

“Pretty Feenix not go. Her belong to prince. Pretty Feenix stay in rocks. Looker not get she.”

“Eagnad! Get back to work!”

Kelma’s bellowed command was punctuated by a solid hit of her stick on his back. Feenix grabbed the flowers before Eagnad had time to tuck them away, and before Kelma saw the exchange. The warrior woman stuffed them in the front of her ragged gown, hiding the motion by standing quickly and picking up the laundry paddle. Looking over her shoulder, she watched as Eagnad shuffled away and resumed his job of hauling the heavy sacks of dirty clothing to the washers.

“You! Teela!” Kelma walked over to Feenix and prodded her with the stick. “Lala wants you.”

She put the paddle down and wiped her water-pickled palms on her thighs. “Where is she?” Whap!

Before Feenix knew to duck, Kelma hit her on the shoulder with the stick. Damn, but it hurt!

“You will address me with respect.”

Feenix fought the urge to yell and beat the elf senseless. That would not solve her present situation. She closed her eyes for a second, and took a deep breath.

“Yes, Kelma. Where may I find Lala?”

There. That didn’t hurt too much, she lectured herself.

“She is waiting for you in Prince L’Garn’s room.” The laundress motioned to a guard.

“Sir, take this one back to Lala in the prince’s room.” She turned to Feenix. “You will report to me after your breakfast tomorrow.”

Feenix watched her walk away, and then the guard gave her a none-too-gentle push towards the cavern’s opening.

“Move, slave.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, but obviously the oaf didn’t recognize sarcasm when he heard it.

She was relieved to reach the room. Not only was she bone tired, and her muscles and back ached in ways she had never experienced, but she was anxious to brew herself a cup of Kestrel tea. She only hoped Lala would allow her the luxury of having a pot of hot water.

The head slave was waiting for her when Feenix and the guard returned to L’Garn’s room. There was no sign of the prince. Feenix wasn’t sure if she was happy about that or disappointed. But at least she wouldn’t have to listen to his slander.

Without warning, her lips tingled with the remembered texture of his as he had kissed her back. The flavor and scent of the prince teased her tongue and caused shivers to run down her spine.

Lala dismissed the guard, and the elf’s movement broke Feenix’s reverie.

“Kelma tells me you worked fairly well today, Teela. She only had to hit you three times.”

The old slave watched Feenix closely to see how her words were received.

Feenix rubbed her shoulder a bit. “Any halfwit from the lowest scum pile could do the work, Lala. If they had a mind, and the muscles.”

Lala nodded once. “I would like to know why you cooperated so readily. I would not have expected it from you. In fact, I was anticipating having to use force.”

“Is this a test?” the warrior woman snarled. “Look, what did you expect me to do? I’m chained, without my weapons, half dead from a beating and then an illness. The cavern must have had over fifty guards crawling all over the place—”

“You counted. I expected nothing less.”

“If I had caused a row, I would have been killed. I’m crazy, Lala. Not stupid.”

“Still,” Lala continued, “I thought your tongue would get you into more trouble. Apparently, you kept it between your teeth and only spoke to Kelma and Eagnad.”

“Gossip travels fast in Cragimore,” Feenix commented dryly. “How did Kelma manage to tell you all this before I got back here? The troll and I had our conversation just before Kelma sent me back to the room.” She quirked an eyebrow and cocked a grin. “Eagnad *is* a troll, right? Although I have to tell you, I’ve never seen a troll that little or even one that was friendly.”

Lala couldn’t hide a slight smile.

“We believe Eagnad’s father was part troll. We do not know for certain, as he was born here in Cragimore after his mother had been taken in a raid. His mother did not survive the birth. What did you and Eagnad have to converse about?”

Feenix didn’t want to discuss the Kestrel flowers with Lala.

“He wanted to give me some disgusting and smelly meat. I don’t know why. Are you telling me Eagnad’s been a slave all his life?” Feenix could not even begin to contain the horror at such a fate and used the little troll to move the subject away from the blue flowers. “How long have you been here, Lala? Were you born here, too?”

Lala walked to the table and adjusted the dish and cup laid out for L’Garn’s meal.

“No, I was not born in Cragimore.” Her words were so low, Feenix had to strain to hear them.

“It’s obvious you’re not a Night Elf. Where did you come from?”

The head slave whirled around and threw an angry glance at her. “Do you not know it is highly rude to ask such questions, human? Where we come from matters not. We are of Cragimore now. We have no other life than to serve.”

Feenix couldn’t believe her ears.

“And how long did they have to beat you for you to believe that lie?”

“Enough of this talk! It is not your place to question me, Teela. While I was not born here, Cragimore is my home now. Leave it at that.”

Feenix sensed something from the elf. Lala said all the correct words, but Feenix wasn’t convinced that the head slave believed them. Something in the way she stood, her mannerisms, even a quality of her voice, told the warrior woman that Lala was not as resigned and content being a slave of Cragimore as she would have her believe.

“Are slaves allowed to have mates? Families?”

Lala seemed startled by the question.

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s a terrible crime that you are forced to live your entire life in a place not of your choosing, doing work for other people at their whim. But it would be a tragedy if you were not allowed to find a little bit of happiness in such an existence.” She peered at the slave’s face to try to read the emotions on it. “Please tell me, Lala, that you have a mate or someone who holds you at night

while you sleep.”

For a moment, Feenix thought she saw deep sadness and the beginning of a tear in the head slave’s eyes, but before she could be sure, Lala turned her back and walked to the other side of the room.

“Your questions are not proper. Are you hoping for something more than a slave/master relationship with the Prince?” Lala’s voice was serious and pensive. “Believe me, the most you can ever hope for is to become his concubine for a short while. You must put such thoughts from your mind.”

The thought of being L’Garn’s concubine sent a rush of heat through Feenix’s blood. She may have enjoyed kissing the elf-man, but she certainly wasn’t going to be around long enough to find a Night Elf attractive! By Mac Lir’s ears, she would not start hungering after him, she commanded herself.

Herself wasn’t listening.

“I have no intention of becoming anyone’s concubine and I won’t be around here long enough to get attached to the prince. But if I feel the urge to enjoy a pleasant romp in another’s bed, by the god’s blue eyes, I will!”

Lala shook her head.

“You are the property of Prince L’Garn. He will approve or disapprove of what you do and what you think.”

“You’re the second person who has told me your prince owns me. I belong to no one but myself!”

“If the prince—your master—grants you the supreme honor of finding a mate, you will have had to work long and hard to earn that gift. Such a thing does not happen often. Do not even think along those lines until you have learned to curb your tongue and obey without uttering a word in question.”

“You can’t be serious.” Feenix was horrified. She had never had to ask permission for sex, and she wasn’t about to start now, just because she found herself in a difficult situation. If some male caught her eye, and if he was willing, she’d damn well please herself. No stinking elf-man was going to stop her.

“You will find, Teela, that I am very serious. My job is to teach you the way to go on as a slave of Cragimore. There is no room for disobedience. If you do not listen and learn, you will find yourself with a scarred back and the most menial jobs. Do yourself a favor and learn quickly. It is the only way to survive.”

“By the god’s ears,” Feenix muttered to herself, “then I might as well be living in a nunnery!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

L’Garn entered the room quietly so as not to disturb Teela. It was not that he was being thoughtful of her needs. Rather, he was still pondering his grandfather’s words and did not want to have to answer questions from the human, or worse, get into another argument.

The order he had been given to kill the slaves, survivors of the Meedrion wars and captives brought back from those long ago raids, did not sit well with him. Some of those elves he had known all his life, and to simply kill them in cold blood left a bad taste in his mouth.

If they were part of an uprising, or attacked from within Cragimore as Zimpher suggested, he could understand the need to eliminate them. But these were old slaves, many serving his people for over three hundred and fifty years. What possible threat could they pose to the people of Cragimore? Surely they were in no position to cause trouble.

But L’Garn knew that if he refused to comply with the king’s orders, Zimpher would make good his threat to kill both his mother and Teela.

The mere thought of the unruly slave caused him to glance over to her cot. She was sleeping soundly, and his legs dragged him over to the side of her bed.

The human disturbed him in a way that went beyond his comprehension. L’Garn looked down at her sleeping form and cursed himself to Tuawtha’s halls.

Being a ‘Breed, he had very little natural magic of his own. Spell casting for him needed to be supplemented with a magical object, and even then, the spell was not as powerful or as accurate as spells of full-blooded elves.

He wished he could probe her thoughts to get a better understanding of her nature, but his limited magic did not lie in that area. He was forced to rely on direct questions, and his ability to discern the truth from her. No easy task, especially since she seemed to delight in arguing and fighting with him.

She had been his captive for better than four nights now and still he put off questioning her at length. Of course, most of that time she had been in a very bad way; unconscious from the whipping that animal, Holdert, had given her and the resulting fever and illness. Strange, she had not asked about the guard when she regained consciousness. He had fully expected her to demand to kill him herself. How she enjoyed threatening people.

Of course, it was all bluster, he assured himself. He did not believe for a moment that a female as feminine and delectable as Teela could truly kill. Although, he thought as he rubbed the trim beard at his still-sore jaw, she certainly knew how to throw a punch. He really ought to punish her for that, he supposed. His grandfather was correct in that, at least.

After his talk with the king, he was going to have to make a decision about her, and soon. His grandfather was asking awkward questions and even his mother had heard about the bombastic human he had captured. He wanted her close so that he could question her at his leisure, but he was running out of excuses for not sending her to the slave quarters. Her wounds were almost completely healed, and it was not common practice for a slave to be housed in the quarters of the royal prince.

That was another point of contention between his grandfather and himself. How was it that the human was healing so quickly? Magic potions and spells were not squandered on slaves. It was against the laws of Cragimore. However, she seemed to heal faster than the normal time for wounds that had festered and caused fever. It was as if someone had cast a Healing spell upon

her.

Of course, all of Cragimore knew it could not have been him, he thought with a mental snort, so no investigation would be ordered. But people were interested in his slave, and gossip and speculation were rife as to his purposes.

He watched her as she slept and an ache to touch her smooth face was too much for him to deny. L’Garn traced the dark arch of her eyebrow with a gentle fingertip. The contrast between his pale, creamy skin and her deep tanned tone was startling. She was a woman accustomed to being out in the deadly rays of the sun. He knew she was not going to adapt to life in Cragimore with ease.

She murmured something in her sleep, and a delicate smile grew across her full lips. He touched the corner of her mouth and wondered what she was dreaming about. The thought flitted through his mind that he should wake her and ask.

Lala had reported that Teela worked long and hard in the laundry that night. While he was leading a company of surly warriors and scouting out the Sea Elves in Shalridoor, Teela had been washing his family’s clothing. Appropriate duties for a slave and a female, but for some reason he did not feel it would have suited Teela’s temperament. Lala’s report that she had been cooperative did not ring true in his mind.

Why would she suddenly decide to cooperate with them? He did not think it was because she was afraid of another beating. He had never seen anyone hold up so well under the whip. During the entire time, she had continued to threaten and insult them all. No, he was sure she was not intimidated.

L’Garn decided to continue to watch her closely and see if she gave herself away. In the meantime, he was tired for he had traveled a long distance this night, but then to be ordered to kill innocent people was not conducive to a pleasant rest. Somehow he needed to find a solution to his problem. Either he refused to obey the order, or he had the slaves killed. Either way, his sleep would be troubled for many a coming rest period.

If that problem were not enough, the constant strain of keeping his men in line and forcing them to obey his orders was wearing on him. He wished his grandfather did not put as much pressure on him to conform and overcome his human side. How did one totally do away with a part of himself, he wondered? He had been tracking that elusive goal his entire life.

A tiny voice deep inside his heart admitted that he did not want to completely purge his humanness. Why else would he refuse to remove his facial hair? Secretly, he took pride in standing out from among the Night Elves, demanding their attention with his obviously alien background.

His grandfather and mother were always ordering him to remove the trim beard that proclaimed him an Outbreed. He refused, preferring instead to let all who saw him know that he was different from them. Perhaps the small act of defiance was his way of excusing himself for his lack of full silvan magic. A double disgrace to the House of Meedrion.

By the Jewels, if he had to be different from everyone else, he would flaunt it! He would proudly wear this badge of disgrace and spit in the eye of any who dared to question his right to the royal title of prince. If tainted blood flowed in his veins, so did the honor of royal blood, and he would carve a place for himself in Cragimore, despite the impurities of his bloodlines.

L’Garn had determined long ago that he simply had to work harder, achieve the near impossible, and his grandfather would find him suitable and acceptable to ascend the throne of Cragimore.

That was where this human was going to play a large role in his future, he decided. Perhaps

she could give him the clue to the inner workings of his human heritage, and thus provide him with the answer to his dilemma. He had to use her to find himself. In order to have the time and opportunity to do that, she must stay close by him.

He pulled the light blanket from the bottom of the pallet, where Teela had kicked it, and covered her shoulders. He would not disturb her sleep. He needed to rest also. Tomorrow he would tell his grandfather he wanted the human as a concubine. That would enable him to keep her close by, and no one would question her sleeping in his quarters.

He felt a stirring in his blood. The thought of taking this human was not an unpleasant one. He would slake his hunger of her body and use her mind and experiences to his advantage. Then, when he knew as much about humans and how they thought and worked as possible, he would put her aside and get on with his life as the royal prince of the House of Meedrion.

A slight smile touched his lips. Tomorrow he would begin schooling Teela in her duties as his concubine. Coincidentally, his schooling as a human would begin also. It would be a pleasant learning experience, he was sure.

He turned from her slumbering form and crossed the room silently. She would need as much rest as possible before her new duties began. He vowed to himself to do all in his power to make it a pleasant experience for the slave, as well.

He slipped into bed feeling pleased with himself. Just before sleep claimed him, he wondered briefly why the possibility of Teela's pleasure would make him feel so good. But the thought flew away like a shadow in the noon sun as his mind drifted into the warm darkness of sleep.

~*~

Feenix smiled and turned her face to the sun. Birds sang a captivating chorus in the trees overhead, and a light breeze whispered through the leaves, calming her fears and sending a pleasant faint smell of spring and flowers to her nose.

She looked up into the boughs of the closest tree and watched the antics of a large bird as it danced along a thin branch, swaying to the music of the wind and birds. It was a SongBird, she realized, and was thrilled that the magical bird had come to her woods to sing for her.

The bird exulted in the freedom of the music, and he became more and more vigorous in his graceful movements. He watched her closely, and she had the feeling that he danced just for her, consumed with trying to impress her with his lithe body and supple movements.

Suddenly and without warning, an ancient old crow, feathers tipped in gray from age, swooped down and landed with a grunt on the branch her SongBird had been dancing on. The old crow poked the beautiful, younger bird cruelly with his beak, then opened its maw and screamed a dreadful cry.

Feenix tried to hide as the sky darkened with unnumbered birds flying from every direction. The air filled with their raucous cries as they swooped and dove at the young bird. The old crow again pecked the SongBird, and its ancient beak dripped blood as her magical bird fell from the branch, lost for a moment from Feenix's sight in the sea of black bird bodies.

Then, she saw the handsome SongBird tumble through the crowd of feathered bodies, dropping towards the ground at a speed that would guarantee its total destruction upon impact.

She ran through the woods, which had magically transformed into a long, cool meadow of green grass and light blue flowers. As she ran, she held her arms out, hoping to catch the SongBird to save it from death. She called out its name and in a flash of blinding light, the SongBird became L'Garn and the deadly plummet to his death slowed. He floated gracefully

down in to her arms. His smile and eyes held gratitude and an emotion she had rarely seen directed at herself.

Love.

Feenix woke with a start and found her captor standing beside the bed with a puzzled look on his face. Her heart did a flip in her breast, her palms began to sweat and her breath caught in her throat. The effects of the dream lingered. She felt rested and whole and totally confused.

“What do you want?”

“It is time to awake, Teela.” His voice held a strange edge to it she couldn’t name. “Tonight you have much to do.”

“Do all the slaves in Cragimore have the dubious honor of being awakened by a member of the royal House, or am I the only lucky one?” Feenix did not want to feel drawn to this Night Elf, and she fought the attraction with the only weapon she had, her sharp tongue.

“You are a strange creature, human,” was the only answer she got. He turned from her and busied himself across the room.

She threw the coverlet off her body and stood with a fluid movement, accompanied by the metal clanging of her chains. By Mac Lir’s blue eyes! Her back did not hurt, nor were her muscles sore! The Kestrel had done its job! The only way she could tell she had been beaten was in the tightness of her skin as it pulled across the recently healed scars.

The chains at her wrists jingled and banged against the bed as she straightened it from her sleep. Sleeping in chains, and a metal collar around her throat, was a challenge.

Lala had taught her the trick was to lie as quietly as possible, once a position had been found where the chains could rest comfortably against the pallet. Never had she thought she would need to know such information.

“What’s for breakfast?” she asked as she walked towards the table. “Korsh, I suppose. By the god’s toenails, you should have someone in the kitchens who knows how to make a decent meal for breakfast. How can you stand to eat it everyday?”

His deep chuckle surprised her.

“Korsh is only for the slaves. It is made up of ingredients to ensure your health and stamina. It is the best thing for slaves to eat.”

“Is that so? Well, it tastes like black beetle dung!”

“How do you know what beetle dung tastes like? Do humans make it a habit to eat such foul things?”

She scowled at him. How could he be so handsome so soon after rising from sleep? That beard he wore made her forget he was the enemy, a hated Night Elf.

“Don’t be an ass. Of course we don’t eat such things,” she answered, ignoring his look of displeasure. Before he could reprimand her for calling him names, she hurried on, “I’m just saying your slave food tastes as foul as I think beetle dung would taste. Have you ever tried it?”

L’Garn’s displeasure turned to astonishment.

“Of course not. Why would I eat slave food?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Feenix said in a nasty voice. “Perhaps to see what your property is forced to endure while you enjoy the finest feasts. Slumming, perhaps? An experiment?”

He put his hands on his hips and tilted his head as if he were seeing her in a new perspective.

“Why would I want to know those things? Ah, I believe you are teasing me,” he said, nodding as if he had just solved a great puzzle.

“No, elf-man, I’m not teasing you. Didn’t you ever wonder what it was like to be a slave, to be forced to eat only a certain type of food, or work all day doing a job you had no choice over?”

He shook his head at her, the puzzlement back in his eyes.

"We eat the food provided for nourishment and health. We all do the work required of us, each according to his station. No one has the freedom to choose what they will be or do in life, Teela. Where did you get such strange ideas?"

"Where did I get..." she broke off in amazement. "You are a prince, by the god's ears! A *prince*! Doesn't that mean anything around here? You could have whatever you wanted just by asking for it!"

"I am a prince, that is true, but I can not have whatever I wish. There is no order in such a thing. I have what I need to do my job and fulfill my duty. What more could be needed? You seem to think that the title of prince carries with it something more than duty and responsibility."

She was almost speechless.

"But you must be obeyed because you are the prince! Everyone must do your bidding, except for the king, I suppose."

"Why?"

She blinked at him, wondering if she was still asleep and this was part of her odd dream.

"Because you are a member of the ruling family! And you must be rich because that's the way things are!"

"Where?"

"Where?" She could barely contain herself. She paced in front of him, trying to release some of the pent-up frustration she was feeling at his obtuse questions and implications.

"Here! In Cragimore. Surely the Night Elves are ruled by the king, and as a prince of the ruling house, you are obeyed and honored."

He shook his head, looking as if he were amazed at her strange ideas.

"The fact that I am a royal prince merely means my job is a bit different from others. I have no choice in it. I am required to prepare myself to submit to the mantle of duty when my grandfather dies. This is not a job that others envy. They know the burden of such a mantle."

"But you can command others to make that job easier. You don't have to do it alone." She didn't understand him. "Mac Lir knows you have enough wealth to make the chore a pleasant one!"

"I do? What wealth would that be? The only wealth that matters here, Teela, is that we have enough supplies to feed all of our people. Enough cavern space to house them and keep them safe and warm. Wealth is measured in survival here, Teela. How do humans measure wealth?"

"Why, in gold and gems, of course! With enough of those you can buy all the supplies you need. You could buy the people needed to keep your caverns clean and safe and warm!"

The thought of the piles of riches Cragimore must house sent her heart pounding and her palms itching to hold it.

"We do not need to buy labor, Teela. We have slaves. What need to buy supplies when we can provide them for ourselves? Or raid for them? We have no need of gold or gems, except when we deal with humans and other species. It is beyond my comprehension how you can value something that sparkles prettily, but is otherwise useless."

"Useless?" The elf-man must have gone daft living inside a mountain range all his life. "With enough wealth, a person doesn't have to live from day to day hoping to find a scrap of food or a filthy job no one else will do. Your belly would never go hungry; your clothes would always be fine. People would see you for who you are inside, and not the filthy street urchin trying to stay alive for just one more day. With wealth comes power, and your enemies back off and don't spit at you, or kick you around. Or worse."

She was aware that her voice had risen sharply and a frenzy was fast consuming her, but she was unable to stop the words from tumbling out, or the memories and pain from squeezing her heart.

“With enough wealth, elf-man, people look at you like you’re someone special. They treat you with respect, and they listen to you when you tell them to go away...to stop...*no!*”

The last word reverberated off the stone walls and hung in the air, refusing to go where spoken words go when their usefulness is at an end. L’Garn had a stunned look on his face, and Feenix felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment as she realized she must have sounded like an insane woman to him.

She turned away from his light, searching eyes and busied herself with adjusting the dull gray gown, brushing at the creases and wrinkles without any discernable change in the rag’s appearance. She was a fool. Those thoughts and memories hadn’t surfaced in years. By the god’s left toe, what had she been thinking?

She felt a light touch on her shoulder, and she whirled around, bringing her chained hands up into a defensive position.

“Don’t touch me, elf-man, unless you want to die.”

His eyes were full of sympathy, and she wanted to rip his head from his shoulders for it. She was Feenix of Port Marcus. She didn’t need anything from anyone. Least of all sympathy.

“Save your soft looks for some other slave, prince!” She bit off the last word as if she wanted to fling it in his face.

“I did not intend to open old wounds and inflict pain, Teela.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she blustered, lowering her hands and relaxing her stance. “The only painful wounds I have are from your stinking guardsman, Holdert. Who, by the way, has an appointment with death very soon. And, elf-man, my name is Feenix, not Teela.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but then must have changed his mind. Instead, he went to the door and spoke low to the guard standing outside. When he returned, he looked her in the eye, and Feenix got the feeling something important was about to happen.

“Lala told me that yesterday you worked well.”

She hadn’t thought her performance of yesterday was the main thing on his mind.

“So?”

“So,” he said, taking a silver key from inside his tunic, “give me your word that you will not try to escape or kill anyone, and I will remove your manacles and chain.”

She was tempted. By Mac Lir’s ears, it would be good to have free movement of her arms again! But she could not give her word to him about not escaping.

“No.”

He pulled himself to his full height and glared at her.

“No? Do you mean you deliberately choose to remain shackled?”

“I mean I can’t give you my word not to escape. It’s my job. If you take the chains off, or if you leave them on, I will continue to try to find a way to escape this hole. I will be no one’s slave willingly.”

“You are a stubborn human.” He ran his hand through his short hair and looked as though he wanted to shake her. “Do you not see the uselessness of trying to escape me? You do not know the way out. Cragimore is full of my people who would kill you in an instant.”

He stepped closer to her, and Feenix had to force herself from taking a step back. “I could have your food drugged with an herb that would take the will from you! Is that your wish?”

L’Garn’s anger confused her. Why was he angry that she should want to escape? If the

situations had been reversed, she was sure he would also be trying to escape.

“Fine. So, I’m stubborn and unreasonable because I don’t want to be your slave. But at least I don’t have to resort to rooming with captives just for a little companionship.”

Now she had done it. The silence of the room rang in her ears like the clamoring of a warning bell.

Being chained and manacled must have a dulling effect on one’s reflexes, Feenix thought, for before she could react to the rage in his eyes, L’Garn had grabbed the front of her gown and shoved her against the stone wall.

“Just what are you trying to say, Teela?”

His face was so close to hers that she could see the individual whiskers of his beard, and the fanciful part of her brain noticed that he hadn’t yet shaved since arising from bed. His light blue eyes had turned deep gray with emotion, and he looked like he wanted to rip out her heart with his bare hands.

If Feenix of Port Marcus had learned anything in her twenty-eight years of life, it was that you never back down when someone was ready for a fight. To back down was to offer your neck to the blade of an enemy.

“I may have been blindfolded and under a spell when you brought me in here, elf-man, but I noticed your men aren’t overly fond of you. Do you have to pay them to spend time with you when you’re looking for a relaxing game of dice or a drinking partner?”

His fist pushed her even harder against the stone wall, and he stepped into her, effectively trapping her chained hands between their bodies. Feenix was caught fast between the cold stone of the cavern wall and the rock hard body of L’Garn in a rage.

“I have never needed to pay for companionship in my life, human.”

Knee to knee; thigh to thigh; stomach to stomach and chest to chest, Feenix was aware of every tiny muscle movement of her antagonist as he used his lean body as a brace and a clamp to keep her from escaping his fury. He looked deeply into her eyes, daring her to push him further.

His breath came fast, as if he had been running a marathon, and with each movement of his lungs, his chest snuggled into her breasts in a way that caused her nipples to tighten. By the god’s left ear, was she crazed that her body would respond in such a way to his threatening stance?

Before she could fling another insult at him, his left hand came up and claimed her jaw, his fingers splayed across her cheek and his thumb in the tender hollow under her chin. He snapped her head back against the rock, but not hard enough to cause more than a mild discomfort.

He turned his body slightly, raised her up against the wall a bit, and pressed his hip into the juncture of her legs.

“What need have I for paid companions, Feenix of Port Marcus, when I have you to use as I wish?”

His breath raised goose flesh on her skin as it tickled a few tendrils of her long hair that had been loosened from the confines of her braid. She watched his mouth as he spoke the menacing words, and had a fleeting wish that he would kiss her.

She forced her eyes closed and swallowed hard. In another moment she would have been drooling for his lips, by Mac Lir’s blue bells!

And then his words registered in her brain. He had called her by her name. She looked at him again, and suddenly her will to resist him seemed to melt away. No! How could her body betray her like this? By the god’s beard, she would be no one’s slave!

“Big words, elf-man. I am chained and fettered and still recovering from an illness. Remove

the chains and give me a sword. Then we will see who uses who!”

Again he shifted, this time raising his right arm to rest beside her head, smoothing her hair from her temple with his long fingers. He had captured every inch of her, and she could not even move her head from side to side. Her breathing was labored and her heart raced in her chest. It seemed like all the nerves throughout her flesh were sensitive and attuned to his every movement.

The anger had left his eyes and had been replaced by a smoky haze of lust. Instead of registering fear, she felt her body respond and prepare itself for his touch. Much too long without a lover, she chastised herself.

“Ah, Teela,” he whispered in a horse voice, “you tempt me.” She was aware of his double meaning. “However, I fear for your safety. I would not want to be responsible for any more scars on your lovely body.”

“Don’t worry, L’Garn,” she tried to push him away with her bound hands, but couldn’t get any leverage behind the effort. “Once I have a sword in my hands, you’ll be dead before you know what happens to you.”

He chuckled deep in his chest. His hips moved in short, tight spurts as his laughter escaped. A new light entered his eyes, and his lips curved into a deeper smile. She thought he looked like a starved man, just before a meal.

She felt a liquid fire rush through her womb, and her blood suddenly felt hot and heavy. She couldn’t keep herself from squirming against his hip.

His eyes roamed her face, and his fingers touched her here and there; temple, cheek, jaw line. But soon his gaze lowered to her lips, and she caught her breath. Why would a man’s eyes on her lips cause such a riot inside of her?

He stilled for a long moment, looking at her lips. She dared not move, fearful of what he would do. Or wouldn’t do.

“I will taste you now,” he said. He waited, and Feenix didn’t know if he paused for her approval or denial. She almost begged him to hurry up and do it, but fortunately, she had no breath to utter the humiliating words.

Then he lowered his dark head and captured her lips in a kiss that stormed all her defenses. It was not a gentle caress, but a searing assault that was as brutal and fierce as the jagged mountains and naked cliffs that had nurtured him. His mouth demanded her will, her soul, her very existence. She fought his lips’ command, but it was a losing battle. Deep within, she wanted his domination. She craved a lover strong enough to bend her to his will. But Feenix of Port Marcus would never admit such a thing—to herself or to another living being.

Unfortunately for her peace of mind, her body did not have such high standards and it admitted to the craving, welcomed it in fact. She was lost in the sensations his mouth, tongue and hands were evoking, and she gave back to him all that he demanded.

She wanted him—needed him—in a way she had never known before. Little whimpering sounds came from deep in her throat as her body tried to coax him into every part of herself.

He had stepped away to allow his hands free access of her body. The slave’s gown had been ripped from her shoulders, and he was fondling her breasts with skillful strokes.

Her hands had located the belt at his hips and had freed the strip of leather from his waist. While the chains restricted full movement of her arms, they were long enough to allow both of her hands to dip inside L’Garn’s leather tunic and feel the textured flesh of his stomach and hips.

The musky pine scent of him excited her to a fevered pitch, and her body ached for the promised joining. Unconsciously she rubbed against his hard body, begging silently for his

touch.

Feenix felt the gray gown slide down the length of her body, and almost screamed when he reached down and cupped the hot flesh of her buttocks and pressed himself into her.

A heavy knock at the door startled them both. They looked into each other's eyes, and it was as if each were dunked into icy water.

Feenix backed away and tried to cover herself with her arms. By all the water in the god's blue ocean, what had she been thinking? She grabbed the blanket from a cot and wrapped it around herself.

"Teela," he said as he straightened his own clothing and ran a shaking hand through his hair. "We will speak of this later."

The knocking came again, this time louder and more insistent.

"Damn right we will, elf-man," she said, barely controlling her anger. "And when we do, you better bring a weapon, because I plan to kill you."

L'Garn walked to the door, leaving Feenix to wonder who she was angrier with—the prince for forcing his touch onto her, or herself for being so weak as to actually want that touch?

CHAPTER TWELVE

They were under attack! Shalridoor was under attack yet again after more than three hundred forty-seven years!

Thelorin ran to an outcropping of huge boulders, leading a small squadron of warriors. He brandished his sword and cut down one attacker before the line of defense could be breached.

The assault had been completely unexpected, but the sentinels on watch were alert and gave warning in time. How could their enemy, the Night Elves, have known they were back at Shalridoor? They must have a system of spies all along the Tylana coast, he thought. How else could those at Cragimore, which lay fifty leagues away to the southwest, have known of their return?

Unless, he thought as his distrust of all things human kicking in, that human woman had spilled her guts and told the enemy everything. He knew humans were inferior in all things. Apparently, she could not withstand a little torture.

Thelorin's brother, Rendolin, climbed atop a large rock and wielded his mace with deadly accuracy. Two Night Elves lay dead at the feet of the boulder, and another fought for his life as Mac Lir's High Priest swung his weapon, chanting prayers as he bashed in the heads of his adversaries.

As ferocious as Rendolin might be at present, Thelorin knew his brother would be the first to attempt to save the lives of the very enemy he had struck down, just as soon as the battle was over. He smiled grimly, knowing his brother would rather be healing wounds than inflicting them.

The sounds of battle were all around. Thelorin could not tell if there were one hundred attackers or only ten. He could only see a few, but their screams and war cries made it seem like the whole Night Elf nation had arrived. It was a terrorist tactic that pumped fear through an opponent's blood.

He parried a wild swing from another foe and stepped smoothly in for a neat thrust to his enemy's chest. His blade slipped into the body clear to the heart. Thelorin pulled his sword out swiftly as the dead Night Elf fell to the ground.

He looked around to see where his men were and what the status of the battle was. It appeared that the Sea Elves were holding their own and were successful, for the time being, in keeping the enemy back. Thank the god for the training Captain Feenix had given his troops. She knew her business of war, even if she was a human—and female at that! By the god's eyes, if she proved to be a traitor, then Thelorin would use her flesh to feed the fish.

Thelorin called to his troops to rally for a charge. They must take the battle to the Night Elves if they had any hope of defeating them and preventing any from returning to Cragimore to report of the Sea Elves' strength.

From the corner of his eye he could see his brother high on the rock, his long golden hair blowing in the evening breeze as the starlight shone down, an open target for any Night Elf who was skilled with a bow. But he knew Rendolin had placed a protection spell around himself before climbing the rock, and Thelorin prayed that it would be enough.

"Advance!"

Putting his brother from his mind, Lord Thelorin Hiloris led his men as they swarmed from the rocks and boulders, meeting the attackers with swords, knives and arrows. Screams of rage

and pain echoed off the rocks and rolled down to the sea. Blood from both sides splattered the ground, making footing dangerous. The smell of battle—blood and fear—mingled with the cries of the dying.

His sword arm grew heavy and painful as he cut his way through the enemy. Thelorin lost track of time, or any reason for the carnage around him. His only purpose in life narrowed down to keeping the enemy from Shalridoor and preventing any from escape.

His breath rasped in his dry throat, and his eyes grew tired from trying to see clearly in the dark. All elves have excellent night vision, but Sea Elves preferred the daylight to night. Thelorin's enemies had no problem with night vision, and in fact, saw more clearly in the dark. If any had an advantage in this battle, it was the Night Elves.

But the Sea Elves knew the terrain, and therein lay their hope of victory.

While Thelorin and Rendolin led the main force against the Night Elves, a small band of warriors, led by Thelorin's first lieutenant, Tobius, was even now circling around behind the enemy, and should engage them from the rear within minutes. Rendolin would give them the signal from his advantage high on the rock. He would be able to see when the Sea Elves were in position.

One of his attackers managed to sneak in under Thelorin's defense, and he felt the burn of a sword slice his left forearm. It was enough to bring his concentration back to the battle, and Thelorin quickly dispatched the opponent.

"Hold!"

Thelorin again called to his men. They had to hold the enemy a little longer to allow Tobius to reach his position.

After what seemed like days, Rendolin gave the signal and the second force of Sea Elves closed in on the enemy. The Night Elves began to panic as they realized they were surrounded, and there was no escape. Their calculated war cries turned to a chaotic noise as they fought as if in a frenzy, refusing to surrender.

Thelorin had no choice but to allow his men to kill or mortally wound them all. He knew they were under orders from Cragimore to die rather than be captured.

All around him dead and dying elves lay, some silent in death, others writhing in agony. Thelorin wiped the sweat from his eyes and leaned wearily upon his sword. The Sea Elves had won the battle, but at a cost. None of the Night Elves were in any shape for him to question, and only one appeared to have a slight chance of survival, if his wounds were tended immediately.

Thelorin looked around for his brother but could not find him in the confusion and carnage.

"Delik, find the High Priest," he yelled to a warrior who did not appear to be hurt. He watched the young elf hurry away towards the large boulder where Rendolin had last been seen.

Thelorin turned from the sight and caught his lieutenant's eye.

"Tobius, report!"

He walked to the side of the killing ground and found a fairly smooth boulder where he could await his second in command. Tobius picked his way through the dead and dying, giving an occasional command here, checking on the condition of a body or two. His lieutenant was a good commander, and Thelorin had no doubt that the report he would give him would be accurate and precise.

"Lord," the younger elf saluted. "We have completely destroyed the Night Elves' attempt in attacking Shalridoor itself. The warning was given in time. However, we were not successful in capturing any for interrogation."

"All are dead?"

“No, lord, two are alive still. But one is beyond the skill of any priest, and the other is close behind his comrade. If we do not have your brother cast a Healing spell upon him quickly, he, too, will die.”

Thelorin nodded. “I have sent Delik to bring Rendolin. They should be here any moment. What is the status of our troops?”

Tobius wiped a bloody hand across his face, leaving a smear of crimson.

“Two dead; five wounded. It could have been much worse, Lord Thelorin.” He shook his head wearily. “Though I hate to admit it, Captain Feenix’s training saved our hides this night.”

“My thoughts, also, Lieutenant. It appears my brother and his Bonded Mate were right when they insisted that Feenix should train our warriors.”

His words were hard and clipped, as if it pained him to make the statement.

He looked towards the boulder where Rendolin had stood during the skirmish, and saw the young elf, Delik, running in their direction.

“Lord! The High Priest has been shot with an arrow! He fell from the rock and is unconscious. I do not know where the other priest is!”

Thelorin rushed past his men and dashed behind the rocks where Rendolin lay. Kneeling among the rough and rocky ground, he checked for a pulse. It was slow and faint. A black fletched arrow protruded from his right shoulder, and blood stained the High Priest’s shirt. A trickle of blood ran from the side of his mouth, and his golden hair soaked up the bright red fluid as it dripped into a puddle by his ear.

“Where is the other priest?” Thelorin demanded as he tried to slow the flow of blood with his tunic.

“He was killed in the battle, lord.”

“Mac Lir’s bells,” he swore. “Help me staunch his wounds and bind them tight. Look in his pack. Rendolin keeps his healing supplies there.”

Thelorin gave orders as he ripped his brother’s shirt open to get a better look at the arrow’s damage.

“Tobius, take charge of the wounded and dead. Send someone for another priest. Tell them that the High Priest is wounded and requires immediate Healing. And by all that is holy,” he added, looking up and stopping the lieutenant from running off, “what ever you do, do not tell my mother or *Glenowaeli* that he is injured!”

“Too late, lord.”

Thelorin turned to look where Tobius indicated with his hand. Making her way through the rocks and bodies, Rendolin’s mate, Korrene, hurried to reach the fallen High Priest. Her silver hair was unbound and hung in clouds around her face and shoulders, as if she were a young maiden. Close behind her was his mother, Elawae, and the Master Healer, Lord Selrin of the House of Olewis. All three wore grim expressions on their face, but Korrene’s held fear and determination as well. The mate of his brother was a formidable personage when she chose.

“Ren!” She pushed Thelorin aside as if he were a mere slave. “How long has he been lying here in his own blood?” she asked him without taking her eyes off Rendolin.

The sight of this human-turned-elf always made his blood boil. Especially when she spoke to him as if he were beneath her notice.

“I do not know when he was struck. I have been attempting to slow the bleeding while waiting for a priest.”

She picked Rendolin’s head up and cradled him against her breast, heedless of the damage his blood would cause to her own clothing. Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her pale cheeks.

“Lord Selrin is here,” she told him needlessly. “He will Heal him.” Then ignoring Thelorin, she spoke softly to her mate. “Ren, my love, I’m here. You will be fine. Just hang on. I’m here. Stay with me now. I love you!”

Thelorin was embarrassed by the display of blatant affection. The human had no sense of decorum. He left his brother’s side to make room for the Master Healer, and to speak with his mother.

“Mother, how did you know Rendolin was injured?”

“Need you ask, my son?” The petite elfin woman was still beautiful, even though she was the mother of two grown sons and the widow of one of Leondrilik’s heroes. “Korrene screamed with agony when the arrow hit Rendolin. She knew the moment he fell to the ground because the *Binding Link* was severed.”

She watched with a worried look as Selrin removed the arrow and cleaned the wound.

“Severed? Has the link been severed completely?” Thelorin was surprised at the feeling of dread and fear that filled him when he learned that Korrene was no longer connected to his brother’s spirit.

“She says the link is tenuous and very weak,” Elawae answered without taking her eyes from the Healer’s work. “Apparently, she was able to find his spirit before it left his body completely. She commanded it to remain.”

Elawae glanced at her eldest son with an expression of respect. “Rendolin’s Bonded Mate is a strong and determined woman. Mac Lir chose the High Priest’s mate well.”

Thelorin nodded in agreement, but he was still not completely comfortable with the knowledge that a human was now a member of his family.

There was nothing he could do while the priest worked on his brother, so Thelorin searched out Tobius to see how the skirmish was cleaning up. Perhaps Selrin could Heal the wounded Night Elf before he, too, died. It was imperative that they find out just how much the enemy at Cragimore knew about their return. And who had informed them of the Sea Elves’ return.

He found his lieutenant speaking with one of the warriors.

“Bury the dead Night Elves. Make arrangements to have our people brought back to Shalridoor.” Tobius turned to Thelorin. “The Night Elf died, Lord. There are no survivors.”

Thelorin looked off into the night sky. The yellow moon of Carthig was a mere scratch of light in the black velvet heavens. Eon, the blue moon, would be rising soon, and it, too would only be a thin crescent. A perfect night for a raid from Cragimore. But with Mac Lir’s luck, the attackers had been defeated and Shalridoor was untouched.

Feenix had to be returned so she could lead the attack on Cragimore. Time was of the utmost importance, especially now when the enemy knew they were back. With both Feenix gone and Rendolin injured, their chances of success had dwindled to an alarming rate. A surprise attack was their only hope of survival here on Tylana, Thelorin thought. But how? Especially if Feenix was now working with the enemy.

Using a dangerous spell, Rendolin had established a mind link with the missing captain. He said she was inside Cragimore itself, held captive, and that she would try to learn the enemy’s weaknesses and report back to him. Now, with the High Priest injured and unconscious, how would the human make her reports?

Thelorin did not have a good feeling about that; his natural instincts were to distrust all humans, even the Captain of the High Priest’s guard. What if she was lying to Rendolin?

However, he had to admit Feenix had been more than helpful in training his troops and in devising the plans to attack the enemy. A tiny voice kept nagging at him, though, insisting that

Feenix's captivity was far too coincidental for reality.

"Lord?" Tobius' voice brought Thelorin back from his mind's wanderings. "Lord Selrin has ordered that Rendolin be carried to Shalridoor, and my men have finished moving our own wounded and dead. All that remains is for the burial of the Night Elves."

"Very good, lieutenant," he said, returning the young officer's smart salute. "Carry on. I shall return to Shalridoor with the High Priest. Report to me when the task has been completed."

He walked to the group tending his brother. A litter had been found and the unconscious elf lay atop it, Korrene holding his hand and speaking low to him as if he could hear her words. Rendolin's face was a pale blur in the evening's limited light. White linen covered his head, and another length of cloth wound around his shoulder and chest. A dark spot stained the perfect whiteness of the bandage.

Thelorin took his mother's hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

"He will be well, mother. Mac Lir would not dare let anything happen to his High Priest now that he has rallied our people and Bonded to the human woman."

"One would think not," she replied. "However, even a god's plan can be tampered with, my son. Let us pray that Selrin's Healing magic will be enough."

Putting his arm around his dainty mother, Thelorin led her back to Shalridoor's walls. The night was growing old. There would be no other assault this evening from their enemy. Cragimore was too far away for the Night Elves to travel in full darkness, which was imperative for them. They could not survive the direct sunlight.

Lord Thelorin of Hiloris sighed deeply. How he wished he was back on Sasheena and free from this tangle in which Mac Lir had placed them all.

Yes, he nodded to himself, all of their troubles could be laid at Mac Lir's feet.

The spark of anger that had been kindled against the god when Thelorin learned of the Binding now flared and burned hotter in the elf lord's breast.

What was the use of a god who led his people into tragedy after tragedy?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Put these on.”

L’Garn tossed a pair of rope sandals at Feenix. Lala stood at the door with a bundle of clothing. It was obvious the half-elf had gotten the footwear from the old slave.

Feenix didn’t even try to catch them. “I prefer boots.”

“I am sure you do, Teela. However, these will have to do for now. Put them on and come with me.”

“And if I don’t?” What demon inside her head made her say such stupid things? By the god’s left toenail, she didn’t want another wrestling match with the prince.

“A proper slave does not question,” Lala began to lecture, but before she could swing into the rhythm of the speech, L’Garn cut her off.

“If you do not put them on, Teela, you will have your feet ripped to shreds. It is your decision. Wear them or not. It makes little difference to me.”

L’Garn turned away and watched as Lala packed a large leather pouch with his clothing. It appeared, Feenix decided, as if the elf-man and she were going on a trip.

“Fine,” she said with a disgusted sigh. She sat on the stool and tied the rough shoes on. Perhaps they would save the soles of her feet, but the rope was going to rub blisters all over her ankles and heels before ten steps were taken.

“Where are we going?” She couldn’t keep her mouth shut, could she?

“You have a treat in store for you,” the prince answered without looking up from his chore. “We are going Atop.”

“I can’t wait,” she mumbled to herself. Where in the great blue ocean was *Atop*? She thought it had been a product of Eagnad’s imagination.

L’Garn finished fussing with the sack and issued a few orders to Lala before looking at Feenix.

“Follow me and do not try to escape. My men have orders to kill you on sight if they find you not in my company.”

He stepped through the door without a backward glance, and Feenix had no recourse but to follow him through the corridors. She couldn’t walk freely since the chain prevented her from moving her arms, and as a result her balance was hampered. Because everything was so dark in Cragimore, stumbling was a real danger for her. It was like living in a world whose only sun was a single candle.

Everywhere, shadows washed the landscape of the cavern’s interior and cast all colors and shapes in a washed-out, gray patina. How could people exist for years in this half light? Feenix felt it weigh her down with dread and worry.

There was a hot, ravenous feel to the darkness. As she followed L’Garn through the winding corridors of Cragimore, it seemed to her that an ominous foreboding hung in the air. The deeper they traveled into the heart of the mountains, the more the sense of danger and menace grew and intensified. At first, she slowly became aware of a feeling of unease and worry. But gradually the impression grew from a tingle along her spine and scalp, to sweaty palms and a pounding heart.

The half-elf didn’t speak while he led the way to god-knew-where, and she didn’t feel much like talking as she tried to follow without tripping and splitting her head open on the rough stone. Strange, she thought. When had the smooth, hand-hewn walls transformed into the ragged

surface of natural corridors? She had to stoop in a number of places to avoid the occasional stalactite. By the god's left toe, she wished she had sufficient light so she could see where she was going!

Feenix walked around a bend in the corridor into another large open cavern. She blinked against the sudden light. The cave was lit by torches braced high up the cave's walls. Noise echoed off the stone walls, and the smell of fresh-ground wheat hit her unexpectedly.

"This is where we grind our wheat to make flour for our bread."

The pride in L'Garn's voice was warranted, she thought. She had never seen anything like what lay before her gaze, there in the middle of Tylana's largest mountain range.

She watched as two, not one, large grindstones slowly turned, causing a rumbling and grinding sound that she could feel reverberate up her legs, as well as pound through her head. The huge stones were turned by teams of male slaves pushing a large wheel in a relentless, never-ending circle. The slaves looked as if they had been at their job for so long that they were, in fact, an actual part of the device that crushed the wheat.

A path had been grooved into the stone floor where countless feet had walked in a never-ending circle. How many years did it take for living stone to be marred like that? Feenix couldn't even begin to guess.

The weary looks on the sweat-soaked faces of the yoked teams of slaves echoed the flat expression in their dull eyes. Nowhere could she see a spark of interest or intelligence. Day after endless day of the monotonous labor must have ground out any glimmer of spirit from them long ago.

Such a life was not for her, she thought to herself. Feenix would die before allowing this scum to turn her into an animal of burden.

"Don't ever expect me to be chained to something like that," she said to the prince of the Night Elves. "I will die first before ending up like that, and I'll take as many of you filthy scum with me as I can before I go."

L'Garn turned to her, speaking loudly over the constant noise of the room.

"This work is not for females. Only the strongest males can survive the heavy work here. As I told you, you are a servant of the royal House. Your work will be considerably lighter and more pleasant."

Any work as a slave would be unpleasant, and the weight of captivity heavier than anything she had previously encountered, she reflected. But she did not share her thoughts with the Night Elf. Instead, she watched the slaves as they mindlessly walked in an unbroken circle, heads down, backs bent, knees pushing and bare feet gripping the worn track. Mac Lir save her from such a fate, she prayed.

She noticed an old elf with only one hand, who looked more alert than the others. In fact, now that she paid close attention, when others around him were ready to drop, he spoke to them, in words she could not hear. Each time, the flagging slave seemed to gain strength from the other's words and continued on.

The right arm was missing, from about the middle of the forearm. A large wad of material had been strapped to the stump, and the elf was able to brace it against the wooden bar he was chained to, allowing him to push with both arms.

Feenix noticed other indications that the elf had seen a battle or two. Old wounds, their ragged scars still vivid against his skin, crossed his chest, upper arms and even his thighs in a way that proclaimed to her they had been made by a sharp sword. Here was a warrior who had some how been captured and forced into slavery, just as she had been.

For the first time since entering Cragimore's depths, hope flared in her breast. She didn't know how she would go about it, but she knew she would have to speak to that slave. Perhaps he could help her with the plan to discover the Night Elves' weakness and escape. Who knew? Perhaps she could help him escape, too.

"Come."

L'Garn walked to the nearest grist mill without a look at her, obviously expecting her to follow. *Like a blasted dog*, she mumbled to herself, but she followed without a word.

When they came within a meter or two of the production, he motioned for the guard to join them.

"Put a crew on the lift," he ordered above the racket of the mill.

The guard saluted sharply, then jogged to the wheel. Feenix could not hear, of course, but she watched as the Night Elf stopped the slaves and ordered three of the strongest of them to another part of the cavern. The slave with the missing hand was one of the ones removed from the wheel.

"Come along, Teela."

"Where are we going? You haven't told me anything since before breakfast."

He gazed intently at her for a long moment, and she felt her cheeks blush at the remembered kiss they had shared. She was acting like a young girl with her first lover, Feenix told herself with disgust. *Get a grip on yourself!*

The mysterious look on his face didn't do much for her feeling of well being, but at least he didn't mention their pre-breakfast activity.

"We are going Atop." He turned and walked towards the area where the crew of slaves had been led by the Night Elf guard.

"So you said, but that doesn't tell me anything."

Stubborn elf scum! Feenix didn't have a clue what he was talking about, and it appeared as if he wasn't going to enlighten her.

Well, she might as well follow him and try to get a clearer picture of the inside of this massive stronghold. Maybe she would even see a way out of this hole.

Watching her step as she moved across the uneven cavern floor, she followed L'Garn.

The slaves stood around a smaller version of the grist mill wheel. Each of the men had a long, well-worn wooden bar and waited patiently for the order to start moving. The guard had a whip at his side, but she had yet to see him use it. Apparently, these slaves were well trained and didn't need the added incentive of the leather's bite.

Now that she was closer to the laborers, she could see that the one-handed slave was, in fact, a Sea Elf. She recognized the bronze skin tones and the lanky build. The slave's eyes were the color of a spring day, greens and blues combined to remind her of tender young growth and clear, clean sky. They stared directly into her eyes without wavering.

Feenix's stomach did a little lurch as she thought she recognized the elf—but that was impossible, of course. How could she know some old elf who had obviously been a slave in Cragimore for more years than she had been alive? It was more likely a family resemblance to someone she had seen on Sasheena...but who?

Suddenly, Feenix had a brilliant idea. Perhaps she could get some information out of this royal prince without him being aware of her intent.

"Is that a Sea Elf?" she asked him. She had deliberately pitched her voice to be mildly surprised and, she hoped, innocent.

L'Garn turned sharply to her and grabbed her arm in a painful grip.

"What do you know of the Sea Elves?"

She hadn't expected such a reaction from him, and hadn't even tried to evade his touch. *So much for innocent*, she thought. *Now what?*

"Get your hands off me."

"Speak, Teela, if you value your life." He gave her a little shake to emphasize his words.

"I said, get your filthy hands off me," she yelled, but Feenix didn't try to break the hold herself. For some reason, his touch sent warmth rushing through her body to pool in the region of her belly.

Instead of releasing her, he took possession of her other arm, holding her with a firm grasp. He glared at her intently as if he could force her to speak by his will alone.

"Teela, if you know anything of the Sea Elves, you must tell me immediately. Lives depend upon it."

Strange, she thought. Now that she had some decent light—not enough, of course, but decent—she could refresh her memory about the things she noticed the day she was captured. His eyes were a pale blue, almost white color. Except near the middle, where a tiny ring of blue, the shade of Kestrel, outlined the black of his pupils.

His lips were a deep rose color and right now were tight with grim concern.

His forearms were dusted with a covering of dark hair, just enough to proclaim him very male. His short hair was not long enough for her to run through her fingers, but she imagined that it would feel wonderful against her sensitive palms and fingertips.

She noticed a tiny swirl in the whiskers of his beard. It wasn't a full beard, thank Mac Lir's toes. She hated the thought of touching facial hair that grew in abandon all over a man's face and across his lip, hiding those sensuous muscles from her eyes.

No, L'Garn's beard was short and did not hide his upper lip with growth. His beard began just beside his two silvan-tipped ears, and raced along his firm jaw line, meeting at his chin. Nor did the bristles grow down his neck and throat, like a black shadow from an outcrop of rock. He allowed it to cover the skin just under his jaw and chin with what, Feenix thought, was perfect taste. Clean, crisp lines, like the blade of a sharp sword.

"Answer me!"

The sharp note of concern in his voice brought her back from her musings. She broke his grasp on her arms and took a step back, glaring into his face.

"The only thing I know is that you better keep your hands off me, elf-man!" She rubbed her arms where his fingers had left slight marks.

"Tell me what you know about the Sea Elves, Teela."

He ground out the words between clenched teeth, and she knew L'Garn was close to losing his control. She didn't want to push him that far again so soon after their earlier battle.

Because she knew about the long hatred between Rendolin's people and his, she understood his fierce emotion. However, there was no way she could let him know that he had inadvertently brought a spy—the warrior in charge of the Sea Elves' army, in fact!—into his very stronghold. She had to keep him from finding that out before she had an opportunity to learn Cragimore's secrets.

"I don't know anything about them. I thought they were just legends, like everyone else on Tylana does."

"Then how were you able to identify his race?"

"I just guessed. It's easy to see that he's not a Night Elf. Look at him," she commanded with a wave of her hand. "He stands taller than any other elf around him, even though his back is bowed with age. His skin is darker than the average Night Elf, and his eyes are a different color. It's

easy to see he didn't come from Cragimore's breeding stock."

He looked at her as if he wanted to believe her story, but wasn't quite ready to let it go.

"Lala has dark skin, yet you haven't asked about her origins."

"But Lala has such a different build. I've seen other slaves like her, short and stocky with the dark skin of a people used to the sun. Lala's type seems to be very common. Sea Elves, if they exist, would be very rare. That one is the only elf of his kind I have ever seen."

She watched him digest her words. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the tension eased from his body. He looked around as if ashamed to have anyone see the way he had reacted to her question. He knew he didn't have to answer; his reaction confirmed her suspicion. The one-handed slave was a Sea Elf. He had probably been taken in a raid, long before Rendolin's people had found sanctuary on Sasheena.

Feenix cast a glance over the slave in question. He stood erect and met her eyes without flinching. A tiny smile flirted in the quirk of his lips. By Mac Lir's eyes, he reminded her of someone, but she couldn't think who.

"I am pleased that you notice such things," L'Garn finally said to her. "Come. I have better things to show you than the workings of the mill."

He took her arm again, only this time his touch was almost gentle and his face held anticipation. It was obvious L'Garn was going to ignore her question. Fine. She would satisfy her curiosity on her own.

He turned her towards the waiting slaves before releasing her arm, and again she followed him as he led the way to a small enclosed area. As she passed the Sea Elf, she pretended to trip and stumble in the slave's direction. He naturally reached out to prevent her fall. Because she was close to him, his reaction was faster than the half-elf's.

Feenix righted herself and took a second to thank the one-handed elf, and to whisper one word for the slave's ear alone.

"Sasheena."

For a quick moment, the old slave's fingers grasped Feenix's hand in a wrenching grip. His eyes registered shock, then showed an odd combination of surprise, longing and fear before he dropped his head and backed away to the wooden bar. She knew he had heard.

"This floor is rough and uneven," L'Garn said as he helped her to his side. "You must pay attention at all times, Teela, and watch your step."

She answered something in response to his words, but her mind was busily trying to plan a way to speak with the Sea Elf privately, and soon. It was obvious such a meeting wasn't going to happen right now, but she vowed to make her way back to the mill and find an opportunity to talk with the slave.

Without warning, the floor under her feet jerked and began to move. She reached out to grasp the first solid thing she could find, and blushed as her fingers found themselves entwined in L'Garn's linen shirt.

"What's happening?" She barely controlled the panic in her voice.

"We are in the lift."

For the first time she noticed that they were standing in a metal, box-like compartment, its walls only as high as her waist. Thick iron beams continued up to connect overhead, making an open ceiling. A rope and pulley were attached to the cross beams above them. As the slaves pushed the wheel, the lift rose inside a carved-out stone shaft.

The ascent was smoother than she would have thought possible, but still she clung to the half-elf as if her life depended on his solid support.

“What if the rope breaks?” She hated herself for her panic, but couldn’t seem to get control of it. By the god’s left eye, she was acting like a completely helpless female!

L’Garn put his arm around her, the strength of his warm body giving her support and comfort beyond her imagination. She breathed in the scent of him, musky male mixed with a tangy trace of pine.

“The rope is strong, Teela. It will not break.”

He looked down at her, and she caught her breath as his eyes held her captive. How could she feel so safe in his arms when she knew first hand how brutal he could be? He was the scum who had made her his prisoner. His slave. The one who had savagely assaulted her in his room not more than a few hours ago.

She shivered, not sure if it was from fear or anticipation. His eyes held a promise. She was not surprised to see lust and desire in their pale depths. They also held secrets she thought might be better left untold. An answering wave of anticipation coursed through her veins, and she found her body responding to the blatant desire on his face.

The slight rocking movement of the lift gave her an excuse to press closer to his side. He didn’t seem to mind as his other arm came around to hold her more tightly.

“You don’t have to hold me. I can stand on my own,” she lied.

He ignored her words and continued to brace her against the rough ride. She felt his heart beating strongly, and an odd idea popped into her head that her own heart synchronized itself with L’Garn’s. What a wild idea; she forced it from her mind.

“Look up.”

His voice was pitched low, almost a whisper, but she felt the words reverberate through his chest rather than actually heard them with her ears. She didn’t want to break contact with his chest, but couldn’t think of any excuse to give him for her refusal to look up as he commanded.

Feenix tilted her head and looked above the iron lattice work. Her stomach felt as if it dropped to her knees.

Stars!

She saw midnight blue sky and thousands of tiny points of light! They were rising out of the hole of Cragimore.

“Sky,” she breathed as if it were a holy word. Clinging even tighter to L’Garn and forgetting for a moment where they were, she bounced a little on her toes and couldn’t hide her grin of delight. “We’re going out?”

The lift lurched two or three times before L’Garn tightened his hold to stop her excited movements.

“Easy, Teela. While the rope is strong, we do not need to cause more work than necessary for the crew working the lift.”

Feenix stilled and felt the blood drain from her face. She looked down the shaft and was horrified to see exactly how far they had come in the time they had been in the lift. If the rope broke, or if the slaves faltered, they would plunge to their deaths. Her stomach did another flip, only this time it wasn’t from joy.

Sweat broke out over her body; she could feel the tingling sensation under her arms spread across her backside. Her breath came in little gasps, and her head felt light. Was there no air in this stinking shaft?

“Teela, it is all right. We will not fall. Look up and do not think of anything except the sky.”

His breath cooled the moisture on her brow. By Mac Lir’s toe, was she going to end up a red mass of skin and bones at the bottom of this endless shaft? What was the point of the last few

days, if all the blasted god had in mind was to let her drop to her death inside the hold of Cragimore?

“Look up!”

The command snapped her out of the panic that threatened to overpower her mind. Without pause, she again tilted her head up and focused her eyes on the stars. The sky seemed to be lightening, and it wasn’t so easy to see all the points of light. “Keep your eyes on the stars, Teela. We will be Atop in another moment or two.”

“If this contraption falls with us in it, elf-man, I will never forgive you.” She didn’t know where she found the breath to get the words out. Her lungs didn’t seem to want to function properly.

L’Garn chuckled and the rumble from his chest, and the comforting support of his arms helped soothe her fear. Again she cursed herself for acting like a witless female, but she couldn’t control the fear without his support.

“Can’t this thing go any faster?” she demanded.

“Patience, Teela. We are almost Atop.”

He rubbed her back with his hand in a reassuring way, tracing wide circles over her gown with a light pressure that did not cause pain to her almost healed wounds. For a Night Elf, he was being suspiciously tender and gentle with her. Why, she wondered?

At the thought, again her body responded to his, and she felt her breasts tighten and swell in anticipation of his touch. She found her arms around his neck, but couldn’t remember putting them there.

She dragged her eyes from the sky and looked into his face. He had been watching her closely, and a jolt of pleasure shot through her as their eyes met.

His lids had a sleepy, sensuous droop to them, and she watched with excitement as he dropped his gaze to her lips. Feenix slowly licked her bottom lip, knowing the sight of her tongue would be hard for him to resist. She felt him suck in his breath sharply. Then her fingers crept up the nape of his neck and, using only a tiny amount of pressure for encouragement, she waited for him to find her lips with his.

The wait wasn’t long.

As soon as their lips met, he deepened the kiss, pulling her body into his, molding his hips and thighs to her own. This kiss wasn’t like the other. There was no anger or hate in it, but rather a desire to learn more about her, and it felt as if she had been fashioned by the gods to be a perfect fit for him.

Feenix opened her mouth and welcomed his tongue. She savored the taste and feel of him, and his groan of pleasure sent a thrill to her heart. The ground moved beneath their feet. Lights seemed to explode behind her closed eyes. She felt like she could fly in this elf’s arms, and she prayed the kiss would never end.

One final jolt and the kiss ended with Feenix and L’Garn each trying to steady themselves. The lift had stopped.

Before L’Garn could say anything, Feenix looked out from the lift, away from the shaft, and caught her breath in amazement.

The sun had just set behind the western mountains, and the meadow was cast in a deep blue shadow. The sky glowed golden and pink, with dusky blue-black clouds streaming across the vast expanse.

Stretching out before her eyes, from one horizon to the other, a large meadow dotted with trees and neat rows of crops lay at her feet. Tall mountain walls encircled the land, standing as

effective barriers to intruders, holding the valley securely captive within a giant, stone palm.

A breeze, laden with the scent of new crops and pine, caressed her face. Twilight descended softly upon the hidden valley.

“This will be your home, Teela, while you learn your new duties.”

A feeling of dread slipped through her chest to settle in her stomach, chasing away her feeling of joy.

“And what duties would those be, elf-man?”

The glint in his eyes proved without a doubt that he was savoring this moment to its fullest.

“Why, the duties required of my concubine, of course.”

He had been wise to keep the chains on her, she acknowledged. Otherwise, he would be nursing another sore jaw.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The shaft for the lift had been carved out of the side of a cliff, and so as she stood with her back to the east side of the wall of mountains, she could look out over a bowl-shaped valley. The mountain walls towered high above their heads, and the setting sun's warmth still lingered as the heat radiated from the living rock.

As lovely as the view before her was, Feenix had no mind for scenic vistas. Her total concentration was on L'Garn and his egotistical comment about the duties of being his concubine.

"Tell me, elf-man. Just what makes you think I would be so asinine as to agree to be your mistress?"

She watched him lead the way from the shaft down the side of the mountain. The path was smooth from many feet, and the going easy. She didn't know where he was leading her, but she was determined to follow him, if for no other reason than to find out just what in Mac Lir's wide world he meant by *concubine*!

"You did not seem to mind kissing me," L'Garn's voice floated up to her as she lost sight of him around a sharp bend in the trail.

"You took advantage of the situation! I was feeling uneasy in that lift that brought us here. Believe me, prince," she continued, trying to trot down the trail without falling, her hands still useless for balance in their fetters. "If I had my wits about me I would have never come near you in that contraption!"

She rounded the bend at a full jog and almost collided with L'Garn, who had apparently decided to wait for her to catch up. The spot where he had chosen to linger gave her a wide, unobstructed view of a fertile land laid at their feet, lush with vegetation and well-husbanded crops. Off to the right were rows of trees which could only be an orchard, although she was too far up to identify the type of fruit.

"Strange," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders to steady her as she fought to remain on her feet after coming to such an abrupt halt. "I seem to remember you were the one who initiated that kiss. No matter." He turned from her and again set off down the trail. "The kiss was pleasant and I feel confident that you will make an adequate concubine."

"Adequate?"

How dare he imply that Feenix of Port Marcus would make anything less than a stupendous concubine? That is, if she wanted the position.

She hurried after him again, the jingle and clanking of her chains creating an effective counterpoint to her feet slapping the trail in indignation.

"Listen, you elf scum! I would make an outstanding concubine, if I set my mind to it!"

A crack of laughter met her statement.

"Really? Well, that is reassuring. I admire a female who believes in self improvement."

"By Mac Lir's blue eyes, I could not care less what you admire! I will not be your mistress, you arrogant pig!"

She was finding it difficult not to stare at his trim buttocks as she followed him down the mountain side. He was a much more interesting sight than the panoramic vista offered by nature. His legs were long and muscular, and as she had noted before, his backside was one of the best she had ever admired. Perhaps *the* best. She began to wonder just how his skin would feel if she

touched him there...

No, by the god's gray beard! She had to concentrate on learning all she could of Cragimore so she could report to Rendolin when he next contacted her. Mooning about this half-elf prince was not the way to affect her escape or win the war.

"Your opinion does not matter in this, Teela. You will be my concubine."

The path had leveled out and they were now following a road that stretched through the meadow towards the east. Feenix could see lights in some buildings off in the distance. Probably the farm buildings, she surmised, since the twilight prevented her from making out any details.

"Here is where we raise many of the crops we need to survive. As you can see," L'Garn said, motioning with his hand as if they were not in the middle of a very personal discussion of another topic, "the valley is fertile and large enough to grow wheat, corn, vegetables and many kinds of fruit. We have two orchards as well as a vineyard." Again he stopped and turned toward her.

"I don't give a damn about your blasted crops or fruit! Stay on the subject! If I say I will not be your concubine, elf-man, you can be sure my opinion will matter to you!"

"It just occurred to me." L'Garn waited for her to reach his side before resuming his trek. "If you are worried about my treatment of you, have no fear. Many females have vied for my attention, and none have ever had cause to complain."

By the god's left eye! The elf scum had more nerve than a wagon load of Port Marcus guild masters!

"Where did you get this unhealthy opinion of the powers of your own attraction? It seems to me that the females of Cragimore should be pitied if you are the shining example of their ideal mate!"

"I did not say I was their ideal mate, although many lovely females have voiced an interest in me for that purpose." He ignored the nasty look she threw in his direction. "Concubines are temporary, as you know, and mates are a different matter all together. No, I am interested in a concubine, Teela, not a mate. However, I thank you for your interest."

How in the Seven Cella World's creation did he live with himself, she wondered? The prince of the Night Elves needed to be taken down a peg or two, and she was just the woman to do it!

"I was not expressing interest in becoming your mate! I'm not interested in you in *any* way, you conceited pond scum! When I take a man to my bed, it is of my own choosing!"

L'Garn had stopped again, but instead of making a show of ignoring her, he scowled at her.

"What makes you assume that you would not choose me, once you had sampled the delights of being my concubine? As I said, many have."

"You are not my type." Feenix tried to march past him as he stood in the middle of the road, but he put his hand out and stopped her.

"And what would that type be?"

"A man well able to satisfy my needs and wants. One must only guess at the performance of a male such as you. I need a complete man, not some half-elf, half-man monstrosity who is so puffed up with his own consequence it's a wonder he can stand to be in the same world with anyone else!"

For a long moment the two stood in the road staring at each other with murderous intent. Feenix had seen the same ferocious mask descend upon L'Garn just before he had so brutally kissed her in his room. Her heart did a leap as she feared he would force himself on her again.

Feared...or hoped?

She didn't have time to decide as he whirled around and stomped off towards the farm

buildings, dragging her along. His fingers dug into the flesh of her forearm, but she would be roasted alive before she told him he was hurting her.

"Get your hand off me. I can walk on my own!"

But the prince ignored her and continued to lead her through the warm evening, as if he were on an important mission.

He pulled her up the steps of the largest building—a house or cottage it seemed to her—and pushed her through the door. With each step it was obvious L’Garn was more and more angry. The rage and danger seemed to radiate from him like heat from a baker’s oven.

Once inside the building, he pushed her away and slammed the door. She stumbled and lost her balance, falling to the floor, but breaking the fall with her chained hands.

"By Mac Lir’s blue eye, what is the matter with you, elf-man? Can’t deal with a little rejection?"

His breathing was deep and rapid. The walk to the house had not been that strenuous, so Feenix knew it was an effort on his part to gain control of his emotions. It looked as if he was failing miserably.

"Oh, I can deal with rejection, human."

L’Garn’s voice held a quality Feenix hadn’t heard from him before. It was an odd combination of fury, sarcasm and self loathing. She recognized it, for she had used it often and successfully in her years before Sasheena.

"I have perfected the art of dealing with rejection, in fact. Have dedicated my life to the project, you could say."

He stepped towards her, a menacing force of male fury, and she could not help but scoot out of the way. She realized what she was doing and cursed herself silently. To back down was to die. Hadn’t she learned that lesson eons ago on the streets of Port Marcus?

Feenix stopped moving and glared up at this new dimension of the prince of the Night Elves. This was her enemy. He had lulled her into thinking him kind and even a bit gentle while they were in the caverns, but this was the true L’Garn, and she was in danger if she took a misstep.

She struggled to regain her feet, and he watched her with hooded eyes. She didn’t expect him to help her, but she had expected something other than a menacing stare. What?

"Everyone has to learn to accept rejection in his life, elf-man. Even a prince of the Night Elves."

"You know nothing of my life, Teela, so do not try to make light of something you can not comprehend. You are a human and a female."

He lunged for her, but she dodged by jumping behind a large wooden table. For the first time she noticed the room was huge; it contained many tables and chairs and looked like an eating hall.

"I know that life is only what you make of it! If you don’t like what the gods have dealt you, change it!"

By Mac Lir’s beard, wasn’t *she* living proof of that?

He picked up the end of the table and threw it to the side. She quickly moved out of the way, and found herself boxed between a wall and a huge fireplace.

He moved with the smooth grace of a large hunting cat.

She felt like his prey.

"You know nothing! But you will learn, Teela. Oh, yes, you will learn."

He lunged again and slapped the palms of his hands against the wall behind her, imprisoning her head between them. She was trapped between the wall and his body, as before. But this time,

he did not close the space between them. He merely glared down at her and panted like a winded beast.

Wrapping the chains around her knuckles, Feenix brought her fists together and braced herself to bring her hands up and smash him in the face. Before she could do more than raise her arms a few centimeters, he stepped back and clamped his hands around her wrists.

“You’re very good at this threatening stuff, aren’t you, elf-man? At least when you’re threatening a female in chains!”

“I am very good at threatening people who are not in chains, also. Make no mistake about that.”

Silently they battled with their hands, she trying to break his grasp and punch him, he trying to force her arms back down.

“If I had my weapons, you half-elfin scum, you would be dead in a heartbeat!”

A light seemed to flash in his eyes, and he stepped away and released her. A grim smile curved his lips, giving him the look of a wolf.

“So you say, again and again, Teela. It is becoming rather monotonous hearing the same obvious lie from your pretty lips every night.”

“It’s no lie! By Mac Lir’s ears, if you were half a man you’d take these chains off me and let me prove it in a fair fight! But no,” she pushed at him with her words and angry eyes, “Night Elf scum that you are, you’re too much of a coward to put my words to the test!”

“Half man I may be,” he said in a low and deadly tone, “but I am no coward, Teela.”

He turned his back on her and stomped to the far side of the room. If she had any wits about her, she thought, she would take advantage of the reprieve and bolt like a rabbit. Instead, she watched unmoving as he pulled some keys from inside his tunic and unlocked a solid wooden door.

The twilight had faded long ago, and the room had only a few strange lights scattered around. While they were enough to for her to identify chairs, tables and fireplace in the room, they did not shed enough light for her to see what was behind the door L’Garn had unlocked.

Her curiosity was soon quenched.

He stepped from her sight for a moment, and when he returned, he was carrying a long sword in each hand. His face was grim and, in the shadows from the weak lights, she thought he looked like a walking scull.

He advanced to within a couple of meters of her then tossed a sword in her direction.

“Now we will put an end to your ridiculous claims, Teela.”

Her arms had somehow become entangled in the chains, and when she put her hand out to catch the hilt of the expertly tossed sword, she missed, like a novice recruit.

Feenix felt the heat of humiliation rush her cheeks as L’Garn smiled smugly.

“Take these chains off me, so I can fight you,” she yelled in anger. “Or are you afraid of the damage I might do in a fair fight?”

He kicked the sword across the room, away from her, and took another key from his tunic.

“Hold out your hands, human. I will remove the chains, and we shall soon see how adept you are with a sword.”

A cold rage still burned in his eyes, but she could see he had himself in control. She was secretly pleased; a true warrior needed to be in control of his emotions in order to fight well. If not, the victory would most likely go to the opponent.

Then she realized she should be disappointed that he had regained his control. She intended to win this confrontation, and her chances would be better if she could get under his skin again.

Nonetheless, Feenix was glad that L'Garn understood this basic fighting tactic.

She stood still as he released the lock, drawing the chain through the manacles and through the ring on the neck collar. He kept the chain and then stepped back warily, as if he expected her to leap on him.

"The collar and manacles remain, Teela, but the chain does not have to be replaced if you vow you will not attempt to escape."

Slowly she flexed her arms, smiling at the burning, tight feeling in her elbows and shoulders. She bent over a couple of times and worked the kinks out of her arms, back and sides. Biding her time, trying to think of an effective way to beat him and then make good her escape, she ignored his comment and rubbed her wrists.

Finally, after making him wait for a few long moments, she was ready to respond.

"No."

"No? You would prefer the chain?"

"I have already told you, it is my duty to escape. Nothing has happened to change my mind. However," she added with a slight smile, "I will make you a wager."

Feenix could see he was not happy with her words, but curious in spite of himself.

"What wager?"

"I'll give you a lesson in sword play. If I win, you will remove the slave collar, manacles and set me free."

He laughed harshly.

"Is that all, Teela?"

The sarcasm dripped from his voice. That really wasn't a very attractive part of his personality, she thought.

"No, as a matter of fact, there's something else. You will call me by my name. Feenix."

He walked over to the sword on the floor and casually picked it up, but she noticed he kept his own blade pointed in her direction, even if it was in a lowered position.

"I see no advantage for me to make such a wager, Teela. You will not win, and nothing will change. What is my reward when I am the victor?"

"If you really believed that, elf-man, then you wouldn't be so worried about making the wager. However, I can see you need a bit of encouragement."

She stepped away from the wall and approached him slowly, holding her hands out by her sides in a non-threatening way. "If you manage to win our little wager, I will agree not to escape."

He smiled evilly. "You will agree to serve me faithfully without argument, forego any escape attempts, answer to the name of Teela, and accept your fate as my concubine?"

He ticked off his conditions as if he were counting bales of hay.

"That's quite a list, elf-man. However, since I can not fail to defeat your sorry backside, I will accept your terms. Toss me the sword."

He stood with a sword in each hand, then appeared to have another thought.

"One more thing," he said, holding up her sword. "You will stop addressing me in that insulting way. You may call me 'your highness' or 'Prince L'Garn.' I do not like it when you call me elf-man."

"Too bad," she sneered. "Now, toss me the sword and we will commence with your lesson."

He tossed the sword with his left hand. It arched through the air gracefully, and Feenix had plenty of time to snatch it in mid-flight. The hilt slapped her palm neatly and fit into her hand as if it had been made for her.

By the god's right ear, it had been too long since she had held a blade in her hand. She sliced an arc over her head and around to the side. The passing of blade through the air made a most delicious song. Her arm was stiff, and she could have used an extra few moments to limber up, but she could see that the prince was impatient with her antics.

Probably thought he would disarm her in the first pass, Feenix conjectured.

Well, *Prince Elf-Man* was in for a very large surprise. She chuckled to herself and stepped into the middle of the room, the sword held across her body as she looked at it.

"Nice blade," she said to him, conversationally. "Needs a bit of cleaning, but that's to be expected from Night Elf scum. You probably don't even know a blade should be kept clean in order to stay sharp."

He raised his own blade in a casually defensive position and smiled at her. Again he reminded her of a wolf.

"It is obvious you have listened to warriors before, Teela, but that is not the way one should stand when holding a sword."

She pretended to be surprised.

"Oh? How should I hold it, prince? More like *this*?"

As she uttered the last word, she lunged and ducked beneath his guard, opening a small slice on his left thigh. Before he could react, she had retreated and stood in a militarily correct position of defense, waiting for his response.

He clapped his hand over the wound and starred at her with wildly surprised eyes.

She grinned like a silly girl.

"Lesson number one: Never under estimate your opponent. Especially when your opponent is me."

With deliberate purpose, L'Garn straightened and gripped the hilt of his sword more securely.

"Well done," he said with disdain lacing his voice. "Now let us see if it was luck or skill, shall we, Teela?"

L'Garn raised his sword and attacked her in a flurry of efficiently calculated thrusts.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

He could not remember when he had enjoyed himself so much. It had been far too long since he had verbally sparred with anyone, and Teela's quick wit and caustic tongue only made him want to tease her all the more.

Despite what he had told his grandfather, and Teela herself, he had no intention of forcing himself on her or of demanding she become his concubine. No, that was only a diversionary tactic to get his grandfather's mind away from the thought of killing her.

L'Garn grinned to himself. However, baiting Teela with the threat of her new *duties* was providing him with more amusement than he had anticipated. She was so easy to tease, and she rose to his bait every time.

It was not as if he would not enjoy having her as a concubine, of course. He was honest enough with himself to admit that. She was a delight to his eyes and she had caught his interest and continued to hold it, by the god's teeth. No female had held his attention for so long a period.

He wondered if the reason he found her so interesting was because he had yet to bed her. Perhaps, he admitted, but for some reason he did not believe that was the full truth. She certainly knew how to kiss. He smiled to himself.

Each time their lips had met was a different experience. The first time she had caught him totally off guard. He had never expected her to initiate such a strong kiss. It was almost as if she was trying to convey something to him, prove that even though he held her pinned in his arms, with her neck open to an attack, she was still in control.

He wanted to believe that, while Teela had started the kiss to prove her mastery over him, by the time it was over she was just as affected as he had been.

The second time was the most powerful. He had been in such a fury, he wanted to dominate her. Actually, if he was completely honest with himself, he had wanted to hurt her physically, punish her for the words that had cut so cruelly through him. When he pinned her against the wall, the urge to overpower and master her completely was too much to resist. He had been afraid he would injure her physically, so he kissed her in an attempt to deflect his anger.

It had not worked as well as he had hoped.

Instead of quenching his rage, the emotions had been channeled into a storm of lust the like of which he had never experienced before. Furthermore, the challenge of his kiss had been met by Teela with an answering force; a force that had melded their emotions and wills together in such a way that he had no doubt there could have been only one possible conclusion to the episode. If not for Lala's timely knock on the door, Teela would have been his slave in body as well as in name.

His mouth became dry when he remembered the brief but tantalizing glimpse he had of her full, round breasts, and the way they filled his hands to overflowing. Such smooth and luscious skin. How he had wanted to taste that ripe flesh.

The third time they kissed, while in the lift coming Atop, had been completely different from the two previous times. The woman was like one of those rare, tiny dragons he had heard of, the ones that could change and adapt themselves to whatever environment they were in. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

That last kiss was gentle and needy. She had been frightened, he knew, and that in itself was a surprise to him. He had begun to think that Teela was afraid of nothing. To discover her

weakness for heights seemed to make her more real to him in some way. He could not explain it, but she had suddenly become more like what he had long thought was his ideal female—soft and tender, needy and weak, totally dependent upon him for protection and support.

The kiss was sweet and giving, and if he had not experienced the other two kisses, he would have thought it was perfect. But oddly enough, he knew the person who had been in his arms during the assent Atop was not the true woman, the woman he was beginning to realize he had to know in all ways.

To distract himself from that strange thought, he began baiting her as they traveled down from the shaft towards the farm buildings. He would amuse himself and see just how far he could push this strong-willed slave.

But truth to tell, he was beginning to think of her not as a slave, but as an equal, and that truth disturbed him more than all the others.

It was hard for him not to turn and watch her as she stumbled down the path, trying to keep her balance at the same time she struggled with her temper. He knew she would have been very happy to hit him with a rock or anything, and he would have given just about anything to see her face when he told her he admired her for trying to improve herself. He just could not keep from laughing when she had informed him she would make an outstanding concubine if she wanted.

Yes, he was enjoying himself hugely.

Until she called him a monstrosity.

It was if she had been in conversation with his grandfather. Or as if she could read the deepest part of his mind. Why did she have to discover the truth about him before he had the opportunity to teach her to like him a little?

He had smothered the childish thought and rushed them to the house as quickly as possible. The gods damn her for her cutting tongue. He was a monstrosity, but why could he not pretend to be a normal being, just for one night? Why did his illusion have to be shattered, and by the one person on Tylana with whom he wanted to spend some time?

She fell when he pushed her into the house, and he wanted to help her up, truly he did, but by then the rage had such a strong hold on him, he did not dare touch her. There was no telling what he might do if he put his hands upon her.

“Can’t you deal with a little rejection?”

Again she knew instinctively just what to say to cause him pain.

“Oh, I can deal with rejection, human.” If she only knew, he thought. “I have perfected the art of dealing with rejection, in fact. Have dedicated my life to the project, you could say.”

A voice from somewhere in the vicinity of his heart told him he was almost out of control, but he paid no heed to it. He advanced on her, and watched as she tried to back away from him.

You will ruin everything if you do not regain control of yourself, he tried to reason, but a darker force from within smothered the tiny voice. He wanted—no, he *needed*—to prove that she and his grandfather, and all of the Night Elf nation, were right about him. There was no reason to try to fight it any longer. He was a monstrosity, an Outbreed, and he would never be anything else besides unworthy of the throne.

But still that small part of him struggled to regain some command of his emotions. He watched her stand and pull her dignity around her. She was magnificent, and still she did not waver or cower before him.

He admired her spirit, but knew if he were a true Night Elf, he should quench her defiance ruthlessly. Especially when she dared to lecture him on how he should conduct himself as the prince of his people. How dare she?

He threw the table aside and lunged for her, intent only on proving to her, and to them all, that he knew his duty. That he, in fact, could perform his duty better than all of them.

She slipped past his grasp and escaped to the corner by the fireplace.

“You know nothing! But you will learn, Teela. Oh, yes, you will learn.”

He knew his words were a prophecy. He would teach this unruly slave just exactly what her position was, and how little he regarded her words.

He leapt over the fallen table and captured her between his arms, his palms against the wall of the house. She had nowhere to run, no way to escape. Now he would show her he was strong enough, brave enough, worthy enough to be Prince L’Garn of the House of Meedrion.

She should have been cowering before him. She should be a puddle of female tears on the floor at his feet.

Instead she stared him in the eye and threatened him. The sight almost made him laugh.

And then she called him a coward.

Enough of this foolishness. He would put an end to her bluster and lies for all time. He would give her what she wanted—a sword—and he would force her to admit she knew nothing of such weapons and that he was the dominant one in this relationship.

It never occurred to him to wonder when he had begun to think of them as having a relationship other than master and slave. Instead, he turned away from her and opened the door to a room that held a supply of weapons.

He tossed her a sword and he grinned knowingly when she fumbled it and it dropped to the floor with a metallic clang.

“Take these chains off me, so I can fight you! Or are you afraid of the damage I might do in a fair fight?”

Why not? She was not going anywhere, even if she managed to somehow escape him and his lesson. If she managed to get outside, the lift would not take her down without his command, and she certainly could not scale the mountain walls. She would never survive; no one ever had.

The Watcher made sure of that.

Secure in his knowledge that he had nothing to lose, least of all his slave, he again offered to remove the chain for good if she but agreed not to try to escape. But Teela was uncanny in her ability to read him.

“I have already explained to you it is my duty to escape,” she told him.

And then she dared to make him a wager. Again, why not?

Teela could never overcome him in a sword fight. He could gamble the two moons of Tylana without fear of paying a penalty. He could even agree to call her by her human name, Feenix, without fear.

However, just so she would not see how completely he had trapped her with her own greed to be free, he put some conditions on the wager. He really was taking advantage of her, he knew, but she needed to have this lesson ground into her for all time.

“You will agree to serve me faithfully without argument, forego any escape attempts, answer to the name of Teela, and accept your fate as my concubine.”

Perhaps he would force her to fulfill that duty after all. He was certainly earning the right, with all this bickering and bargaining over the details of a ridiculous wager.

He tossed her the sword and watched as she struggled to hold it properly. She made some inane comment about it needing to be cleaned, but he knew she was merely stalling, trying to figure a way out of the predicament she found herself in. He would give her no quarter.

“It is obvious you have listened to warriors before, Teela, but that is not the way one should

stand when holding a sword.”

He almost smiled when she looked at him in surprise. She had been so sure she was doing everything right to convince him she knew how to wield a sword. The passes she made over her head with the blade were somewhat impressive, but anyone could have done them. Although, he admitted to himself, she had a natural grace and ability. If she had a few lessons, she might be able to make a decent thrust or two.

“Oh? How should I hold it, prince?”

Finally. She was almost ready to admit that she did not know the first thing about weapons, and swords in particular. He waited for her admission, or at the very least, a request to show her how to hold it.

Burning pain stabbed through his left thigh before he realized, in complete amazement, that she had actually sliced him. He stared at her as she assumed the most correct position of defense he had ever seen. The wound was not deep—only a scratch in fact—but her sword should never have made contact with his leg.

“Lesson number one,” she said, behind a triumphant grin. “Never underestimate your opponent. Especially when your opponent is me.”

Enough, his darker side yelled in his brain. This miserable slave had hit him, spit in his face, kissed him without permission and now sliced him with his own sword! He would take no more!

L’Garn gripped the hilt of his sword more securely and acknowledged her hit with a slight tilt of his head.

“Well done. Now let us see if it was luck or skill, shall we, Teela?”

A best defense is a swift and merciless offense, and this woman was going to get absolutely no mercy from him. He lunged and attacked with the full intent to disarm her and get this farce over with in a hurry.

Instead he met a wall of steel defense backed up with a blur of offensive thrusts and parries that sent a shock of awareness racing through his body. He might actually lose this wager!

She advanced on him, and backed him toward the door. He realized she was instinctively trying to get him into a more lighted area of the room, and away from the fallen table and clutter of chairs.

As he parried her attack, a part of him watched her skill with amazement. She did know how to use a sword. In fact, she was brilliant in her attacking thrusts and parries. L’Garn tried to find the pattern of her attack, but so far had not been able to predict any of her movements.

She had grasped the skirt of her gown in her left hand, pulling it tight across her body to allow free movement with her sword arm. The material clung to her thighs and breasts in a way that distracted him.

Before he could regain his wandering attention, Teela had sliced open the sleeve of his tunic, and cut a surface wound in his biceps.

“Lesson number two,” she laughed, dancing back to watch him. “Pay attention at all times!”

By the Jewels! She was enjoying this more than was seemly for a slave.

“Where did you learn to wield a sword, Teela?”

The gods damn her, she was not even breathing heavily. He realized the wager would be won only with some hard work on his part.

She lunged for his left shoulder, and he deflected her blade easily before advancing on her. She dodged around a long wooden bench and parried each of his thrusts with short, cutting movements.

“I picked it up here and there, elf-man.”

It was her turn to advance, and his to retreat with skillful parries of his own. Again she slipped past his defense, and this time sliced open the sleeve on his other arm. The touch of her blade was a mere whisper on his skin, and he suddenly realized she was toying with him.

He dropped his stance and fingered the shredded material of his tunic. Then he looked at her and almost bellowed in rage. The woman was laughing at him—Prince L’Garn of the House of Meedrion!

“Come, elf-man,” she taunted. “The wager cannot be won unless you put a little more effort into it.”

“You are sorely in need of a lesson in manners, Teela.”

He could feel the blood pumping throughout his body, and he knew that if he did not gain control of his temper, he would fail to disarm her before she did him some serious injury.

“Are you planning on teaching me, then? Bring it on, scum!” She dropped her skirt and made a beckoning motion with her fingers. Teela flashed him a charming grin. The urge to wipe it from her lips was overpowering.

With a growl of anger, he lunged at her, thrusting and slicing over and over. But she managed to parry each of his thrusts, despite the fact that their blades clashed with such force he felt the vibrations all the way to his neck.

By the Jewels, she was magnificent! Her skin glowed and her eyes sparkled. Her teeth flashed white in a huge grin as she danced and parried, thrust and whirled as if she had done this deadly dance thousands of times before.

L’Garn admitted to himself that she probably had. Teela had not lied when she told him she was a warrior.

“Where did you learn that move?” he asked, after she performed a particularly graceful pirouette, followed up by another thrust to his leg. The material on his thigh gapped open and a thin red line beaded with blood.

He had taken four hits from her blade, but each one was no more than an insult to his pride. However, he was observing, and L’Garn thought he had detected the slightest trace of a pattern in her movements.

“What? That little maneuver?” she asked with false modesty. “It was taught to me by a Brassarian sword champion. It is very difficult to master, but I was able to comprehend the complexities of it in only two days.”

He advanced with two quick thrusts, which she parried expertly, but he was pleased to see she had reacted exactly as he had anticipated.

“Sword play is more than flash and dash, Teela.”

He wiped a trail of sweat from his brow and parried her advance.

“Don’t feel bad that the move is beyond your skill, elf-man. It took me only two days, but most people require two weeks of constant drill to understand the move. However, a Night Elf scum like you would only require...what? Two *months* to get it right?”

Teela was obviously trying to get under his skin with her comment, and he had to admit she was having an effect. But he could not allow himself the luxury of losing control.

He was pleased to see she was beginning to pant a bit, and sweat had dampened the hair at the nape of her neck and around her face. She looked good enough to eat, he thought.

He faked a thrust to her right, pivoted and whirled just as he had seen her do a moment before. As he came around in a full circle, her left side and back were open for his attack. Instead of slicing through her tender flesh, he slapped the flat of his blade across her buttocks.

He met her outraged squawk with a wide grin and a defensive stance.

“Why, you sneaky scum!” she yelled at him.

Suddenly, Teela was no longer facing him. In her stead stood a furious woman who gripped the sword with both hands as if it were a lifeline, and advanced on him with an ear-splitting battle cry. He barely had time to defend himself from her whirlwind onslaught.

“I’m done with coddling you. Now comes lesson number three.”

She leaped over the bench, which had been overturned sometime during the battle, and used a chair as a step up to the table. She braced her legs in a wide stance and looked down from her height, waiting for him to advance.

“Teela,” he said from the safety of a good two arm-lengths away. “Enough of this. I concede that you know how to handle a sword. Let us stop before someone is hurt.”

“No! What you mean to say, you sorry excuse for an elf, is that I should concede the battle and you win the wager. I *will not* remain a slave! Do you understand me? One of us will die today. It does not matter to me which one of us it will be.”

Before he could respond, she leapt from the table directly at him, with her sword pointing at his chest, her left arm bent and locked against her side, both hands holding the hilt of the sword with an unwavering force.

Pure instinct saved his life. He parried the blade, but her momentum carried her into his body and knocked him to the side. In a blur she pivoted and thrust her blade deep into his upper arm. Suddenly his sword arm was useless. He flipped his blade into his other hand and took a defensive stance. The pain was intense, but it kept him from fainting as the blood drained from his head.

By the Jewels! She meant to kill him!

“Your usefulness is at an end, elf-man. I will be done with you now.”

He kept his feet through pure force of will. What did she mean? As he parried again and again, looking for a chink in her offense, the rage began to build again.

Usefulness?

“What nonsense are you spouting, Teela?”

She slashed another gash in his biceps, the other arm this time, but not deep enough to prevent him from advancing on her. Twice he could have sliced her, but he refused to harm her in that way.

Why? His brain demanded of him. *Kill her and get it over with! She is a danger to our people!* L’Garn fought the voice inside his mind as he parried Teela’s sword.

“Ha,” she laughed without joy. “You thought you were bringing a harmless human slave into your great fortress, did you not, elf-man?” She dodged a swing from his arm and stumbled over something on the floor. “You are finding out now that I’m not so harmless, am I?”

She feinted to the right and then lunged to the left. It almost worked, but his anger was growing, and it seemed to pump new resolve and energy into him.

“Did you never wonder why I call myself Captain Feenix? Did you ever have the wits to even ask yourself that question?”

The clang of their swords meeting again and again echoed through the large room, making a weird counterpoint to the slap of their feet and the harsh rasp of their breath.

What was she getting at, he wondered? Captain? Aye, she had called herself that and he had made light of it.

“Captain of what, Teela?”

He lunged and she scampered out of the way just in time. He was glad, for he had misjudged his reach and would have nicked her. His loss of blood was affecting his reflexes. Or perhaps he

was losing his inner battle?

“Here is the delicious part, elf-man, and your final lesson before you die!”

“And what would that be, Teela?”

His breathing was coming in great gasps. He knew he was at his last ounce of energy. All he needed to do was disarm her, retrieve her sword and put an end to this ridiculous sword fight. He needed to do it before he was in no shape to do more than fall at her feet. Such an event would be beyond humiliating.

Suddenly, he found himself without a sword. L’Garn watched it go spinning through the air to land in her hand. The point of Teela’s blade lightly kissed his skin, as she held it unwavering at his neck.

She looked him in the eyes, as if she wanted him to be very aware of who it was that held his life in her hands. She need not worry about that, he thought to himself. The shame would live with him all his life.

“I am Captain Feenix of Port Marcus, you half-elf scum. And I work for Lord Rendolin Hiloris, Mac Lir’s High Priest of the Sea Elves of Shalridoor!”

Her voice reverberated and buzzed around his head like flies swarming a corpse before settling down enough for him to make any sense of the words. The Sea Elves? He had brought a spy into the very bowels of Cragimore?

She smiled the nastiest smile he had ever thought possible, and held her breath and her death thrust, as she waited for her words to sink in. And they had. By the Jewels, they had.

“What have I done?” he whispered. “Grandfather was right. My blood is cursed and I am useless to my people.”

The rage that had been building took complete control of him. No longer did Teela/Feenix stand before him. Instead he saw all the mistakes and inadequacies of his life through a red haze of fury.

In that one instant he realized the only thing he could do—the last thing he would ever do—was stop her.

With a strength born of total despair, he pushed the sword tip away from his neck with his left hand, and pulled a hidden dagger from inside his tunic. If he was going to die, he would do all in his power to keep his people safe.

He lunged into her body the exact moment the burn of her steel opened his side. She grunted in surprise as he felt his blade slip into her flesh, and a tiny grin tugged at his lips.

His last conscious thought, as he took the woman down with him to the floor, was how sorry he was that he would never know Teela as a friend and a lover.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rendolin Hiloris stood before his god, the mighty Mac Lir. Creator of the Silvan Race on all the Seven Cella Worlds.

The god spoke to Rendolin, although no words were spoken aloud. The meaning of the words pierced the High Priest's mind and soul in a way that could be neither forgotten nor misunderstood.

Rendolin was aware that he was being granted a rare and precious gift. To be summoned to the presence of the god was almost unheard of, and he prayed he would be found worthy of the great privilege.

"Be at peace, my son," the god spoke into his awareness. "Thou shalt be healed of thy wounds for I have a further mission for thee to perform."

Rendolin knelt and bowed his head. "I am yours to command, Mac Lir."

~*~

Thelorin watched his brother's bonded mate as she bathed Rendolin's face in rose water and fussed about. He stood in the doorway, his shoulder leaning against the chipped and cracked stone, and almost convinced himself to leave and come back later when the human was not in attendance. However, since she lived in the room with his brother, he doubted if such a time would happen soon, and he needed to speak with Rendolin.

The High Priest had regained consciousness only a few hours ago, but Thelorin thought he looked hale enough. A white bandage wrapped around his head held his hair out of his eyes, and a bruise the color of crushed grapes covered the side of his face, but other than that, he looked fit.

Actually, Rendolin had sustained only a minor wound from the Night Elf arrow; it was the fall from the high boulder that had rendered him useless during the clean up after the battle. The High Healer, Lord Selrin, had been most concerned over the blow to his head. Even the healing spells cast by the great healer had failed to awaken Thelorin's brother as expected.

During the entire time in which Rendolin had lain as if dead and Thelorin had worried for his younger brother's life, Korrene had sat by her mate's side, tending him and speaking to him, holding onto a tenuous mind link that only she shared with the High Priest. Thelorin would deny it if asked, but he had to admit to himself that the human had played a large part in his brother's return to the living.

"Brother," Rendolin spoke from the large bed. "Just the person I wanted to see. Come in and sit beside me."

Thelorin pushed away from the door and walked to the foot of the bed.

"How are you this morning, Ren? You look remarkably well for someone who was at death's door for two days." Thelorin ignored Korrene, as was his custom. He had developed the knack of disregarding the human's presence when in the same room. He also ignored the fact that Rendolin disapproved of his treatment of Korrene.

"I am well, my brother." Rendolin beckoned with his hand, "Sit here beside me, and tell me about all that has been happening. Korrene, love," he said, turning to the woman. "I am sure Thelorin would appreciate something to eat."

"You can't dismiss me that easily," she sighed and removed the damp cloth from his head. "I

will have the kitchens send something up for you both.”

Thelorin watched the two lovers as they silently communicated through their mind link. *What would it be like to be bonded to someone you could love for eternity*, he wondered before he realized he was thinking foolish thoughts. He had no time, nor patience, for such frivolous pursuits.

“Have there been any more raids?” Rendolin asked as his mate left the room.

Thelorin settled down in the chair, resigned to answering his brother’s questions before broaching the topic that had brought him here.

“There have been no raids for the past two nights. We have guards and pickets out beyond the boundaries of Shalridoor. All has been quiet, as you know.”

“Yes, Korrene and Helarn have filled me in, but I wanted to hear what you had to say on the matter. What do you think of our situation?”

Thelorin let the words settle to the floor before answering. It occurred to him that he suddenly felt very old. When had that happened?

“Unless we send scouts into Cragimore, or you hear from Captain Feenix, there is no way for us to accurately judge the situation. We had thought that the Night Elves would be unaware of our return and yet, before we are ready to defend Shalridoor, we have already been attacked.”

“And you suspect Feenix. Do not try to deny it, brother.”

“I can not deny that my fears run in that direction.” Thelorin met his brother’s eyes without flinching. “However, I will wait for you to again contact the human before I pass judgment upon her.”

“I have informed Selrin that I will attempt to re-establish contact with Captain Feenix this night,” Rendolin said.

“You will do no such thing, you foolish elf!”

As usual, the uncouth woman interrupted his brother as she swept back into the room. She carried a platter with two steaming bowls and a loaf of crusty bread. A servant followed with a jug of ale and three goblets.

“You are too weak to cast any spells, Rendolin, as you well know,” she fumed. She handed Thelorin a bowl of hot soup without looking at him.

“I *must* contact Feenix, and no, I do not want any more soup, Korrene,” Rendolin said with a shake of his head. “What I truly want is for you to stop fussing over me, and a meal that I can sink my teeth into. All this gruel and soup is enough to turn my stomach!”

Thelorin agreed, but grinned at his brother’s discomfort. Perhaps he could distract the human long enough for his brother to explain the reason behind his summons.

“Rendolin believes that Captain Feenix is the only person who can tell us what the Night Elves are up to,” he said to his brother’s mate.

She turned her head and looked at him deliberately, as if it were the first time she had noticed he was in the same room with them. He was sure it was the same greeting Korrene would give a beetle found in her shoe.

“She is a slave. How could she know what the hell they’re up to?”

“Easy, love,” Rendolin soothed her with a gentle hand. “Thelorin is correct. She may be a slave, but Feenix is the key to Cragimore and all of our troubles with the Night Elves.”

Thelorin felt a shiver creep down his back. His brother spoke prophecy.

“How so?” he asked. He hated it when Rendolin spoke as the god’s mouth piece. It never boded well.

“While I was asleep,” Rendolin began, but Korrene rudely interrupted his words again.

“You were unconscious and nearly dead, Rendolin! Don’t wrap it up in linen!”

“By all that is holy, woman! Will you just let him tell his story so we can all get on with our lives, trying to adapt yet again to the next absurdity his god decrees?” Thelorin’s limited patience was at an end.

“How do you know my story is from Mac Lir?” Rendolin asked, silently soothing his mate’s ruffled feathers. From the glare of annoyance she shot at him, Thelorin could assume his brother was successful in keeping his woman under control...but only barely.

“Whenever you speak with that tone of voice, it means you are the god’s mouthpiece. It always gives me the shivers, brother, so I pray you will get on with your tale.”

Thelorin watched Korrene’s mouth pull into a sneer. If she were not his brother’s bonded mate he would wipe it from her face. However, he could not deny she was good for Rendolin, so he pretended not to notice. No small trick, since he was seated almost directly across the bed from her.

“Mac Lir has told me that Feenix has been placed inside Cragimore for his own purposes. Exactly what that purpose is will be made known to me in due course. In the meantime, it is important for us to make peace with the Night Elves.”

Thelorin could not have been more stunned if the sea had suddenly gone dry.

“Peace?” He stood and instinctively pulled his dagger from its sheath, as if ready to defend himself from such an unwelcome thought. “By all that is holy, brother, that hit on the head has addled your brain! We will never surrender and bow down to the Night Elf yoke!”

“I did not say we are to surrender, Thelorin. Put that dagger away and sit down.”

The Lord of Hiloris responded to his younger brother’s authoritative voice without conscious thought. He silently cursed himself when he realized what he had done. It was another of those priest tricks that he hated.

“Explain yourself, priest,” he commanded. “And make it quick, for I do not have time for such treasonous ideas, and I warn you! I will not be party to the overthrow of our people!”

His brother made a little motion with his hand, and a trace of rosemary lifted into the room.

“You are always so quick to jump to conclusions, my brother. Wait until you have heard all the facts before you make a decision. Be at peace, Thelorin. Mac Lir would not let his children of the sea come to harm.”

“Then spit it out,” Thelorin growled, although his anger was fast evaporating. He knew his little brother had used a minor spell to calm him, but he allowed it since he did want to hear whatever nonsense the god had come up with this time.

“The Night Elves are being manipulated by Tuawtha. They are in as much danger of becoming extinct as we are.”

“Says your god, who, it seems to me, is using you to manipulate our people just as he claims Tuawtha is doing to our enemy! We are all nothing but pawns in the hands of the gods!”

Rendolin threw the covers from him and sat up on the edge of the bed. His eyes shone with the same intensity they held when he had first explained the importance of the Binding with a human. Thelorin groaned inwardly. His brother would not be easily turned from this new god-decreed development.

“Think, Thelorin! Tuawtha is determined to eradicate all life except for his demons. He has started with the silvan. Look what he has been able to accomplish on Korrene’s world. All of our kind are gone! Only legends and rumors are left behind of the thriving silvan culture. Do you honestly want something like that to happen here on Tylana?”

“Of course not! But you only have this god’s word that such a thing happened. How can you

trust him? How can we trust any god?"

Rendolin peered intently into his brother's eyes, and Thelorin felt unwelcome tears gather. With an impatient jerk, Thelorin turned his back and brushed the moisture away. He was becoming an old woman!

"Oh, my brother," the priest said, laying his hand on Thelorin's shoulder. "When did you become so distrustful of our god? What happened to you that you can no longer believe the evidence of your own eyes? Mac Lir is our father, and he only wants the best for his beloved children."

Thelorin threw off Rendolin's comforting hand and stood, knocking the chair over with a loud clatter.

"So you say, brother, but I have never seen any of Mac Lir's love! He has allowed our people to be killed and captured by our enemy for un-numbered years. Our own father was sacrificed in the name of Mac Lir's goodness. Time and again families have been torn apart because of the Night Elves and their blood feud with us."

He strode to the doorway and then turned to face his brother again. "Now you tell me we must make peace with our enemy because they are also Mac Lir's children and they are acting under the direction of Tuawtha? That is reason enough, my deluded brother, to kill them! They are traitors to Mac Lir, and should be executed!"

Rendolin stood and walked towards his brother. Thelorin noticed that Korrene did not appear upset, or try to stop her mate from the activity.

"Thelorin. They do not know they are being manipulated. They do not understand that they are being used as Tuawtha's tool to kill their own kin. Worse," he said sadly, "they do not see that they, too, will be eliminated once their usefulness is at an end."

Again the High Priest put his hand on his brother's sleeve in a soothing manner. "It is likely that they are not even aware of Tuawtha's influence. That is how the demon god works, in secrecy and deceit."

Thelorin felt his brother's words slip into his heart and mind. Yes, he knew all about manipulation, secret works and deceitful actions. Perhaps there was something to his brother's reasoning.

"Very well," he said with a weary sigh. "Tell me the whole of it, and I will try to keep my comments and thoughts to myself until you finish."

The brothers resumed their seats, and Korrene silently tucked her legs beneath her as she settled herself at the end of the bed.

"Tuawtha hates all silvan kind. Actually," Rendolin paused for a moment before continuing in a thoughtful voice, "he hates all living beings except for his own creations."

"Demons?" Korrene asked softly.

"Demons, devils, goblins and all manner of evil, vile creatures, my love," Rendolin replied.

"Get on with it," Thelorin demanded. Why did Rendolin not send the woman to the kitchens where she could make herself useful?

"Tuawtha's plan is to destroy all living creatures on the Seven Cella Worlds so that his creatures will be the only occupants of them. He has determined to begin with the silvan races, but Mac Lir says he will not stop there."

Rendolin looked at his mate with a sympathetic smile before he continued, "On your own world, Korrene, now that the silvan have been defeated, Tuawtha has begun his campaign against the next race; the humans.

"How? Did Mac Lir say?" Her voice seemed all fuzzy, and Thelorin was sure it was due to

the tears that leaked from her eyes unchecked. Foolish woman.

“Plague, my love.”

“There is nothing we can do for your world, human,” Thelorin broke into their touching moment without remorse. “What else did your god say about Tuawtha and Tylana, Rendolin?”

He waited impatiently while they obviously shared some private communication before his brother answered him.

“Basically, Mac Lir has given me the job of negotiating a peace between the three silvan nations: Sea Elves, Night Elves and Wood Elves.”

“Wood Elves?” Thelorin was again surprised. He had thought they were only legends and myths. “Do you mean there are still Wood Elves on Tylana? I thought they were only childhood stories.”

“Apparently, Tuawtha has not been completely successful in bringing about their demise, brother. There is a band of our kin still living in Ashilor. They have been under attack from Tuawtha’s minions for many years, and are about to succumb to defeat.”

Rendolin again touched Thelorin’s sleeve, and the older elf could feel the heat of his brother’s concern and love for their cousins.

“Do you not see, Thelorin? The Wood Elves have almost gone the way of our kin on Earth. We can not allow that to happen!”

Thelorin watched the thoughts and emotions chase each other deep within Rendolin’s eyes. His brother was committed to this cause, and believed with all his being that something could be done against the demon god.

What could they—a puny race of elves whose main goal in life had been to fight and kill each other off—do to stop a god? Why even try? They would only be killed sooner. Better to wait and live out the rest of their lives, rather than gamble on a ridiculous scheme that could only end in the shedding of more silvan blood.

No, better to let the gods fight it out amongst themselves, using the Seven Cella Worlds as their battleground, leaving their children to get on with their lives as best they could.

“We *are* the gods’ battle ground, brother,” Rendolin spoke, as if Thelorin had voiced his thoughts out loud. “We will surely die if we do nothing, Thelorin. With the help of Mac Lir, we will stand a chance of succeeding, which can ensure our children’s survival.”

His people’s survival had been ingrained into Thelorin from his birth. To put such a directive aside was a near impossible task. Even when he had opposed his brother in the Binding issue, it was done because he truly believed it was his people’s best course.

“How can you be sure this is a true prophecy, brother, and not some wild imagination of your fevered brain?”

Rendolin gripped both of Thelorin’s shoulders in a firm grasp. Thelorin looked into the face he knew as well as his own, for until recently, it was a mirror of what peered back at him every day during his washings. Except for the color of eyes, he and Rendolin appeared identical, with the same color hair, same nose, chin and dimple. However, the Binding with the human had taken a toll on his younger brother. Now there were tiny lines around Rendolin’s eyes and mouth. Their hair was worn at different lengths; Rendolin’s flowed to his shoulder blades, and his own cropped to just below his ears, but the High Priest’s hair had lost some of its luster. Silver threads now appeared in the golden mane.

Thelorin recognized the earnest pleading in his brother’s eyes. He knew that Rendolin believed the god, and more! Would do all in his power to obey Mac Lir’s commands.

Including heading up a suicide mission to bring peace and harmony to the silvan race of

Tylana. One had a better chance at arguing with a rock troll than Rendolin when he had made his mind up to obey his god.

“What is Mac Lir’s plan?” Thelorin asked with heavy resignation.

Immediately, he was pulled into an encompassing hug that threatened to expel all the air from his lungs.

“I knew I could depend upon you, Thel!”

Another shiver of apprehension skittered down his spine as he heard his little brother call him by his childhood name. An ancient proverb popped into his mind as he returned the hug and smiled warily into his brother’s sparkling emerald eyes.

“Never count the teeth of a sleeping dragon.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There was a great weight on Feenix's chest, pressing her into the hard floor. Her hips ached and her shoulder blades felt like they were molded to the ground. Her head pounded and she couldn't focus her eyes.

The smell was familiar and horrible. Blood. Lots of it, mixed with sweat and fear. A battle, then? Had she been in a battle and left for dead? She couldn't remember.

A sudden cough spasm forced its way past her lips, and her entire body heaved with the effort to expel the fluid in her chest. The taste of blood was in her mouth, but she didn't think it came from her lungs.

She felt around the inside of her mouth with the tip of her tongue, and grunted in satisfaction as she discovered the ragged cut inside her cheek that had most likely produced the blood in her mouth.

She realized the reason she couldn't focus her eyes was because it was deep night. There were no sounds of battle, no sounds of hurt men, no sound except for her own ragged breathing.

A fire burned in her side, which ignited anew each time she drew a breath or tried to move. However, she couldn't lay here forever and wait for death if it was, in fact, coming for her this day. She would meet it head on and standing on her own two feet.

"By the god's toenail," she moaned as she tried to move the large mass that had her pinned to the ground. At the touch of her hands on the cool, still flesh, Feenix suddenly remembered where she was and why she was hurting so much.

"L'Garn."

She had killed the half-elf.

With a strength born of desperation, remorse and dread, she rolled the body to the side and wiggled free of the dead weight. Hot agony ripped through her left side, and she put her hand to her waist. Instantly her fingers became sticky and wet with blood.

He must have stabbed her, but not mortally. How? She knew she had disarmed him because she remembered taunting him. He must have had a dagger hidden on him. Typical elfin trick, one she'd used often herself. Well, at least she wasn't going to die in the next few moments.

She had to see if L'Garn was dead, and she wasn't going to be able to do it in this half light.

Holding back her moans, she crawled to the side of the room where one of the strange lights gave off a weak illumination. Up close, it looked like a silver bowl filled with a glowing liquid. She picked it up and brought the small light back to the fallen man, holding it over his face.

He didn't look like he was breathing, but she knew such appearances were often deceiving. She placed her bloodied fingers on his neck, checking for a pulse.

After a moment, during which time she held her breath as if her fingers needed to hear the possible pulse rather than feel it, an icy cold flood of relief washed through her when the first faint flutter registered in her awareness. She almost dropped the light with relief.

Why? She should be upset that she *hadn't* killed him.

By Mac Lir's beard, she supposed now she had to help him or he'd bleed to death! An alive, wounded prince was better than a dead one, if she needed to bargain for her escape.

She didn't know how long she had been unconscious. The aches and pains in her bones suggested that L'Garn had been crushing her for at least ten years, but that was probably a bit of an exaggeration. More likely it had only been a few minutes, but she needed to tend to both of

their wounds before the loss of blood prevented either one of them from recovering.

Perhaps it was already too late to help the prince.

She still didn't know why she hadn't killed him in the fight when she had the chance. He had certainly pushed her hard enough. The battle lust had filled her being, and she remembered how much she wanted to kill him for his taunts, and for daring to make a slave of her.

Something had prevented her from the killing thrust, when it came right down to it. And now she had her own wounds to tend to and a half dead prince on her hands. He'll most likely be the death of her!

"By the god's right eye, stop that nonsense, woman," she commanded herself. "You'd better figure a way out of this right now! No one is going to come rescue your sorry backside! You've been in worse situations and survived. Now, think!"

She touched L'Garn's cheek and forehead, checking for a fever, she told herself. But she was afraid there was another reason for her gentleness, and she didn't have time to explore that possibility.

No fever yet. That was good. She needed to bind his wounds to stop the loss of blood, but before she did that, she knew she had to tend to her own wounds. She was dizzy from the loss of blood, and probably the crack on the back of her head when she went down under his onslaught.

Crazy half-elf! What the hell did he think he was doing, jumping into her sword like that?

With grunts and moans, she gathered all the lights from the room and placed them atop one of the large tables. Together, they gave off enough light for her to check her side.

L'Garn had managed to slice her waist with his dagger. However, while the cut was long and painful, it wasn't very deep. It was awkward for her to pack the wound with a piece of her tattered gown and then tie it in place, but she eventually managed.

Totally winded, she had to sit and catch her breath for a few minutes before moving to L'Garn. The fear that she would faint from loss of blood, and the terror that she would not be able to care for him before her own fever set in, propelled her to his side after far too short a rest.

Feenix didn't know how she managed, but after what seemed like a lifetime of hard labor, she wrestled his limp body over to the table and eventually levered him onto it. The warrior woman was not strong enough to lift him cleanly onto the table, and she cursed her weakness. But by a series of props, first on a bench, then against the table, she was finally able to roll him onto the top of the table.

Again she had to rest before proceeding.

"Mac Lir, you son of a sea whore," she complained through cracked and dried lips. "If you were ever any good for anything, the least you could do is help me out here! After all this work, if this blasted half-elf dies, I am never going to forgive you!"

She cut away L'Garn's tunic with his own dagger. Appropriate, she thought, as she chuckled to herself before realizing she must be close to insane. How could she laugh about such a serious matter? The loss of blood was making her feel drunk.

"Damn! And I didn't even have the pleasure of drinking any cold ale!" She licked her dry lips. "Sure could use something wet about now, L'Garn," she said to her patient as she peeled away the bloody tunic from his chest. It was easiest for her to just cut the silk shirt from him, once the tunic was gone.

The cuts on his biceps were nothing more than scratches. She hadn't lost her touch with the sword, she reflected as she admired her handiwork. She didn't even bother to check the ones on his thighs. They had already stopped bleeding, and she turned her attention to the great gash in his right shoulder.

The cut was deep and clear to the bone. She had to clean it out before she could tell exactly how bad it was. The blood was flowing sluggishly, and considering how long he had been without any help, she knew an artery had not been cut. But tendons could well have been cut, and if that was the case, without immediate healing spells, L’Garn could lose the use of his arm. Or worse. Lose the arm itself completely.

She stopped wondering why she cared about the severity of his wounds, and just accepted that she wanted him well and whole.

“Mac Lir, if you’re listening, you better get your sorry ass down here and help me! You can’t possibly want the royal prince of the House of Meedrion to die, can you? Isn’t he one of your blasted children, too?”

She rolled up the remains of his shirt into a firm pad and pushed it into the open wound. Pressing on it with a considerable amount of her weight, she applied pressure to stop the bleeding.

“I mean it, you sorry excuse for a god! Get down here and help me now!”

After holding the shirt firmly into the wound for a few minutes, Feenix slipped L’Garn’s belt from around his waist and used it to tie the pad in place. The pressure wasn’t as great, but as she tightened the belt, she knew it would have to do while she searched the building for other supplies. The immediate need of stanching the wounds had been accomplished.

“I’m going to leave you for a few minutes, now,” she told the unconscious man. “Don’t go anywhere, and don’t even consider dying on me, you half-elf scum!”

She picked up one of the strange lights and noticed for the first time that there was no heat or flame.

“Magic, of course,” she mumbled to herself. “Blasted stuff makes my skin crawl, but there’s no hope for it.”

Going towards the door where L’Garn had gotten the swords, Feenix saw a corridor leading off the main room. She followed it, and soon found herself in a large kitchen area, complete with a stone sink and large fireplace for cooking. Cabinets and shelves lined one wall, stocked with everything from plates and cups to spices and fruit. There was even a root cellar that appeared to have vegetables stored within its dark depths.

Everything was neat and clean, and looked like it was waiting for the owners to return at any moment.

“By the god’s left eye, where is everyone? It’s obvious this place feeds a small army, so where in the god’s blue ocean are they?”

Actually, if she were truthful with herself, she had to be thankful that she and L’Garn were alone in the building. If any of his people had been about while they were in the middle of their sword play, she doubted if she would be alive right now. Perhaps the Night Elves weren’t overly fond of him, but L’Garn was the prince; and even elves as stupid and disloyal as these appeared to be wouldn’t let their prince be run through by a human.

Would they?

“Well, we won’t starve at least,” she said to herself, as she began to rummage about.

A large wooden barrel, the kind ale was shipped in, stood just inside the back door. Feenix removed the wooden lid and was relieved to find fresh water. After taking several large gulps, she dipped a pot into it and removed some water to clean L’Garn’s wounds.

Next she lit a fire in the fireplace and filled the pot hanging from the cooking hook with more water. After she finished with L’Garn, she’d come back and get a hearty stew going. They would need to eat something soon.

"If I only had some more of the Kestrel that troll person gave to me. A nice hot tea would do both of us a world of good." She tipped her head back and shouted to the ceiling, "I don't suppose you could just conjure up some Kestrel for me, could you Mac Lir?" When there was no immediate answer she continued, "No! That would be helping, and by all the Seven Cella Worlds, we know you can't help me out, don't we?"

She pawed through the cupboards, looking for linen or towels, or something to clean the half-elf's wounds.

"What good are you, anyway? Never around when I need you, and always there to make my life one hell after another."

Feenix continued to mumble and gripe as she tossed items aside before discovering a wooden box tucked in the back of one of the shelves.

She opened it, and the smell of musty, dried herbs tickled her nose, making her sneeze. Carefully, she removed mullein leaves, dried mint, tansy, arrowroot, coltsfoot, comfrey, dill and other herbs, all carefully wrapped and marked. In a leather pouch she found gossamer spider webs packed so as to be easily removed when needed. Last, the box held a large steel needle and a spool of strong, silk thread.

It was obvious she had found the house's supplies for attending to minor hurts. It was a lucky find, and Feenix felt quite pleased with herself as she carried the box, pot of water and towels back into the large room where L'Garn lay.

"I don't know what I'm doing this for," she told the half-elf as she sponged the wound clean of blood. The shirt and belt had done their job, and the cut was no longer bleeding more than a little.

"I should just walk away and let you die. That's what I should do," she continued as she crushed some dried mullein leaves into the cut. "Make a slave out of me, will you? It would serve you right if you did die."

Feenix had to stop again and catch her breath. The burning in her side had grown more intense after all the carrying and lifting she'd done. She would like nothing more than to lie down and sleep for three days, but she knew that was impossible. She had to finish tending to this miserable Night Elf and then make good her escape before the others returned. L'Garn would be fine once she took care of this cut she had given him. His own people would nurse him back to health, so she needn't feel so bad about leaving him.

Besides, she wanted to be well away from him and never set eyes on him again! Yes, she did, and no amount of guilt would change her mind, she scolded herself.

Feenix dropped the needle once before she was able to get it threaded. She hated the feel of the steel entering flesh and then the sensation of the thread as it pulled through muscle and skin. However, it must be done, or there was no hope of the wound ever healing. As much as she hated magic, she would give her second best sword for a Healing Spell right about now.

The stitches were not neat and dainty the way a proper woman would make them, she supposed. Rendolin's boring mate, Korrene, would probably stitch the shoulder closed with neat, smooth stitches, and finish up with a pithy little homily tattooed in his skin so he would always remember the lesson of clashing swords with Feenix of Port Marcus! Something like, "Never cross swords with a human slave," or some such.

She closed her eyes and waited for the latest of the waves of dizziness to pass. They were coming more often, she knew, but the job was almost done. And then she could make good her escape.

She bit off the thread after the final stitch was in place, then rinsed her hands in the pot's red

water. Dipping the towel into the water, she wrung it out and wiped his shoulder one more time. Drying her hands on her filthy gown, she opened the leather pouch and separated a goodly portion of the spider web from the clump. Carefully, she wrapped his shoulder with the thin material, pressing it down gently over the wound.

When that chore was finished, she took the remaining two towels, made a pad of one, and then ripped the other into strips to fasten and tie the makeshift bandage in place. Her strength was fast running out, and it took longer each time to lift his side to wrap the bandage. Finally, just as she was sure she would faint with exhaustion, the job was finished.

She looked at her handiwork, the mess of dried leaves, bloody material, and puddles of water scattered over the table. She didn't have the strength or the desire to clean it up. Those Night Elf scum could clean it all. She had done the important part; L'Garn's wounds were bound and the immediate danger of him bleeding to death was over. Of course, fever was bound to follow, but she wouldn't be around to deal with that, would she?

Of course not. She had to get out of here. Get back to Shalridoor and report to Rendolin and Thelorin. She had a mission to complete, didn't she?

She placed her fingers at his neck again, and the pulse seemed to be stronger. There. She could leave him with a clear conscience, couldn't she?

"Thank the gods," she whispered to herself. Then Captain Feenix of Port Marcus did something she hadn't done in decades.

She put her head down and wept like a baby.

~*~

"Pretty Feenix have to wake now."

Something slapped her cheek, and the sting brought tears to her eyes. By the god's left ear, who was hitting her?

Feenix picked her head up with a start and groaned in pain. The wound in her side felt like it was going to tear her apart. She swiveled her head around, trying to identify her assailant.

In front of her, lying atop a large wooden table was L'Garn, unconscious and covered with blood. Standing on the other side of the table, grinning at her like an open gash in the side of a hill was her troll acquaintance, Eagnad.

"Pretty Feenix come," he said in his deep broken voice. "Come before workers come."

"Come?" she asked, shaking her head clear of the sleep and exhaustion. "Where?"

She hadn't planned on falling asleep, and look what happened! That troll person found her lying over the hacked-up remains of his master. Would he turn her in, or help her?

"Eagnad, do you know how to get me out of here?"

The little troll picked up L'Garn without any difficulty. "Come. Follow Eagnad."

"Hey, wait a minute," she commanded, rounding the table and stopping him with a hand on his arm. "Leave him here. His people will take care of him, and he'll only slow us down."

"No. Prince die. Must come." He turned and walked towards the door.

"He's dead?"

With a feeling that her heart had just dropped out of her chest, she scrambled over to the half-elf and felt his neck.

L'Garn's skin was clammy and slick with sweat, but he was not dead.

"Pretty Feenix bring things," the troll said. "Eagnad bring prince. Hurry. Workers come."

There was no arguing with the little troll, and if she were totally honest with herself, she

didn't really want to leave L'Garn here without being sure he would survive. Besides, the decision had been taken out of her hands when Eagnad picked up the half-elf and headed out the door.

Without another comment, Feenix quickly gathered up L'Garn's gear, including the dagger and pouch. She grabbed the box of herbs, and as she jogged after the retreating troll, she picked up the two swords they had used. *You never know when they'll come in handy*, she thought to herself with a leer.

She stepped onto the porch and realized the sun was breaking over the edge of the eastern mountains. The glorious sight brought tears again to her eyes. How long had it been since she had seen a dawn? By Mac Lir's eye balls, never had she seen such a beautiful sight.

"Pretty Feenix hurry," Eagnad yelled back to her. He was already a small speck in the distance, heading south. With another hungry look at the pink and golden sky, she set off after him, favoring her left side.

The pain in her side reminded her she was in no condition for an all day hike, but for some reason she felt sure the troll's destination wasn't that far away.

The swords and gear were awkward, banging against her legs, and slipping from her grasp. In her weakened state, she'd never keep up, carrying all the stuff this way. It was hampering her progress. She stopped and donned the leather belt, sheathed the dagger, tucked both swords into the belt and wrapped the remaining items inside the bloody tunic. Slinging the makeshift sack over her shoulder, she continued slowly down Eagnad's back trail.

Ah, life was definitely improving; she smiled to herself in the warm morning air. A sword at her side and no chains were simple pleasures she had never truly valued. Of course, the cursed metal was still around her neck and wrists, but as soon as they reached their destination, she would correct that oversight. L'Garn must have that little key somewhere in his gear, and as soon as she found it, she would be truly free of him.

Feenix lost sight of the troll as he ducked to the left, between the branches of a group of huge scruff elms. By the time she reached the spot, there was no trace of where he could have gone. While she struggled to regain her breath, she searched the ground, but the rocky terrain left no clue as to the path he had taken.

"Eagnad," she yelled. "Eagnad, where are you?"

No sound greeted her question. Even the birds stilled in their morning singing to listen with her.

Just when she had decided to search further into the trees, something clamped around her ankle and yanked her off her feet. With a startled squeak, she fell down a dank hole and landed at the feet of the troll.

"Pretty Feenix must not yell. Looker get she."

With a groan, she regained her feet, and looked around. They were in a deep ravine, shaded by the dense growth of trees. A pool of water beckoned tantalizingly at one end, and a clearing amid the rocks and boulders waited at the other. A crude bed had been thrown together under the overhang of the ravine's edge, and L'Garn now reposed upon the branches and grass that made up the mattress. She was sure it wasn't the most comfortable bed in the world, but it looked like heaven to her right now.

"What is this place, Eagnad?" She was comforted to see that no one would easily discover the place. Not unless they were actively seeking.

The little troll began to make a strange and horrible sound, as his body bounced erratically. It looked as if he was about to have some sort of seizure, and she panicked for a moment,

absolutely positive that her meager healing skills would never cover treating such a problem. Would he become violent in the thralls of the fit?

“This be Eagnad’s special place,” he said between the terrifying sounds. “Looker not find. Pretty Feenix and prince be safe here.”

His hideous, pocked-marked face pulled into a tight grimace, and his mouth opened, showing broken and greenish-yellow fangs. The frightening noise continued to issue from his mouth, but he made no threatening move...and she finally realized the troll was laughing.

“Mac Lir,” she growled to herself, “if you think this is what I had in mind when I told you to help me, you are more of a useless piece of sea scum than I had ever imagined!”

She dropped her pack, pulled the swords from her belt, and sat wearily down on a low rock. She was too tired and hurt to enjoy the troll’s humor.

“Eagnad, can you find me some more of those pretty flowers? The flowers you gave me in the laundry?”

She had little hope that he would know what she was talking about, never mind know where to find them. However, she was past reasoning with herself. If she didn’t do something soon, she would collapse and never get out of the Night Elves’ hold.

As abruptly as it began, the laughter stopped and Eagnad slipped quietly and quickly up the side of the ravine. It amazed her that he had not made a sound.

She only had a moment to ponder that phenomenon before she slipped bonelessly to the ground, unconscious.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The smell of crushed green leaves, and moist earth warmed by sunshine, brought Feenix slowly awake. It was glorious to float towards awareness on a cloud of comfort and wellbeing for a change. No one slapping her awake, or jerking her up with the command to get breakfast before starting chores. Not even the blare of a bugle to announce a change of guard in the barracks. Just soft, blissful feelings of safety, peace and comfort.

Then she made the mistake of trying to turn on her side.

Excruciating pain knifed through her, cutting her breath off like the agony of a vivisection without benefit of any pain-numbing herbs.

“Pretty Feenix wake now?”

She opened her eyes, but had to shield them against the brightness of the afternoon sun filtering through the elm leaves high above.

“Er, um,” she managed to growl past her dry mouth and tight throat before a coughing fit assaulted her. She didn’t know what was worse—gasping for air between gut-wrenching coughs that made her side ache unbearably, or Eagnad pounding on her back in an attempt to help.

“Enough...stop!” The little troll backed away. “Damn, Eagnad,” she sputtered as she tried to catch her breath. “You’re going to kill me. Stay away from me!”

“Pretty Feenix better now. Eagnad help.”

“Fine, just help over there, and don’t touch me!”

The look of hurt that settled on his horrible face sent a shaft of remorse through Feenix’s conscience. She didn’t know how it was possible, but he looked like a puppy that had just been kicked by its best friend.

“Oh, Mac Lir’s ears,” she said in exasperation. “I’m sorry, Eagnad. I’m a bit of a bear when I first wake. I didn’t mean it.”

She felt totally foolish apologizing to him, especially since she couldn’t remember the last time she had apologized to any living soul. However, at her words, he perked up again, and his face broke into its usual gashed grin.

“Pretty Feenix nice,” he said eagerly. “Eagnad help.”

“No!” she commanded when he took a step towards her again. Immediately, he halted in his tracks. “I don’t need any more help, thank you, Eagnad. Unless,” she said after reflection, “you can get me something to drink and help me up so I can...um, go for a quick walk. Then I need to check on the prince.”

“Prince not wake,” the troll said as he gently helped Feenix to her feet and then handed her a battered cup filled with water.

“Did you get the flowers for me, Eagnad?”

She downed the entire contents of the cup and handed it back to him. The effort to remain on her feet made her side burn with fire. She was going to have to see to herself soon.

“Yes.”

His short answer surprised her somewhat, but she was too intent in getting herself to the thick bushes where she could have some privacy to give it much thought.

By the time she returned to the camp, Eagnad was warming something that smelled almost edible on a small fire. Her stomach growled, and she realized it had been quite a while since her last meal. She wondered what had become of the pot of hot water she had started in the house.

“Where are the flowers? I need to make some tea for the prince and me.”

To her surprise, Eagnad had already heated a dented pot full of water, and the Kestrel was laid out on a rock by her resting place.

She snipped off the flowers and leaves and discarded the stems. Then, rubbing them between her palms, she crushed the fragrant flowers and dropped them into the simmering pot. A wonderful aroma wafted into the air, and Feenix tried to stifle a huge yawn without success. She put the brew aside to steep for a while.

“Where are we, Eagnad?” Perhaps she could gather some information while she checked her side. She opened the herb box and took out enough supplies to tend to her own gash. If she didn’t clean it out soon, it could become festered, and then she’d be in deep trouble.

“This Eagnad’s secret place. Atop.”

She was beginning to read his face, and recognized that his open, gaping mouth meant he was smiling or happy when it was accompanied by his orange eyes squinting and glinting. He was smiling now.

“Does anyone else know where this secret place is?” she asked as she ripped the last towel into bandages. The troll watched her intently, but made no move to help her or come nearer.

“Eagnad show only pretty Feenix and prince secret place. Looker not even know,” and he exploded into another laughing fit. It was horrible and enthralling to behold.

“Who is this Looker you keep talking about?” She turned away from him and lifted the remains of her gown to get a look at her side. The wound had bled through the towel and then dried over the course of the night. A fetid stench emanated from it, and she knew it was going to hurt like Mac Lir’s toothache when she pulled the cloth away to clean it.

“Looker big. Bad. Kill she. Looker not nice.”

The troll had moved so that he could see what she was doing, although he kept his distance. She decided to ignore his presence and concentrate on taking care of herself while her mind was still free of the fever. Strange, her skin had not yet begun to burn with a rise in temperature. Neither had L’Garn’s, come to think of it.

“Eagnad, I’m going to soak in that pool of water,” she said, tearing another piece off of the remains of her gown. “Will you keep a watch on the prince for me?”

She stood slowly and stumbled. The troll reached her side before she could go down, and picked her up as if she weighed no more than a child.

“Put me down! I can walk!”

“Eagnad help,” was all he said as he carried her to the edge of the pool. Tenderly, he put her down on a flat rock within stepping distance of the water. When he was sure she had her balance, he turned and went back to tend the fire, leaving her alone.

Feenix didn’t quite know what to make of him. He was certainly one of the ugliest beings she had ever encountered, but it seemed that he was determined to take her under his wing and help her all he could. So be it. She was not a fool.

She would take his help now, and when she was out of this situation and back to her own life, she would reward Eagnad for his service. Feenix of Port Marcus knew how to take care of those who helped her, make no doubt about that.

She removed the rag she wore, and slipped into the water, surprised at the warmth and texture. The pool was quite obviously fed by a hot spring, and judging by the pungent aroma, the water was full of minerals. When she first approached the pool, she should have noticed the multi-colored deposits along the edges and where steam rose in cooler weather. Her survival skills seemed to be impaired by her recent adventures.

She sat down on the bottom of the pool, the warm silt shifting and billowing around her, covering her legs with a brown fog. She eased her body down and submerged herself up to her neck in the soothing water.

Ah, gods, this is heaven, she thought, closing her eyes and relaxing as she hadn't done in more time than she could remember.

She reminded herself to only enjoy a few moments of bliss before taking care of the business of removing the filthy bandage. But the lure of the water was overpowering, and she soon drifted into sleep, lulled by the warmth and quiet of their hiding place. Eagnad was standing guard, and there was no need for her to worry.

The shock of water up her nose snapped her awake. She gasped and a mouthful of water leaked down her throat and into her lungs. Another coughing spasm claimed her, and the little troll came running to her aid.

"Pretty Feenix must not sleep. Water not good for sleep. Kill she." He knelt at the edge of the pool and held her arm, which prevented her from slipping fully into the water, but also kept her from catching her breath, since she struggled to get free.

Finally, her lungs cleared of the water and Eagnad let her go.

"I'm fine," she whispered through her raw throat. "Fine. You can go back to the fire. I'm fine."

"No go sleep," he ordered before leaving her with a reluctant glance behind him.

He was right. Feenix had better not go to sleep again. At least not until she was out of the water, her wound tended and some food in her belly. She was more tired than she had thought.

The bandage came off with only a slight pull. The warm water had worked its magic, washing away the dried blood and cleansing the gash. It didn't even hurt as much as it had before she got into the water. Must be the minerals, she speculated.

After climbing out of the water, she applied the dried mullein to her wound, then bound it up as tightly as possible. It could probably use a couple of stitches, but she couldn't sew herself up with the cut in such an awkward position, and she didn't think Eagnad would know how. She'd just trust to the god. He had to be useful for something.

Pulling the ragged and dirty gown back on her body was not the most pleasant thing she had ever done, but neither was it the worst. She checked L'Garn before joining the troll at the fire and accepting a plate of the meal he had prepared. She had learned through many years in primitive camps, eat when you can, and don't ask too many questions about the contents of your dish.

The sun was setting. The golden light slanted through the leaves, casting an almost magical glow around the camp. The Night Elves would be out looking for them as soon as twilight descended.

"Are you sure no one knows of this place, Eagnad? What if some of the prince's people come looking for him? Do you think they'll find this place?"

She had no way of knowing what precautions he had taken, if any. Nor did she know the lay of the surrounding land. It was like trusting their lives to the whim of a child, and she did not feel comfortable about it at all.

"No one come. Looker keep away."

"What do you mean? Why does the Looker let us stay, if it will keep them away?" She was completely confused. Didn't the troll say the Looker would kill them?

"Looker not know secret place," he smiled at her.

"Then how will he keep L'Garn's people away?"

Eagnad put his food down and took her arm. He tugged her to her feet, and led her over to the pool. He skirted around the edge and pushed his way through a thick clump of scrub oak and elm. The leaves gave way to a slick, black cliff that towered above them and looked like it disappeared into the sky.

“See big cave?” The deep rumbling of Eagnad’s whispering voice seemed to sprout out of the ground at her feet.

The little troll pointed a dirty finger towards the sky. Far up the cliff, in the dying rays of the sun, Feenix realized part of the black cliff was actually a dark opening in the rock wall.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

“Looker live there. Prince’s people not come. Looker keep away.”

“Do you mean to tell me,” she demanded, stunned to her core, “that we are camping at the feet of this Looker’s home?”

Eagnad’s face cracked open and his orange eyes started to twinkle as if lit with a hundred tiny campfires.

“Yes. Looker live up there. Not see Eagnad’s secret place. Good joke, yes?”

By Mac Lir’s beard, the troll was either the stupidest creature since the discovery of Siravo desert sheep, or he possessed the wisest survival instincts she had ever heard of.

“Why does the Looker not see Eagnad’s secret place?” She had to know.

A chuckle escaped his lips, but he contained his full mirth with a bit of hard won control. “Looker look *out* and away. Not look *down*!” Another chuckle rolled out, and this one seemed to have a whole horde of brothers and sisters just waiting their opportunity to escape. “Who be stupid enough to sleep at Looker’s feet?”

Eagnad slapped his two hands over his mouth and raced back to the fire before his laughter erupted like an explosion of unchecked water from a burst dam.

She looked up through the concealing leaves and strained to see the opening in the cliff again. Every thief surviving on the Port Marcus streets knew the best place to hide a stolen object was in plain sight, right beneath the owner’s nose.

A movement at the entrance of the cave high above caught her attention. Something was up there!

Feenix looked after Eagnad, but the troll was apparently already back at the fire enjoying his joke. She didn’t dare call to him for fear of alerting the Looker—whatever it was.

She concentrated on the spot where she was sure she had seen movement. The twilight and distance made it difficult for her to be certain, but her warrior instincts and the chill that raced up and down her spine pretty much confirmed her suspicions. Danger was lurking up there, and she didn’t have a clue what, in the Seven Cella Worlds, it was.

As she strained her eyes and ears for anything, a large shape burst from the side of the cliff and plunged through the air for two heartbeats before huge wings unfolded from a bulky body, carrying it from what had looked to be its death plunge up into the air. The sinking sun glanced off the enormous creature and bounced glistening ebony rays to the earth. A piercing roar rent the stillness of the night, and Feenix’s blood froze and her body became paralyzed with *FEAR*.

By all of Mac Lir’s blue bells. The Looker was a creature she had hoped never to encounter again in her life. One brush with a dragon was more than any sane person wanted. But a Black Dragon...

As the deadly creature flew off towards the West, the influence of *FEAR* lessened, and she was able to move.

“Mac Lir, you miserable son of a sea whore! This just keeps getting better and better, doesn’t

it?”

She watched the dragon become a tiny speck in the night sky, and then disappear all together from her sight.

“Get me the hell out of here, do you hear me? I don’t care what it takes! I don’t care what I have to do, but if you don’t help me out of this situation soon, I swear by my favorite sword, I will never help you or your pathetic silvan children again!”

Feenix stormed out of the bushes and retraced her path around the pool. With each step, the verse from an ancient childhood song repeated through her brain.

“Sleeping at the feet of a dragon; Invisible for all to see; Sleeping at the feet of a dragon; Hip Hop, One, Two, Three!”

When she returned to the fire, Eagnad was standing as still as a stone, staring into the night sky.

“Looker go. Be back later.”

It seemed to Feenix that he had to drag his eyes back from the sky to look at her. “Eagnad go. Masters look for Eagnad. Must not be late.”

“Wait a minute,” she commanded, as the troll started to leave the ravine. “Where are you going?”

“Eagnad must go. Masters beat Eagnad if he not work in laundry.” He reached out a dirty hand to pat her shoulder reassuringly. “Eagnad back before sun. Pretty Feenix eat, sleep. Help prince be well.”

He turned to leave again, and she grabbed the back of his tunic.

“When you come back, bring some clean bandages for the prince, and see if you can find some ale, or wine, or something stronger than water.”

He looked at her with those strange orange eyes, which seemed to hold more intelligence than she was willing to admit. Then he grinned and nodded once before he slipped from her grasp and disappeared up the ravine wall.

Shadows had slid into the ravine some time ago, and with the setting sun, it was getting difficult for Feenix to see. But the fire burned low and gave off a comforting light. Its glow spilled across L’Garn’s pallet, and shone on his still face.

She knelt beside him and checked again for fever. His skin was warmer to her touch, but not dangerously so. How odd. She could not remember ever seeing a wounded man not come down with a fever, unless they had received a Healing Spell.

Perhaps L’Garn had some magical ability to fend off the fever. He was half elf, after all. No telling what sort of tricks those magical beings had.

But that didn’t explain her own lack of illness, she realized suddenly. Nor did it explain why she wasn’t hurting as much as she had when she first woke. In fact, she marveled, she wasn’t nearly as weak and exhausted as she should be. Why?

Feenix checked the bandage on L’Garn’s shoulder. She needed to remove it to look at the wound, to make sure it was not festering, but the thought of putting the dirty rag back on him again turned her stomach. Perhaps she should wash it in the pool and let it dry by the fire before binding him up again.

His skin around the wound was red and inflamed, but there was no bad smell coming from it. Neither was there any oozing or leaking. The stitches were holding, and the herbs seemed to be doing their job.

Of course, closing the wound was only part of the healing process. L’Garn might never be able to use his arm again, and the thought of that sent a shudder through Feenix’s soul.

“Why in Mac Lir’s blue ocean should I care?”

As she packed new webs over the wound, the half-elf moaned and tossed a bit in his sleep. It was a good sign, she thought. At least he wasn’t completely unconscious any more. What a fool she was for getting so excited over a little moan.

Raising his head, she pried his lips open to dribble some water from the pool down his throat. As soon as his body recognized what it was, he drank greedily, and she was afraid he might overdo. She only allowed him half a cup before lowering his head gently back onto the pallet.

He gave a slight whimpering sound, and she couldn’t help the smile that touched her lips. She felt his brow again, and then trailed her fingers over the stubble on his face that had grown in the past twenty-four hours. Had it only been one day? It seemed so much longer.

Her fingernails rasped against the black bristles, and she found herself liking the feel of the prickly texture against the soft pads of her fingers. She brushed them back and forth, against the grain of growth as well as with the smoothness. Then she ran her fingers over his full lips, which were cracked, but still moist from the water.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she lightly touched the tip of his ear. The skin was smooth and cool. With both hands, she rubbed his temples and the area behind his ears, then traced the shell of his ears lightly with her fingers. Why had Mac Lir given his silvan children pointed ears, she wondered? Was it to tempt humans the way she felt tempted?

Her eyes trailed down his chin, over his neck, and lingered on his broad shoulders and chest. A forest of short, swirling black hair grew in a V-shape on his chest. Not so much that it hid his male nipples, but enough to tantalize and excite her.

She leaned down and rubbed her cheek across the springy hair. His smell was exciting; pine and musk and totally L’Garn. Without conscious thought, she tasted his skin, and the tang of salt exploded in her mouth, causing an aching hunger that screamed to be sated.

By the god’s left toe, what was she doing? She jerked her head up and looked into his light blue eyes. How could she hunger for this half-elf? He was at death’s door, and all she could think of was touching and tasting his body.

Then she stilled as the realization that his eyes were open hit her like a two-handed axe.

L’Garn was awake.

She held her breath, not knowing what he would do. After all, the last time he had looked at her, she’d been trying to kill him. Come to think of it, she reflected, he had been trying to kill her, too. Her whole body tensed.

L’Garn lifted his left hand and cupped her cheek. His long fingers caressed her jaw and hairline. Tingles of pleasure rushed over Feenix’s head and down her spine. She felt herself lean towards him as if her body had a will of its own.

“You are a dream,” he whispered before pulling her mouth down to meet his.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He knew he was dreaming. A part of him, deep down inside, knew that Teela—no, was it Feenix—would never look at him with anything except hate and loathing. Instead of light fingertips caressing his skin, she had run a cold hard blade of steel through his chest. L’Garn preferred his dream to the reality.

The phantom woman’s nails trailed across his chest and nipple, and he almost moaned aloud. The sensation was delightful agony. She put her head down and lightly brushed her cheek across his chest. He dared not move for fear of waking and chasing his dream away.

The gentle rasp of her tongue against his skin forced his eyes open. The top of her head was right beneath his nose, and the female scent of her filled his brain with a heady excitement. It appeared that he was dreaming with his eyes open. What a strange thought.

As if she had suddenly become aware of him, she sat up and peered deeply into his eyes. A look of wariness and annoyance combined in her sapphire gaze which, instead of cooling his ardor, only served to heat his blood more.

He reached up and caressed her cheek because he could not live another moment without touching her. The fact that she did not pull away, or try to flay him alive with her caustic tongue, only confirmed to him that he was dreaming. And such a nice dream it was.

“You are a dream,” he murmured and then pulled her luscious lips to his.

The tantalizing taste was not enough; he needed to deepen the kiss, to experience all of her. He reached to enfold her completely within his arms and almost yelled out in agony. He could not move his right arm and it felt like it was being ripped bodily from its socket.

By the Jewels! It was not a dream after all. Teela was a spy and had tried to kill him. Worse. He had failed in his last duty to eliminate her and save his people.

He broke the kiss and pushed her away with his left hand. He was as weak as a newborn; the gesture should have sent her flying from his side. Instead, she only retreated a couple of hand widths.

“Are you here to finish the job you started, Teela?”

His throat was parched and dry and the words were mere whispers. However, by the hard look that came over her face, she clearly understood him.

“And what would that job be, elf-man?”

He hated to see the light in her sparkling eyes dim, but it was necessary. She was a spy. She was a danger to his people. He had no business wanting to kiss her and hold her.

“Killing me, of course. It is obvious you bungled the job, despite your many boasts of skill. Are you now going to finish it with a dagger while I sleep?”

“Why, you arrogant, pompous ass,” she sputtered, standing up quickly to loom over him. “I’ve been exhausting myself trying to keep you alive, and you have the gall to accuse me of stabbing you while you sleep? I wouldn’t have to resort to such a cowardly trick, if I truly wanted you dead, elf-man.”

He watched color blossom across her angry face and the swell of her breasts as they rose and fell with her agitated breathing. Her hair had come loose from its bindings and it covered her shoulders like a sable mantle. He wanted to slip his fingers into the silken tresses and bury his face in her scent.

Instead, he steeled himself to keep her at sword’s length until he could gain his bearings.

Where were they?

He turned his head and saw rock and dirt walls, guarded by numerous elm trees. The branches and leaves provided a speckled canopy over their heads, where a few stars peeked through. A small fire had been banked close by, allowing for heat but little light. Obviously, she knew how to make a camp which would be difficult to find, if others were searching for them.

“What is this place?” He tried to sit up, but almost passed out with the pain instead.

“Lie still or you’ll open your stitches and start bleeding again,” she ordered.

The woman was always issuing orders or yelling insults. Why could she not be quiet and biddable?

He closed his eyes, hoping to ward off the pain, as she fussed around his arm and chest.

“I don’t have any more clean bandages until Eagnad gets back, so you just lie there and go back to sleep. Unless you want to bleed to death. That would be just like you,” she muttered as she jabbed his chest and moved his arm into an agonizingly awkward position. “Ruin all my hard work simply because you’re too stubborn to do what you’re told.”

“Stop it,” he ground out between gritted teeth. “By the Jewels, woman, shut your incessant noise and leave me alone! You are doing more damage to my wound than I ever could. Answer my question: where are we?”

“We are in Eagnad’s secret place. We’re safe, for the moment.”

She backed off from trying to make him comfortable—if that was truly what she was trying to do—and stared down at him with her hands on her hips. “Do you want something to eat?”

His stomach rumbled coincidentally at that exact moment.

“Actually, I am rather hungry,” he admitted. “Who is Eagnad and how did I get here?”

She spooned something brown onto a metal plate and handed it to him, along with the spoon, before answering. The low glow from the fire cast her shape in outline against the night. She had such lovely breasts. The urge to hold them was like an ache.

“That’s so typical of royalty!” She sat down on a rock in front of the banked fire. “Eagnad is one of your slaves, your highness! You should know that.”

“Why should I know his name?” he asked around a mouthful of food. “I do not know the name of every slave in Cragimore.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

The sarcasm that dripped from her words sent a burning blush to his cheeks. She had little respect for him, that was obvious. Why should that bother him? He was a Night Elf. What care he for the respect of a human slave?

“There are over three hundred slaves in Cragimore,” he could not help but defend himself.

How could this woman make him feel so foolish over not knowing a simple name? And why should he care, a part of him demanded again. Caring was but one of those human emotions he had determined to purge from himself before he could truly be the prince his people needed.

“That’s no excuse,” she assured him. “If you are to be a leader to your people, you should know their names! Especially if you expect them to fetch and carry for you, and in other ways be forced to live like pack animals.”

He tossed the plate aside, causing a sudden burning pull to his shoulder.

“You know nothing about it, Teela.” By all that was holy, he hurt. “Do not presume to tell me what my duty is to my people.”

She stood and moved to retrieve the discarded plate. “Stop moving around like that or you’ll have those stitches bleeding. And you agreed to call me by my name, not that disgusting one.”

“I agreed to call you that only if you won the wager.”

She put her foot on the rock where she had been sitting, leaned on her knee and grinned a menacing leer at him. Her hair threatened to slide forward to curtain her face from his sight, but she caught it in time.

“I won the wager, elf-man. You lost.”

The angle at which he was lying gave him an interesting view of her creamy thigh. Apparently, she did not realize that her tattered gown combined with the glowing firelight provided a display that was not conducive to his breathing. L’Garn suddenly felt as if there was no air at all in his lungs.

“That is open to debate,” he managed to get out, around his parched tongue and non-functioning lungs.

“Hardly.” He almost whimpered when she removed her foot from the rock and towered over him, hands on her hips. “You’re flat on your back, and I’m the one standing with the sword.”

He let his eyes wander up the length of her body, lingering for a moment on her breasts, then continuing up to meet her intense gaze.

“Point taken...Feenix.”

The smile of victory she gave him was worth his admission of defeat. What he would not give to have her turn that smile on him in a friendlier situation.

He expected her to crow over his loss, but instead she left his side and poked at the glowing embers for a moment. His eyes drooped and he realized he would not be able to stay awake much longer.

“Tell me, before I fall asleep again, where is this secret place? How long have I been gone, and what do you plan to do with me, if you have no plans to kill me?”

He could hear his voice grow softer with each word, but he fought the languor that was threatening to transport him back to sleep.

“I think you need to rest for now, L’Garn.” She returned to his side and handed him a warm cup. “I’ll answer your questions in the morning. For now, drink this and just get some sleep. We’ll talk later.”

He wanted to order her to answer him, but fatigue was fast reducing his will power to nothing. He gulped a few mouthfuls of the warm beverage, then drifted off into a dark, warm place of lassitude; he smiled softly, realizing she had called him by his name.

~*~

Feenix watched his long black eyelashes brush his pale cheeks, as L’Garn surrendered to his exhaustion. The best thing for him right now—besides a strong Healing Spell—was sleep and the Kestrel would see to that. He needed to regain his strength if his body was going to continue to successfully fight off the impending fever. She wished she had a blanket to cover him, but obviously Eagnad didn’t feel his secret place needed such luxuries as blankets or bandages.

She made sure the fire was nothing more than a pile of glowing embers, enough to ward off the night chill but not enough to signal their position—she hoped. The massive canopy of leaves and branches should keep the glow from prying eyes. If they had any luck.

“Probably be captured again as soon as I fall asleep,” she complained to herself as she drained a cup of the Kestrel tea. “Mac Lir, keep your blasted Night Elf scum away from me long enough to catch a nap. That’s all I ask.”

She had little hope of the god answering her prayer, but it was the best she could do.

Feenix moved her sleeping branches over by L’Garn and the fire. It was the area of the ravine

that seemed to be the most protected by boulders and trees. It was also the most easily defensible.

Lying down with L’Garn’s dagger under her head and a naked sword at her side, she settled in for some rest. Even if she dozed off, she was confident that her warrior training would allow her to awaken instantly if anyone—or any thing—approached the camp.

She ran through her mind all the possibilities for escape once she was sure L’Garn would survive. Perhaps Eagnad could show her a way through the mountains. There had to be a pass or some secret route.

Her cheeks popped as she gave in to the urge of a huge yawn.

Of course, it was out of the question to stay with him. What would he want with her besides a slave? And she would never degrade herself by being his concubine. There was no point of even thinking about it.

Determined to put the half-elf prince out of her mind, she turned on her side and let sleep overtake her. The image of L’Garn, hurt and vulnerable, gave way as she remembered the hungry look in his eyes and the feel of his lips. She snuggled into sleep with a tiny smile.

“Feenix, wake up and pay attention!”

She pulled the dagger from beneath her and sat up, listening intently and scanning the ravine for an intruder. While she didn’t have the spectacular night vision of the silvan, her eyesight was good for a human.

The fire had burned down to just a few glowing embers. L’Garn slept peacefully on his pallet. The stars shone their cold eyes down from the heavens, and the double moons of Tylana rode the sky. The only sounds were night bugs singing in the early summer darkness, and a distant howl of a hunting animal. Danger did not threaten their little camp.

But something had jolted Feenix awake.

“Rendolin? Is that you?” Her whispered words silenced the nearby bugs. “Why in Mac Lir’s blue ocean do you always have to talk to me when I’m trying to sleep?”

“Aye, ‘tis me. I have not been able to contact you for some time due to a slight injury.”

Even from this distance, Feenix could detect weariness and pain emanating from the Sea Elf. Was that part of Rendolin’s spell: that they could feel each other’s pain and emotion as well as hear thoughts? By the god’s beard, she hoped not.

“I was beginning to wonder if you were going to leave me here to rot, elf! I have some information for you.”

“Hold your report for a bit, captain. I have information for you, and it is vital that I convey it to you before this link is severed.”

“Well, if that isn’t just like you, elf! Tell me to reconnoiter and then when I have the knowledge you ask for, tell me you don’t want it!”

“Woman, will you please shut your mouth and let me speak?”

A shaft of annoyance sliced through her brain, but she recognized that Rendolin must be very weak, since the link felt tenuous and faint.

“Very well. What is your news?”

“Mac Lir has spoken to me about a great many things. He has commanded me to negotiate a peace with the Night Elves.”

“What?” Rendolin had to be insane.

“Captain, do not yell. Merely listen without speaking until I have finished my message to you.”

She stood and paced the small area between the ravine walls. “Fine. Get on with it.”

"The Night Elves are being manipulated by Tuawtha, the demon god. He has been influencing them for years, although they are not aware of it. Mac Lir has commanded me that we must warn them of the danger and form an allegiance, together with the Wood Elves, to overthrow Tuawtha here on Tylana. If we can not do this, the silvan races will be destroyed, just as they have been on Korrene's world."

Great. Leave it to Mac Lir to decide they could do the impossible.

"So, what do you want me to do about it? I'm still stuck somewhere inside Cragimore, although I think I might have found a way out."

"You are to use your influence on the prince to arrange for a meeting with me."

"What influence?" She almost laughed out loud. "He'd sooner run a sword through me than agree to meet you to talk. Besides," she added, "he's not doing very well. We had a bit of a...disagreement...and he's lost a lot of blood."

"It appears you have been your usual charming self, captain. How badly hurt is he?"

"He's bad, Rendolin." She was surprised at how worried she was over L'Garn. Hadn't she wanted to kill him? There was no time for maudlin thoughts, and she pushed her remorse aside. "His right shoulder has been sliced to the bone. I think his tendons have been damaged. I doubt if he will ever have full use of his arm again."

"When did this happen? Has the fever set in?"

"I wounded him a little over a day ago. Neither one of us has had a fever, although L'Garn was a little warm earlier this evening when I checked. I'm surprised over that, since I was sure he would be raging out of his head by now, but it might have something to do with a pool of mineral water we've been drinking from."

"So, you did not come away from the disagreement totally unscathed? Good for this prince."

She heard him give a mental chuckle, but before she could comment, he continued, *"How badly hurt are you?"*

"Thanks for your concern, priest, but I'm fine. It was only a slice from a dagger, and after a soak in the pool, it seems to be healing nicely. Just a little sore."

There was a small space of silence, as Feenix pictured Rendolin pondering the situation. She was sure someone was there monitoring him during this mind link. Probably his mate, Korrene, she thought.

"Feenix, in order for Mac Lir's plan to work, your prince needs to be Healed."

"He's not *my* prince, elf, and unless you have some way of conjuring up a Healing Spell, it isn't going to happen. This prince is in a bad way. I can't move him. And even if I could, I don't know where in Cragimore to go to find a priest. And even if I found a priest, I'd be dead on sight because I'm the one who used their prince for sword practice! They frown on slaves doing that around here."

She could feel his frustration with her, but for some reason couldn't seem to shut her mouth up.

"Rendolin, you have to help me here. I didn't want to run my sword through him, but he made me so mad, I couldn't seem to stop myself! He didn't believe me when I told him who I was. He thought I was some useless female who was lying to him. If he hadn't charged into me, I would have only nicked him."

"Feenix," Rendolin spoke into her mind. "Peace. The damage is done. Now let us see if we can repair it. Mac Lir will help."

"What do you mean, Mac Lir will help? All he's done so far is get me into more and more

trouble! That god is useless!”

“I would suggest you not speak of our god in that tone, woman. If you expect him to heal your prince, softer words will go much further. I will need you to help me, Feenix.”

“Help you?” She didn’t tamper with magic if she could help it. “What do you mean, help you? What do you want me to do?”

“You must be the conduit for the magic. I will cast a Healing Spell through you to L’Garn.”

“Wait a minute, elf,” she blustered. “I don’t want to have anything to do with any magic spells. You can just Heal him by yourself. I don’t have any magic abilities, and well you know it!”

“Peace, captain. You do not need to have magic. All you need to do is place your hands where I tell you and allow the magic to flow from me through you, into the prince. I am not there, and so can not Heal him directly, nor do I have access to his mind as I do with you. I need you to be my eyes and hands.”

Mac Lir’s toenails! She didn’t want magic flowing through her and causing all sorts of strange things to happen in her life. It was bad enough she had to shape change into a dolphin once a month. There was no telling what might happen if she allowed this High Priest to use his magic on her.

“There has to be another way, Rendolin. If I let you use me to cast this spell, how do I know I’ll be normal when it’s all over? I don’t like fooling around with magic. Nothing good ever comes of it.”

“There is nothing to fear, Feenix. You will be the riverbed and the magic will be the water. You will simply be the course through which I will direct the magic. A bridge, if you will, between the source of the spell and the recipient. It will not touch you, merely pass through you.”

“I don’t like it, elf. You can never predict what will happen with magic.” She would be damned if she’d allow the priest to use her for his experiments.

“If you do not allow this, captain, Prince L’Garn could very well die. If he manages to survive, by your own words, he will not have the use of his arm. Worse, Mac Lir’s plan will not succeed and the silvan races will be destroyed forever from Tylana. I need you to help me, Feenix. Without you, the prince will die.”

Feenix walked to L’Garn’s side. She peered down at his sleeping form and watched his chest rise and fall with his breathing. She remembered the kisses they had shared, and realized that, as angry as he made her, she did not want anything to happen to this half-elf. In fact, as she looked deep inside herself, she realized that she would be missing a part of herself if he died.

When had L’Garn become such an important part of her life? When had his well-being become paramount to her?

She knelt beside his pallet and lightly touched his lips. When had the taste of him become as important to her as the rising sun? When had she fallen in love with him?

No! By Mac Lir’s blue bells, she was not in love with him. She could not be. Love was something she refused to devote any time to. Love was dangerous and unpredictable—just like magic. It would never touch her if she had any say in the matter.

She dropped her head into her hands. Tears threatened to leak between her closed eyelids, but she pushed them back. She couldn’t be in love with this elf-man! She couldn’t afford to love anyone.

Love only made you weak. It slowed down your reflexes and turned your mind to things other

than survival.

Love wasn't for her.

She looked at him again. The double moonlight filtered through the leaves, tracing a quilted pattern across his sleeping form. Deep within her soul, a stirring of tenderness began to bloom. Already the dangers of love were making themselves known. She should turn her back on him and let him die.

Walk away now, a voice inside cautioned to her. But it was too late. Without even trying, this half-elf held her captive in a way he never could as her slave master. She was his for life, but he would never know, she vowed. He would never have that much control over her. No one would.

A prince would certainly never love the likes of her. Born and raised from the dregs of the Port Marcus gutters, what would he want with her other than as his slave? He had said she would be his concubine. Perhaps she could steal some joy for herself in his bed, but she had more pride than that.

If nothing else, her rise from the sewers and docks of Port Marcus had taught her that if she once allowed herself to fall back, to take a step towards the direction from whence she had come, she would be lost in a meteoric slide back into the gutter. She could not allow that to happen, no matter how she ached to be in his arms.

However, she could not allow him to die, either. As much as her common sense told her it was in her best interests to leave him and make good her escape—leave him to live or die as he would—she knew she could not.

She would help Rendolin, even at the risk of using magic.

"Very well, priest," she said to Rendolin. "What do you want me to do?"

"Bare his wound so that you can tell me what it looks like."

She removed the bandage and the spider webs without comment. She worked quickly, but her hands were sure and gentle. When the wound was bared, she described it to the High Priest, and explained what she had done to bind it.

"It is well, Feenix. You have done well. Now place both of your hands upon the prince; your right hand on his forehead and the other on the wound."

She moved to allow free access to L'Garn. "Now what?"

"Open your mind to me," Rendolin spoke, and the scent of rosemary filled her mind and nose. ***"In the holy name of Mac Lir, I use my priesthood powers..."***

Rendolin's voice filled her mind and soul. Power gathered around her and filled every pore and blood vessel; it coursed through her body as the blood in her veins. For a moment, panic threatened, but she felt a fragment of Rendolin's awareness brush her fear aside, and peace and tranquility surged through her.

L'Garn opened his ice blue eyes and found her. She felt as if she was falling into their icy depths, and at the same time gathering the magical power and pumping it into his body. She could feel the energy course through her body and flow through her hands, as if she were a pitcher pouring life into his empty vessel.

They were joined, the three of them. Rendolin, Feenix and L'Garn. Magic linked them as surely as the links in a chain, forged from the depths of Tylana by the master smith, Mac Lir. The surge of power went on for eternities...and then ended abruptly.

One moment Feenix was filled with power, drawing strength from the priest and casting it into L'Garn, and the next moment she was as empty and dry as a horse trough in a drought. She felt Rendolin break the link in her mind, and she collapsed like a limp rag.

But before she did, she watched the ugly wound she had inflicted on the prince heal over and

saw fresh, new flesh replace the raw and angry gash. She smiled into his eyes, content to have mended what she had broken.

CHAPTER TWENTY

L’Garn’s arm felt hot, but not uncomfortably so. He had woken to find Feenix hovering above him, her hands on his head and shoulder. It seemed to him that something strange had passed between them...and someone else, as well...but he was not quite clear on that point. A surge of energy had filled him for a moment, and then she had collapsed at his side.

He pushed the fuzzy memories aside as he realized that Feenix was shivering so hard, the branches of his pallet rustled with her involuntary movements. He turned on his side, pulled her into his arms and tucked her beside him, trying to share his own body heat with her. He rubbed his hand up and down her arms and back, warming her with friction.

“Mmmmm. That feels good.” Her voice was drowsy and slightly shaky against his neck. She snuggled closer, like a puppy searching for its mother’s comfort. In a moment, he knew she was fast asleep.

He breathed in the scent of her—womanly musk and fresh air—and wanted nothing more than to kiss her awake; to taste those full lips again, but this time in sleepy languor. It was a temptation almost beyond his control. Instead, L’Garn forced himself to be content with rubbing her shoulder.

He stroked and smoothed her hair just above her rounded ear. He marveled at the smooth curve and shell-like perfection, so different from the ears he was used to. Instead of seeming foreign and strange, he found it exotic and beautiful.

Feenix had plaited her shining hair in a long, thick braid, and a few errant strands were damp against his cheek. Had there been a rainstorm? But her clothes were dry, and so was everything within his reach. She must have washed it, or perhaps she had taken a bath. His body stirred at the thought of seeing her naked and splashing about in the water.

By the Jewels, he had to gain control of his thoughts! Think, he commanded himself. Why were they lying here, outside and alone?

He lay still, holding her body close, and tried to sort out the past few days in his mind. Most of his recollection after the sword fight in the farmhouse was either a blur or completely gone. He did remember waking up and talking with Feenix while she checked his wound.

His wound!

Expecting horrible pain, he stilled, fearing to take a deep breath. He concentrated on his wound, and realized his shoulder did not hurt. In fact, it felt as if it had never been sliced to the bone. Experimentally, he moved his right arm.

Nothing. There was not even any residual stiffness or soreness.

As slowly as possible, so as not to wake Feenix, L’Garn moved away from her and searched his shoulder with probing fingers. A ragged red scar cut his skin in a jagged pattern, but it was healed over and looked healthy. He traced the crooked stitch marks, but felt no pain.

Feenix had Healed him! How?

Maybe the question should be why? he thought to himself. Why would she go to such great lengths to Heal him and take care of him, after she had tried her hardest to kill him? Why had she not left him to die and made good her escape?

It made no sense.

As quietly as possible, L’Garn slipped from the sleeping pallet and Feenix’s side. He stood and stretched, seeking for any pains or wounds of which he had been unaware. There were none.

He felt well and whole, and actually better than he had in a long time. He was a little tired, but he supposed that was to be expected, considering what his body had gone through in the past few days.

He quickly checked through the camp, gathering up his gear and one of the swords. His shirt was missing, his tunic covered in blood, but it would have to do. Stopping by the pool, he cupped his hands and drank. The last of the cobwebs fled from his mind.

L’Garn looked about him to get his bearings. It did not take long. The magic, inherited from his silvan mother, was handy. He was a tracker and hunter of great renown among his people. It was the only skill he possessed that his grandfather approved.

By the position of the small moon, Eon, he knew the night was fairly young. He recognized the cave of the Watcher, and had a good idea of his position.

L’Garn looked back at the sleeping woman and smiled. How clever to hide directly under the nose of the black dragon. His people would never think to look for them here.

He returned to Feenix’s sleeping form. What to do with her while he tended to business? He feared she would not sleep through the night. That would be too much to expect from the woman, he acknowledged. However, he hesitated to again chain her. She had won her freedom, but he saw no help for it. If she woke and found him gone, she would leave and the Watcher would surely kill her.

No, for her own protection, and his sanity, he would chain her to a tree. She could move about some, but not escape. It was the best solution, although she would want to run a sword through him again for his action.

He had been surprised to find Feenix’s chains still in his pouch when he had gathered up his gear. His finger touched another piece of metal—the silver key. Why had she not removed the collar and manacles from around her neck and wrists? He had no answer.

The chain reached from a stout tree to her left wrist. He would not hinder movement of her favored hand by fettering it. After an agonizing debate with himself, he also put her sword close by, in case she needed to defend herself from some beast. It was probably a stupid idea, he admitted, but he felt better for doing it. The tree was too thick for her to hack through with the blade, and the chain was too strong. Feenix would not escape before he returned.

After wolfing down the remains of the food and bringing a pot full of water within reach of the sleeping human, L’Garn left the camp. He was easily able to pick out Eagnad’s tracks in the soil, but he really did not need the evidence of the slave’s passing. The prince knew where he was, and where he was going.

When he entered the house, all evidence of any fight had been removed. Someone had scrubbed the floor, removing all trace of blood, and the tables and benches were righted. Everything was in its place. If he did not know better, he would have sworn nothing more violent than a disagreement over a meal had taken place in the room.

The noise of his arrival brought an elderly elf from the back of the house.

“Your highness,” he said with a deep bow. “We feared for your life! His majesty sent a company of warriors Atop to search for you and the human slave.”

It was as he feared, L’Garn thought. His grandfather thought he could not control a simple female slave.

“As you can see, Sarnett, I am well. Where is everyone?”

“They are about the farm, searching for you and that human slave.” The elderly elf looked as though he would faint with relief at his prince’s safe return. L’Garn gave him a huge grin. Although Sarnett was a cousin on his royal grandmother’s side of the family, he had been in the

royal family's employ since before L'Garn's birth.

"Did you think to be rid of me, Sarnett? I am not so easily disposed of, as my grandfather well knows." He clapped the old elf on the back in a kindly gesture. "Send runners. Let them know I am well. I will speak to the king myself, but first, what is to eat? I am famished!"

"I am sure it is not my place to comment about the king, Prince L'Garn," the older elf said as he led the way to the kitchens. "Yet it can not be denied that there was quite a bit of blood about the place which had to be cleaned up. Except for bloodied bits of your shirt, and some broken furniture, there was no trace of you."

L'Garn chuckled. "I can see I was very inconsiderate for making such a mess while I fought for my life. Next time, I will clean up after myself, how is that?"

"Humph!" the servant answered as he turned from his Prince.

Before leaving to assign the runners, Sarnett heaped a plate full of fruits and cheese and placed it before L'Garn. The prince noticed that the old elf only chose the fruits that were L'Garn's favorite. It was good to be with the elderly retainer. Sarnett was the only person, besides his mother, of course, who had ever shown him kindness without expecting something in return.

As the prince ate, Sarnett returned.

"I told you it was not a good idea to dismiss the staff and bring that human here, your highness."

"All would have been well, if I had not given her a sword." L'Garn almost choked with laughter at Sarnett's face.

"You gave her a sword? What ever for?"

"She said she was a great warrior and would kill me if I but gave her the chance. I was tired of hearing of her boasts and so I unchained her and gave her a sword."

"That explains the amount of blood, then. What did you do with her body?"

L'Garn felt a stab of embarrassment as he explained what happened to his old friend.

"Actually, I did not kill her."

"No?" The surprise made Sarnett's eyes wide.

"No. She nearly killed me. In fact, if she had not somehow cast a Healing Spell upon me, I would probably be dead right now."

"Healing Spell," the retainer sputtered in shock. "It is forbidden for slaves to have spells, especially Healing Spells."

"Apparently, our human did not know about that rule, and a good thing, as far as I am concerned."

He picked up a red apple and stuffed it into his pouch.

"I must report to the king, Sarnett. And of course show myself to my mother so she will not worry."

"At the news of your death," the old elf said, "the princess took to her bed. The physicians and priests are holding a deathwatch over her. It is feared she will take her life. You had best hurry and let her know you are well, highness."

Dread filled his heart. It had not occurred to him that his mother would take her own life should he die. He knew she was unstable and apt to go off on strange starts, but to become suicidal at his death was a shock.

"Sarnett, are all the staff hunting for me? Is there no one here who can cast a Commune Spell to let my mother's companions know I am well?"

"I am afraid not, sir. I am the only one here except for that batch of slaves you ordered

brought Atop yesterday.” The regret in his voice did nothing to comfort the prince.

“I had forgotten about them.” L’Garn remembered giving orders to have all the Sea Elf slaves rounded up and sent Atop. He had to get them out of his grandfather’s sight before the king had someone else execute them. “Where are they?”

“They are housed in the second barracks. Shall I have them moved, highness?”

“No. Let them rest there until I return. I will have orders for their new duties then.”

He hoped his plan would work and he could convince Zimpher that they were no longer a threat.

“Thank you for the meal, my friend,” he said, gathering up his things. “I will be back before morning.” He rushed out the door.

Before the servant could return to his duties, L’Garn was back.

“One more thing, Sarnett. Are you familiar with a slave named Eagnad?”

“Eagnad?” the old elf asked, scratching his head in thought. “I am sure I do not know him, your highness. But I could have a runner sent to fetch him, if you would like.”

“Never mind,” L’Garn replied. “I will ask Lala after I speak with the king.”

With that, he was out the door at a dead run.

~*~

“I should have killed that scum of a half-elf when I had the chance!”

Feenix jerked on the chain that held her fast to a large tree. The fact that L’Garn had left her the sword and a container with water did little to soothe her fury.

“The sword was a mistake on his part,” she growled after a sip of the water. “The next time I see his sorry tipped ears, I’m going to run him through, and this time I won’t stop to bind him up!”

She had woken to a pounding headache that started in her shoulders and climbed up her neck, up the back of her head, and erected a permanent home in her temples. She remembered Rendolin and the Spell, and she could vaguely recollect watching L’Garn’s shoulder heal under her hand. The residue of the priest’s magic still lingered in her mind, and she thought she could still taste rosemary in the back of her throat.

“That’s what I get for dabbling in magic! The elf-man is healed completely and goes his merry way, and I am left with a headache that would take a dragon to its knees, and captured yet again! Where’s the justice in that, Mac Lir?”

She raised her face and voice to the star-filled sky. The two moons of Tylana rode low on the horizon; morning was not far off.

“Why don’t you just kill me and get it over, you miserable excuse for a god?”

She paced the area around the tree, working herself into a frenzy as she yelled at the god.

“No! That would be a waste, wouldn’t it? Then who would you have to torture? Who would provide your entertainment then, Mac Lir?”

For the third time, she examined the lock that secured the length of chain around the trunk of the tree. What she wouldn’t give for a slender piece of wire...or better yet! A metal thief’s pick like the one she used to own when she roamed the streets of Port Marcus as a snot-nosed child.

“One of the drawbacks of being a slave,” she muttered to herself, “was you couldn’t own any useful property! Like a dagger or sword or a lock pick!”

She grabbed a good-sized rock from the base of the ravine’s wall and contemplated the effect of smashing the lock with it. Would it release the spring or merely cause the lock to be crushed

without opening, effectively fettering her to the tree forever?

“Ha! You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Mac Lir?” She tossed the rock away from her. “Well, I’m not going to ruin the lock, so you can just put that thought out of whatever you use for a brain! I’m going to get out of this newest mess you put me in, and when I do, don’t ever expect me to talk to you again!”

She kicked the sleeping pallet with her foot, scattering the branches in every direction. Then sitting on the rock by the cold fire, she drew her sword and began polishing it with a piece of her ragged gown. The activity calmed her as she concentrated on the familiar job. The repetition of rubbing the hard steel with the cloth, up and down, back and forth, soothed her anger and helped her to think about her predicament.

Feenix ran different scenarios for escape through her head, as her hands continued to perform the simple task that they had done countless times before. Perhaps she could find something here in Eagnad’s place that could be used for a pick? But what? The lock was small, and a piece of metal that size would be difficult to find here in a ravine. The only thing she had seen that even remotely resembled metal, besides her sword and L’Garn’s dagger—which he had very inconveniently taken with him—was the spoon the little troll had used during their supper.

The sky began to lighten. The night sounds grew still, and even the light breeze stilled as if it, too, held its breath in anticipation of the new day. Then, thousands of birds decided to herald the birth of the sun at the same time, and the air was suddenly filled with cheerful song.

She couldn’t help it. She turned her face to the east and a shiver of excitement raced through her body. She was going to see the sunrise for the first time in more days than she cared to count. Laying the sword down, she stood and held her breath, waiting with the wind for the first glimmers of the dawn.

The sky over the mineral pool was clear of the ceiling of leaves, and she was thankful that it was eastward in the ravine. She watched with tears in her eyes as purple fingers of light slipped over the mountains, as if the sun used the great rocks to pull itself up into the sky, like an old woman rising from her knees.

“Oh, Mac Lir,” she whispered as if afraid to frighten the dawn. “You may be a miserable son of a sea whore, but when you get something right, it can take my breath away.” She swallowed against the prickly pain of tears in the back of her nose. “How can such beauty exist in a world so miserable and cruel?”

The breeze came to life and stirred the hair at her neck. Again sitting on the rock, she absentmindedly brushed the tendrils aside and watched the sun push back the night, claiming the sky as its domain. She watched the golden glow caress the tops of the trees and the edge of the distant mountains, and she longed for the feel of its golden warmth on her face.

Slowly, the sky filled with light and the first faint touches of the sun’s beams crawled across the ravine floor. Soon, her skin would feel the life-giving force of the sun, and her flesh pebbled with a tiny shiver of anticipation. She couldn’t take her eyes off the golden luster haloing the cliff walls and tops of the trees.

Unbidden, a feeling of apprehension tickled her brain. She tried to push it away, but instead it grew in its persistence. The birds stilled; not a noise could be heard. Again, the world held its breath, but this time the wait was for something dreadful.

She stood and searched the ravine for the source of her unease. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but her skin began to crawl, and her knees wobbled a bit with *Fear*.

And then she knew.

Frantically, she searched the sky. The dragon was returning to its lair, which was directly

above her hiding place. She picked up the sword and gulped great breaths of air to calm her nerves.

Feenix darted to the side of the ravine wall and crouched behind a large boulder. The trees were thick here, and the shade gave her a false sense of security, as if she were safely hidden from the dragon's eyes. The chain was long enough to allow her to reach the hiding place, but it was taut and didn't let her move around much.

"Mac Lir, just when I begin to think you have some redeeming qualities, you go and throw something like this at me." She kept her voice low because she knew from first hand experience, dragons had remarkable hearing. "You know I hate dragons, don't you? What is this? Another game to play at my expense? Well, you can just keep your little pet away from me, because I don't feel like playing today!"

No sooner had the words left her mouth, than the tops of the trees began to writhe and dance as if they were in agony. A huge shadow swallowed the sun's radiance and a fetid stench that Feenix had prayed she never would experience again filled the air.

The warrior woman stilled, paralyzed with the effects of the dragon's innate weapon, *Fear*. By the god's blue eye, she hated feeling like a helpless child again! She had sworn she would never be in a situation like that again, and here she was. About to wet herself because a dragon was nearby.

"Pull yourself together, woman! It doesn't know you're here, and will just fly into its cave and leave you alone!" She passed a shaky hand over her face, wiping sweat from her eyes. "You're not some dirty street urchin, begging to be someone's next victim. You are Captain Feenix of Port Marcus, by Mac Lir's toe! Get a grip on yourself, and stop quivering like a leaf in the wind!"

She closed her eyes and pulled more air into her lungs. The crashing overhead as trees were snapped in half and branches and limbs tossed to the ground like dice in a game, startled a scream from her.

There in the middle of Eagnad's secret place, with one great foot and part of its tail hidden in the pool, was the largest dragon Feenix had ever seen.

"Oh, Mac Lir," she managed to stammer. "I hate you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The dragon was huge, at the shoulder taller than three men. Its long head was covered with spines and scales dark as the night, with a sheen of blue-green glistening in the sun, the color of death. The long neck arched, giving a clear view of its underside, which was a brownish color. The skin looked smoother than that on the upper body, with fewer scales and no spines.

Its teeth, the size of a man's forearm, protruded from the wide mouth, and a black tongue, long and forked, constantly flicked about as the monster turned its huge head back and forth, searching for prey.

Leathery wings lay folded and tucked behind the forearms of the beast, and the claws on each foot were sharp enough to rip the guts from its prey—be it man or beast—with a single swipe. Feenix had seen it happen, a long time ago.

A fetid stench engulfed her as she crouched behind the boulder, trembling and sweating with *Fear*. The smell was straight from the carnage pits of a Port Marcus slaughterhouse. She choked back a scream and tried to swallow a wave of bile that threatened to overcome her.

What to do? She was chained and could not even attempt to sneak past the beast. She had a sword, but such a puny weapon was as effective as a flea bite against a dragon.

"Mac Lir, help me," she whispered into the morning breeze.

The hair at the back of her head stood of its own accord. Had she actually asked that miserable god for help? Impossible! He was as useless as a drop of water in a firestorm.

Feenix watched the dragon as it waddled forward, its huge feet and long tail crushing trees and brush with each step. The side of the pool collapsed under the weight of the beast, and for a moment, she hoped it would fall into the water and drown. The pool was not deep enough, however.

"And besides," she said to herself, "the blasted thing can probably swim!"

The dragon stopped in its tracks and turned its great yellow eyes in her direction. The long, black tongue flicked out, as if tasting the air. Large nostrils, each the size of a man's head, flared as the beast picked up her scent.

Instinctively, she tried to back up, to place as much room as possible between herself and the dragon, but the chain prevented her from doing so. She gripped the pommel of her sword and swore long and loud.

"By Mac Lir's backside! That elf-man will be the death of me! He's chained me to my doom!"

Fear swirled through her blood. She knew what it was and tried to fight it, but the innate ability to produce the emotion in its prey gave dragons an almost insurmountable advantage in any battle.

"Mac Lir, if you even exist—"

The dragon's head snaked towards her hiding place, and the beast roared like a thundering mountain slide. Her blood turned to ice water.

"Fine! You exist! I know you exist," she assured herself and the god. "Just give me a fighting chance, that's all I ask." She moved to the other side of the boulder, and the chain dipped with the slack. "Help me get this blasted chain off so I can at least defend myself!"

The dragon came closer, and she wiped the sweat from her eyes, fighting to control the tremors of fear that shook her body.

“If I ever meant anything at all to you,” she pleaded, “release this chain so I’ll have a chance of dying as a warrior, fighting rather than fettered like a helpless sacrifice!”

Mac Lir remained silent as the monster closed in on her. With a tremendous swipe of its forelegs, the claws mowed down a number of trees that shielded her from its view.

One of them was the tree that held the chain.

She thought her arm had been ripped from its socket as she was jerked from her hiding place and flung a half meter to the side. It was a miracle that she hung on to the sword.

With a shake of her head, she cleared the dazed feeling from her brain and looked at the tree that had been her nemesis until the dragon came along and presented a more dangerous enemy. Now, it was nothing more than a splintered stump, with a length of chain lying a small distance away.

She was free! Mac Lir?

She didn’t waste time pondering the possibility of the god’s assistance. Instead, she pulled the length of chain to her as she ran for the opposite side of the ravine, keeping a wary eye on the monster. Its great yellow eyes followed her as she made her way through the rubble of ruined trees and tossed boulders.

With a quick flick of its wings, the dragon lunged and blocked Feenix’s path as effectively as a sudden avalanche. Trapped between the steep wall of the ravine and the enormous body of the dragon, she almost cried in frustration.

“Mac Lir, why do you toy with me? You release me from the tree only to be pounced on by the dragon? By the Seven Cella Worlds, what the blazes good are you?”

The monster reared up on its hind legs. The supple neck of the beast curved down and the huge maw opened, with row upon row of wickedly sharp teeth looking like a fence protecting the open throat. Gray, oily saliva dripped from the jaws and splattered on the ground. Tiny puffs of smoke curled towards the sky, as the spittle’s acid burned the vegetation on the ravine floor.

From prior experience, Feenix knew that the only way to destroy a dragon was to attack its vulnerable spot. The soft underbelly was the most effective, if a warrior could survive the acid breath and get in close enough. She had no armor. The acid from its saliva would burn the flesh from her bones before she could reach the beast.

The eyes were another good spot, but with only a sword it was highly unlikely she would be able to reach them. If she had a dragon lance—a specially made iron pole, long and barb tipped, which weighed almost as much as a man—she might stand a chance of surviving. A lance wedged between its jaws was sometimes an effective way of stopping a dragon.

She looked frantically about, as if hoping to find a dragon lance lying conveniently to hand. The only things even remotely similar were the fallen and splintered trees.

Wrapping the chain around her left forearm, Feenix scrambled over to a toppled elm. It was too thin and supple to do much good, but she propped it against a boulder, pointing in the direction of the oncoming enemy.

Now what? That wouldn’t stop a child, she thought. The wood was too soft. If only there were a few oak trees lying about. That hard wood might buy her some time.

The huge head lunged at her, snapping its jaws over thin air just as Feenix ducked and rolled away. A white-hot pain ripped through her shoulder as a drop of saliva hit her. As she rolled, she gathered up a handful of leaves and scrubbed the acid from her flesh. A dab of skin came off with the acid, but at least it wouldn’t eat through to her bone.

The chain was a nuisance. She had no way to secure it around her arm, and it weighed quite a bit. She tucked the end inside a few of the coils as she wound it around her arm yet again.

“Now what, Mac Lir?”

Feenix looked behind her and saw a small cavern that had been formed when three large boulders had collided with each other. It was no more than an animal’s den, but it might provide some protection from the dragon.

If it had not already found her.

No, with one swipe of its claw, the dragon would knock the boulders aside and she’d be as vulnerable as a poached fish lying on a serving plate.

So far, the sword had done her no good, but there had to be a way to either escape or defend herself.

“Think, Feenix,” she ordered herself. However, the *Fear* was still with her, and it was difficult to put together two complete thoughts. “I don’t want to die now, Mac Lir.”

That was a strange thought. She had never been afraid to die before. In fact, one of the reasons she had gained such renown as a leader and warrior was because she never hesitated to face danger. She was more apt to take the battle to the enemy than wait for an attack. The best defense was a swift and decisive offense, she liked to boast.

Yet here she was, worrying over her possible death, alone in Eagnad’s secret death trap. It must be the effects of the dragon’s *Fear*, she surmised. That rationale did little to banish her worries, however.

Why did the thought of her own death bother her now? What had changed?

A deafening roar startled Feenix out of her reverie, and she barely had time to move as the dragon’s claw came at her with lightning speed. As she jumped to the side, she sliced with her sword, making contact with the underside of the great foot. Another roar shook the leaves, and brown blood dripped from between the middle claws of the beast.

Hardly a significant wound, she knew, but a tiny jolt of satisfaction made her smile, knowing that she had at least made her presence felt.

But she had only succeeded in making the monster angry.

The huge spiked tail whipped around the massive body, knocking more trees down and sending rocks and boulders flying. How could she possibly fight something like this by herself, and without the proper weapons? She was going to die alone and no one she cared about would ever know.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. L’Garn would know.

“Shut up,” she yelled at herself. But as usual, *herself* did not listen.

With death in the guise of a large black dragon staring her in the face, she had to be honest. She had come to care deeply for the half-elf prince. She’d rather stand weaponless in front of three dragons than admit it, but by the god’s left eye, she couldn’t deny the fact. Somewhere in these past days as a slave within Cragimore, she had fallen in love with a stinking elf-man!

How?

Why?

It really didn’t matter, she realized. She would never see him again. Tears fell unheeded, and a blanket of despair settled over her, making her feel tired and old.

So many years battling her inner demons, as well as those met in war, and all for nothing. Always, she had been able to keep her heart safe and unhurt. The armor she wore around that unseen organ was stronger and tougher than any protection she had ever placed on her skin.

All those years she kept her heart whole, only to have it broken by a miserable half-elf prince, a noble son of the enemy.

Was there no justice in the world at all?

“Mac Lir, is this your final jest? Is this the last entertainment I provide you? I die with the knowledge that Feenix of Port Marcus has finally fallen in love and will never be able to do anything about it?”

Again, she rolled to avoid the dragon’s attack. Fatigue threatened to pull her down, and she had to gasp for breath to fill her lungs. The tears continued to roll unheeded down her face, washing great streaks through the dirt and grime on her cheeks.

For the only time in her life that she could remember, Feenix did not try to hold the tears back. No one was here to see; there was no facade to maintain. She was just a woman mourning the loss of what might have been, and she was free to express her sorrow.

With another roar, the dragon lunged yet again, throwing Feenix to her back, the breath knocked out of her. The massive claw-studded foot descended, and she was trapped like a mouse inside a cat’s paw.

“Mac Lir,” she shuddered. “Help me.”

The weight of the beast was unbearable. If not for a large boulder beside her that had taken most of the dragon’s weight, she would be dead. Even so, her ribs would surely snap like twigs under the colossal burden of the monster.

Adrenaline pooled in her belly, cold and thick, and her limbs felt like they were made of stone. The pure knowledge that she had just witnessed her last sunrise sent her heart racing with terror.

“I don’t want to die, Mac Lir. Not now that I’ve found L’Garn.”

The whispered words trembled on her lips as if they, too, were afraid to attract the dragon’s attention.

Teeth bared, the dragon’s mammoth head lowered to bite her into pieces. A trickle of saliva flowed out to spill over her face. Before it could reach her, she closed her eyes and prepared herself for death.

“Please, Mac Lir.” She held her breath.

“Please help me.”

Nothing happened.

No acid; no teeth ripping her body in two; no bones snapping from the weight of the dragon’s foot.

She was still alive, and the pain had stopped, although the pressure from the dragon’s foot continued to hold her securely.

Feenix opened her eyes, and everything was as she remembered; the huge head bent with mouth open to chew her to bits. Even the spittle hung suspended from the jaw, unmoving—dangling in the air.

What was happening?

“The first time I saved thy life, thou wast too young to understand.”

A rich voice reverberated from the ground where she lay. It was as if Tylana itself spoke to her. She thought the voice was familiar, but could not put a name to the speaker, other than it was definitely male. And powerful.

Feenix trembled with a new fear.

“I watched over thee and protected thee through thy growing years. Many times thou didst tax my patience.”

“Who’s there?” She was afraid of the probable answer.

“Thou art a stubborn and proud woman. Thy prayers are full of contention.”

All thoughts of the dragon left her mind as she realized to whom the voice belonged. Mac Lir.

The god of the silvan; Rendolin's deity.

Feenix closed her eyes in dread as her mind raced with reasons why a god would deign to speak with her. None of the reasons were good. Her innards felt like mush; if she had been standing, her legs would have collapsed.

"Thy back is stiff and thy neck too proud to bend in humility. Thy tongue is tipped with the barbs of a thousand wasps, thy temper as hot as a volcano's heart. Long I have waited for thee to call upon me in humility; to reach out and embrace the gifts I have offered unto thee."

As the voice continued speaking, the ground trembled beneath her prone body, but she wasn't sure if it was her own fear causing her to quake...or something else. Never had she been in such a position! How many times had she railed at the god for a circumstance or because she found herself in an unpleasant situation? How often had she demanded he show himself and answer her charges and accusation? She must have been mad! Never had she thought the actual event would be so traumatic.

"Wh...what do you want?" She was ashamed of the tentative sound of her voice, but could not control the tremor in it.

"For the first time in thy existence, thou hast called upon me for help. What dost thou want?"

She wasn't sure if she had heard aright. After years of being ignored, Mac Lir had finally decided to answer one of her prayers? Why?

"Why would you help me?"

"Because, daughter, thou asked it of me in sincere prayer. And because I have a work for thee."

She had to think about that for a moment. She wasn't even sure if she was really talking to a god.

"I asked for your help before and you never raised one finger to help. Why should you help me now?" A thought entered her head. "Wait. I'm dead, right? The reason I'm talking to you is because I'm dead. Well, then why is this dragon still crushing me if I'm dead?"

"Thou hast ever railed and demanded, woman, as if thee were in a position to dictate to me. Never did thee ask with a sincere heart. Until now, thy heart was not soft enough to hear my words or to listen to my voice."

She turned her head to try to see if there was anyone in the ravine who might be responsible for this strange conversation. She saw no one, except the huge dragon still poised to kill her with a single bite. Strange how the saliva hung in the air, unmoving.

"I don't understand," she said. "If you are going to answer my prayer, then why am I still trapped beneath this dragon? And why is it not moving? What happened?"

"Thee are caught between heartbeats. Time, by thy measurement, seems to have stopped while we have our discussion. I cannot help thee unless thee listens closely to what I have to say. The choice to live or die lies with thee, Feenix of Port Marcus."

"What do you mean, the choice lies with me? You're a god! You can keep me from dying just by saying so. I've already chosen, and I want to live!"

The god didn't make any sense to her. He was all powerful, wasn't he? Why couldn't he just make the dragon disappear and let her get on with her life?

"Thou hast been walking a thin line for uncounted years. On one hand, thou hast become an evil and cruel creature. Thou hast not hesitated to kill for gain, nor to steal and plunder when given the opportunity."

“It’s what kept me alive, Mac Lir! You sure as hell weren’t around to help out, were you? Where were you when I was starving on the streets with no place to sleep, and no bread in my belly? I remember going for days without a mouthful of food, and finally finding something only partially rotted in the gutter. I’d have to wolf it down before another beggar, worse off than me, saw it and tried to claim it. Lying for hours in the rain; slops the only thing keeping me alive.”

Why was she defending herself to him? If she hadn’t learned how to steal, she would have been dead long before this.

“And as for me killing people, well, it’s my job. I’d rather be a paid warrior than a slum whore any day! And I always stopped short of becoming a hired assassin, so you can just stop trying to make me feel guilty. It’s what I do best. War is my trade; killing is my destiny.”

“Guilt is an emotion meant to temper a person’s excesses.”

“What is that supposed to mean? I’m not in the mood for riddles, Mac Lir. Are you going to help me or not?”

“On the other hand, thou hast many kind and loving inclinations,” the god said as if she had not spoken. **“Thy creation of the orphanage in Port Marcus proves thou hast a tender heart, if thee would but let it rule thy head. Thou hast been the savior of many children through the years. Their innocent prayers of thanksgiving and blessings upon thee have cried out to me. Thy actions of mercy have not gone unheeded.”**

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! An orphanage indeed! I have no patience for such things; I am a warrior with no time for children and such foolishness!”

“Think thou can hide thy doings from a god?”

Feenix blushed and felt like a fool.

“No one knows about the orphanage, and I want it to stay that way.”

“The true mark of loving persons is that they perform their good works quietly and without fanfare. Thy service will remain a secret as long as thou wish it.”

Feenix did not know where this conversation was going. Why couldn’t the god just do as she asked without all this embarrassing gibberish?

“What is this choice you’re talking about? I asked you to save me. Apparently I asked nicely this time,” she made a grimace. “So, are you going to help me out of this tight spot, or are you just going to lecture me all day?”

Actually, talking directly with a god was more intimidating than she had thought, but old habits were hard to break. And if she were totally truthful with herself, she had to admit that it just wasn’t in her make-up to humbly submit to anyone’s will—including a god’s—the way Rendolin did when speaking with the deity.

“Thou art not expected to change thy personality, daughter.”

Why did it surprise her that he could read her mind? He was a god, by the Seven Cella Worlds! He could do anything he wanted.

“Not everything. For some things, I need the cooperation of a chosen few. Thou art one of the chosen, Feenix.”

Oh, damn. Why couldn’t the god just save her and let her get on with her life?

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, and a sure knowledge that she didn’t really want to know, she asked, “Chosen for what?”

“The silvan races are being destroyed.”

“I know all that. Rendolin had to Bind to Kory in order to save the Sea Elves from extinction. That’s old news, Mac Lir. You were there, supposedly. What does that have to do with me? I’m not one of your silvan children.”

“Still thy tongue and hear my words.”

The voice was like thunder coming from the ground, and for the first time since the interview began, Feenix knew the god was losing patience with her. She clamped her lips shut and tried not to tremble.

“Thou hast been chosen to be a mediator between my children, the Sea Elves and the Night Elves. Thou wilt be an instrument in my hands, and thou shalt help negotiate a treaty for lasting peace between them.”

“Hold on,” she managed to say after the initial shock wore off. “I thought your High Priest, Rendolin, was going to do that. That’s what he told me when he Healed L’Garn.” This couldn’t be happening. The world had gone insane. She was a warrior, not a peacemaker.

“My High Priest will negotiate a lasting peace, but thee will be the mediator between the two sides. It will be thy job to convince the prince of the importance of this treaty. It is vital that my children come together to overthrow the true threat to their existence—Tuawtha.”

“This is insane! They’ve been trying to kill each other for hundreds of years! What makes you think that they’ll just stop?”

“Because if they do not, they will perish from the face of this world, just as the silvan have from Earth. Thou will convince L’Garn that he must speak with Rendolin. Only thee can do this.”

“You said I had a choice. What if I decide not to choose to be this mediator? What then?”

Deafening silence greeted her words, but after a moment, the ground began to rumble and a moan grew from the depths of the earth itself. Feenix started to think a hole would open and swallow her, along with the dragon, before the earth subsided and Mac Lir decided to answer her.

“Then thou hast chosen death, for thyself as well as for the entire silvan races. Thou art free to choose the course thou would, but remember what thou wilt be giving up. The orphanage will no longer have a patron. Where will the children go?”

Instantly, an image of the large building that housed the children came to mind. Without her support and funds, they would be turned out into the street with nothing. Those who had begun to train for careers in the army or in trade might fare well, but what of the little ones, too young to learn a trade or too small to survive on their own? Where would they go?

Unfortunately, she knew from personal experience where they would go. Back to the gutters.

“What of thy love for the prince? Wilt thou sacrifice it and stand by to watch kin slay kin without trying to stop it? What wilt thou do when L’Garn is killed by a cousin? Would thou not prevent such a thing if thou couldst?”

She had just found that she could love. Was she really going to pretend that she hadn’t lost her heart to the half-elf? Could she walk away from him, now that she knew how much she loved him?

But he didn’t love her! How could he? They had spent their entire time together trying to kill each other. Feenix was sure he despised her, or else why leave her chained to a tree after she had helped to Heal him? No, better to walk away with her pride, than have him crush her heart beneath his heel when he learned of her love.

“Thou wouldst doom a whole race and hundreds of children because of thy pride? Where is thy humility, woman? Where is thy compassion?”

Minutes seemed to fly by as she wrestled with her pride. What was her pride compared to the lives of so many? What worth was her heart, if children had to grow up in the gutters, dying every day from starvation and disease? She couldn’t condemn them to that life again.

Could she condemn herself to a life without L’Garn’s love?

And what of the elves? Was it true that their only hope was to form an alliance and defeat Tuawtha? What of it? Surely, they didn’t need *her* to reach a truce.

As much as she pretended otherwise, she loved the silvan people. Something about their beauty and grace called to her soul. It had been that way ever since she was a little girl and had seen her first elf.

The magical being had looked at her with soft, kind eyes, and had given her a juicy, sweet fruit, along with a warm loaf of bread to eat. When she asked him why, the handsome elf smiled kindly and answered, “Because children are rare and precious gifts.”

Strange, she hadn’t thought about that incident in years.

If Mac Lir’s words were true, could she condemn a whole race of beings to death?

“What do I have to do?”

“Accept me as thy god, and free thyself.”

By the god’s toe, more mumbo jumbo! Couldn’t Mac Lir ever just answer a question?

“What do you mean? Do I have to burn incense and pray to you every day, because I’ll tell you straight out, Mac Lir! I don’t have time for that nonsense!”

“Thou shalt carry a prayer in thy heart, and shalt acknowledge me as thy deity.”

Well, that didn’t sound too bad. She supposed.

“How do I free myself? I’m pinned beneath this dragon’s foot, and it’s about ready to step on me and crush me into pink slime.”

“Between one heart beat and the next, an entire eternity exists. Free thyself and find my servant Eagnad.”

“Eagnad?” she yelled in surprise. “What does that troll have to do with anything?”

But the voice remained silent, and Feenix felt as if the presence of Mac Lir had withdrawn.

She looked up at the dragon’s head, and it appeared as if the saliva was a little closer than the last time she had looked. Frantically, she tried to squirm from beneath the monster’s foot, and found that she could move a tiny bit. Using her feet to push herself, and holding her breath to squeeze her stomach as tight as possible, she managed to wiggle from beneath the great foot, pushing rocks aside to obtain her freedom.

She crawled away from the suspended foot, and looked at the beast poised overhead to kill her. Was that a movement of the monster’s eyes? She didn’t have time to ponder the situation.

Jumping to her feet, she looked around for her escape.

“Pretty Feenix come this way.”

To her combined joy and fury, Eagnad stood by the small cave of the three boulders that she had noticed before. He motioned frantically to her, urging her to move quickly.

A deafening roar shocked her into action. She ducked a raking claw, picked up her sword, and ran as fast as she could, throwing herself into the tiny cavern headfirst.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The interview with his grandfather, the king, had gone better than L’Garn could have hoped. Zimpher seemed to be more distracted than usual, speaking with his advisors in a secretive manner, and not really paying much attention to his grandson. As a result, the prince had not been required to go into detail about his absence.

“I suppose you were holed up in some whore’s room,” was the only comment the king made, after acknowledging L’Garn’s presence with his usual insults and barbs. “In the future, let someone know when you have an itch in your breeches. All this unnecessary fuss over nothing, sending runners out to look for you. Foolishness!”

L’Garn made no answer to the comment. All he was really interested in was seeking out his mother’s healer and finding out her status. Perhaps the king would know something.

“Grandfather, the servants report that mother is ill and has taken to her bed.”

The old king turned from the quiet conversation with his advisors. His face was grim.

“Your mother is always taking to her bed. Have you not learned that in all your years? The woman is habitually ill; she makes a career of her health!”

L’Garn swallowed his annoyance with his mother’s father. He had learned over the years that Zimpher had no use, nor any affection, for his daughter Sembali.

“The healers say that she is on her deathbed, grandfather.”

Zimpher’s face grew red as his anger mounted. He pushed one of the advisors away, and advanced on L’Garn.

“I care not about your mother! If she is on her deathbed, so much the better. She was ever a puling, useless female; more bother than her worth.”

L’Garn fought down the urge to punch the king in the face.

“After the disgraceful and traitorous act of birthing you, she was no good to me at all! I could not pay any decent man to take her off my hands, much less sell her to the highest bidder! Even the common riff-raff would have none of her! If she dies, it will be less of a drain on my purse!”

“How can you speak so about your own daughter?” It was impossible for L’Garn to remain silent while the king ranted about Sembali. “I can understand you hating me, but have you no family feelings at all? None for your own child?”

Zimpher stepped within a hand’s breadth of L’Garn. His eyes were red-rimmed and glowed with a fanatical light that sent a shiver of worry through the prince’s body.

The king was nearly insane; there could be no doubt of it.

“I have many feelings for family! For my daughter, I feel only annoyance that she did not die birthing you. I have contempt for her mother, the queen, that she gave me but one child before she died, and that one a female! And for you, my noble prince,” the king’s voice dripped sarcasm. “I have nothing but loathing and disgust that one such as you should be destined to sit upon Meedrion’s throne when I am dead!”

L’Garn held the king’s glare, fighting the urge to draw his blade and run it through the old elf. It was hard to accept his grandfather’s hatred of himself, but near impossible to listen to Zimpher’s venom towards his mother, Sembali.

“My mother is a kind and loving woman, your majesty, and I will not listen to your poisoned words against her.”

“You will do as I command, Outbreed. I am your king and you will obey me in all things.” An

evil look stole into the old eyes. "Or I shall be forced to punish you."

L'Garn drew himself to his full height.

"I have stood your punishments before. I daresay I shall withstand anything with which your majesty cares to test me."

"Ah. But can your dear mother?" Zimpher asked with a sly grin. At L'Garn's stupefied expression, he continued, "Do not get above yourself, or you shall be forced to watch your mother be punished for your misdeeds. Do I make myself understood?"

"Completely, your majesty," L'Garn answered through clenched teeth.

The king smiled cruelly and looked at his advisors in a pleased way. They returned the king's smirk, then gave L'Garn a look of amused scorn.

"Do I have permission to take my leave of your majesty?" L'Garn asked in clipped tones, bowing deeply to hide his fury.

"You do." Zimpher held out his hand for L'Garn's salute.

The half-elf stood and stared at the hand for a moment, appalled that his grandfather would expect him to kiss those fingers in respect. With great reluctance, he slowly took the fingers in his hand, and bent to kiss the wrinkled knuckles. He dropped the hand as quickly as possible, turned smartly on his heel and marched from the vaulted chamber.

The echo of the king's laughter, mixed with that of his advisors, followed L'Garn through the corridor. His ramrod straight posture proclaimed to any interested parties that the royal prince was in a rare rage, and none ventured a smile or comment.

Within moments, L'Garn reached his mother's suite. After speaking briefly with the majordomo, he slipped quietly into her bedchamber.

Priest lights hung from each corner, casting a warm glow around the room. A large canopied bed stood prominently in the center of the room; delicate pink silk hung from the tall posters and draped gently from the jeweled headboard.

Plump pillows and sumptuous coverlets scattered about the bed gave the impression of luxury and decadent comfort. L'Garn could barely see his mother's sleeping form, buried as she was amid the mounds of feminine fluff.

The stone walls were hidden behind huge tapestries and more draped silk. It was obvious to the casual observer that the occupant of the room preferred not to be aware of the hard, cold mountain from which the room was hewn. Even the vaulted ceiling boasted silk decoration, and L'Garn could not help but smile when he thought of the unlikely event of his grandfather visiting his mother. He would most likely have a hemorrhage at the sight of such wasteful decoration.

A thick fur, dyed pink to match the pillows, carpeted the floor beside the high bed. Nowhere else in Cragimore could that particular, frivolous color be found.

His mother always did have a flair for the dramatic, L'Garn thought.

The smell of Sembali's perfume, thick and cloying, soaked the air, and after only a few moments in the room, he could taste it in the back of his throat. It was one of the rare items for which the Night Elves traded. She was proud of the fact that this particular scent could only be purchased from a specific merchant and no one, except she, wore it in Cragimore.

The scented room evoked many memories, and L'Garn closed his eyes, allowing them to wash through his mind. A small child hiding in the comfort of her soft arms; breakfasts on the bed amid laughter and food; stolen kisses and hugs when no one was around; the usual things a son remembers of a mother's love. If not for Sembali, his life would have been bleak indeed.

"Pardon, your highness, but the princess will be pleased to see you." Glofer, the princess's butler, spoke softly at his side.

The words brought L’Garn quickly out of his reverie.

“How is she?”

“Not well, highness. She was sure you had been killed when the report from Atop came in. She called for the herbalist and took to her bed.” The elf’s voice was heavy with concern.

L’Garn stepped further into the room and peered at his mother’s sleeping form.

“She is too pale, Glofer. What do the healers say?”

The servant dropped his eyes and clasped his hands in front of him.

“The king has forbidden a healer to attend her, highness.”

“Why?” L’Garn’s shocked voice echoed around the chamber, threatening to wake the princess.

“His majesty believes the princess is merely suffering a mild disappointment and is not ill at all. He has issued orders that no healer is to be sent to her, on pain of death.”

L’Garn turned away in anger and disgust. He paced the chamber like an animal on a leash.

“Are you telling me that no healer has even examined her?”

“Aye, my prince. Only the herbalist and your mother’s personal servants have attended her. We are all very grateful you are back, your highness. We have been worried about her.”

L’Garn placed a hand on the elf’s shoulder, gave him a wan smile and said, “Thank you for all that you and the staff have done, Glofer. Leave me now. I would sit with her. I want to be here when she wakes.”

“You shall not be disturbed,” the servant said with a bow. “If you need anything, please ring. A servant will come immediately.”

“Thank you,” L’Garn answered absent-mindedly over his shoulder. He had already put the staff from his mind as he slowly sank into a comfortable chair that had been conveniently placed beside his mother’s bed.

Sembali, royal princess of the House of Meedrion, lay in the large bed, amid the pillows and coverlets. She looked like a small child, and her son felt helpless and alone as he sat and watched her sleep.

Her abundant auburn hair had been pulled back from her face, and someone had obviously attempted to brush it and arrange it into some semblance of order. Tiny curls escaped from the severe style, and they rioted about her still face, like gypsies dancing around a campfire. He had an urge to smooth them back, but feared to wake her.

Her face was as pale as milk, and although they were closed, L’Garn could see deep blue smudges beneath her eyes and covering her eyelids. It was almost as if someone had beaten her and left bruises on her lovely face.

One of her hands lay still upon the coverlet, the blue veins easy to see through the almost transparent pale skin. Gently he picked up her delicate hand, and cupped her fingers between his two strong hands. As always, he unconsciously noted the differences between his mother and himself; his hands were larger, squarer and of course, spiked with tiny human hair. It stood out in dark contrast to the pale tone of his skin, which was of a slightly darker hue than that of full Night Elves.

Not as tan as Feenix’s hands, he observed. His skin coloring was somewhere between his mother’s overly fair complexion, and the human’s creamy tan tone. Thoughts of Feenix sent a deep yearning through his body, surprising him in its force.

“Not now,” he commanded himself. Right now he must concentrate on his mother.

“My son.”

Sembali’s voice was soft and weak. L’Garn was not sure if he had imagined it, but her lashes

fluttered against her cheeks as if the weight of her eyelids was insurmountable.

"Mother, I am here." He leaned closer to her and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Can you hear me, mother? Awaken."

Slowly, Sembali raised her eyelids and peered at him with glazed and unfocused eyes. He watched in silence as they cleared of confusion and sleep.

"L'Garn? Are you really here?" Her voice was airy and full of doubt.

"Yes, mother. I am here. I am well."

"Where is my herbalist? He said you had been killed by a human. I need my posset."

Relief that she was lucid and awake warred with his annoyance at her demand for more drugs.

"I was not killed, mother. See? I am here beside you, whole and safe."

She rolled her head away from him and tried to pull her hand from his clasp.

"No. You are dead. This is another one of Mac Lir's tests, but I shall not fail."

Her voice sounded like the whine of a child forced to do something it did not wish to do.

"Mac Lir?" He felt a strange sense of destiny settle into the room. How odd. He was not usually given to such imaginings. "Mother. Look at me. It is L'Garn, your son. I am alive and well."

Sembali turned her face back towards her son's voice. Her gray eyes appeared to be clear, and as he watched, recognition slowly crept into their depths.

"L'Garn? Is it truly you?" She gripped his hand tightly.

"Yes, mother," he answered, smoothing her hair from her face. "I am here, and I am well."

A delighted smile slipped over her lips, and she pulled him in to her arms in a weak hug.

"Oh, my son! They told me you were dead, but Mac Lir said it was not so. I should have believed!"

L'Garn felt his mother's tears on his neck as she clung to him. He held her gently and kissed her cheek. Her perfume mingled with the scent of illness, and he struggled to hold back his own tears.

"Hush, mother. You have been ill, and must rest."

"No! L'Garn, I must speak with you," she said, pushing him away so she could look into his face. "My son, I must tell you about Mac Lir."

The strength she had conjured up to hug him seemed to be slipping from her as she spoke. Her voice was agitated and she appeared to be working herself into some sort of frenzy. He feared she would tax herself too much.

"Mother, rest. You can tell me when you have regained your strength."

He helped her to lie back against the pillows, but she continued to insist that she must speak to him.

"I must speak with you now, while the Dream is still with me. L'Garn, please get me some water, and make sure the door is locked. What I must say is for your ears alone."

"Mother, you must rest—"

She cut him off with an impatient movement of her hand. "Stop arguing with me. Just let me tell you the Dream and then I will rest."

With a resigned sigh, he poured her a small glass of water and held it to her lips. She drank a couple of swallows, then watched him place it on the stand beside her bed.

"Are the doors locked?"

To humor her, he got up and checked both doors of the chamber. While he did not really lock them, he made sure no one was standing outside, trying to listen.

"All is secure," he said, taking his seat once more at her side.

“L’Garn,” she began, taking his hand in hers and holding it firmly. “I never told you about your father. It is time.”

The bottom seemed to drop out of L’Garn’s world. Of all the things his mother could choose to speak about, never would he have imagined it would be about his father. An excited bubble began to build deep within, but he tried to clamp it down.

“My father? What does he have to do with anything? Why do you want to tell me about my father now? You would never speak of him before.”

She patted his hand, as she had done when he was a child.

“I know it was difficult for you, L’Garn, growing up without a father. I tried to shield you as much as possible, but I knew you suffered for the lack.”

“I felt no lack, mother. You gave me all I needed.”

“It is kind of you to say, my son, but you do not have to lie for my sake. I know how you were teased and ridiculed because of my disgrace.” She put her head down and sighed heavily. “I would have spared you the pain of such ridicule if I could.”

“It is well, mother. I survived.” He felt the need to comfort her, but he did not know how to accomplish it.

She looked up, and held his gaze with her eyes.

“Your father was a brave and noble man, L’Garn. Under normal circumstances, I would never have met him. But the ways of Mac Lir are deep and mysterious and your father and I were put upon the same path in life for a little while. We fell in love, and you are the result of that love.”

He could not help himself. Too long had his questions been unanswered. Too long had he tortured himself with unvoiced fears and anxieties.

“If he loved you, mother, why did he leave you to raise a son alone? Why did he not care for you and protect you?”

“I know you have many questions, and you carry a great hurt and anger within you. I cannot answer all of your questions, for the answers are not all mine to give. But I can help to ease your hurt.”

She took another sip of the water before continuing.

“Your father’s name was Steffen; you already know that he was human.” She gave him a wan smile. “He was a great warrior among his people. When I was young, I was very strong-willed and disobedient. Often I would take my horse and explore the land about Cragimore. One such night, my horse stumbled into a hole and broke his leg. I was alone and stranded, with the sunrise soon to come, and my poor lovely Moonstar screaming in agony.”

“Let me guess,” L’Garn interrupted. “This Steffen found you and helped you. As a reward for his kindness, you slept with him.”

“No,” she answered, ignoring his sarcasm. “A band of brigands found me. They took me prisoner and planned to sell me at a Tarnanian market. As you know, Tarna is beyond the Backbone of the World mountain range. It was a cruel journey. I will not go into detail.” Her voice was sad and full of remorse. “Steffen bought me.”

L’Garn’s spine stiffened in outrage. His mother, a slave? It could not be!

“He said that he had been instructed by his god to return me to my people.”

“And you believed him?” He could not understand how the female mind worked! How could she trust a human?

“L’Garn, you will please keep your snide comments to yourself until I finish my tale.”

He swallowed his angry words and nodded his head.

“The journey to Cragimore was long. During that time, we fell in love. We talked about

making a life together, rather than returning to Cragimore. We were very happy for many months, and I decided that a life with Steffen was better than a life living with my father's constant disappointment in me."

L'Garn could well understand that decision.

"Then one night, the god, Mac Lir, came to me in a Dream. He told me I would give birth to a son who would bring peace to all the silvan nations. When I woke, I wanted to believe it was nothing more than an odd dream, but Steffen had the exact Dream. He was more used to dealing with Mac Lir, and he convinced me that the Dream was true."

"What do you mean; he had more experience dealing with the god? How? Was he a priest?"

Sembali looked away and seemed to drift off into another time.

"No, as I said, he was a great warrior. But he was a strongly faithful man, and believed in Mac Lir's goodness. His spirit was one with the god. As a result, Mac Lir often blessed him with visions and dreams."

L'Garn waited while Sembali quietly remembered her time with his father. By the sweet smile on her face, it was easy to believe she had loved the human. However, that still did not answer the question most burning in his mind.

"What happened that this godly, faithful man abandoned his love and their child?"

At the pained look in her eyes, L'Garn felt remorse for hurting his mother. But still the question burned in his soul.

"He learned that I was of the royal House of Meedrion, and insisted that I return to Cragimore to speak with my father, to gain his blessing on our union. I tried to dissuade him from this course, but he insisted that Zimpher should know of your impending birth." She paused for a moment, as if gathering her strength for the remainder of the tale.

"King Zimpher had him killed."

L'Garn sat in stunned silence, his mother's words washing over him in great fiery waves. Why should he be surprised at the depths of his grandfather's cruelty? He should be immune to it by now.

He looked at his mother, and the glistening tears that coursed down her cheeks stoked a burning rage against his grandfather that had been banked for years. His hands shook with fury as he tried to comfort his mother.

"I am so sorry, mother."

She smiled through her tears and again patted his hand.

"Do not be sorry for me, my son. Steffen and I were happy, and I was given the wonderful gift of you. However, the story is not yet done. There is more I need to tell you."

He forced himself to sit quietly by her side, when his whole body and mind cried out to confront his grandfather and run a sword through him. He drew a great breath of air into his lungs, and tried to calm his racing heart.

"Mac Lir has sent me another Dream, L'Garn. Your time has come. You will lead our people to a time of peace with our kin, the Sea Elves, and the Wood Elves."

"Are you mad?" he demanded, before remembering to whom he was speaking. "I am sorry, mother, but our people will never consent to a truce! We have been at war for countless years, and many have died. Our kin's blood must be avenged! Honor demands restitution! Peace is out of the question."

"Nevertheless, it will be so. Mac Lir has shown it to me."

L'Garn stood and paced about the room, one hand on his hip and the other running through his short dark hair in agitation.

“How? What you say is impossible.” He returned and knelt by her side. “This is merely a dream you had, mother. Gods do not concern themselves in the lives of the likes of us. You must have imagined it.”

Sembali pulled her hand from his.

“Do not speak condescendingly to me, L’Garn! It was a true Dream and I can prove it to you!”

“Mother, calm yourself. I am sure you thought Mac Lir spoke to you in this dream, but—”

“The human slave sliced a sword through your shoulder. You almost died, but she Healed you, with the help of Mac Lir’s High Priest.”

He looked at her as if she had suddenly become someone he did not know.

“How did you know that?”

“Mac Lir told me. He told me other things, as well.”

“What other things?” L’Garn could not quite believe what he was hearing. How could his mother know?

“Her name is Feenix, and she is a warrior in the employ of Rendolin Hiloris, High Priest of Mac Lir. I know that she loves you and that you return her love, although you are not completely aware of that fact as of yet.”

What was she talking about, he wondered? True, he was attracted to Feenix, but he did not love her.

Did he?

“Do not try to deny it, my son. Your heart will prove you a liar.” She smiled at him again. “I know that Feenix has been chosen by Mac Lir to be the mediator between our people and the Sea Elves. She will help you bring peace to our race.”

“What are you talking about? I do not love her.”

Sembali ignored his words and continued, “The threat to our people is very real. All the silvan are in danger of dying, L’Garn, and Mac Lir wants you to help put a stop to it.”

“How? What can I do? Zimpher is the king. Our people follow him. They would never listen to me. Have you forgotten? I am an Outbreed.”

“I have not forgotten,” she said kindly. “You will soon become king, and then you must lead our people to peace. If you do not, all will be lost.”

Her words shook him to the core.

“I will become king? What of my grandfather?”

She looked at him with great sadness before answering.

“He will be killed, my son. It must be, if the Night Elves are to survive. The demon god has held Zimpher in thrall for countless years. The key is in the throne.”

He shook his head as if to dislodge the haze of confusion clouding his brain.

“What are you talking about?”

Sembali sagged weakly against the pillows, her eyes losing their clarity.

“I am very tired now, L’Garn. Leave me. Go and find your Feenix. She will help you in all you must accomplish.”

“Mother, are you sure this is a true dream?” He could not quite digest everything she had said. She was sick. The tale was probably nothing more than fevered imaginings.

But how had she known about Feenix, and his wound?

“Go. Leave me.” She closed her eyes and snuggled into the deep pillows.

There was nothing he could do but obey her. He feared she might become even more ill if he taxed her further.

“Rest well, mother,” he said as he smoothed the coverlet over her. He bent and placed a kiss on her cheek before walking to the door.

“L’Garn,” she whispered, barely loud enough for him to hear. “The key is in Meedrion’s throne.”

Then sleep claimed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Where, in the Seven Cella Worlds, are you leading me, Eagnad?”

Feenix hit her head for approximately the fourth time on the low ceiling as she tried her best to follow the small troll. She thought she had dived into a tiny cave to escape the dragon, but it had proven to be larger than she imagined. In fact, it looked like an entrance into Cragimore’s depths, unused by anyone except Eagnad.

“Pretty Feenix, hush. Guards must not find.”

“I need to get back into Cragimore to find Prince L’Garn. Are we going the right way?”

“Eagnad find prince. Pretty Feenix must not talk.”

“I can’t see a thing,” she whispered at him. “Can’t we light a torch or something?”

It felt like they had been dodging stalagmites and stepping around bottomless holes for hours. She was tired, and hungry, and just plain ready to sit and take a break. She wanted to take time to think about her conversation with Mac Lir, but traveling in a cavern, in the dark, without knowing exactly where she was going, prevented her from concentrating on anything except surviving and not losing the troll.

Suddenly, she walked into something not quite as hard as rock. It took her a moment to recognize Eagnad’s body; the pungent aroma of troll finally registered in her brain. It took her a moment more for her mind to register that he was standing stock still in the middle of the tunnel, his hands cupped together while concentrating on something he was holding.

“What are you doing?”

“Shhh,” was her only answer. She folded her arms across her chest and waited impatiently for the troll to enlighten her.

And then it dawned on her. She could *see* what Eagnad was doing! She dropped her hands to her sides and peered nervously at the troll’s hands.

“Magic!” By the god’s toenails, she hated magic. It always got her into trouble! “Put that away, Eagnad!”

A yellowish-blue glow rested in his dirty fingers, giving off enough light to illuminate his hands and arms. Light spilled over to reveal the broken floor of the tunnel, and splashed over to Feenix herself.

The tunnel was not very wide; Feenix could touch both sides with her fingertips if she stretched out her arms. The floor was a broken jumble of rocks, holes and small columns of rock. The ceiling disappeared into the blackness, giving no clue as to how high it was.

“Pretty Feenix hold,” the troll’s soft voice interrupted her observations. He was holding the glow to her.

“No. I don’t want it.” She backed up a step and bumped into the wall. By Mac Lir’s eyes, she was acting like a fool.

“Won’t hurt. Pretty Feenix take.”

He reached out, took one of her hands and dropped the glowing light into her open palm. She felt nothing—no heat, no weight—yet the light continued to give off its faint illumination.

“I don’t like magic, Eagnad,” she tried to explain. “I’m fine. I don’t need the light after all. I’ll just hold on to your tunic and we’ll be fine.”

The troll ignored her comments and turned to proceed down the tunnel. There was nothing for her to do but follow. By the god’s ears, she didn’t have a good feeling about this.

Feenix followed Eagnad as he squeezed through a narrow opening and disappeared into the darkness beyond. With the small light, the traveling was easier, but she still didn't know where they were going.

The glow from her hand glinted off black crystals, and tiny veins of silver threaded the walls throughout. When the glow spilled onto a crystal, the glare that bounced back into her eyes was nearly blinding. She quickly learned not to look directly at the sides of the tunnel. Instead, she kept her head down and concentrated on where to put her feet.

She began to feel a prickling sensation running up her neck into her scalp. She didn't know when it had begun, but the feeling grew with each step. A low thrumming pulsed from the living rock within which they traveled. The noise, like a persistent itch inside her brain, a buzz against her teeth, raised bumps along her flesh. She remembered hearing and feeling the same thing when she was in the lower regions of Cragimore. Perhaps it was a peculiar trait, distinctive of the Night Elves' stronghold.

"Eagnad, do you hear that noise? What is it?"

The troll tilted his head to the side, listening intently.

"Cragimore talk." He continued on his way through the tunnel, clearly expecting Feenix to follow.

"Cragimore? What do you mean? A mountain can't talk."

What was the troll thinking? It was hard enough to try to understand him, without Eagnad going off on some crazy idea.

"Cragimore talk to king. Pretty Feenix hush. Almost home."

The hair on her head prickled as a feeling of recognition raced through her. She didn't know what it meant, but she was sure it wasn't good.

They continued through the empty tunnel, meeting no one, as Eagnad led the way back into the bowels of the Night Elf stronghold. She supposed she needed to stop thinking of L'Garn's people as the enemy, but habits were hard to break. The fact that they hadn't been very friendly to her didn't help.

Come to think of it, they weren't very friendly to L'Garn either. At least not so she'd noticed. Why was that? He was their prince, by Mac Lir's eye, so they should have more respect for him. When he carried her in that first day, she noticed the guards were disrespectful to him, and even called his mother names in front of him. While she couldn't see them, she heard the hate and fear in their voices loud enough.

Could it be because he was half human? She hadn't noticed any other half-elves while she had been here. And, come to think of it, L'Garn himself always seemed uneasy about the fact that he had human blood.

She smiled to herself, remembering the way he bristled whenever she called him 'elf-man'. She did it just to get him riled. Maybe the reason he disliked it so much was because he was ashamed of his human side.

If that was the case, she reasoned, the smile slipping from her lips, there was no hope for her at all! If he couldn't even stand to think about his own humanity, he must hate humans with a passion. He would never love her, Feenix realized.

This journey back into Cragimore was becoming more enjoyable by the moment.

"Put light away. Feenix home."

The little troll had stopped at an opening in the tunnel. Torchlight illuminated the entrance, and she could clearly see Eagnad standing by the side, peering out into a vast cavern.

"How do I get rid of it?" How she hated magic.

Eagnad quietly slapped his palm over hers and the glow disappeared. When he removed his hand, there was no trace of the magic light.

“Where are we?” she whispered, craning her neck to look over his shoulder and wiping her palm on her leg to get rid of any magic residue.

“Work cavern,” he said. Motioning with his hand, he explained, “Not many elves. Sleep time for them. We move slow, quiet like rat hunting food, we not caught.”

Silently she pulled the sword from her belt and tapped Eagnad on the shoulder with a finger to indicate she was ready.

Once she had a clear view of the cavern, she recognized it as the area that contained the laundry and cooking fires. As soon as they took a step out of the secret tunnel and into the huge room, the roar of the waterfall crashed into her ears. She had forgotten about that deafening noise. The tunnel had muffled its voice.

Their backs hugging the chamber walls, they began to make their way around the cavern towards the exit that led to L’Garn’s room. The most difficult part of their journey would be when they had to pass the guard station, set behind a column of stalagmites.

They reached the station without being seen, and Feenix ducked into the guard room, looking for a change of clothing. Her slave gown was nothing more than tattered rags, and hardly covered any of the more personal parts of her body.

Sitting inside the door, dozing in a chair, was an elf holding a club and wearing a sword and whip. At her appearance, his eyes popped open and he grabbed for his weapon. With a huge grin, and an odd twinge of guilt, Feenix attacked. She ran her blade cleanly through his heart, catching him before his fall alerted other guards. She dragged his body into a smaller room, which, to her delight, turned out to be a supply room.

Gleefully, she grabbed a leather jerkin, boots, and a pair of leggings. She didn’t take the time to do more than throw the jerkin around her shoulders. She would change when she reached the safety of L’Garn’s room.

As she left the room, she grabbed a dagger in a beautifully tooled sheath and stuffed it inside one of the boots. Draping the clothing over her shoulder, she stepped back into the cavern and resumed her journey. Eagnad was nearly to the exit.

They reached the prince’s room without further incident, and Feenix collapsed on the bed with a relieved sigh.

“Guard the door, Eagnad, while I change out of this rag.”

~*~

L’Garn stepped into his room and stopped dead in his tracks.

Feenix was in the process of pulling a leather jerkin on over one of his best silk shirts. The sleeves were too long for her arms, and she had rolled the cuffs up over her wrists. The chain he had used to fetter her to the tree was wrapped around her left arm, like a strange ornament.

Her long legs were encased in leather leggings that showed off her lower anatomy in a way that shocked his body into a state of frenzied anticipation.

She wore scuffed boots that had obviously been appropriated from some luckless guard with a larger foot than hers. A dagger was strapped to the outside of the right boot. Her sword scabbard hung on the bedpost within easy reach of her hand.

Feenix had undergone a metamorphosis, from a lowly slave into a fearsome warrior.

Her thick ebony hair was coiled and pinned on top of her head, making her smooth neck

appear long and graceful. The shirt was open at the neck, and he could see the swell of her full breasts as she struggled with the stiff leather garment.

A warrior she might be, but the accouterments of war could not hide her beauty from his eyes.

"Would you like some help with that?" he asked, once his initial surprise was gone.

In a blur of movement, she drew her sword, and lunged in his direction.

"Hold, Feenix," he yelled, jumping to the side and narrowly avoiding the blade. It was fortunate for him that the leather top caused her movements to be awkward.

"L'Garn! Don't you know better than to startle me like that?" She lowered the sword and adjusted the jerkin. "Eagnad! I thought I told you to guard the door!"

The little troll stepped away from the corner shadows, where he had been invisible to her.

"Pretty Feenix say she want to find prince. Prince here."

He shrugged his shoulders and continued to eat a piece of fruit that he had pilfered from the table.

"You wanted to find me?" L'Garn asked with a smile, taking a step towards her. That she had come seeking him, rather than escaping, made him want to laugh with joy.

Instantly, Feenix raised the sword and pointed it at his heart.

"Easy, elf-man. I have a score to settle with you."

His smile slipped, and disappointment washed through him. Of course she wanted to find him, he realized. She wanted to run her sword through him again for chaining her to the tree.

"How did you get the chain from the tree?" He noticed she still wore the collar and wrist manacles. She could not have used a key.

"Well, now, it's interesting you should ask, your highness." Her voice dripped sarcasm. It was one of the things he liked about her. She always had a ready tongue in her head. "An obliging dragon came along and wanted to make me his dinner. I took objection, you understand, and in the ensuing confusion and melee, the tree was broken into firewood. I slipped the chain."

"Were you hurt? Are you well?" He ignored the sword and came close enough to touch her, although he did not think she would allow that.

"I'm fine, no thanks to you, elf-man! Why did you chain me to that blasted tree? I almost died!"

"I was afraid you would wake before I returned, and try to escape on your own. I did not want the Watcher—the dragon—to find you and kill you."

He watched her face and wished he could run his fingers across her brow and erase the scowl that darkened her expression.

"Well, your plan didn't work! The dragon found me, and if not for Mac Lir's intervention, I would have been breakfast!"

She sheathed the sword angrily before continuing her tirade against him.

"Were you trying to get me killed?"

"No, I did not want you to die. I want you to live a long life, Feenix."

His words eased some of the scowl from her face, and it was amazing to him how that little bit of encouragement pleased him.

"Hold out your arms, and I will remove the manacles."

"When you've done that, take this blasted collar off my neck! I can't breathe properly with it on."

She held out her left arm and he quickly unlocked the iron. He noticed her hand tremble when his fingers brushed the inside of her wrist. He looked up and caught her eyes staring into his. She blushed and looked away. It was hard for him to hide his pleased smile.

The chain, with the manacle attached, slid from her arm and dropped to the stone floor with a loud clang. Feenix held out her other hand and turned her head away, giving him a clean view of her straight little nose and strong jaw. He had an urge to kiss her until that clenched jaw relaxed with need of him. Instead, he unlocked the other manacle and it joined its mate on the floor.

"That's better," she said, rubbing her wrists.

He took her hands in his and turned them over, looking at the red welts that the metal had created.

"I am sorry for the pain these caused you."

He could not stop himself from placing a lingering kiss on each of her wrists, exactly over the bluish veins where her pulse beat a rapid tattoo. His blood stirred and he felt himself become aroused.

Encouraged that she did not pull her hands from his grasp, he looked up and gave her a tentative smile. Perhaps his mother was correct. Perhaps Feenix did have feelings, other than hate and loathing, for him. As he acknowledged he had for her.

"It's nothing," she muttered before jerking her hands from his touch. "Now, get this blasted collar off before I lose my temper."

Some mischievous imp compelled him to tease her, just so he could see the flush of anger wash across her face and light her eyes with an indigo fire.

"This collar is a mark of your status. If I remove it, people will think you are no longer my slave."

She slammed both fists on her hips and glared at him. "I won my freedom, if you remember, elf-man! Now take it off or I will kill you, then do it myself!"

"I seem to recall the terms of our wager were that if you killed me, you would win your freedom. Here I stand, not dead at all."

"The only reason you're alive, you miserable elf scum, is because I saved your life! Now, remove this collar; or does your word mean nothing to you?"

Her attempt to anger him did not work. In fact, it only amused him to see her try to manipulate him into doing her bidding. Life with Feenix of Port Marcus was going to be exciting and never dull.

Life with Feenix? He stilled in surprise. Was he actually thinking about spending his life with this ferocious woman? This human with a temper that could flay the skin from a dragon?

The answer slipped through his heart and mind like spring honey. Yes. He wanted to spend forever with her.

Now, all he had to do was convince her she wanted the same.

"I will remove the collar on one condition."

He watched the emotions in her eyes race across her mind—surprise, doubt, anger, resignation.

"What condition?"

He stepped closer, using his body's heat to help her feel how intensely he felt about her.

"You will not call me 'elf-man' again."

She licked her dry lips, and his arousal surged against the prison of his breeches. A sudden weakness invaded his knees, and for a moment he thought he would embarrass himself by stumbling.

"By the god's blue eye, just get the blasted thing off!"

"And you will not call me that humiliating name again," he insisted, holding the key in front of her face, and tempting her with its closeness.

“Fine.” She trembled, but whether from fury or passion, he could not tell.

“Say it.” He traced her jaw with the silver key, echoing with the metal what his fingers longed to do.

He watched her swallow hard. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply as if trying to calm her heartbeat. L’Garn smiled, knowing that she was feeling the tension between them.

“I won’t call you elf-man again.” Her eyes snapped open and she glared at him. “Are you satisfied?”

“Oh, no, Feenix,” he said softly, dropping his eyes to her lips and then back to her green glare. “I am far from satisfied, but I will accept your word.”

“Then, by Mac Lir’s thumb, do it!”

“Lift your head.”

With an exasperated sigh, she tossed back her head to allow him access to the lock under her chin. With gentle fingers, he held the silver collar as he inserted the key in the hasp. Instantly, the lock clicked and the collar opened, releasing her long neck from its metal prison.

Before she could move, he dropped the ring of silver from her neck and slipped his hands over her jaw, cradling her head and the nape of her neck with his fingers. Silently, he bent and kissed the red sores where the cruel collar had blistered the delicate skin.

Her pulse raced beneath his lips, and he felt her gasp with surprise. She smelled of *cheetamuk* flowers and sweet sweat; the combination was a heady aphrodisiac.

With deliberate care, he ran his lips along the entire ring of red that marred the perfection of her skin. When she placed her hands on his shoulders, he knew she was not immune to his wooing, and his blood surged like liquid fire in his veins.

L’Garn lifted his head to peer into Feenix’s passion-filled eyes. His thumb skimmed over her cheek, and she turned her face against the palm of his hand.

“Stay with me, Feenix of Port Marcus,” he heard himself say. He knew longing filled his eyes, and he did not try to hide it.

She lifted her hand to his cheek, tracing a line from his nose to his hair. Her fingertips, lightly caressing the tips of his ear, sent a wave of desire through him, and he almost carried her off to his bed without her consent. Instead, he dropped one of his hands and pulled her close into his body. As before, her form fit snugly against his, in all the correct places.

“Let me make love to you—here. Now.”

“Yes,” she breathed, and he was lost.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Feenix's heart raced, and her blood pounded in her ears. Was this really happening? Did L'Garn feel the same for her as she did for him, or was he merely interested in releasing some pent up lust?

In answer to his question, L'Garn's lips crushed hers in a searing kiss at her whispered, "Yes." The intensity of the kiss nearly brought her to her knees. The feel of his velvet tongue exploring her mouth sent shivers of desire dancing across her skin.

She found herself opening his shirt to explore the hard planes of his chest. Crisp hair tickled her palms as she slid her hands up and over his shoulder and then down to his waist. He moaned deep in her mouth as her fingers glided over his stomach and dipped into the band of his breeches. They were both in a rush to discover each other.

"This has to come off," he murmured against her lips, struggling with the jerkin she had pulled on only moments ago. Without comment, and keeping her lips on his until the last moment, Feenix grabbed the hem of the garment and pulled it over her head. She felt as if she had lost her life when they had to break contact with their lips to remove the clothing.

"Oh, my flower," he breathed on her skin, nipping her neck and licking a path to her earlobe. "You set my blood on fire."

Flower? She choked back a soft laugh. She'd never been anyone's flower before. Bed partner, yes. Companion, of course. But never someone's flower. Feenix decided she liked it.

He cupped her breast in his hand and gently squeezed, rubbing his thumb across the sensitive nipple, while he nuzzled and kissed the column of her throat. She sighed contentedly and leaned into his body. She needed to feel as much of him as possible. The hard ridge pressing into her belly told her he was as excited as she.

But was it love, or lust, he was feeling?

She tried to push the question from her mind. What did it matter? She had shared lust with men before and had never wondered at their motives. Why should the prince's reasons bother her? The only thing she wanted to think about was the way L'Garn's mouth made her feel.

Ruthlessly, she ripped the silk shirt from his body in an attempt to put her doubts from her. What did it matter why he wanted her? The fact remained that he did. She needed to concentrate on this moment, the sensations rushing over her skin as the one she loved kissed and caressed his way to their mutual satisfaction.

His long fingers were in her hair, while his mouth and tongue lit bonfires and sent them racing along her spine. His tongue laved her nipples through the thin shirt, creating a tiny shock as the chill air hit the wet material, when he left one aching breast to feed on the other.

With a fierce tug, L'Garn sent her hair cascading down around them, like a black waterfall, effectively closing off everything except their need for each other.

"I have dreamed of seeing your hair like this again. The first moment I saw you on that beach, I wanted you in my arms with your glorious hair your only garment." His words shot fire all the way to her toes.

"L'Garn," she spoke, struggling to regain some control. Could she trust him? Could she trust herself? This was no drunken encounter that she wouldn't remember the following morning. This was much more than that, at least for her, and Feenix was feeling extremely vulnerable.

Love or lust? Why should it matter?

He bent and kissed the cleavage between her full breasts. His hands smoothed the silk from her shoulders as he licked a path down the front of her. He dropped to his knees, fumbling for the release of her leggings.

“L’Garn,” she said, catching his face between her hands. “Wait.”

He dipped his tongue into her navel and ran his hands around her hips, over her buttocks and down the back of her thighs. Her head was spinning and her knees trembled, but she knew she had to stop him—stop herself.

Love or lust?

This time, it *did* matter.

“Please, L’Garn,” she forced his head up. His icy blue eyes, filled with heated desire, met hers in question. “Stop. We have to talk.”

It was the last thing she wanted to say to him, but better they talk now than after they both did something he would later regret, she reasoned. “Please, stop.”

“What?” He looked as if he didn’t quite understand what she was telling him, but she watched him struggle to comprehend and gain control of himself.

“Please stop, L’Garn.” She backed up a step and pulled the shirt closed across her breasts. “We need to talk. I need to tell you some things about myself before we do something here that we’ll both regret.”

He sat back on his heels and looked up at her like a little boy who had just been told he couldn’t have a treat. His breathing was harsh and rapid, as was hers.

“Stop?” he echoed, running his hand distractedly through his hair. “Very well, what do you wish to talk about?” He gulped a great breath, then stood with a smooth movement, waiting for her to answer.

It was difficult for Feenix to begin with him standing in front of her, his lips red and swollen from their kisses and his shirt in rags around his waist. His body was covered in a fine sheen of perspiration and his breathing still came quickly. She could even see the pulse at the base of his neck beating rapidly. She wanted nothing more than to throw herself into his arms and forget about confessing.

She turned around so that her back was to him. This might be easier if she wasn’t looking at him.

“I need to tell you something, and I don’t think I can with you looking at me like that. So just listen before you say anything.”

A long pause met her words before he answered.

“Very well. What do you need to tell me?”

This was it, by Mac Lir’s blue bells. She had to tell him about Rendolin and Mac Lir, and hope and pray he wouldn’t hate her by the time she had finished. She took a deep breath and began.

“I am in the employ of Rendolin Hiloris, High Priest of Mac Lir. He is a Sea Elf.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “You told me that just before you put your sword through my shoulder.”

She winced at the memory, but continued as if he hadn’t said anything.

“I am the captain of his guard. I have also been training all the troops, preparing for an attack on Cragimore.”

“So you said.”

He really wasn’t being very helpful, by Mac Lir’s toes. Still, she supposed she couldn’t blame him.

"I did not plan for you to capture me, but since I was here, I decided to learn as much as I could about Cragimore's defenses so the attack would be successful."

She stopped to take a breath and gather her jangled wits. *It was so much easier to tell an enemy that you had plotted to betray him, rather than a person you loved*, she decided. If she still thought of him as an enemy, the words would have spilled from her mouth like water from a damaged dam. Instead, she found herself trying to find just the right way to tell him of her deceit, without earning his contempt and disgust. Impossible, she knew.

"No harm done," he said quietly from behind her. "You could not have given the information to anyone."

She turned to look at him. Since the Sea Elves' mission had changed from war to peace, there really was no need for her to admit to her reports to Rendolin. However, if there was any chance at all for her to have a relationship with L'Garn, she wanted it to be an honest one. She had to build the foundation of that relationship on truth, or it would never stand the test of time.

"Yes, I did. Using his magic, Rendolin found me. He used some sort of communications spell." She fought to keep her tone of voice neutral, but it was difficult with the wall of silence that met her words.

"We talked strategy more than once," she continued, "and I told him as much as I could about your stronghold, which wasn't a lot because, what with being ill from that beating, and you sending me to work in the laundry, I didn't get to see much. Actually, that magic contact was how Rendolin was able to Heal you...through me."

Damn! She was babbling like a fool. She shut her mouth and watched him closely. He showed no emotion at all, but merely stood in front of her, his hands hanging by his side, listening to the words she had to say, as if they were not the most important ones she had ever spoken to him. Possibly even the most important ones she would speak in her entire life.

"I wondered about that."

He was making her more nervous with his calm words and unreadable expression. She had never been very good at subtle warfare. Her forte was an open, all out display of emotion and action. By Mac Lir's toes, he wasn't making this easy at all!

"That was before the dragon."

"Ah. The dragon," he nodded. "Since surviving the dragon, I take it you have had a change of heart?"

She wanted to hit him. For a moment, she was sure he was laughing at her, but his eyes remained ice blue and not another muscle moved on his face after he had spoken. Blasted half light in this infernal cavern, she growled to herself. She never could be sure of what she was seeing.

"Yes. Well, no." She didn't want him to think it took a dragon to make her realize how much he meant to her. "I mean, Mac Lir saved me from the dragon. Since then, I have not spoken with Rendolin to give him any further information about Cragimore."

"Well, you have hardly had time, have you?"

She fumbled with her shirt, twisting the fabric together, trying to keep her hands from clamping around his throat. The half-elf was maddening!

"That's not important —"

"It is to my people," he cut her off.

"Will you just listen without these little comments?" She was fast losing her temper with him. "I'll never get this out if you don't keep your mouth shut!"

"Pardon, Feenix," he said, ducking his head, but she caught a glint in his eye. "Continue."

She decided to ignore his attitude and just get the words out.

“Mac Lir saved me, as I said,” she rushed on. “But before he did, he told me that all the elves are in danger—not just the Sea Elves as Rendolin and I had thought—but all the elves, including the Night Elves. The only way for the Night Elves to survive is to form an alliance with Rendolin’s people, and together defeat the true enemy.”

“Form an alliance,” he repeated thoughtfully. “My people will not fall in with your plans easily.”

“I know that, but Mac Lir said that I was to act as mediator between you and Rendolin. If you lead your people to a truce, and Rendolin leads his people, peace can be achieved.”

“Are you a dreamer, as well as a warrior, Feenix of Port Marcus?” His words were soft and the look in his eyes was almost tender.

A spark of hope flared in her heart.

“No, I’m just a fighter. But Mac Lir wants this alliance to succeed, and I have committed myself to his cause.”

“You have not told me how the elf nations are threatened, and who the true enemy is.”

She swallowed again. Here was the truly difficult part; how to tell L’Garn that his grandfather had been influenced by Tuawtha for so long that as a result, his own people were being manipulated by the demon god.

“Are you familiar with the tale that the Seven Cella Worlds were created by the gods, and that they populated them with beings of their own creation?”

L’Garn tilted his head a bit, looking at her as if he were trying to judge her level of sincerity.

“Of course. Mac Lir created the silvan races; Elemjiah created the humans.”

“Right. Well, apparently Tuawtha the demon god is trying to kill off all the silvan races, and he’s been using the Night Elves to do his dirty work.”

Finally, her words produced a reaction from L’Garn. He scowled darkly. “You are saying the Night Elves are the puppets of Tuawtha? What proof have you?”

“I have no proof other than the fact that Mac Lir told me.”

He turned from her and walked over to the table to pick up a piece of fruit absently. “Why would Mac Lir speak to you, a human? He is the god of the silvan races.”

Her stomach seemed to drop to her toes. She was going to have to tell him about the *Change*, there was no way around it. And once he knew what an abomination she had become, any chance she had of winning his love would be lost.

“Tell me, if you can, Captain Feenix of Port Marcus. Why would the silvan god speak to a human warrior woman?”

There was nothing else to do. She had to tell him in order for her to convince him of the truth. By the god’s beard, why couldn’t anything be simple?

“A few years ago, I was on campaign in the central part of Tylana. My garrison was under attack from a horde of goblins and trolls. We were taking quite a beating, but held the keep, despite the wave upon wave of foul creatures that seemed to come from some unlimited source. I was mortally wounded by a troll who got in a lucky sword thrust while I was busy killing some of his companions.

“Anyway, I was a goner. One look at my guts spilling out onto the ground told me that. But there was an elfin priest fighting with us, who happened to take a liking to me. I don’t know why; I never gave him the time of day,” she smiled grimly, remembering the tall elf with the gray eyes.

Feenix felt the stone walls of Cragimore retreat as memories of the horror and stench of war

filled her mind. It was almost as if L’Garn was no longer standing before her. Instead, she was at the Blakenrift Garrison, watching her lifeblood and internal organs ooze between her fingers and sink into the thirsty ground.

“The elf dragged me behind a crumbled wall and started chanting some nonsense to his god, Mac Lir. I don’t remember exactly what happened because I kept going in and out of consciousness. I do remember he had his hands up to his forearms in my belly, and I stopped hurting once he started that blasted chant. It was magic, you see, and nothing good ever comes of magic.”

L’Garn grunted, but she barely heard him, so intent was she on her memories and the story.

“I don’t know how long the elf worked on me. When I took the hit it was early afternoon, but then the next thing I knew it was dark and night had come. When it was over, the elf told me that Mac Lir had agreed to save my life in exchange for my service to his cause.”

She slammed her fist into the palm of her right hand.

“You can believe I told the elf I wanted no part of any god and his magic. I would rather have died from my wound. I was a simple warrior and didn’t have any business with such things. But the elf insisted that Mac Lir had marked me as one of his own, and from that point on, the god seemed to delight in making my life a misery!

“When it was over, I didn’t even have a scar.” She looked up at L’Garn and was surprised to find him standing so close, with a look of deep concern on his face. “Don’t you think I should at least have a scar?”

She’d never quite understood that part, and she always thought that somehow she should.

“How did Mac Lir mark you, Feenix?” Again, she was surprised at the gentle tone of his voice. How she wished her next words would not cause him to turn from her in disgust. But she knew the likelihood of that was all but nil.

“He cursed me, L’Garn. Once a month, no matter where I am or what I try to do to prevent it, he changes me into a blasted dolphin, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

She dropped her head so she couldn’t see the revulsion in his eyes.

“That day you captured me on the beach. . . I had just come out of the sea because the *Change* was over for the month. Rendolin and his brother were supposed to have left my gear on the beach, but they failed me. That’s why I had no clothing or weapons when you came upon me.”

His fingers under her chin surprised her, and she lifted her head at their relentless urging.

“Why are you ashamed of this ability, Feenix? It seems to me a rare gift the god has bestowed upon you.”

Her heart leapt at the tenderness she saw in his light blue eyes; but years of thinking herself a monster, and trying to hide her shameful curse from everyone, made her leery of compassion, and she couldn’t believe his concern was real.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, pulling her face away from his fingers. “What matters right now is that Mac Lir seems to think I belong to him and that I can help his cause. After saving me from the dragon, I agreed to do his bidding. And right now, that means I have to convince you that your people are in danger and that you are their only hope of surviving.”

“What of King Zimpher? Why are you not telling this story to him?”

“Because Mac Lir said you would be the person to lead the Night Elves to peace, not the king. Besides.” She was hesitant to tell him the next part, but there was no hope for it. “Zimpher is being controlled by Tuawtha somehow and wouldn’t listen to me. You have to make him see reason. You’re his grandson. He’ll listen to you.”

She was surprised at the dangerous grin that stole across his lips.

“Even if I believed your story, Zimpher will not listen to me. He hates me. I am an Outbreed.”

She had never heard such regret and anger mixed in a voice before, and she had the urge to comfort the half-elf standing like a defiant lost child in front of her.

“You are the royal prince. Of course he will listen to you. A grandfather can’t hate his grandchild.”

“You do not know Zimpher the Golden, that is easy to see. No,” he paced the room thoughtfully. “The king will not listen to me, and our people will not follow me. There is nothing I can do.”

She couldn’t believe her ears!

“You’re not going to do *anything*? You’re just going to let your people die without even trying?”

“Even if I believed that Zimpher was in the thrall of the demon god—and I have to admit he has been acting irrationally of late—there is nothing I can do. Do you not understand? I am an Outbreed! My people do not consider me worthy to rule. If it were not for my royal blood, I would have been killed at birth! How do you expect me to convince them to put aside their long animosity towards the Sea Elves and Wood Elves? It is a matter of honor that the war continues. If I try to persuade them of the danger, they will kill me. And Zimpher will put my mother to death.”

She stood and looked at him for a long moment. It was as if she were seeing him for the first time. Never had she thought he was fearful of anything, yet here he was, as much as admitting to the fact that he was afraid of how the Night Elves would react if he tried to warn them of their danger.

It didn’t feel right. There seemed to be hidden meanings beneath L’Garn’s simple words.

“So, you’re just going to let your whole nation be killed because you’re afraid your grandfather will kill you?” She gave him a scathing look. “If I weren’t seeing it with my own eyes, I would never have believed you to be a coward.”

He threw the fruit against the wall, and it splattered, sending sticky pulp flying in all directions.

“I am no coward, but you do not understand what you are asking! If Zimpher refused to listen to reason, I would be inciting a rebellion! Without any followers, it would be a suicide mission!” He grabbed Feenix by the upper arms and shook her to emphasize his words. “What would that serve? More elves would be killed and Mac Lir’s cause would fall by the wayside. Is that what you want?”

Feenix jerked her arms from his grasp and looked him firmly in the eyes.

“You know it’s not, but at least it’s better than just standing by and watching the whole silvan race die because you’re too frightened to try to stop it. If your grandfather won’t see reason, then you have to try to persuade his advisors.”

“Listen to me, woman,” he growled, looking more threatening than Feenix had ever seen him. Even when he was angry with her during the sword fight, he hadn’t looked like he wanted to tear her limb from limb, as he did now. “I am not afraid of dying. I just do not see how getting myself killed is going to solve anything. Especially if my sacrifice does not convince the king to parley for peace.”

“Are any of the king’s advisors loyal to your family, not just the king? Perhaps you could reason with them and get their support.”

“There are a few who might listen to me, but I could not guarantee they would believe me.”

“Well, it’s a start, isn’t it? We need to speak with them as soon as possible. Also,” she

continued, picking up momentum and enthusiasm. She could see L’Garn was beginning to lean toward Mac Lir’s plan. “What about your own company of men? Wouldn’t they follow you, if you commanded it? Do you have any followers and friends, or are they all like that scum who accosted you when you first brought me into Cragimore?”

He looked thoughtful before answering. “There is a handful that would probably follow me if I laid the plan out to them. Others would lend support simply because I am the heir to the throne, and they wish to curry favor.”

“Aye,” she agreed with a nod. “There are always those who would ride the crest of another’s power. We can use them to our advantage.”

For a moment the prince’s eyes shone with excitement and the challenge before them. Then he seemed to realize how hopeless the whole thing was, and the light dimmed.

“Even with my men and the odd advisor or two, if it comes down to a fight between the king’s men and ours, we could not possibly win, Feenix. We would be hopelessly outnumbered.”

“Don’t be so negative,” she said with a smile, slapping him on the back. “If it comes down to a battle, you have more allies than you think. What about the slaves you have, the Sea Elves? I’ve seen a number of them. If we spoke with them and told them about Mac Lir’s plan, don’t you think they’d help?”

He stared at her in amazement. “They are only slaves. What can they do?”

“Put a sword in their hands, give them their freedom and I bet you’ll be surprised at what they can do. A man fighting for his freedom is a terrible thing to behold.”

“You might be right, Feenix,” he said after a moment of silent thinking. “Most of them were captured when they attacked Cragimore many years ago. They were all warriors. True, they have not wielded a sword in all those years, but they are strong and healthy. But how do we know they will not turn the swords on us? We must be assured we are not loosing the enemy to attack us in our own home.”

“Leave them to me,” she said with a confident air. “I’ll be able to convince them. And I’ll have Rendolin to council me, once he makes contact with me again.”

“The king had ordered me to have them all killed. Instead, I took them Atop, thinking I would reassign them duties there, and keep them out of Zimpher’s way. Perhaps, that was a good move on my part.”

“Perhaps,” Feenix observed, “you were merely acting at the prompting of Mac Lir without even knowing.”

“I do not want to think I have been influenced by a god without my knowledge.”

She shook her head, but smiled at his obstinacy. Who was she to talk? Hadn’t she been reluctant to acknowledge Mac Lir’s guidance? L’Garn would come to realize he had little choice but to follow the god’s plan. Let him learn the hard way, as she had. Perhaps they both learned best by taking a punishment rather than by reason.

“So, L’Garn. Do you believe my story?”

He looked away from her as if considering his words.

“Yes, I believe. You have confirmed what my mother told me. She had a Dream and Mac Lir told her the same information.” He stepped to her and looked deeply into her eyes. “It is hard for me to accept that Mac Lir is using us for his plans. It is especially hard for me to accept, when he has not found me worthy to speak directly to me. Instead, he sends females to tell me my duty.”

Feenix put her hand upon his cheek and stroked his beard with a gentle caress.

“Don’t let your pride get in the way of helping your people, L’Garn. Use the tools that have been placed before you. Use me. I will fight by your side, if need be, as long as you accept the

fate the god has thrown in your path.”

She smiled and shook her head, remembering how long she had railed against Mac Lir’s influence in her life.

“It will do you no good to fight it. Mac Lir has us well and truly caught in his plans. We might as well sit back and enjoy the ride.”

He caught her hand in one of his own, kissed the palm and then held her hand captured to his heart.

“I will enjoy the ride if you will be there, beside me, the entire time.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Could he really want her, even after all she had told him?

“Do you want me beside you? Even knowing the truth?”

“By the Jewels, I have tried to reason why I should be so drawn to a woman who enjoys fighting at every turn,” he laughed, “but I can not seem to get you out of my blood. And now you say that Mac Lir has named you the mediator between my people and the Sea Elves. It seems that he wants you in my life.”

While it wasn’t exactly the declaration of love she had been hoping for, L’Garn’s words were encouraging. But she had to be sure. She had never contemplated putting her own plans aside to commit herself to another soul. If she was going to take such a drastic step, she needed his assurance that he was committed, too.

“Are you sure? I’m marked forever, L’Garn. Can you stand to be with a woman who changes into a fish without any control? Can you bear loving Feenix of Port Marcus—warrior and shape-changer?”

He brought her hand to his lips, kissing each finger while peering deeply into her eyes.

“How can I bear not to?”

He swept her into his arms and captured her lips in a kiss that spoke of commitment and longing, but which quickly turned into a heated thirst for more.

He opened her shirt and she rubbed her breasts against his chest, the crisp hair sending shocks of desire coursing through her blood. She felt safer than she ever had in her entire life. How could she have lived so many years without this half-elf? His kiss branded her for life, and she would fight to the death to keep him by her side.

“Pretty Feenix and prince must come quickly!”

The troll’s voice shocked her out of the intense sensual sea in which she had been floating. L’Garn stilled, as if he too had forgotten the existence of Eagnad.

“By the Jewels, who are you and how dare you disturb me?” It was the first time Feenix had seen L’Garn in all his royal dignity. She couldn’t help but be amused.

“This is Eagnad, your highness. He carried you to the ravine where we could take care of you, and he helped save me from the dragon.” She turned to the little troll, “What do you want, Eagnad?”

“Pretty Feenix and prince must come. King going to fight Sea Elves. Must stop now.”

“The attack on Shalridoor,” L’Garn said, as if remembering an important event.

“What do you mean?” Feenix grabbed the half-elf’s shoulders in a fierce grip. “What attack?”

“When I spoke with my grandfather a few days ago, he said he was planning on a large attack on Shalridoor, to wipe out all the Sea Elves for good. He forbade me to take part, but assured me there would be none of the enemy left to plague us further. He must have decided to launch the attack tonight.”

“Yes, must hurry. Stop king.” The troll hopped from one foot to the other, over and over

while wringing his hands. His cavernous face looked like it would break open and spill an ocean of tears.

“How far is it to Shalridoor? How long before they reach the Sea Elves?” Feenix ignored the little troll’s agitated bouncing.

“The army will reach them tomorrow night, after Eon’s rise.”

“We have to stop the king from attacking,” Feenix said, fixing her clothing and donning the tunic again.

“I do not know if we can, Feenix. If he has sent the advance guard forward, it is too late to stop the battle.”

“Then we have to gather your people immediately! Come on,” she yelled as she rushed from the room, strapping on her sword.

The prince and the troll followed in her wake.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“You are granting us our freedom? In exchange for what?”

The band of Sea Elf slaves clustered around the one-handed elf. Feenix had noted this particular slave when L’Garn first brought her Atop. Even chained to a grinding wheel, he had commanded her attention, as well as the other slaves’ respect. Looking at him now, she was again reminded of someone, but she could not quite place who. The slaves seemed to look to this one elf as their leader and spokesperson.

Upon their return Atop, L’Garn had ordered a small company of household slaves to bring his mother above to the farmhouse. After she was settled comfortably in a suite of rooms and her needs tended to, Feenix and Eagnad watched while L’Garn spoke with his servant, Sarnett, about Mac Lir’s plan, and the importance of peace. Sarnett had immediately sworn his support, and that of many other loyal family retainers. By the time they had approached the Sea Elf slaves with the plan, L’Garn had a following of about seventy-five strong Night Elves. Some of them were guards, trained in war.

While nothing was said directly, Feenix had a strong feeling that L’Garn’s people were tired of Zimpher’s cruelty—to his own people as well as to enemies—and they looked forward to a change of ruler.

Sarnett and a few others were sent to try to recruit other Night Elves who would be willing to listen to what L’Garn had to say regarding the god’s plan. Those remaining prepared for a confrontation by stocking the farmhouse with weapons and supplies. L’Garn and Feenix went to talk with the Sea Elves.

“What is your name?” the prince asked.

It was obvious to her that L’Garn realized his best opportunity to convince these worn elves to follow him was to speak to this one-handed slave. She couldn’t help a pleased smile from flitting across her lips. L’Garn was a good judge of character, it seemed.

“Your people have called me Himli since my capture.”

The one-handed slave stood proud and unwavering as he answered the prince’s question. Not a single shadow of fear or uncertainty marred his strong face. His clear gray eyes met the prince’s without hesitation, and Feenix was impressed despite herself. Here was an elf who had been used to command, and in fact, still knew how to gain others’ trust and co-operation.

By Mac Lir’s nose! She finally hit upon who this slave reminded her of. She would wager her best sword that this elf standing so proudly before them was a relative of Mac Lir’s High Priest. It would be wise for their cause if this slave were to throw his backing behind L’Garn.

“What is the name by which you were known among your own people?” L’Garn asked.

“Why?”

The distrust the slave infused in that one word seemed to Feenix to sum up all the concern and doubt she sensed in L’Garn’s own heart.

If the alliance was to succeed, she knew both sides were going to have to trust each other. The first step was to share information.

“Prince L’Garn would like to address you by your true name. Since you are no longer a slave, that name is not appropriate. Is that not correct, your highness?” She turned to L’Garn and waited for his reply.

Some strong emotion flashed across the prince’s face, but was gone before she could put a

name to it.

“Yes,” L’Garn agreed with a tight smile. “I would address you as your true name.”

“However,” she continued before the slave could reply, “I believe I recognize you as a member of the House of Hiloris. Is that so?”

Her words had an electrifying effect on all the elves who heard her. L’Garn turned to look at her with a question on his lips. The one-handed slave’s eyes held questions, but were filled with speculation as well. And the other slaves murmured amongst themselves with fearful and anxious whispers.

“How did you guess, lady?” Even in bondage, she noted, the elf’s noble birth could not be quenched.

She smiled warmly, trying to radiate as much assurance and good will as possible. “I am closely acquainted with Lord Thelorin of the House of Hiloris, as well as his brother, Rendolin, the High Priest of Mac Lir. You have their look.”

The sudden silence that met Feenix’s statement seemed to echo forever.

“How are you acquainted with these brothers, might one ask?” The slave asked his question in a quiet and polite tone, but she knew by his rigid stance all of his senses were quivering in tight anticipation of the answer.

“I am Feenix of Port Marcus,” she said. “Captain of Rendolin’s personal guard. I am also Mac Lir’s mediator in the negotiations for peace between the silvan races.” She waited quietly for her words to penetrate.

“Peace negotiations? Between the silvan races?” The slave seemed to be having difficulty comprehending such an alien idea. “What trick is this?”

“No trick,” Feenix assured him. “The god, Mac Lir, has decreed that his children, the silvan kind, are to come to terms of a lasting peace. Your people are threatened by a more dangerous enemy than each other. But all this will be made known to you soon.”

“Again, I ask your name,” L’Garn said sternly. Feenix was sure he was not used to asking twice for any information.

The Sea Elf pondered her words for a moment, and then made a decision.

“From your words, Captain Feenix, it seems we have much to discuss.” The slave gave her a courtly bow before he straightened and turned to L’Garn. “Your highness,” he addressed the Night Elf. “I am J’Laris Hiloris, Lord of the House of Hiloris, and,” he added with a glance to Feenix, “father of Mac Lir’s High Priest, it appears.”

By Mac Lir’s ears, this information will rock Shalridoor to its foundation, she thought in amazement! It was believed that J’Laris had died when the brothers were young, during the attack on Cragimore. The attack had been merely a diversion that enabled the survivors of the war-wracked Shalridoor to escape to Sasheena.

Both Rendolin and Thelorin grew up believing their father dead. They were in for a shock. Thelorin would not take well to having his authority removed from him, she speculated, when the surviving Lord of Hiloris returned. She would enjoy watching his reaction to the news.

“Do you mean to tell me,” L’Garn said, after his initial shock had worn off, “that we have had the king of the Sea Elves enslaved for all these years and were not aware of it?”

“I am not a king, your highness. Merely the Lord of the ruling House. But yes,” he admitted with a definite twinkle in his gray eyes. “I have been a slave to your people since the attack on Cragimore. If you had known of my existence, your king would have used that knowledge to enslave all of my people. I thought it best to keep my identity a secret.”

Feenix threw her head back and laughed. It was obvious to her where Rendolin had inherited

his humor and charm. She was going to like this J'Laris very much.

"This is no laughing matter, Feenix," L'Garn admonished her. "However, we can use this knowledge to our mutual benefit."

He again addressed J'Laris and his band of Sea Elves.

"Regardless of whether you throw your lot in with me or not, I grant freedom to you all. When you return to Shalridoor, I ask that you, in turn, release any Night Elves held captive."

"Of course," J'Laris said with a regal nod.

"However," L'Garn continued, "before you depart for your families and homes, I would ask that you listen to what Captain Feenix and I have to say. Then, if you are adamant that you return to Shalridoor, I will not hinder you."

"If, after we listen to you, we decide we wish to depart, you will allow this?"

"Yes, J'Laris," the prince said. "However, I will not allow you to take weapons, and you may only have short rations. These we must keep in the event that we will require all we have to persuade Zimpher to our cause."

"You expect a fight then?"

"I pray it does not come to that. However, we must be prepared for anything. As you will learn, Zimpher has been a puppet for Tuawtha for so long, I doubt he would hesitate to turn on his own people. Or his own grandson."

Feenix put her hand on L'Garn's shoulder in an attempt to offer her support and comfort. Without a word, the prince covered her hand with his, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Proceed with your tale then, Prince L'Garn. The Sea Elves will listen closely before making their decision."

The former slaves nodded their agreement, and Feenix and L'Garn began their story.

~*~

By the time J'Laris' questions had all been answered, it was time to eat. Everyone gathered in the large farmhouse dining room, and Feenix noted the feeling of unease and tension that lingered throughout the meal.

She could understand it. If she had been held captive for three hundred and forty-eight years and forced into slavery the whole time, she supposed she would be a bit leery of sitting down to break bread with her former masters.

"Tell me, L'Garn," she leaned over and spoke quietly to him. "I know that elves all possess magic. Why didn't the Sea Elves just use it to escape rather than be held prisoner all those years?"

"Most elves have magic, Feenix. Some do not. However, to answer your question, it is the korsh."

She was confused. "The korsh? What does that foul stuff have to do with anything?"

He smiled. "The korsh has an additive which dampens magic. Slaves are required to eat a bowl of korsh each morning."

"Don't remind me," she said with disgust.

"After a few days, the additive in their system prevents them from the use of any magical ability."

"I wasn't aware of such a thing. Does it leave them permanently magic free? Will they ever have their ability returned to them?"

"In most cases, the magic slowly returns in about six months. Rarely has the magic failed to

return.”

She was glad to hear that. While Feenix did not like to use magic, or be around those who did, she recognized the value of such a handy ability.

She stifled a large yawn, and her jaw cracked. Blast, she needed some sleep. And if she needed to rest, she thought, L’Garn certainly did, too. Only yesterday, he had been close to death. He needed to rest to make sure he was completely Healed.

“Feenix,” the prince leaned over and said softly in her ear. “Perhaps we should rest before attempting to speak with my grandfather.”

She felt her face heat with a blush for being caught in the yawn. “I’m fine, but you probably should lie down. That shoulder was open to the bone only a day ago. You don’t want to overdo it.”

He leaned closer and nibbled her ear before speaking again with a hot breath she knew he used purposefully. “I will lie with you, my flower, but I do not intend to rest.”

A chill raced down her spine, and she felt the blush deepen to a bright red. She was acting like a young girl with her first love.

She pushed him away and looked at him sternly.

“You will rest or you will not be able to do what you must. Don’t waste my efforts on your behalf, L’Garn.”

He sighed heavily, gave her a boyish grin, then straightened in his chair.

“Very well, Feenix. But I want to go on record stating that you are a hard task master.” He stood and pulled her up beside him. “Sarnett, I will rest for a while. Please see that I am not disturbed until Eon rises.”

“Very good, your highness.”

~*~

Feenix snapped awake and reached for her dagger. Someone was leaning over her in the dark, and she reacted with lightning reflexes to the danger.

“Peace, Feenix,” the shadow spoke.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?” she yelled at L’Garn. “It’s the best way I know of to get a knife in your heart.”

“You have already pierced my heart, Feenix,” he said, bending down to give her a lingering kiss. She battled to hide her disappointment when he stepped back and elected not to take any further liberties.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and scratched her head after putting the dagger away.

“Is it time to go?”

“It is,” he answered. “Sarnett has a quick meal ready for us, and then we must leave. Zimpher will have eaten his breakfast by now, and is preparing for the coming night. I have requested an audience with him, and he has granted it, although reluctantly.”

“Fine. Just give me a moment, and I’ll join you in the dining hall.” Feenix needed a little time to check her weapons and tend to personal business. A good, brisk washing of her face wouldn’t be out of order, either, she decided, as she fought to clear the lingering drowsy cobwebs from her mind.

“Very well,” the prince said, moving to the door. “Do not be overly long.”

She poured water into a stone basin, then retied her hair back from her face. Her fingers worked quickly without any conscious thought on her part. The chore was one she had completed countless times, and her nimble fingers made short work of it.

“Feenix, can you hear me?”

She dropped the rag she had picked up to wash her face. Water splashed all over her shirt.

"By Mac Lir's toe, Rendolin! I wish you'd give me some sort of warning before sneaking up on me like that!"

"I am not sneaking, and this is the best I can do for a warning. Now, report, Captain. What has been transpiring since our last communication? And please remember not to yell. I can hear your thoughts quite clearly."

"Can you hear this?" she asked and then sent a thought stream of the most foul gutter language she could dredge up from her earliest memories.

"There is no need for vulgarity, captain. Just report. Time is of the essence."

It gave her a tiny thrill of pleasure knowing she had upset Rendolin's ordered thought process, and she smiled into the shadowed room.

"I have a lot of things to report, but the most important is that Zimpher is planning a massive attack on Shalridoor. L'Garn and I have an audience with the king in an hour or so to speak with him about Mac Lir's plan for peace. However, we are not counting on Zimpher's cooperation."

"Mac Lir told me that you are to be his mediator. I have to confess, Feenix, I was rather surprised that you had agreed."

"Never mind that now, elf. It's a little hard to say no to a god when he's saving you from a dragon."

"A dragon?"

She smiled at Rendolin's surprise. She decided to hold the telling of that tale until a more convenient time.

"Rendolin, we have collected more than one hundred elves who will back L'Garn over Zimpher. When we go to speak with the king, we are hoping to persuade more to Mac Lir's cause."

"That is a good start. I hear restraint in your tone, Feenix. What are you not telling me?"

She wished she could see his face when she told him of his father, but he needed to know now.

"What of my father?"

Rendolin's voice was confused and troubled. Obviously, he picked up her worry even though she was not consciously projecting her thoughts to him.

"Feenix, I order you to tell me what you know about my father."

"Easy, Rendolin," she tried to calm him. "L'Garn has granted freedom to all the Sea Elves that have been held in Cragimore, and it seems your father, J'Laris, is one of them."

The High Priest was silent. She knew he was trying to digest the information which must have been a huge shock. The quiet in her mind felt like a bottomless hole.

"I have spoken with him, Rendolin. He is a good man. The Night Elves did not know who he was all this time, and so he has kept your people safe."

"What are you saying? Are you telling me that my father did not die in the attack on Cragimore?"

"Yes. He was wounded—he lost his hand—but other than that he is fine. He's looking forward to seeing his family again. And he has pledged himself to Mac Lir's cause."

"He would," she heard him speak quietly with pride into her mind. *"Mother and Thelorin will be ecstatic!"*

Excitement and joy began to bubble up and spill into the tone of his voice. Feenix could picture the small boy Rendolin had been, and the delight and enthusiasm with which he must

have greeted each day, when his family had been whole and complete.

Then suddenly, it seemed as if the excitement hit a stone wall.

"This will change everything."

She knew he thought of Thelorin and the change in his status the return of their father, the rightful Lord of Hiloris, would bring. She didn't want to intrude on his thought. However, she couldn't help but think that Thelorin would survive, and perhaps even be a better man for his father's return.

"Do you have anything further to report, captain?"

Feenix felt him force his mind back to Mac Lir's business. There would be time later, if all went well, for the answers to all the questions that filled his head.

"Nothing that can't wait. After we have spoken with Zimpher we will know more. Is there anyway we can contact you?"

"J'Laris can contact me when you return from your audience with the king."

"Rendolin," she said gently, "his magic has been taken from him. He can't contact you, nor can any of them use any of their magic."

"Why? What has happened to prevent it?"

"They have been systematically fed some sort of food that dampens the magic. It's built up over time, and their magic is completely useless."

"That explains so many things," the High Priest replied thoughtfully, after a long moment of silence.

"L'Garn told me that it's not permanent, once they stop eating the additive. The magic should return in about six months."

"Very well. I will contact you again in four hours. That should be enough time to determine Zimpher's answer to Mac Lir's plan. In the meantime, Thelorin and I will prepare for the attack here, in case the king does not call off his men."

"There is one more thing."

"Speak, captain."

While she hadn't discussed this with L'Garn, she was going to demand that the Sea Elves release all Night Elves that they held captive. It was a good faith action that she knew would go a long way in gaining support for the god's plan. And, as the official mediator, she had the right to make the request.

"You must release any Night Elves you have on Sasheena and at Shalridoor, as an act of good faith that the Sea Elves will honor Mac Lir's plan."

"It shall be done," the High Priest replied without hesitation.

Feenix nodded to herself in satisfaction. She had not thought he would be opposed to the move.

"Most are on Sasheena as slaves," Rendolin continued, *"but a few are here with us, as you know. I will send someone back to the island with orders to bring the Night Elves to Shalridoor. It will take a few days."*

"Thank you, Rendolin. I will inform L'Garn that his people have been set free. I'm sure the information will make him happy."

"Take care, captain," the elf replied. *"I will speak with you in four hours. And thank you for the information about J'Laris."*

Before she could comment, he had broken the link to her mind and was gone.

Feenix quickly finished her preparations and joined L'Garn in the dining area. After a hasty meal, they mounted horses to reach the lift.

It wasn't until they were half way down the shaft that Feenix realized she hadn't seen Eagnad since they returned Atop.

"Now where is that blasted troll? Mac Lir," she mumbled, "I hope you don't expect me to keep him out of trouble as well as mediate a peace between these arrogant elves! Because if you do, I'm afraid you're out of luck. I have my hands full with L'Garn and Rendolin, so you'll just have to watch over the little guy yourself."

"What are you mumbling?" L'Garn asked, giving her hand a squeeze.

"I just noticed I haven't seen Eagnad for a long time. Do you know where he is?"

"No. Why?"

"Nothing, I guess." However, a nagging fear hovered in the back of her mind.

What was the troll up to?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Feenix stood just inside the huge audience chamber, trying hard not to look like an inexperienced novice fighter with her mouth hanging open.

The entire trip through the lower caverns of Cragimore had grated on her nerves to the point that she was ready to scream. With every step, the dark menacing thrumming grew; the thrumming she had first heard when L’Garn had carried her into the stronghold all those days and nights ago. A prickling at the back of her neck and along her spine had been the first herald of the eerie sensation. A sound, almost strong enough to feel, danced along her nerves and through her brain, giving the warrior woman the feeling that ants were crawling around in her skull.

“By Mac Lir’s beard,” she had finally said to L’Garn, “what is that noise?” She rubbed at the back of her neck. “It’s driving me mad!”

“Aye,” he answered over his shoulder, never slowing his pace. “The deeper we go into Cragimore’s heart, the stronger it gets. You will become accustomed to it,” he reassured her. “Although, you will never be comfortable with it. I know I am not.”

By the time they reached the outer hall to the audience chamber, the thrumming had become a deep, dark hum that vibrated through the soles of her boots, penetrating up through her bones and setting her teeth to a grating buzz. A dull headache throbbed behind her eyes.

The chamber was massive, even larger than the laundry and cooking cavern. It was lit by those odd priest lights, which were everywhere. They hung from the ceiling, they were set into the stone walls on little shelves, and they glowed from the floor all along the circumference of the room. This was, by far, the best-lit place she had ever seen in Cragimore.

The only piece of furniture in the entire massive chamber was a large shining throne of black marble, set high above the floor on a five-tiered dais. No carpet graced the cold beauty of the black steps leading to the throne; not a smudge nor scuff mark marred the crisp clean lines of the hard steps which sparkled and gleamed in the light.

This magnificent throne was the source of the near-debilitating noise that had saturated every nerve in her body. She could almost see some great force of energy snapping and crackling around the empty seat, as if it were a living thing, impatient for its master to arrive and possess it.

What was the point of having such a huge room and only putting one chair in it, she wondered, forcing her eyes from the black marble seat and looking around the cavern. But, in truth, she knew the answer.

This king of the Night Elves wanted no distractions when his audience was before him. The lighting, the sparseness of the room, everything had been staged for the dramatic entrance of King Zimpher the Golden. The elf knew the benefits of total intimidation, it was easy to see.

Standing behind the throne and on either side were two tall personages, their faces hidden in shadow. They wore long, blood-red robes that were topped off with deep, voluminous hoods. She could see nothing of their features except some indistinct shading. They were like specters, silently waiting, poised as if expecting an attack; their long white fingers held lances at an angle from their bodies.

Beside each of them burned a raised brazier of incense. The pungent, sweet scent mixed with the damp mustiness of the cavern, adding to Feenix’s headache and discomfort.

“Who are they?” Feenix asked in a low whisper. “They look like emissaries from Death

himself.”

“My grandfather enjoys setting the stage with threatening dramatics,” he whispered back. “They are his two closest advisors.”

“I’ll bet they’re lots of fun at celebrations.”

The tension of waiting for the king was beginning to weigh on her almost as much as the thrumming sound. Her attempt at levity failed like a flaming arrow shot into a bucket of water.

Scattered around the room, on either side of the dais, were other somber elves. Each wore a long sword sheathed at his side, and all appeared more than willing to use them. They stood watching Feenix and the prince with what she surmised was accusation and suspicion.

Altogether, not a very warm welcome, she thought.

By Mac Lir’s blue eyes, where was the king?

“I thought you said your grandfather was expecting us.”

“He is.”

L’Garn answered without looking at her. He seemed to be trying to fight some sort of deep emotion, and most of his concentration was trained on the empty throne.

“Well, he’s late.”

A strained smile slipped across the prince’s lips, but was gone in two heartbeats.

“No. He is right on time.”

A blinding flash of lightening split the heavy air above the throne. In the blink of an eye, the smell of fresh ozone and burnt flesh permeated the cavern, effectively smothering all traces of the cloying incense.

King Zimpher the Golden had made his appearance and now sat serenely upon the Throne of Meedrion.

“Nice trick,” Feenix commented out of the corner of her mouth.

L’Garn did not answer, but stood rock still, staring at the elf seated on the throne.

Zimpher was dressed in pure black silk, except for a flowing golden cloak that draped off his shoulders to spill over the sides of the throne. The Crown of Meedrion sat regally on his bald head, looking as if it weighed no more than a feather or two.

Feenix was impressed with the beauty of the crown. It was made of black crystal and laced with silver. With each movement of the king’s head, five large diamonds embedded in the front of the crown threw glistening sparks about the cavern.

It would garner a hefty pouch of gold coins if sold at some Port Marcus dockside fence, she wagered. Too bad she’d never have the opportunity to see exactly how much gold.

“Come,” L’Garn said to her quietly before striding to within a meter of the stairs. Feenix matched him step for step, although slightly behind him and to his left.

All right, Mac Lir, she said to the conveniently absent god. Time to tame the king of the Night Elves. You’d better be right about L’Garn leading his people to peace, because it looks like we’ve just stepped into a big pile of dragon dung!

“Your majesty,” L’Garn greeted the king with a formal bow.

Feenix placed her hand on the hilt of her sword and merely nodded in the direction of the throne. She would be damned if this old elf was going to intimidate her into a more formal greeting.

“What brings you into our presence, Outbreed?” the king demanded in regal tones. “And how dare you bring your human whore with you dressed in the garb of a warrior?”

“Whore?” she sputtered, taking a step towards the throne and beginning to unsheathe her sword.

Every robed elf around the room immediately pulled their blades and stood ready to defend their king.

"Peace, Feenix," L'Garn said quietly while putting his hand on her wrist, preventing her from actually pulling the weapon from the scabbard. "I will handle this."

She reluctantly seated the sword firmly back into the scabbard. L'Garn was probably right. He should handle his grandfather, but by the god's toes, she didn't like inaction.

"I see you have her well trained," the mocking voice of the king rang in Feenix's ears, raising her hackles even more. "That is something in your favor, I suppose."

She wanted to blast the king of the Night Elves to the Seven Cella Worlds with a scathing commentary on his mother's lack of morals, but Feenix swallowed the burning words and concentrated on achieving Mac Lir's goal. She'd never realized how difficult it was to keep her mouth shut.

"Majesty," the prince said, ignoring Zimpher's rude and cutting remarks, "may I introduce Captain Feenix of Port Marcus? She has been sent here to speak with us on behalf of our god, Mac Lir."

Feenix didn't know how he could ignore the insulting words of his own grandfather. She knew it was taking all of her own will to keep from charging the throne in her usual way. But she supposed, now that she was Mac Lir's mediator, she should make some attempt at restraining her reckless nature and try to talk reasonably rather than fight. By Mac Lir's thumb, it was not easy!

"Our god has appointed Captain Feenix to be his mediator between all the silvan races," the prince said. "She is here to warn us of a grave danger, and we need to listen closely to what she has to say."

At L'Garn's words, Zimpher's face darkened in anger. The power-laden air crackled through the cavern.

"Mac Lir is a weak, sniveling, insignificant excuse for a deity," the king pronounced from his throne. "I do not recognize him as the god of the Night Elves."

"How can you say that?" L'Garn asked in amazed tones. "You know that he created the silvan races, among which are the Night Elves. You can not simply state he is not our god."

Zimpher stood and the force around the throne popped with a pent energy that raised all the hair on Feenix's arms and head.

"You dare to tell me—King Zimpher the Golden—what I can say, Outbreed?"

It seemed to Feenix as if the elf standing before the throne on the dais blurred for a moment; his face became something from out of her worst dreams. The illusion was gone in a heartbeat, and she blinked her eyes against the pain in her head. The thrumming deepened and felt stronger.

"You misunderstand, grandfather. I am not trying to say you cannot state your opinion of Mac Lir. However, it can not be denied that he is our creation father and his emissary deserves to be heard—*must* be heard, if our people are to survive."

L'Garn's voice had a strained and rough edge to it that Feenix had never heard. It was an odd mixture of respect, fear and anger all held in tight control. By the set of his rigid stance and the emotions racing across his face, she could see the prince battling with himself; an inner war he was unsure he could win. She wished she could help him in some way.

"I am your king!" The old elf took one step down the stairs. "My word is law. I will not listen to Mac Lir's lies!" The advisors standing by the throne grasped their lances firmly in an attack mode. "I will not be disobeyed. Mac Lir's time has passed, and he will never be worshiped in Cragimore again! Mac Lir is dead to the Night Elves. I will not receive an emissary from a dead god!"

Upon hearing the king's words, the robed elves below the throne's dais began to shift uneasily and murmur amongst themselves. Feenix couldn't hear what they were saying, but she recognized the look of someone who is uncomfortable when she saw it. It seemed to her that not all the king's advisors liked the idea of Mac Lir's death.

"What harm can come of listening to Mac Lir's emissary..." L'Garn tried to reason. He was cut off without mercy by Zimpher's sneering voice.

"Harm indeed!"

The king had advanced farther down the stairs to stand on the middle step. The red-hooded specters stood one step behind him, their lances at the ready. Power and energy streaked from the throne and swirled around the head of the king.

Feenix could feel her skin crawl and the hair bound in her braid moved. She knew it without a doubt.

"I will not allow your whore to fill my advisors' ears with lies. Begone from my sight," he said, motioning with his hand towards the door. "I will give you this one opportunity to leave without another word before I order the guards to kill you both!"

"Your majesty," one of the robed elves stepped forward to stand between L'Garn and the irate king. "This is your grandson, majesty. I beg of you to consider the words you are saying."

"Stay out of this, K'Lerin," the king commanded, casting a look of loathing towards the elf. "What transpires between this Outbreed and me is no concern of yours. You are no longer my chief advisor, and I have not asked for your advice. If you value your life, stand aside."

"This is the royal prince," K'Lerin said without moving. Feenix admired a man with courage. "He is the heir to the throne of Meedrion. He deserves to be heard, at least."

"It was an evil day for the Night Elves when this..." Zimpher's vocabulary seemed to fail him for a moment. "...when my daughter gave birth to this monstrosity! To my everlasting shame, this," he motioned to L'Garn, "is the last of the line of Meedrion, tainted as his blood is. I cannot change the laws of our people in order to keep him from taking my place when I die. I wish, by the Jewels, that I could—but he must *outlive* me in order to sit upon Meedrion's throne."

The threat hung in the air, pulsing with the force of the thrumming cavern. Feenix watched as a terrible pain flashed in L'Garn's eyes. So this was the source of his self-hatred, she realized. By Mac Lir's ears, the king should be horsewhipped.

She put her hand on the prince's shoulder, trying to convey her support and understanding, but L'Garn jerked away from her touch and pushed K'Lerin from his path.

"Your hatred of me, *grandfather*," he said with a sneer, "should have nothing to do with our people. Mac Lir has sent us a warning, and by the Jewels, the Night Elves have a right to hear it!"

"They have only the rights I allow them to have," Zimpher bellowed as he stepped off the last level of the dais. "I am the king! My word is law!"

"You would put yourself above the god?"

L'Garn did not back down as the raging king advanced on him. His two hooded advisors stood menacingly behind him.

The force of the throne thrummed and hummed in Feenix's head and she had trouble focusing on the two combatants.

"I put myself above a dead god, yes!" Spittle flew from the king's mouth.

Feenix was close enough to see the yellow, dry skin of Zimpher's face, and the red-rimmed eyes. The elf looked near death himself.

"Your highness...majesty," K'Lerin spoke softly, obviously trying to defuse the tense

moment. "Can we not discuss this calmly and with restraint? If Mac Lir has sent his emissary in the guise of this human, with a warning to us, should we not listen to her?"

The other robed elves nodded their agreement, but the two advisors standing behind Zimpher did not follow suit. The one on the king's right spoke quietly to Zimpher, but the voice carried in the cavern.

"It would not be wise."

Feenix shivered. There was no musical quality in the tones. This was not the voice of a silvan being. It was raw and grating, reminding her of a dull sword being sharpened on a dry whetstone. She peered closely to try to penetrate the shadows of the hood, but the darkness within was like a void into nothing.

The robed elfin advisors again began to murmur and look uneasy. The hooded two slowly turned their gazes on the uneasy elves, and the murmurs of the king's two eerie companions subsided. Without a word, the will of the king's advisors had been subdued.

However, K'Lerin was made of sterner stuff, it appeared.

"Are you going to let this outsider speak for you, your majesty?"

Feenix was impressed with the elf's courage.

"Yes, grandfather. When did the king's Council start to include outsiders? Who are these advisors with you?"

"You dare to question your king? Be careful, L'Garn. You tread the delicate line of treason!"

"No one has spoken treason here. It is our duty to listen to the god. This is a reasonable request, and one that should not be open to debate." L'Garn cast the two tall advisors a dark look before he continued. "I believe these two advisors of yours are giving you bad council. They care not for the welfare of the Night Elves."

Feenix had not thought it possible, but the energy surrounding the king and his two councilors rose to such a tremendous pitch, she was sure someone would be struck down with a powerful blast of force. That someone would likely be L'Garn, she thought, if he didn't keep his mouth shut!

Mac Lir, you miserable god! Help me get this job done, if it's so important to you!

"Listen, king," she said, stepping forward and looking the old elf in the eyes. "Mac Lir has a vital message to give you. He thought it was so important, he sent me to deliver it. I've gone through seven worlds of pain and misery to get to this point, and by all the hairs on Mac Lir's head, I'm going to give you his message!"

Unconsciously, she slammed her fists on her hips and pushed her chin out in a defiant and belligerent way. "What happens to your miserable hide afterwards, king, doesn't concern me. Now shut your mouth and listen!"

The entire chamber froze as the occupants looked at her in shock and surprise. The old king's eyes seemed to grow so large with fury that they were in danger of exploding. The air shimmered and glowed with a red haze before her eyes. The energy hovered over them all, spurring sparks of angry lightning bolts from the throne.

"Silence, human," an alien voice grated.

One of the hooded advisors stepped forward with his arm extended, lance pointed at Feenix's heart. A bolt of yellow energy erupted from the point of his lance to stream past the king on a course for Feenix.

Before she had an opportunity to react, L'Garn raised his arm and moved to intercept the force.

"No!" Feenix yelled, grabbing the half-elf's other arm as the killing bolt hit the prince instead

of its intended victim.

"You fool," she cried, expecting the force to blast him into pieces, or at the very least, char him to a cinder.

Instead, the bolt of lightning splashed like liquid fire against an unseen wall then bounced back, engulfing the hooded councilor in its killing force. The luckless advisor dropped like a millstone. The hood, thrown from its head, revealed the creature within.

"What in the Seven Cella Worlds is that?" Feenix felt like her breakfast decided to escape from her stomach without warning.

The creature lying before them, cloak and hood smoking from the lightening bolt, looked like it was related to a lizard gone berserk. Fangs protruded over the top lips, which were pulled back in a grimace of agony. The skin was covered with tiny scales the color of a toad's underbelly. Little horns grew from its forehead and around the eyes, along the cheekbones. The eyes were black-rimmed and golden. Holes on the side of its head were the only indication of ears.

"Arch-demon."

In surprise, Feenix turned to look at the speaker.

"Eagnad! By Mac Lir's beard, what are you doing here?"

Before the little troll could answer, Zimpher pulled a sharp, wickedly-curved sword from beneath his cloak, and sliced open K'Lern's chest. The elfin advisor never had a chance to defend himself.

"You murderous scum," Feenix yelled, pulling her own sword and attacking the insane king before he could kill his own grandson. From the corner of her eye she saw all the elves arming themselves with their swords, but they appeared to be undecided who they should attack.

The other lance-wielding advisor, its hood also thrown back to reveal its demon ancestry, lunged at L'Garn, but Feenix, engaged in deflecting Zimpher's thrusts, could do no more than yell a warning.

"Pretty Feenix careful," shouted Eagnad to her, as he hopped from one foot to the other in agitation and excitement.

Wonderful, she thought. She had a cheering section; just what she needed.

The king lunged and slashed at her with strength surprising in one so old. The phenomenon of his features blurring before her eyes happened again. A creature of terrible and horrendous appearance peered out from Zimpher's eyes. For a moment, her concentration was broken.

A scream echoed around the cavern, causing her blood to freeze in her veins. Her fingers numbed with fear as the demon attacking L'Garn howled a heart stopping command.

Instantly, small demons of every horrible description swarmed down the steps of the dais to attack Feenix, L'Garn and the elfin advisors. They were outnumbered at least three to one.

"Where is your Mac Lir now, human?" Zimpher goaded her in a voice deep and gravelly, all trace of silvan softness gone as the creature possessing Zimpher's body took total command of it.

Aye, Mac Lir, Feenix wondered silently as she battled to stay alive. *Where are you now? We could use some help here!*

But the Night Elves were doing a good job of eliminating the demons. Only one elf lay on the floor, but many demons lay bloody and unmoving. A tiny voice in her head noted that L'Garn's warriors were more skilled than Rendolin's. She tucked the knowledge away for future reference.

The king's mighty attack was beginning to wear on her. She stepped back to try to gain her breath, but Zimpher pressed the attack with all the vigor of a young man. The strength in his arms was nearly overwhelming. If she didn't get some help soon, she was going to go under

from the sheer force of his onslaught.

She had to out-think him. It was the only way she could overcome the being that controlled the Night Elf king.

Feenix leaped to the side just as the king's wicked sword slashed at her leg. Using the move she had surprised L'Garn with during their sword battle, she whipped around and slashed the king's side. He screamed in fury.

In a blurred frenzy of lightning-quick thrusts and parries, Zimpher slashed Feenix's right arm. The fingers of her hand at once began to go numb.

"Die, human!"

The king lunged for a killing blow, but she danced out of his reach and transferred her sword into her left hand.

"Not yet, scum!"

With renewed vigor, she advanced and took the attack to the old elf, her feet slapping on the hard stone floor. If she only had a chair or a table or something to use for a limited defense. But the chamber was woefully empty of anything useful.

She needed some leverage...some advantage...

L'Garn was still occupied with the demon and its lance. He had succeeded in chopping the weapon in half, but the creature still held it, using it as a staff. The prince had a split lip, and the side of his face was swollen.

Mac Lir, this isn't funny! You'd better send us some help or your little peace mission is going to be over before it even begins!

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw L'Garn slice a wicked arc through the demon's neck. Black blood spurted all over the prince as he ducked the demon's own reflexive swipe.

Suddenly, her full attention focused once again on the king as he turned and raced up the stairs to the throne.

"Guards!" he yelled. "To me, to me!"

With a loud crash, the cavern doors burst open and elfin warriors rushed into the chamber.

"Seize them," the king ordered.

Feenix, L'Garn and the surviving royal advisors were quickly surrounded and disarmed. Feenix surrendered her sword only after wounding two guards. It took five of them to disarm her.

L'Garn handed over his sword without a fight.

"Grandfather," he shouted above the din of dropped weapons and muttered commands. "Mac Lir warned that our people were in danger from Tuawtha! Has the Demon God possessed you completely? Is that why you have his minions in Cragimore as your advisors?"

Every Night Elf stopped to listen to the king's reply.

"Fools! Tuawtha is a god worthy of the Night Elves' respect! Unlike that pitiful Mac Lir, Tuawtha is strong and powerful! He will give us everything we could ever wish for—victory over all our enemies; the total destruction of our rivals, the Sea and Wood Elves—all he asks in exchange is our worship!"

"Wrong!" L'Garn shouted. The guards surrounding him had let him go at Zimpher's words, and the prince now stepped on the bottom step of the black stairs. "All the demon god asks is our total destruction!"

Feenix moved to stand beside L'Garn. She could sense all the elves in the cavern holding their breath, waiting for the king's response.

The energy force pulsating within the cavern took on a painful drone. All of the Night Elves, with their overly sensitive hearing, dropped to their knees, covering their ears with their hands.

L’Garn grimaced and also covered his ears, but the sound did not force him to buckle under its onslaught. Feenix’s ears hurt, but she could stand it, by Mac Lir’s toes.

“You know nothing, Outbreed,” the king screamed above the thrumming energy. “Tuawtha will protect us and reward us. He has promised me. We shall do his bidding and be crowned in his glory!”

If there was any part of Zimpher remaining in the body of the elf, he was insane. Feenix knew it as surely as she knew she loved L’Garn. If Mac Lir’s plan of peace was to be successful, it was as clear as daylight to her that Zimpher had to be removed, and the prince had to take the throne.

L’Garn took another step up the stairs. Only three steps separated the prince and the king.

“Grandfather, listen please.”

Feenix heard the pleading in his words and her heart wept for him. The king was too far gone for L’Garn’s soft words to penetrate his evil heart.

“I am no relative to you, monstrosity!” Spittle foamed around the mouth of the king and his eyes looked as if they would explode at any moment. The proud Crown of Meedrion tilted dangerously on the bald head, before it toppled unnoticed to the stone dais. The clank it must have made was completely absorbed by the near deafening drone of the pent energy, which seemed to Feenix to be straining the limits of its control.

“Zimpher, for the good of our people, you have to forsake the demon god and embrace Mac Lir!”

The warrior woman watched L’Garn take an agonizingly slow step to the fourth tier. Blood trickled from his left ear.

She turned to see all the Night Elves in the cavern had collapsed and lay as if dead. She prayed they were merely unconscious. It was just L’Garn, Zimpher and she left standing in the chamber.

“Come no closer, Outbreed!”

She returned her gaze to the scene playing out before her on the dais.

L’Garn wobbled a bit, but stood firm on the fourth step. Zimpher stood before the throne on the fifth tier of the dais, his left hand held out, palm towards his grandson. The air swirled and crackled around him, the charged energy anxious to be released. The old elf’s palm glowed a greenish hue as the energy surged from the air into his hand.

“Grandfather, hear me! Let the demon go!”

The prince lifted his foot to take the last step to his grandfather, his arms held out before him as if he would clasp the old body to him in a loving embrace.

“Mac Lir, help him!”

Feenix was not aware that she spoke the words out loud. She picked up a discarded sword and rushed up the stairs to the throne.

With a blinding flash, a massive bolt of energy shot from the king’s hand and hit L’Garn full in the chest. It picked him up and tossed him over her head and down the stairs, as if he were a leaf in the wind. The prince’s foot grazed her cheek, and she lost her balance.

She had only time to notice that L’Garn lay like a broken rag doll, before a smaller bolt of force was thrown at her. She jumped and ducked to the side of the stairs, just in time for it to sail over her shoulder and strike the black stone floor without harm.

Gathering her courage and her rage at the thought of L’Garn’s death, Feenix jumped onto the steps and charged the king before he had time to redirect another bolt of energy.

“You filthy demon scum,” she yelled into the old elf’s face, just as she buried the length of her sword inside his belly. Blood spurted over her hand and forearm, hot and slick.

The king's eyes grew even wider, although she didn't know how that could be. Pushing the hilt of the sword down to try to inflict as much damage as possible, she pulled it out and stabbed him again.

"You're going to die, elf, and I'm going to be the one who sends you on your way to your precious Tuawtha!"

"Whore," the dying elf managed to growl between his blood-speckled lips. Feenix barely had time to register the stench of rotting meat in her nostrils before a devastating blow to her chest knocked her up and over Zimpher's head. She landed behind the throne on her back, the wind crushed from her lungs like a punctured bellows.

"Pretty Feenix."

A thunderous crash of energized power blasted the chamber. Black pebbles and sand sprinkled down from the cavern's ceiling as her awareness registered Eagnad's presence.

Then a heavy darkness crashed down and swallowed her up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

L’Garn could not breathe. By the dirt on his tongue and the grit in his teeth, he knew his mouth was open. Though his eyes were shut tight and he could see only blackness, he thought he must look like a gasping fish. However, try as he might, no air was getting into his lungs, and it hurt.

Someone called his name from a great distance. He did not want to listen. He had to concentrate on his breathing. He must take a deep breath or he would die.

A heavy pressure filled his chest. It did not feel like a great weight was on him, it just felt like a giant’s fist was squeezing his lungs and deflating them of any life-giving air.

The blackness behind his eyelids began to sparkle like tiny lightning in a dark night’s sky. The voice in his mind grew fainter. Someone close by was making strange gasping and wheezing sounds. He still could not pull any air into his battered lungs.

“Prince L’Garn...”

The voice was persistent. Perhaps he should answer? As soon as he got his breathing back to normal he would find out who wanted him.

Strange how heavy his chest felt and yet the rest of him seemed so light. Especially his head. Maybe he should open his eyes now and see if he could identify who was calling to him.

Breath back? Yes. There was no giant; he merely had his breath knocked from him. He remembered now.

“Relax, your highness.”

The voice was back and stronger. L’Garn tried to focus on the voice and struggled, willing his eyes to open. A tiny breath of air penetrated his starved lungs, and the sparks in the darkness began to fade. The gasping sounds grew louder.

He remembered.

Zimpher had thrown a massive bolt of energy at him. There had been no time to duck; no defense had been possible at such a close range.

He should be dead.

L’Garn’s sight cleared even more, and the pressure on his chest lessened as air finally filled his lungs and his breathing resumed.

He was not dead. The pains and bruises quickly making themselves felt by their intensity proved that he was still alive. How? He had no magic to protect him from the power his grandfather had unleashed at him.

Feenix!

He remembered Feenix had been behind him on the stairs when Zimpher released the powerful bolt. Had she been injured in the force as well? He must find her.

The sounds of battle had been replaced by the rumble of the cavern and the cries of frightened elves. It finally registered in L’Garn’s dazed mind that the ceiling was raining crystal shards and grit upon him, making it difficult to stand and gain his balance.

Where was Feenix?

Most of the priest lights were broken, but a few still shed light around the huge cavern. Bodies of both demons and elves were scattered about like broken toys on the floor. The two arch-demons lay where he remembered they had fallen, their lances broken beside them.

L’Garn felt a strong rush of panic. He could not see Feenix.

All around him, elves disregarded the ominous signs of the cavern's collapse and worked to find and help the survivors. A number of the king's advisors cast speculative looks his way, but none approached him. He was glad, for he felt driven to find the human woman before he could deal with anything else.

He sucked on his bottom lip, where a cut leaked blood into his mouth. Stepping over a bloody body, L'Garn ignored his own aches and pains as he began to climb the stairs to the empty throne.

Where was Zimpher?

A crack, the width of a hand's span, formed a jagged and crooked path from the bottom of the stairs all the way to the top dais. The power of the king's energy bolt had broken the steps to Meedrion's Throne. One part of the prince's brain marveled at the phenomenon as he made his way to the top.

The throne appeared untouched. The black crystal still shone and glistened in the priest lights, and the silvan silver lacing the beautiful stone seat glistened as delicate and rare as always. Other than a smeared puddle of blood, there was no trace of Zimpher, or any other living thing. The throne was empty.

And silent.

L'Garn realized the deep thrumming of the cavern had stopped. The only sounds were those of his people as they bound wounds and removed bodies from the cavern. Even the rumblings and spattering of fallen crystals had ceased. The smell of blood and incense hung heavy in the air.

"Prince L'Garn."

The voice from his head was back, only this time it came from below the throne, off the side of the dais. L'Garn peered over the side, and immediately saw Feenix crumpled on the floor of the cavern, lying on her back. Eagnad had her head pillowed on his lap, and he looked like he was trying to wipe the dirt from her face.

"Feenix!" The prince's heart felt as if it was going to burst from his mouth.

L'Garn jumped from the throne's platform and rushed to her. By the Jewels, he thought, she better not be dead, now that I have found her!

"Pretty Feenix hurt," the little troll said, looking at the prince with sorrowful orange eyes. "Prince fix."

L'Garn knelt beside the warrior woman, and tried to ignore the stench of burnt flesh that came from her body. The leather jerkin had been burned from her chest, as had the silk shirt, exposing her once-creamy skin. Little tendrils of smoke wafted gently upward from her still body.

Large, red welts, some spotted with brown and black burned flesh, covered her entire chest and neck. He was afraid to see how far the energy damage had traveled. It was probable that her shoulders and arms were also covered with burns.

A wave of dismay and despair washed over him, and L'Garn felt tears well up in his eyes. How could anyone survive something like this?

"Is she dead?" He willed Eagnad to tell him he was only dreaming and that Feenix was well and unhurt.

"No. Prince fix."

The troll seemed to think L'Garn could do something about Healing Feenix. He did not have enough magic within him to do something so difficult, and what little magic he did have did not include Healing abilities. His talent, if one could call it that, lay in tracking and search expertise. His skill came in handy for killing, not Healing. If Feenix had to rely on his silvan abilities, she

would surely die.

The panic that threatened him before he found her returned ten-fold.

His grandfather was right. He was nothing but a useless failure. No matter what his mother said, L’Garn knew that the human blood that coursed through his veins would forever hinder him from performing even the most simple of silvan tasks. Even his hearing and sight were impaired!

If something as trivial as his sight was affected by his tainted blood, how could he ever even contemplate the thought of trying to Heal Feenix? The troll was insane. L’Garn was not equal to the task.

“Prince fix,” Eagnad said again, grabbing the prince’s hand and placing it gingerly over Feenix’s burned flesh.

“I can not Heal her.” L’Garn pulled his hand away and dropped his head into his hands. “I have no magic! I have never had any magic.”

All the fear and worry that L’Garn had for Feenix, as well as years of empty wishes and frustration at being so inept and flawed, weighed his soul down with despair. He had never felt as helpless and worthless as he did at that moment. He had to get her to a Healer quickly, if there was any hope at all of saving her life.

L’Garn straightened his shoulders and picked up his head before looking at the little troll with renewed determination.

“Help me get her to the Healers Hall.”

The little troll looked the prince squarely in the eyes. L’Garn had never seen such eyes before. They were orange and had a milky, opaque film over them. Despite their appearance, a spark of keen intelligence blazed from their depths, and L’Garn was surprised at the intensity of emotion he found there.

“Do you love her?”

“Yes,” L’Garn answered without hesitation, amazed that he answered the impertinent question from the little slave. It was as if he was answering to a higher authority than even the king.

“Then Heal her.”

Again the troll placed L’Garn’s hand over the horrible wound. This time, however, Eagnad’s gnarled and callused hand remained on his, so that the prince’s hand was sandwiched between Feenix’s wound and the troll’s palm. The troll refused to let the prince free.

The scent of flowers and fresh water teased L’Garn’s nose. Warmth spread through his hand and up his arm. He had never felt anything like it before. A feeling of calmness and peace flooded his mind, and strength that came from some unknown source flowed through his fingers into the tortured body of the woman he loved.

Magic, unlike anything he had ever experienced or witnessed, filled the area where Feenix lay. As L’Garn watched, a golden glow began to grow from around their hands, and radiate out to encompass Feenix’s entire body.

The noisy activity of the cavern slipped from his awareness until there was only Eagnad, Feenix and himself. No sounds except for their breathing reached his ears. No sight except for the golden glow surrounding them existed in his eyes. The rich smell of new and growing things filled his nostrils, and he knew that only life, clean and vibrant, could exist within their little universe.

“What is happening?”

L’Garn was confused. Where was the source of the magic coming from? It could not be from within him, he knew. An Outbreed had no magic.

“Prince fix Pretty Feenix.”

Eagnad closed his eyes and began to hum a tender melody, softly, just above L’Garn’s hearing.

Suddenly, L’Garn had the urge to chant the words to a song he had heard a long time ago. He was not even sure where he had originally heard it—perhaps when he was a very small child hanging about the Healers Hall—but the urge to sing was undeniable. His clear tenor voice lifted in harmony with Eagnad’s deep bass melody.

As smoothly as Tylana’s moons rising in the east, L’Garn’s fear and worry lifted from his heart, and he felt a smile slip across his lips. He could not understand it. How could he feel like smiling when Feenix—his flower—lay as if dead under his hand? But the smile could not be denied, and his heart filled with hope, and love, and peace.

“Ask.”

The one word escaped Eagnad’s lips as if it were an integral part of the melody. Before the prince could question the troll as to what he meant, L’Garn knew. Such a simple thing. Why had he not thought of it himself?

Without breaking the rhythm or melody of the song, L’Garn chanted the words.

“In the name of our god, Mac Lir, I ask that this woman be Healed of all wounds and hurts.”

From within the depths of his mind, sparkling chimes added their accompaniment to the song he and the troll were singing. With each tiny chime, Feenix’s flesh changed. The blackened and burned flesh flaked away, to be replaced by healthy, pink skin. The blistered and raw sores smoothed and healed beneath L’Garn’s fingers. The stench of burned meat was replaced by the stronger, clean scent of growing things and fresh air. The prince watched the miracle with amazement.

He was part of this magic, one with the power to Heal a living being. For the first time in his life, he was actually making a difference—an important difference—in someone’s life. It was wondrous! His voice rose and swelled with the song, and tears rolled from his eyes.

How could this power have been inside him without his knowledge? What brought it forth after all this time?

The answer settled into his heart as gently as an early winter’s snow.

Feenix.

All too soon, Eagnad’s hum floated away with the last tinkling chime, and L’Garn’s voice faded with it. The music softly died, and the cavern and everything surrounding them came back to L’Garn’s awareness.

Feenix’s eyes fluttered open. L’Garn and the troll removed their hands, and the prince was not surprised to see all traces of the terrible wound gone. The flesh was once again creamy and smooth, the way healthy young skin should be.

“What’s going on, L’Garn?”

Her voice sounded as if she had not used it in years, but it grew stronger with each syllable. “I thought I heard music.” She looked around her in a dazed way as she struggled to sit up. “By the god’s beard, what are you and Eagnad doing hovering over me when there is a war to stop? Where’s that demon scum, Zimpher? Did I kill him?”

L’Garn laughed with joy that his Feenix was well and seemed back to normal.

“Feenix, do you think of nothing besides war and killing?”

He watched her tilt her head to the side as if considering his words.

“Not before I met you,” she answered with a smile.

L’Garn loved the way her sapphire blue eyes lit her tanned face when she smiled. He could

not help himself. He pulled her into his arms. The chance to hold her, to assure himself she was well and whole, was too strong to deny.

“Thank Mac Lir you are well.” The scent of her hair filled his heart with joy and longing. “I love you, Feenix of Port Marcus.”

At his whispered words, she stilled in his arms. He felt her pull away to look him full in the face. Had he erred? Should he not have declared himself to her? His heart felt as if it weighed as much as the Throne of Meedrion as he waited for her next words.

“Do not toy with me, half-elf. I don’t give my affections lightly, and I make a mean enemy.”

The confusion and doubt he saw in the depths of her eyes lightened his heart a bit. Perhaps he had not made a mistake. There was only one way for him to be sure.

“I would never toy with your affection, Feenix. You are too fierce an opponent for that. Instead, I would rather be your partner for life. Would you consider becoming my mate?”

He watched her eyes light up with a sparkle that rivaled all the Jewels of Meedrion.

“Do you mean it, L’Garn?”

“Aye, my flower. I pledge it on Mac Lir’s name; I mean it with all my being.”

“By the god’s blue eye, I don’t know why you would want me, but Eagnad here is my witness. I accept your offer of partnership, and if you try to back out of the deal, I’ll gut you like a fish!”

“Ah, my flower,” he said tenderly, pushing a stray strand of her glorious hair behind her ear. “Always the romantic, I see.”

“Your majesty,” an elf addressed L’Garn tentatively, interrupting what the prince was sure would have been the best kiss he had ever yet shared with Feenix.

“What did you call me, F’Rondle?” L’Garn thought he must be going insane with happiness, and a symptom of that illness must surely be loss of coherent hearing.

“Pardon, your majesty, but we have found the body of King Zimpher.”

“What do you mean?”

L’Garn’s head began to buzz and he felt light-headed and dizzy, as if he had been hit on the back of his head with a large stone.

“I am sorry to be the bearer of ill news,” the elf said, “but while we were looking for survivors, we found the body of the king. He is dead.”

“I knew I killed that scum.”

A part of L’Garn registered in his mind that Feenix was standing by his side, happy to have defeated her opponent. Another part of his mind realized that as Zimpher’s only heir, he was now the king of the Night Elves.

“Do not worry,” Eagnad’s quiet voice intruded into his awareness. “Mac Lir has chosen well. L’Garn will be a wise leader.”

The former prince turned to question the troll’s wisdom, but the little slave was no longer anywhere around. He had simply vanished.

“What would you have us do with the body, Your Majesty?”

F’Rondle’s words brought L’Garn’s wandering attention back to the worried advisor.

“With Zimpher dead, our job should be easy, L’Garn.”

“What do you mean?” he asked Feenix, his head still feeling dazed and confused. And where, by the Jewels, had that troll disappeared to?

“With you leading them, the Night Elves will accept Mac Lir’s plan of peace between the silvan races. We won’t have to use the force we’ve gathered Atop to fight Zimpher’s followers. We can meet with Rendolin and his people and plan how best to stop Tuawtha and his demons.”

“Rendolin and his people!”

L’Garn had forgotten for a moment that Zimpher had sent a company of Night Elves to attack the Sea Elves. They must be stopped. L’Garn’s mind became clear and calm as he knew what must be done.

“F’Rondle, gather the people in the Great Hall. I will speak to them in one hour’s time. Make sure the slaves are present.”

“The slaves, your majesty?” Clearly, F’Rondle was confused and unsure of L’Garn’s command.

“All of the slaves, F’Rondle. See to it personally. Also, have my mother’s steward sent to me. I will be in my quarters. Feenix,” he turned to the woman he had just asked to share the rest of his life, “we need to make some plans.”

“Very well, my prince,” she said with a twinkle, “but I don’t know if an hour is going to be long enough. Perhaps you should meet with your people in the Great Hall in two hours.”

He answered her grin with a smile of his own, before draping his arm around her shoulders and leading her out of the dark cavern.

“Unfortunately, two hours will not be possible, my flower, if we are to fulfill the god’s plan and keep my people from attacking Rendolin’s people.”

She sighed in mock despair before answering him. Always she made him proud.

“Very well, half-elf, but as soon as this plan of Mac Lir’s is settled, plan to spend at least two days locked in your quarters with me. Alone.”

“Aye, Feenix,” he gave her shoulders an affectionate squeeze as they hurried down the corridor towards L’Garn’s room. “Alone. I shall endeavor to survive the ordeal.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Feenix had the feeling of being in the middle of a rushing river, floating past trees and homes on each bank so quickly, everything was a blur. That's how fast things were happening around her.

It wasn't until they reached L'Garn's room and the guard, standing at the door, saluted and bowed to him, that she realized he was now the king.

The king of the Night Elves.

And he said he wanted to spend his life with her.

She hadn't bargained for this, and she didn't know if she was prepared to spend her life with a king. But that, of course, really depended upon if he still wanted her, now that he was a king. After all, he had made his statement and pledge to her before he knew his grandfather was dead. What if he didn't want her now?

Well, that made sense, she reasoned. Now that he was a king, he would need to get himself a queen. The gods knew she wasn't queen material! Not with her background and upbringing, she snorted to herself.

L'Garn would need a beautiful elf maiden, calm and well-versed in his people's customs and needs. Someone with patience and diplomatic skills. Someone the Night Elves respected and would accept. Not a hardened warrior with so much blood on her hands it was a miracle they were not stained a permanent red. Certainly not someone who had done some truly horrific things just to survive, things that still gave her nightmares on occasion.

Feenix's spirits drooped as she realized L'Garn must be regretting his hasty words to her. If he didn't regret them now, he would soon enough. She stole a glance at his profile as they stepped into his quarters.

"Are you sure you are feeling well, Feenix?"

She loved the sound of his voice and the note of concern for her, although she didn't know why he was making such a big deal about falling off the dais...

Then she remembered.

Zimpher had hit her with an energy bolt. It knocked her head over ass off the dais! Slapping at her chest, she looked down to see the ruined tunic and shirt. The tattered garments did little to hide the untouched flesh beneath them.

"What happened?" She remembered the searing pain of the energy, but where were the wounds? She should be dead, or at the very least, in a great deal of pain.

L'Garn gathered her in his arms and held her in a tender embrace.

"I am not sure. Somehow, Mac Lir used me to Heal you. I have never experienced anything like it before."

"You Healed me?" She felt herself melting at the thought of L'Garn actually laying his hands on her and calling forth the magic to Heal her. She steeled herself against the sensation; she had to be strong if she had to walk out of his life.

"I do not know if I Healed you or if Mac Lir did it through me. All I know is you are alive and well, and here in my arms."

He captured her lips with a tender kiss, and Feenix felt herself losing the battle of self-will. She longed to have him make love to her, but didn't dare to test her strength of resolve just yet.

"Come on, elf," she said, pushing him away and walking to the chest where his clothing was

kept. "We don't have time for that, and we both need to wash up and change. You're meeting your people in the Great Hall in a short while."

Turning her back to him so she wouldn't have to see the hurt in his eyes, she pulled out a linen shirt from the drawer, draped it on the back of one of the chairs, and poured some water into the wash basin. If she kept herself busy, perhaps he wouldn't ask her any questions, and she could get through this.

"You are right, Feenix," L'Garn said behind her. "We will have time to talk and settle everything after the Sea Elves have been warned, and the truce has been reached."

She heard the rustling of his clothes as he removed his soiled garments. The trickle and splash of the water, as he washed the blood and grime from his upper body, tempted her to turn and watch.

No, by Mac Lir's beard, she growled at herself. Don't turn around and watch him. It will only get you into deeper trouble. Just get dressed and then get the hell away from him!

"Listen, L'Garn," she said, buttoning her shirt and walking towards the door. "I'll meet you in the Great Hall. Take your time."

She was out the door before he could finish his protest. Shutting the door firmly, she hurried down the corridor in what she hoped was the general direction of the Great Hall.

The only honorable thing for her to do was to let him go, she decided as she made her unsure way to the Hall. Do it quickly and with as little fuss as possible. She felt her heart begin to ache as she made the decision. The best thing for them both was to walk away from King L'Garn of the Night Elves.

"Pretty Feenix be sad."

The little troll seemed to materialize from nowhere at her side.

"Where did you come from, Eagnad?"

"Eagnad help get hurt elves to Healers. Then Eagnad find pretty Feenix."

He seemed quite pleased with himself, she thought. His strange orange eyes were crinkled in what she hoped was a smile, although it was hard to tell with his mouth open that way. It could just as much have been a yawn or a laugh. Trolls were strange creatures to figure out, she decided. Especially a little half troll named Eagnad.

Feenix stopped in the corridor, a question on her lips.

"Eagnad, you were there when I woke up from the Healing. Did L'Garn really Heal me?"

"Aye."

"How did he do that? He's an Outbreed and it was my understanding that Outbreeds don't have much magic. L'Garn certainly didn't seem overly magical before this."

"Love be magic, pretty Feenix. You not know this yet?"

What in the Seven Cella Worlds was the troll babbling about now? Feenix had no patience for such riddles.

"Just answer the question, troll! How did he do it?"

Instead of answering her immediately, the little troll took her hand and turned it over so that her palm was up. She thought about pulling her hand from his callused and cracked paw, but instead she relaxed and let her hand lay quietly while he traced the lines in the middle of her palm.

"Magic be power, pretty Feenix. It not matter where power come from. Some power come from the air; some from water. Much power in hate; more power in love. More power, more magic."

Eagnad seemed very interested in the lines woven into her hand. His head was bent so that he

could see, but Feenix didn't know what he was looking for.

"Prince have much love. Much power. He not know before. Mac Lir show he."

The troll closed her fingers and made a loose fist with her hand. Then he looked into her eyes with his own intelligent gaze.

"Pretty Feenix show prince to love. Now he be fixer of many things. Prince fix pretty Feenix heart."

He dropped her hand and left her standing, stunned, in the corridor. She watched his back disappear in the gloomy hall, before she pulled herself together.

"By Mac Lir's blue bells, what is that supposed to mean?" she yelled at his retreating shadow. But he was gone with the answer, and she was left standing in the corridor alone.

"Do you know what I hate most of all about gods?" she asked no one as she continued to the Great Hall. "I hate the fact that they put their noses in things that don't have anything to do with them. Then they have their 'servants' spout some ridiculous garbage and expect you to understand it!"

Her words echoed down the corridor. Still muttering to herself, she stepped into the Great Hall and was stopped by an official looking guard.

"Captain Feenix," the guard saluted her smartly.

"What do you want?" She had no time for delays. She had to blend in with the crowd before L'Garn found her. She wasn't running precisely. She just wanted to postpone the inevitable until after L'Garn had firm control of his new duties. He didn't need her around distracting him. And she didn't need to be around when he realized the mistake he had made concerning her.

"Come with me, please, captain." The elf firmly but politely took her arm and started to lead her towards a set of stairs that led up to an oval balcony.

"Hey," she said, pulling out of his grasp. "Where are you taking me?" Silently, two more guards appeared, one behind her and one on her other side.

"Please come with me, captain. The king has requested that you be shown to the royal section."

Again the guard took her arm. For a moment she thought about refusing, but decided L'Garn didn't need her making a scene just before he set Mac Lir's plan before the entire Night Elf nation.

She followed the guard up the stairs and took a seat behind the balcony railing. A beautiful, fragile-looking female lounged on an elaborate couch draped in pink silk. It was the first bit of color Feenix had seen her entire time in Cragimore. It looked terribly out of place.

Before she had time to ask herself again why she was here waiting around, Feenix saw L'Garn enter the balcony from a concealed door in the back. He was dressed in black leather from head to toe. He wore a deep blue-black silk shirt that shimmered in the priest lights hanging from the arched ceiling. The only reason she had been able to see him enter was because a guard preceding him carried a flaming torch. Her half-elf made an impressive sight.

The Great Hall was filled with elves and slaves. The slaves had been herded to the side of the huge cavern and were being watched over by a contingent of guards, complete with whips and clubs. Feenix recognized a few of them, but due to the poor lighting, couldn't make out a lot of detail.

The Night Elves themselves were in three separate groups; the obviously noble and wealthy group, the merchants and middle class group, and then the worker and servants who were not slaves, but neither were they first class citizens. Each clique congregated together, none daring to break the invisible barrier that separated them.

As L’Garn moved to the balcony’s railing, a few voices from the servant crowd began to chant, “Long live King L’Garn!”

The voices grew, encompassing many of the elves from the merchant group. Few, very few Feenix noted, raised their voices from the noble crowd of elves. She was sure L’Garn also took note of the lack of enthusiasm from that direction of the Hall.

The half-elf raised his hands and asked for silence. The hall became still, as the entire Night Elf nation waited to hear what their new king would say.

“As many of you are aware, Zimpher the Golden is dead.”

Some elves muttered and whispered, shifting into more comfortable positions, straining to hear.

“According to our laws, the closest male by blood stands in line to be crowned king. As Zimpher’s grandson, and as his proclaimed heir, that duty has now fallen to me.”

L’Garn paused, and more whispers and murmurs arose from the crowd.

“Zimpher the Golden is dead! Hail L’Garn the Outbreed!”

The sneering words came from amongst the nobles, but no one seemed to be willing to point out the culprit. A few elves laughed; many looked embarrassed for the new king. Feenix wished she could jump into the crowd and run her blade through the scoffers. By Mac Lir’s beard, how dare the scum laugh at L’Garn?

“That is right,” L’Garn’s voice carried over the noise of the assembled hall. “I am L’Garn the Outbreed. I can not change the blood that runs through my veins, any more than we can stop Eon from rising. But I can tell you this! By our law, I am king of the Night Elves. Anyone who wishes to dispute that fact may do so in private battle after the immediate crisis is resolved.”

“And what crisis would that be, Outbreed?”

A tall elf, older than L’Garn by many years, Feenix would guess by the white hair dusted through his temples and back from his high forehead, stepped from among the nobles. He was a handsome elf, dressed in fine clothes and having an air about him that proclaimed his nobility to anyone with half an eye.

Feenix hated him on sight.

“I am glad you asked, Lord Worseld.”

“I am sure you are,” the elf lord commented with a tight, condescending smile.

L’Garn ignored the snide comment. Feenix admired his control. She would have gutted the lord if it had been her.

“The god, Mac Lir, has sent a warning to us. He has shown to me the self-destructive path we are treading in our war with our kin the Sea and Wood Elves.”

“What nonsense is this?” Lord Worseld’s words unleashed a cacophony of noise from the gathered crowd. “We have been at war with the Sea Elves for thousands of years. The Wood Elves have been all but eradicated and are no threat to us. You would have us put away our weapons simply because you claim a god has said we should?”

“No, Worseld,” L’Garn’s voice carried over the noise of the hall, bringing attention back to the new king high above their heads, standing on the balcony. He waited for silence with a master’s understanding of that powerful weapon. Feenix wanted to yell encouragement to him, but he didn’t seem to need it.

“I expect you to put away your weapons because your king has commanded it.” L’Garn held Worseld’s gaze with unwavering control.

Feenix could actually feel the shift of power in the great cavern as many Night Elves moved, both physically and mentally, away from the challenging Lord Worseld.

"I suppose you feel you can back that command with force," the arrogant lord hissed.

"If I must," the king answered calmly, raising his hand in signal.

Out of the shadows around the perimeter of the cavern stepped a company of fully armed warriors, their swords drawn and at the ready.

"I would prefer not, however."

Feenix felt like she was going to burst with pride. It was a superb military maneuver.

Worseld froze for a few heartbeats, then held his hands up in a non-threatening manner. "As you wish, your majesty," he bowed, taking a step back into the safety of the nobles' group.

With Worseld's submission, the tension in the cavern dropped about ten levels, Feenix thought. L'Garn knew what he was doing, without a doubt. He would make a fine king, she admitted.

All he lacked was his queen.

"I know that a lasting peace with our kin will not be an easy task," L'Garn continued when all eyes had returned to him. "I expect that all sides of this long-standing dispute will have troubles adjusting to the changes Mac Lir has seen fit to decree. But make no mistake." He planted his hands upon the railing and leaned out a bit to emphasize his words. "Mac Lir's commands will be obeyed! If they are not, the entire silvan races will be destroyed from the face of Tylana."

L'Garn went on to explain Mac Lir's warning and how the silvan races had to band together under the one cause, to stop Tuawtha and the elimination of their kind. The new king's task was not an easy one, but gradually Feenix felt the general atmosphere in the cavern evolve into one of guarded acceptance of L'Garn rather than outright hostility.

Being a warrior herself, she knew the driving forces of revenge and blood lust. She knew it would be difficult for all the elves of Tylana to put their animosity and weapons aside to build a new foundation of peace. But she also knew the other side to war: the terrible feeling of the waste of lives over something as trivial as the way a man looked at another. At times, even Feenix was heartily sick to death of the fighting, the blood, the tears of the living when they learned that their loved one would not return to them.

There would be many elves, on all sides, who would not be persuaded to Mac Lir's plan. She knew this, as it was the nature of all living creatures to doubt the words of an absent leader. Feenix supposed that would be part of her job as mediator; help convert the reluctant to the cause of Mac Lir. It would be a challenge for her. Most of her *persuading* had been done at the end of a sharp sword. Now she was expected to persuade with her tongue rather than her blade. Not an easy task for one more used to action than diplomacy.

She sighed deeply. Suddenly she was tired of the whole thing. Tired of war, of fighting, and perhaps most of all, tired of the thought of the battle to come with L'Garn. By Mac Lir's toes, could nothing be simple?

"The first step in our quest for peace," L'Garn's words brought Feenix back from her musings, "will be to free every elfin slave within the hold of Cragimore."

The king's words were met with a heartbeat of shocked silence before chaos erupted. Many of the nobles and merchants were angry and upset over the loss of their free labor.

As expected, the slaves were deliriously happy.

"Silence! Hear me!" With the help of the armed guards, L'Garn finally brought quiet and order to the Hall.

"Already, our cousins the Sea Elves have freed our people that have been held captive by them. We can do no less, for it is an act of good faith that we will no longer be at odds with each other."

"If you expect that thousands of years of hate and revenge will simply go away because Mac Lir and you wish it, then you are a bigger fool than I had thought, L'Garn!"

"No, Worseld, I do not expect the hate and anger to simply disappear. It will not be easy, I know, but we must set our differences aside for the larger picture. What good will our hate and anger do us if our cousins are all dead? Will we turn that anger onto our own people? Will we begin to kill each other because it has become the only way of life we know? And in doing so, will we will fulfill Tuawtha's dream? All silvan kind will have been removed from the face of Tylana. Is that what you want for us, Worseld? Is that what you would wish on your family?"

"You know it is not," the angry lord responded. "But what assurances do we have that the Sea Elves will keep their pledge and not simply kill us at the first opportunity?"

The crowd murmured their agreement; it was a great concern that the Sea Elves would simply kill them if the Night Elves put away their weapons.

"Your majesty, may I speak?"

Feenix looked over the balcony and saw J'Laris, the one-armed slave and Lord of the ruling House of Hiloris, step forward. He was immediately stopped by the guards around the slaves, and many of the nobles protested that a slave would dare speak up in an assembly.

The king motioned for the guards to bring the Sea Elf to the balcony. J'Laris' fetters and collar had been removed Atop, and somewhere he had picked up a clean set of clothing. For a former slave, Feenix thought he looked impressive.

"As your majesty knows," J'Laris said, loud enough for the assembled hall to hear, "I can speak for my people. I stand before you and the entire people of Cragimore to vow and pledge my word to you, that the Sea Elves will honor Mac Lir's plan, and will not raise a hand in the future against their kin the Night Elves, unless sorely provoked."

"What right does this slave have to make such a pledge, L'Garn?"

From the nods of agreement around the Great Hall, it appeared as if Worseld asked the question in most Night Elves' minds.

"This is J'Laris Hiloris. He is the Lord of the House of Hiloris, which is the ruling house of Shalridoor. He is the equivalent to the king of the Sea Elves."

L'Garn turned to J'Laris and took his hand in a firm grip.

"I, King L'Garn of the House of Meedrion, do pledge my word to you, Lord Hiloris, that the Night Elves will not raise a hand against their kin, the Sea Elves, unless sorely provoked," he said with a grin. "For all time, and through eternity."

The two elves gravely shook hands, then sealed the bargain with a brief embrace. A cheer went up from the gathered elves in the cavern. And if the cheer wasn't as loud and enthusiastic as Feenix would have liked, at least there wasn't bloodshed in the Hall.

L'Garn allowed the cheers to continue for a few moments before raising his hands again for silence.

"There are many things that must be done. Zimpher sent a company of our warriors to attack Shalridoor. Through the use of a *Communion Spell*, the Sea Elves have been warned of the impending danger. It is hoped that the attack was not successful, and that our people were not badly hurt. A runner has been sent to notify Captain Theombert of Zimpher's death. The runner carries my orders to cease all hostilities immediately.

"In the meantime," L'Garn continued, obviously settling into his new role with confidence and wisdom, "there are a few things here in Cragimore that need to be clarified."

He looked over to Feenix, and gave her a reassuring smile.

"I would like to present Captain Feenix of Port Marcus to you." He motioned for her to join

him at the railing. She would have given much to sink into the floor and disappear forever.

“Captain Feenix is Mac Lir’s mediator in these difficult peace negotiations. You will be seeing a lot of her in the future, and I expect that she be afforded all respect and consideration.”

Feenix could feel the blood rushing to her face, and for once was grateful for the dimness of the lighting that prevented everyone from seeing her blush. She supposed she should be grateful he didn’t announce to the world that he intended to make her his mate. But then, of course he wouldn’t, she realized. He now knew he needed a pure-blooded elf to be his queen.

She acknowledged L’Garn’s words with a curt bow and then stepped back from the railing, but did not return to her previous position in the back.

“Next,” he continued as Feenix tried to gather her wits and resolve about her, “I name as my heir to the Throne of Meedrion, Balrin, Sarnett’s son.”

L’Garn motioned for a youth to step forward from the elves that were on the balcony. Feenix has assumed they were family members, and now her guess had been proved correct. The youth came forward, and his father, the elderly retainer from Atop, approached with him.

“Balrin is my second cousin on my grandmother Queen Kindara’s side. While not of the House of Meedrion, Balrin can trace his ancestry back to King R’Talg. He is my closest male blood relative.”

King L’Garn embraced the youth. Cheers, louder than the previous ones, greeted this announcement. It seemed the Night Elves were more amenable to Balrin’s claim to the throne, than L’Garn’s.

When L’Garn turned to the crowd again, Feenix had the impression that something was not quite the same with him. He looked like a man determined to complete some distasteful task, regardless of the consequences. An uneasy feeling settled around her. By Mac Lir’s beard, she wasn’t going to like what was coming, but she couldn’t understand why she had that thought.

“My human blood has never been a secret to anyone here. While officially the royal prince and heir to the throne, I have never wanted such a heavy responsibility.”

Feenix’s feeling of unease grew. What was he talking about?

“And in truth, Zimpher did not want me to succeed him to the throne. While my duty and loyalty is to Cragimore and the Night Elves, my heart is no longer here. I have a desire to learn about my human heritage, and have asked Captain Feenix to share her life and knowledge with me.”

By the god’s left toe, what was this stupid half-elf doing?

“Effective immediately, I abdicate the Throne of Meedrion in favor of Balrin. I appoint as co-regent, until King Balrin reaches his adulthood, myself and his father, Sarnett of the House of B’Kent.”

Complete pandemonium broke out. Feenix felt like hitting the half-elf over the head with a club, and crying at the same time. He didn’t know what he was saying! That energy bolt from Zimpher must have addled his wits! She had to do something!

“L’Garn,” she said, rushing to his side. “You can’t do this! You don’t know what you’re saying! Why would you throw your birthright away?”

“Feenix, we will discuss this later.”

He dismissed her with those few words, than turned back to the crowd below. The guards were trying to restore some order in the Hall.

“No, you don’t know what you’re doing, and I’m not going to stand by and let you throw your life away just because you said something to me without thinking!”

L’Garn stepped away from the railing and moved Feenix into the shadows.

“We will discuss this in my quarters, later. Right now, I have a near riot on my hands, and it is not the time to be arguing over this. Go to my quarters and wait for me there.”

“What did you just say to me?” She couldn’t believe her ears. Had he actually ordered her to leave?

“I said, go to my quarters. I will join you shortly.”

As he turned to go back to the railing, she grabbed his arm and spun him around to face her. Immediately, two guards were at her sides, ready to obey any command L’Garn might give them.

“Don’t you give me an order and then walk away like that, half-elf!” Her voice carried throughout the balcony, and everyone was watching what the king would do.

“Do not push me on this, Feenix.” The steely determination in his voice should have warned her, but she was past hearing it. No one ordered Captain Feenix of Port Marcus about! Not even this half-elf scum she imagined herself in love with.

“I’ll do what I damn well please, and by the god’s toe, there’s nothing you can do about it!”

He stared at her in silence for a moment, but she refused to back down. She could have told him she was the champion starer of every Port Marcus tavern.

“Guards,” he spoke quietly, but with authority. “Take the captain to my quarters and see that she remains there.”

The guards each took an arm and began to move towards the back entrance.

“You wouldn’t dare!” How could he humiliate her this way?

“Do what you have to do to keep her in the room,” he said to the elves, ignoring her protests. “Short of hurting her, of course.”

Feenix couldn’t find her voice, so shocked was she at L’Garn’s attitude. In high fury, she allowed herself to be led from the balcony.

“You’ll regret this, L’Garn. I swear it.”

She knew he heard her words, but he made no acknowledgment as he began to address his people, with the young King Balrin at his side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“I should have left him for dead when I had the chance,” Feenix stormed to the empty room. “I should have just left him and taken off back to Shalridoor!”

She paced the sleeping chamber where she had spent so much of her time while held captive in Cragimore. As always, the room was not lit nearly well enough for her peace of mind, and that small fact only contributed to the list of annoying things for which L’Garn would be held responsible.

“Blasted fool! Of course a king can’t mate with someone like me. All he had to do was talk to me and I would have let him off the hook. But no!” She slammed her hand against the chest of drawers and knocked it away from the wall. “He has to go and abdicate his birthright and play the noble male. Well, I don’t care what happens to him now!”

She kicked the stool against the door. The delicate legs shattered and broke as it hit the hard wooden door.

“If I had known he was such a fool, I never would have fallen in love with him in the first place! Who wants to be tied to a foolish half-elf who doesn’t even have the wits to recognize a perfect situation when he sees it?”

She threw herself into the chair by the table and pulled her dagger, jabbing the point of the knife into the table’s smooth surface with a total disregard for the rare material.

“I would have given my sword arm for a sweet set up like his! Money! Power! Respect!” She accented each word with a jab to the unoffending table. “And he has to go and throw it all away because he thinks he needs to discover his human heritage. The fool!”

She couldn’t sit still, by the god’s teeth. She needed to be doing something—preferably slitting the gullet of a certain stupid half-elf! How dare he have her removed from the balcony like some misbehaving child? How dare he lock her in a room and tell her to wait for him to find the time to talk to her?

Who did he think he was?

Well, no one treated Feenix of Port Marcus that way, and if he thought she was just going to sit quietly twiddling her thumbs while he took his time joining her, he was more insane than his grandfather!

What she needed was a *plan*.

She opened the door, and as expected, two guards stood in the corridor, talking quietly.

“Do you think I could have a couple of torches?”

The elves looked at each other and then at Feenix. She knew they were debating the merits of giving such a potentially dangerous weapon to the crazy human.

“Look,” she said, beginning to unstrap her sword from her side. “I’ll give you my sword in good faith. All I want is some decent lighting in here for a change.”

“I do not suppose it would harm anything to give you a torch, my lady,” the first elf guard said after a moment.

“Of course not,” she agreed, handing her sword to him. “I mean, it’s not like I could burn the blasted mountain down, now is it?” She smiled her best comrades-in-arms smile, and blinked her blue eyes at them. She sensed their impending captivation.

“Very well,” the second elf said with a shy grin. He was much too young to be standing guard outside the room of Captain Feenix of Port Marcus, she noted. “I will return in a moment with

your torch.”

“Make it two, would you? I don’t think one will be bright enough for what I have in mind.”

The elf paused for a moment, then nodded before trotting off down the corridor. Feenix winked at the remaining guard, and then went back into the room. That had been no challenge.

With a self-satisfied sigh, she gathered up the sleeping covers, plopped down on the bed, and proceeded to the next phase of her plan.

“Feenix, are you there?”

Oh, blast! She had forgotten about Rendolin contacting her again today. She stopped her work and concentrated on the Sea Elf.

“Rendolin. Has it been four hours? It seems like only years.”

“Your sarcasm is wasted on me, captain. Report, please.”

“Fine, but we have to make this quick. I’m...never mind. We just need to make this quick.”

“Agreed. Contacting you like this twice in one day is very draining on me.”

“Fine. Zimpher is dead. The Night Elves have a new king, and they are agreed to Mac Lir’s plan of a lasting peace. For the most part.”

“Explain ‘for the most part’ please.”

“Well, L’Garn is still with his people hammering out the details, but basically, they agree to the peace and will meet with you and your people to decide the next best course of action against Tuawtha. It was touch and go there for a bit, but your father J’Laris stepped forward and pledged your people’s cooperation. L’Garn pledged his people’s.”

“Splendid. Tell L’Garn that the attack from his people has been aborted, with only a few minor wounds. The runner he sent arrived moments ago, and is now speaking with Zimpher’s attacking force, explaining the situation. All seems well, but we will continue to keep an eye on them.”

“Good. L’Garn freed all the elves that had been held in slavery here, as a pledge of good faith. Did the former Night Elf slaves from Sasheena arrive in Shalridor yet?”

“Aye. We will bring them to the peace negotiations. The negotiations will take place in the Darkening Wood, at the ancient council glen. L’Garn should know where it is.”

“When will the negotiations take place?”

“We will meet in the Darkening Wood at twilight, two evenings from now. Tell L’Garn to bring the freed slaves so they may be returned to their families. We will bring the freed Night Elves.”

“Are we done? I have to go.”

“Yes. I will see you at the negotiations.”

“Goodbye, elf. See you then. Oh, and give my love to your Bonded mate,” she couldn’t resist the slight dig.

“As I said, Feenix, your sarcasm is wasted on me. Korrene sends her love to you, as well.”

The connection was broken just as suddenly as it had been made. Feenix chuckled softly to herself at Rendolin’s parting comment. Korrene might be soft and useless as far as battles went, but she had a sense of humor. Given time, Feenix might actually come to like the human from Earth.

A knock on the door alerted her to the guard’s return. She tucked the coverlet behind her before telling him to enter.

The young guard opened the door and held out three unlit torches to her.

“I thought you might need an extra. Just in case,” he said, blushing at her smile of approval.

“Thank you so much!” She stood and closed the space between them. “Do you think you could light one for me?”

Within moments, Feenix held a blazing torch in her hand, and was able to see the room more clearly than ever before. She thanked the guards once more, then closed the door, anxious to get on with her plan.

By the god’s left toe, that half-elf was going to be sorry he ever banished her to his room like a child!

She worked quickly; the three torches were lit and posted about the chamber. Surprised to find old torch brackets high in the walls, she didn’t hesitate to use the handy conveniences. In a short time, the room was ready for Prince L’Garn of the House of Meedrion.

Feenix sat on the bed and tried to wait patiently.

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The torches sputtered and hissed, giving off an acrid smell that soon filled the room and masked the usual damp and musty odor found throughout Cragimore. Black smoke billowed to the ceiling that, fortunately, was high enough so that the smoke didn’t burn her eyes. The light from the torches gave her the first clear look at L’Garn’s personal space.

The room was fairly large, with space for two chests of drawers, a table, stools, a comfortable chair for relaxing, and the bed. The cot that had been in the room while Feenix was recovering from her fever was missing.

The floor was bare rock, except for a fur rug beside the bed. The fur was dark brown, thick and luxurious. She bent to brush her palm across the soft fur; the remains of a very large and obviously slow mountain bear. It was the only bit of luxury Feenix could see in the entire room.

The walls were made of dark granite with veins of black crystal and silvan silver running through them. A few shelves had been chiseled into the rock to hold personal items. Said personal items were all neatly stacked and sorted.

L’Garn was overly neat. Feenix thought of her own cluttered living quarters, and grunted to herself. Just one more thing pointing to their incompatibility. By Mac Lir’s thumb, she was right to leave him as quickly as possible.

Just as she noticed a small alcove at the bottom of the bed leading to another area, the door opened and L’Garn stepped into the room.

He stepped over the threshold, blinked and then shielded his eyes against the brightness of the torches.

“By the Jewels! What is this?”

Feenix’s stomach did a flip and her knees decided they wanted to buckle at the sight of him. He stood with one hand on the door, and the other over his eyes, trying to adjust his sight to the light in the room.

As she had noted before, he wore black leather breeches and a vest, with a deep blue silk shirt. What she hadn’t noticed in the terrible dimness of Cragimore was that the rich hue of the shirt caused his light blue eyes to darken to the color of a summer’s sky. Silver piping decorated the vest, complementing the silver of his belt buckle and the jeweled hilt of his sword, which rode low on his left hip.

His feet and calves were encased in tight boots reaching to just below his knees. Tucked in the side of his right boot peeked a silver dagger. Feenix’s mouth actually started to water, her desire for him was so strong. It was like a hurricane wind that hit her full in the face.

Why did it have to hurt so much to do the right thing? How could she walk away with the need of him aching in every pore of her body?

She forced herself to concentrate on her plan. *Get a grip, Feenix! He's just a man. With elfin blood running through his veins. Just get it done!*

"This is the first time since I've been in Cragimore that I can actually see what your quarters look like." She took one step away from the bed and shrugged her shoulders. "Pretty sad, prince."

L'Garn slammed the door closed and stepped forward. But not far enough, she noticed.

"Put the torches out, Feenix," he ordered, still blinking and trying to adjust his eyes to the brightness of the room. "Are you trying to blind me?"

"Actually," she drawled in a deliberately insulting manner, "I am, elf-man."

That should get the required reaction.

"You agreed not to call me—"

L'Garn took another two steps into the room, intent upon Feenix. Just as she had planned, the brightness of the torches blinded him to the length of rope she had made from the sleeping coverlet. Feenix had stretched and tied it at knee height across the room. It was an effective trap.

Prince L'Garn of the House of Meedrion tripped and crashed to the hard stone floor.

Instantly, Feenix pulled her dagger and advanced on him, intent upon subduing and forcing him to let her leave Cragimore for good. Unfortunately, she didn't count on the slippery, sneaky tricks a Night Elf seemed to be born with. He rolled onto his back just as she moved to capture his hands behind him.

L'Garn caught both of her wrists in his own strong hands and held the dagger away from his face and neck. She could see the confusion in his eyes; he thought she was trying to kill him. She pushed the guilt and remorse away. Better he thought she wanted to kill him than he realized she loved him enough to leave him. No, by Mac Lir's eyes, she couldn't let him know how she truly felt, or he would never agree to let her go. He would force her to become his mate simply because he felt duty-bound to a pledge he had made in the heat of the moment.

"Do not ever draw that dagger on me again, unless you intend to use it," he said through gritted teeth. Feenix was strong and she had the advantage of being over him and being able to use her weight as leverage. But by the god's beard, L'Garn was stronger, and a part of her thrilled to that knowledge.

"That's my plan," she answered, straining to gain control of the knife, "to use it to skewer you!"

Without warning, L'Garn rolled to his side, using the momentum to reverse their positions. As he rolled, he slammed her wrist against the stone floor, and her fingers went numb. The knife skittered away, beyond their reach.

"What do you think you are doing?" he demanded, sitting on her stomach and holding her hands away from his face, where she wanted to plant her fists.

"Escaping, of course! What do you think I'm doing?"

Foolish half-elf, she thought. Did she have to explain everything to him?

With a great burst of strength and speed, he grabbed the front of her linen shirt in both hands, stood and dragged her up with him. Then he slammed her back into the stone wall. Feenix couldn't prevent the grunt from escaping her lips as the air whooshed from her chest.

Taking advantage of her momentary loss of concentration, L'Garn seized both of her slim wrists in his large hand and pulled her up so that only her toes touched the floor. With her hands high above her head, stretched to the limit, she could not gain any leverage or balance with her

feet. Feenix was effectively subdued.

For the moment, she silently vowed.

His other hand slid up the side of her ribs, brushed her breast, then firmly grasped her jaw. Holding her head still so that he could look her full in the face, he spoke.

"I do not think escape is an option, captain."

His blue eyes held her just as securely as his hands. He peered deeply into her eyes, obviously trying to understand her sudden odd behavior.

If you knew, she said silently, you'd never let me go.

Feenix's chest rose and fell as her lungs labored for air. Her heart raced against her rib cage, and it felt like it was trying to break out of that prison. With each breath, the tips of her nipples brushed against L'Garn's hard chest, and despite her resolve to ignore him, the prince's aura of sexuality settled around her, igniting a burning desire.

And he knew it, damn him! She watched his eyes darken, and he leaned his hard body into her soft flesh just enough to let her know he knew. His fingers found their way into her hair, grazing her cheek and temple with a soft caress en route.

"Let me go," she yelled, raising her leg in an attempt to stun him with a knee to the groin.

"That is no way to treat your mate, my flower," he grinned down at her after snuggling his entire length against her, pinning her even more securely to the wall. "For that, you shall have to pay a penalty."

He captured her lips in a punishing kiss. It only lasted for a heartbeat, but Feenix felt as though her mouth had been bruised and battered. It was not the kiss of a gentle lover. It was the kiss of a conqueror.

"Very nice."

He was laughing at her. She could see it in his eyes and the way his lips wore that smirk she'd love to knock from his mouth.

"Why do you call me that ridiculous name? I'm not a soft and delicate flower that can be bruised by the touch of an ungentle hand—or by a foolish elf-man." She knew he hated that name.

He chuckled deeply. The timbre of his laugh vibrating against her breasts made her nipples pucker; she could feel the traitorous nubs actually move against him.

"While you are deliciously soft, Teela, you are more like one of those flowers whose provocative scent and haunting beauty lures a victim within reach, then snares the unwary and devours its prey at leisure."

Despite herself, she shivered at his analogy.

"Damn right, prince," she said, trying to convince herself not to think too long on just how she'd like to devour him. "Beware my bite!"

"I think not."

His voice was low and silky. His long fingers brushed her cheekbone and traced the line of her jaw. He dropped his gaze to her lips, and she knew he was going to kiss her again. She felt her body respond and almost wondered why she was fighting the inevitable.

Again he placed his lips upon hers, and the jolt of energy from the contact curled her toes. But she was ready for him, and managed to bite down on his full lower lip before he could deepen the kiss.

"Ouch," he yelped, pulling away and touching his lip with his finger. A drop of blood coated his fingertip. "Vixen!"

Feenix laughed at the surprise on his face. She didn't think she would ever be able to surprise

him like that very often. She enjoyed his discomfort.

“That just earned you another penalty.”

Before she could react, he grabbed the front of her shirt and ripped it wide open, exposing her body from the neck to her waist. She gave a short screech of surprise and fury as the cool air of the room washed over her hot flesh.

“Lovely, Feenix. So ripe and golden.” His free hand cupped the underside of her breast and held it gently, testing its weight and texture the way a cook would check a luscious fruit.

She tried to squirm away from his touch, but his lower body still pinned her to the wall. In her present position, she could not defend herself from his onslaught.

“Get your hands off me, L’Garn!”

He smiled lazily and winked at her. “You do not really want me to do that, do you, Feenix? I can feel your heart beating against my hand. Your blood is hot for me.” He bent his head and licked a path from between her breasts up her neck to the back of her ear, while his thumb rubbed exotically against her hard nipple. “Admit it, my flower. You want me.”

By the god’s eyeballs, yes, she wanted him, but she would die before admitting it to him.

“I want you to let me go!”

“When I am ready, my delicious flower.”

Feenix used the wall as leverage for her back and brought her legs up and around his waist. Locking her ankles, she tried to squeeze as hard as she could. Perhaps she could squeeze the breath from him and she’d be able to get free.

Instead of breaking his hold on her, L’Garn wrapped his arms around her tightly, picked her up, stepped to the table, and then dropped her onto the smooth surface. As soon as her back hit the cool wood, he was on her, covering her soft body with his hard, lean one. He again captured her lips with his, swallowing her protest.

Oh, gods, she thought, he tasted so good. Like pine and mint and a touch of something woodsy. And his smell just about took her over the edge. He was musky and male and all L’Garn.

He used his mouth and tongue with expertise. Before she could stop herself, she returned his kiss with abandon. Stroke for stroke she explored his mouth, pausing to suckle on his lip before resuming her exploration. He, in turn, lit sparks in her head with the way he captured her tongue and drew it deeply into his mouth, sucking like a thirsty man.

Her hands caressed his hair, neck and back, trying to pull him closer so she could feel all of him. The fact that he still had his clothes on was a source of great frustration. She growled when she couldn’t pull his shirt from his breeches, allowing access to his bare skin. He chuckled into her mouth, knowing the cause of her agitation.

By Mac Lir’s ears, what was she doing? She was supposed to be escaping from L’Garn, not trying to become a part of him! She had to get away from him.

On the pretense of settling more comfortably under him, she turned and then pushed with her hands and legs, rolling to the side of the table. L’Garn lost his balance and spilled over the side. However, one of his arms had been firmly around her waist, and the other snaked out to grab her shoulder when he felt himself falling. With typical elfin dexterity, he pulled her over with him. The only bright spot in her new predicament was that her dagger now lay within easy reach of her hand.

In a flash she scooped up the knife and held the blade under his chin, softly pushing on his neck in warning. L’Garn relaxed and stilled under her.

“You will not kill me, Teela. I am your mate for life.”

"I told you not to call me by that revolting slave name."

Feenix gasped for breath, whether from the struggle or desire she didn't dare to ponder. She was acutely aware of the fact that she was straddling his lean hips and sat snugly on his groin. And he was highly aroused.

"Do you know what *teela* means in the ancient silvan tongue?"

How could his voice be so silky smooth and without fear while she held a dagger to his throat? The man had the nerves of a rock.

"How would I know that, half-elf?" She couldn't think about the way his warm voice made her feel, like warm honey poured down her spine.

"It means beautiful flower."

The knife wavered for a moment.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you? Well, you've outsmarted yourself, prince. You've walked away from a throne and riches and power, and what do you have to show for it?"

"You."

She felt his answer throughout her whole being. The one word spoken softly into the room caressed her ears with its deep timbre. The hand she had on his chest felt the sound of the one syllable resonate through his upper body. Her bottom felt his arousal punctuate the word with a teasing thrust.

By Mac Lir's ears, she wanted to believe him. She ached to believe him.

"I can't let you give up your birthright, L'Garn. This is your life, to lead your people to peace. It is your destiny, and I can't share it with you."

"You are my destiny, Feenix. You are my life."

"No." The word barely escaped her lips. "You need a beautiful silvan woman to rule at your side. Someone your people will admire and trust." She couldn't pull her eyes away from the depths of his gaze. She had never felt so weak and vulnerable, and yet she held the dagger to his neck. She was the victor; she should be feeling exultant.

"The only life I want, my flower, is one with you." He paused, seeming to wait for her response to his words, but Feenix could only hold her breath and wait for his next words. She didn't dare to move for fear she would miss something vitally important.

"Feenix, I have never belonged here, cooped up in the caverns of Cragimore. My heart has always been divided as I yearned to learn of the world outside these stone walls. Until I met you, I never had the courage or drive to learn about my human heritage; my other birthright. But with you at my side, my heart has become whole and complete for the first time in my life. For good or for ill, I choose you."

L'Garn stretched his arms out from his side, like a man submitting to whatever life sent his way.

"L'Garn, you sorry half-elf fool, do you know what you're giving up? Riches! Power! You can have whatever you desire as the king of the Night Elves!" She had to talk some sense into him before he threw away everything on a whim.

"My heart's desire is you, Feenix." The look in his eyes melted her resolve. "You. Say you will be my mate."

His summer blue eyes burned with desire and determination. How could she deny her love or the need she had for him?

"By Mac Lir's blue bells," she muttered, "where did you learn to beg so prettily?"

The dagger no longer pressed against his neck, but she still held it ready.

"If you are going to kill me, do it now, Teela. You hold my life in your hands. I am ready to

be devoured by you.”

The dagger sliced through his leather vest as if it were cutting butter. In moments, the garment had been disposed of, as well as the soft shirt beneath it. L’Garn never moved, nor did he take his eyes from her face. Feenix was secretly pleased that he trusted her so completely.

“Waste of good clothing,” she muttered as she bared his chest completely. The sight of his strong muscles sprinkled with dark swirls of hair caused her to falter. He was beautiful.

Before she could give in to her urge to touch him, L’Garn again moved with the speed and grace of a large cat, and reversed their positions, plucking the dagger from her hand. Somehow he had managed to flip her onto the thick fur rug, and the silky softness against the bare skin of her back was sensual.

“I think we can do without these,” he said with a sexy smile. Suddenly, L’Garn sliced her leather leggings expertly and she lay under his hot gaze, completely nude except for the boots on her feet. “By the Jewels, Feenix. You are exquisite.”

Exquisite. No one had ever called her that, and it thrilled her to know that her half-elf found her body attractive.

“Too many scars,” she muttered and tried to cover her right breast that was decorated with a particularly ugly and bright red mark.

“Not for a warrior. These are your trophies,” he said, placing a kiss along the puckered line of the old wound. “I find they add to your beauty...and to my attraction.” He captured her nipple in his mouth and suckled like a child. Feenix could not suppress the moan that tore through her being. A fire began to build somewhere in the region of her hips.

When she would have brought him to her in an embrace, he sat back and quickly removed her boots. Before releasing each foot, he massaged it with his long fingers, inspecting each toe and the instep as if he were discovering a hidden treasure. The fire in her blood grew. She could feel her body respond to every tiny touch and every hot gaze he gave her.

“This isn’t fair, you know.” She didn’t recognize her voice. When had it become so husky? There was no disguising the want in her, it seemed. “Take your breeches off, L’Garn.”

The smile that slid across his full lips was sinfully erotic.

“At your command, my flower.”

He stood and, using the toe of each foot, worked his boots off of his feet. In the clear light of the torches, she could see he had remarkably handsome feet. She had never noticed a man’s feet before. It was a surprisingly intimate and arousing sight.

Then he straddled her stomach, standing above her prone body, looking as proud and defiant as a wild bull. With deliberate timing, he slowly loosened the ties at the waist of his breeches. Feenix blushed as he watched her intently. The black leather peeled from his lean hips and muscled thighs, like a tight glove striped from a hand. For a heartbeat, the material caught on his hard arousal, but with an expert twist, the breeches came free and slid down the length of his legs to pool on her belly.

Feenix now didn’t know whether to curse or cheer the torches lighting the scene before her amazed eyes.

“Fair enough?” he asked.

What could she say? To remain mute was probably the safest course, she decided. But she couldn’t remain passive.

Feenix sat up and reached for his legs. She trailed the fingers of one hand slowly up the back of his calf and thigh, while helping him step from the leather breeches and supporting him with her other hand. His muscles bunched and moved as her fingers explored his hot flesh. When the

sensitive pads of her fingers reached his firm buttocks, L’Garn groaned and dropped to his knees, still straddling her lithe body.

In a flash, he had flipped the warrior woman onto her stomach and his hands roamed her back, pushing her long plait of hair to the side. He sat back on his haunches, but he continued to straddle her thighs. Her entire body, from her bottom up, was bared for his inspection and she felt the heat of his gaze as if he were a bonfire.

“What are you doing?” Strangely, she felt more vulnerable with her back to him than she had ever felt before.

“Shhh. I am checking your wounds.”

Lightly, like a feather in the wind, his fingers played over her back, touching and tracing each Healed wound with the tenderness of a mother.

Only the sparks shooting through her body from the touch of his hands didn’t feel very motherly. They felt rather dangerous and very sensual.

Soon his entire palm soothed and smoothed her skin. He ran his hands leisurely down her sides, over her buttocks and back up to her neck. The sensation was a combination of comfort and arousal. How could he do that?

He shifted down her legs and she felt his hands cup and kneed the swell of her bottom. She hid her face in her arms, folded about her head. Thank Mac Lir the half-elf couldn’t see the flush on her face. He would take an inordinate amount of pride from her embarrassment. When his fingers explored the valley separating her buttocks and at the same time, his other hand slipped around her hip and dipped into the hollow of her pelvis, Feenix gasped with surprise. The mere touch of his fingers sent liquid fire rushing through her veins.

“What are you doing?”

“Relax, my flower. I am merely learning about your body and how it responds to my touch. Enjoy.”

Enjoy. By the god’s blue eye, she was enjoying it all right, but how could she relax with his fingers touching her in ways no man had ever taken the time to attempt? L’Garn’s hands warmed her blood as well as her soul. She felt him lean forward and kiss her neck and shoulders, while sliding his hands up and under her chest to fill his palms with her breasts. Instinctively, she picked up her head and shoulders to allow him better access.

“Ah, so full and heavy you are, Feenix. Your breasts are magnificent, and the nubs so responsive to my touch.”

His warm breath tickled against her ear as he continued to lick and nuzzle her neck and ear lobes. She began to tremble in his arms. An urgent pressure started to build deep within her womb. Moisture collected at her woman’s flesh and the need for him made her moan.

Again he shifted, this time to the side so her entire body was now open to his sight and touch. His mouth never left her skin. He licked and nipped a lazy path to her waist.

Not content to simply lay passive, Feenix snaked her hand down by her side and touched his leg. It seemed to surprise him, for she heard him suck in his breath. With a smile, she began to explore the flesh within her reach.

His skin was cool to her touch; the fine hairs along his legs and thigh tickled her hand. She knew her touch excited him, but she was unable to do more than stroke and tease his leg due to her position.

His lips reached the swell of her buttocks, and she gasped as he gently, but firmly bit the left side.

“You are mine, Feenix. Never forget that. Mine.”

His hand smoothed down the back of her thigh, before he slid it between her thighs and under her pelvis to cup her moist mound. She moaned again and thought she had never felt anything so wonderful in her life.

At his silent urging, she rose onto her knees to allow him free access.

“Yes,” he breathed on the flesh of her thigh as his fingers slid inside her hot body. His other hand returned to her tender breasts, teasing and caressing her nipples, rolling the tips between his fingers. The combined sweet torture was almost more than she could bear.

“L’Garn,” she moaned as her body began to sway with the rhythm of his fingers. She had never felt anything so intensely delicious; even her toes tingled from his silky ministrations. Soon the pressure building within had her writhing and moaning like a wild beast. She sensed that L’Garn, too, was finding it more and more difficult to take a slow pace to ecstasy.

Feenix rose completely onto her hands and knees. In this position she was able to bring her head around to kiss his side. He shifted to allow her full access to his chest and flat stomach. She used her lips and tongue to good advantage; two could play at his game.

“Do you know how beautiful you are, Feenix?” He was panting as if he had run a long race.

She didn’t think he really required an answer, so she licked his chest and made a slow progress to his waist. By the time her lips found his arousal, they were both trembling from need.

She kissed his hip—then bit him as he had done her.

“By Mc Lir’s ears, L’Garn, put me out of my misery!”

Again she found herself on her back with his mouth covering hers. The kiss was deep and demanding. Their hands were everywhere, dipping into slippery crevices and sliding over smooth raised areas. The hard ridge of him pressed against her moist softness. Feenix could wait no longer.

She raised her legs and captured him before he could do more than moan with pleasure. Then with a powerful thrust of his hips, they became one being.

“Wrap your legs around me and hold on, my flower.”

Feenix complied without a comment, as she was too busy sucking and nibbling on his neck and shoulders to answer.

In a fluid motion, L’Garn stood, his manhood buried deep within Feenix’s hot body. The feeling was more intense than any she had ever experienced, and she was no untried maiden, she admitted.

L’Garn kissed her again as if he needed to draw her soul from deep within her. As their mouths melded, he carried her to the large padded chair. With each step, Feenix felt him impale her body over and over, and the sensation was beyond her comprehension. She was going to fall over the edge into pure bliss any moment.

“Put your feet down,” he murmured as he sat in the chair and leaned back. Feenix found herself in a position that allowed her complete control of the situation. She could ride him like a prized stallion while he had free access to her aching breasts.

He put his head back and closed his eyes. As she moved against him, his groans of pleasure filled her heart with love. There was no other word for it. She loved him. She wanted to please him in ways she had never considered with other men.

But there was not a single reason in the Seven Cella Worlds why she couldn’t please him on her own terms.

The pleasure mounted for them both, and she felt her heart fuse with his, just as their bodies fused in a way that was meant to be. No other male completed her like L’Garn. No other had touched her heart and soul as he did. She was meant to be with him forever. He was her destiny.

With a final lunge, L’Garn held her hips tightly, straining with an intense release. Feenix herself felt as if she had been thrown to the stars and was now floating back to the loving arms of Tylana.

For many moments they held each other in silence as their galloping hearts slowed, and their breathing returned to normal. As the sweat on her body began to evaporate, she shifted in his arms. They needed to talk.

“If I become your mate, half-elf,” she mumbled against his sweat-coated chest, “you had better resign yourself to a few things.”

“And what would they be, my flower?” His voice was rough and raw from the great yell that erupted from him the moment he had climaxed in her arms.

“First, there will be no experimenting with other women or female elves! Got that? I don’t care how much you want to learn about humans and their behaviors. You will keep all your experimenting right here with this human!”

She felt him smile against her hair.

“I would not have the stamina to experiment with other females, Teela. Learning about you takes all my strength.”

His fingers were busy releasing her long hair from its braid.

“Also, I am a warrior, first, last and always,” she continued, “I don’t want you telling me what I can and can’t do a few months from now! I’m my own woman and come and go as I please.” Her fingers were enjoying the feel of his crisp beard and the way his silvan ears tipped.

“As long as I am by your side at all times, my flower, I will not quibble with that.” He licked the hollow of her throat and fondled her breast with warm hands. “Is that all?”

“No, by Mc Lir’s toe, that’s not all. However,” her breathing became erratic as he licked her nipple and then drew the hard tip into his mouth where his tongue played tag with it. “I, um...I’ll draw up a list and give it to you later.”

“It will have to be much later, Feenix,” he mouthed against her breast. “Right now I need to do some more experimentation on your human body.”

By the god’s beard, he felt good! She squirmed in anticipation of the next bout of love making.

“Just one thing.” He leaned back and looked at her with a stern and serious look on his face.

Oh, gods! What now, she wondered?

“I’ll expect you to do a better job at taking care of my garments than you have in the past, or I will regret the loss of the royal treasure to replace the clothing you insist upon ruining.”

For a heartbeat she didn’t see the twinkle in his eyes. Then she pulled back her fist and punched him in the stomach.

L’Garn accommodated her efforts with a satisfying grunt when her fist connected with his hard abdomen. Then, claiming her lips with another soul-shattering kiss, he proceeded to further his studies of the human body in his arms.

EPILOGUE

The mating ceremony between Prince L’Garn of the House of Meedrion and Captain Feenix of Port Marcus resembled a battle more than a celebration.

The Sea Elves of Shalridoor were represented by the newly returned Lord J’Laris Hiloris, head of the Ruling House; Elawae, his beautiful and wise bond-mate; lords and ladies from each of the Five Houses, as well as Lord Mithris, chief commander of the Shalridoor Army.

The Night Elves of Cragimore were represented by the young King Balrin; his father and co-regent, Sarnett; various nobles from the noble families, as well as Lord Katizink, supreme commander of the Cragimore Army.

Scattered about the wooded *Illoytae*, or Glen of Peace, were the combined armies of the two Elfin nations. An uneasy truce and peace had been forged between the old enemies after three nights of difficult negotiations.

Feenix had played a large part in those negotiations as Mac Lir’s mediator. L’Garn and Rendolin had also had a large part to play. Now that the treaties had been signed and witnessed, it was hoped by all that the life-affirming ceremony that was about to take place would help meld the two nations, and solidify their determination to thwart the demon god’s evil plan.

“By the Seven Cella Worlds, in the presence of these witnesses, and in the name of Mac Lir, I seal this pair—L’Garn of Cragimore and Feenix of Shalridoor—mates together for life.”

Feenix startled at the way Rendolin used her name. To claim her as a member of Shalridoor was a great honor, and one she had not expected.

L’Garn gave her hand a quick squeeze and smiled at her. He looked as if he had known that Rendolin was going to claim her as a member of the Sea Elf nation. The pride on his face meant more to her than all the jewels in Cragimore’s treasury.

By the god’s ear, she finally belonged to someone. And he belonged to her. In all her years, Feenix would never have believed this day would come about. She had never even allowed herself to dream of it!

In a ritual similar to that of a Binding, L’Garn crushed aromatic herbs into a chalice of wine that Rendolin held. Ancient silvan words were spoken, and Feenix smelled Rendolin’s magical scent of rosemary mingle with the other herbs and wine.

She had been present at the Binding of Korrene and Rendolin and remembered that they had shared more than just herbs and wine. They had been required to mingle their blood for the mystical Binding to take place. It had been effective, she was sure, but Feenix preferred to confine her bloodletting to the battlefield.

“Prince L’Garn. Lady Feenix.” Rendolin’s voice held the energy of Power, and the skin at Feenix’s nape crawled, as it always did in the presence of magic. “Drink and seal your lives together.”

The half-elf prince raised the goblet to his lips and drank, his ice blue eyes never leaving her face. Without a word, he handed the chalice to her, and she drank without hesitation. Her heart warmed at his approving smile.

It was done. Feenix was now mated to L’Garn. She had never felt so happy and free in her entire life.

The celebrations lasted all night, and into the dawn. The shade of the Darkening Wood provided safety for the Night Elves from the deadly rays of the sun. While the people from the

two nations ate, drank, danced and sang, a few select members from the combined forces met to discuss much weightier things.

How would they stop Tuawtha?

“Mac Lir was firm that the three Elfin Nations needed to combine forces to defeat the demon god,” Rendolin said, for the hundredth time, Feenix was sure.

His Bonded mate, Korrene, stood at his side looking radiant and happy. They had announced earlier that she and Rendolin would be parents in the spring. They were constantly smiling and touching each other.

By the god’s toe, they should retire to their tent, Feenix thought, wishing she and L’Garn could sneak off, too.

“A company should be chosen to journey to the Wood Elves’ home, Ashilor,” suggested Lord J’Laris.

“They will never come out of their trees if they see Night Elves in the party,” Lord Katizink laughed. “We have put the fear of the gods into them!”

“The idea is to talk with them, commander, not terrorize them.”

“L’Garn is right,” Rendolin spoke up. “Unfortunately, so is Lord Commander Katizink. If Ashilor sees Night Elves returning to their glades, the Wood Elf nation will simply disappear and we will not be able to speak with them.”

“But there must be a representative of each nation to prove our good faith, my son.” J’Laris never seemed to pass up the opportunity to acknowledge his family, Feenix noted. It must be a glorious thing to be part of a family, and she was looking forward to experiencing it herself with L’Garn.

“Might I make a suggestion?”

Thelorin, eldest son of the House of Hiloris, and until the return of his father, Lord of Hiloris, spoke quietly from the shadows. Feenix had forgotten his presence, so quiet and reserved had he been. It wasn’t wise to forget about Thelorin.

“Speak, Thelorin.” As a regent of the Night Elves, L’Garn presided over the discussions, despite the fact that young King Balrin was also present. The youth was merely there in a learning and observing capacity. Everyone knew that Prince L’Garn held the real power in the Night Elf nation.

“Thank you, Prince L’Garn,” Thelorin bowed formally. He always was a formally correct slave to protocol, Feenix remembered. She was not going to miss Thelorin Hiloris, now that she was mated to L’Garn.

“The solution is quite simple, it seems to me,” Thelorin began. “The Wood Elves who had been slaves in Cragimore should be equipped and given rations to return to Ashilor. They will advise the Wood Elf council to expect us.”

Murmured assents and heads nodding encouraged Thelorin to continue.

“I suggest we send a proclamation and treaty signed by all of the silvan leaders here, so Ashilor will know who and what to expect. The negotiations party sent to Ashilor should be a fairly small one, and since Captain Feenix is the god’s mediator, she of course is required to go. Her new mate, Prince L’Garn, should go with her, representing the Night Elves. He is, after all, the royal prince and co-regent.”

“Not to mention half human, and so not a threat as a Night Elf, is that what you are saying?” L’Garn’s face darkened with anger.

“Peace, your highness.” Thelorin held up his hands in a non-threatening way. “I meant no disrespect. However, you must see that, for a number of reasons, you are the best representative

for your people.”

“He’s right, L’Garn,” Feenix agreed. “Besides, I would really like you to come. After all,” she dropped her voice seductively, “we’ve only just become mated. Think of all the possibilities on the road...”

She was rewarded with a sensuous grin.

“Very well. I will accompany Feenix as the representative of the Night Elves.”

“I will represent the Sea Elves.”

Thelorin’s statement caused everyone around the table to pause.

“But your father has just returned to us,” Elawae said. “We have not been a complete family for many years because we thought him dead. You must stay and get to know him again.”

“A few more days will not matter, Mother,” Thelorin reasoned. “Besides, you and Father need time alone to discover each other again. Even if I stayed, you do not need me to do that.”

“But Thelorin, you must to be here to inform him of everything that has transpired since you have been acting as the governor of Sasheena. He can not be expected to resume control of the government overnight.”

Feenix thought she saw tears in the lovely silvan lady’s eyes.

“J’Laris is quite capable of discerning the situation for himself. All the records are complete and up to date. The transfer of power does not need me to be complete. Moreover, as I have been functioning in the capacity of the Lord of Hiloris for so many years, I am the logical representative to go.”

When Elawae would have protested further, her lord intervened.

“Thelorin is right. He is the logical choice. I will renew my son’s acquaintance when he returns from the journey.”

“Then it is settled,” Rendolin decreed, after a brief silence. “The freed Wood Elves will return to Ashilor with a treaty from our two nations. The peace negotiation party will consist of Thelorin of the Sea Elves, Prince L’Garn of the Night Elves, and Captain Feenix as Mac Lir’s mediator.”

Wonderful, Feenix thought as she watched all the elves around the table nod in agreement. She was going to be plagued by the biggest pain in the ass Shalridoor had ever produced, while simultaneously trying to enjoy a trip with her newly mated love. *Mac Lir, you son of a sea whore, I’ll bet you think this is funny, don’t you?*

Feenix didn’t expect a reply, and wasn’t disappointed when the god remained silent.

“Agreed,” L’Garn said. “However, I refuse to leave in the morning. Feenix and I will enjoy one full day and night before leaving on what could be a very dangerous journey.”

Ah, she loved her half-elf! At times like this, they thought alike.

“Very well,” J’Laris said. “In two days’ time, the party will set off for the forest of Ashilor.”

“And may Mac Lir protect and guide them,” Rendolin prayed.

“Come, my flower,” L’Garn whispered in her ear, as the participants of the discussion began to wander off to their own sleeping quarters. “Let us do some more exploring before the sun comes up.”

Yes, she thought again. At times like this, they most definitely thought alike.

~*~

The sea god, Mac Lir, looked upon the gathering of his children, those of the night and those of the sea. The only children missing were those of the woodlands, but his plan was progressing.

Soon even those wayward children would be embraced into the silvan fold once more, if the plan remained on course.

He conceded that Tuawtha's evil scheme could still come to fruition. The Laws of the Universe prevented gods from personal combat, which is why they must use any tool to hand in order to ensure their goals. Mac Lir's honor forbade him to use any but his own children for his purposes. The demon god had no such scruples.

The god cast his eyes about the wooded *Illoytae* and smiled. Too long it had stood vacant of his silvan ones. This mating celebration was the beginning of many old wounds being healed.

A movement along the perimeter of the glen caught his eye. Thelorin of the House of Hiloris watched the gathering with a pensive air. The displaced lord wore an aura of darkness that Mac Lir knew had nothing to do with the night or even his kin, the Night Elves.

Soon, Thelorin's mettle would be tested, and the fate of Mac Lir's plan, and the entire silvan race, would rest on those broad shoulders. The demon god would not be easily stopped, and the elf lord must be strong enough to withstand Tuawtha's designs.

The god cast his eyes northwest. There, in the forest of Ashilor, awaited the unlikely forge that would temper and refine Mac Lir's tool named Thelorin.

The next phase of his plan had begun.

THE END

Glossary – Tylana People, Places & Things

- Carthig*** – Large, yellow moon. Generally, the first of Tylana's two moons to rise.
- Draelu*** – Dark Serpent god. Creator of all reptiles and crawling creatures.
- Elemjiah*** – Human god, creator of all humans.
- Eon*** – Small blue moon. Generally, the second of Tylana's two moons to rise.
- Illoytae*** – Sacred meeting ground; Glen of Peace.
- Lunteena*** – Delicate, magical sailing ships.
- Mac Lir*** – Silvan god, creator of all magical humanoids, including elves, faeries, nymphs, pixies and the like.
- Shalen*** – Band of young, male silvan warriors.
- Shaleni*** – Silvan female of low morals.
- Tilsark*** – A person of irregular, inferior, or dubious origin; an obnoxious or nasty person.
- Tuawtha*** – Demon god, creator of all dark humanoid creatures, including demons, ogres, trolls and the like.

About the author of THE CHOOSING



When she was three years old, PhyllisAnn stood in the middle of her grandmother's cement birdbath and enchanted an audience at a family reunion by telling stories of her magical world where little girls were actually fairy-princesses, and all brothers were trolls. When she was eight she invented a community of gnomes that lived in the attic of their old, 1756 New England farm house. Many years later, she is still weaving stories of magic and beauty. PhyllisAnn is the mother of four ages 9 to 21, and the wife of her high school sweetheart. They all live together with a cat and a Cocker Spaniel (both names for her characters) in central Massachusetts, along with various romantic characters who don't believe an author needs to sleep.

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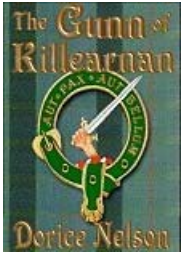
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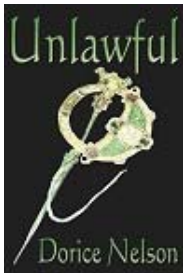
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