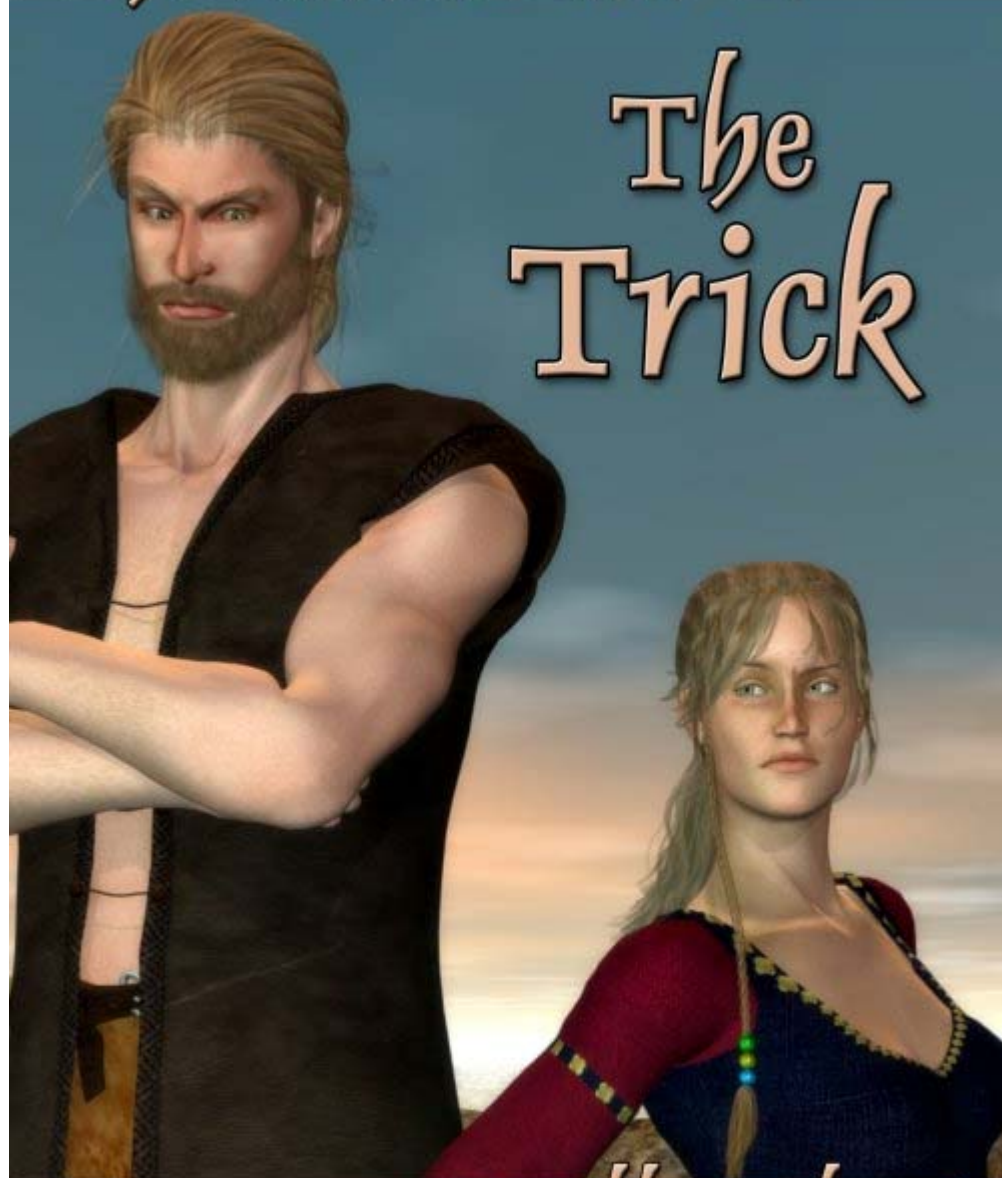


The Finest Line 2:

# The Trick



Loose Id

Willa Okati

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# THE FINEST LINE 2: THE TRICK

Willa Okati

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

# The Finest Line 2: The Trick

Willa Okati

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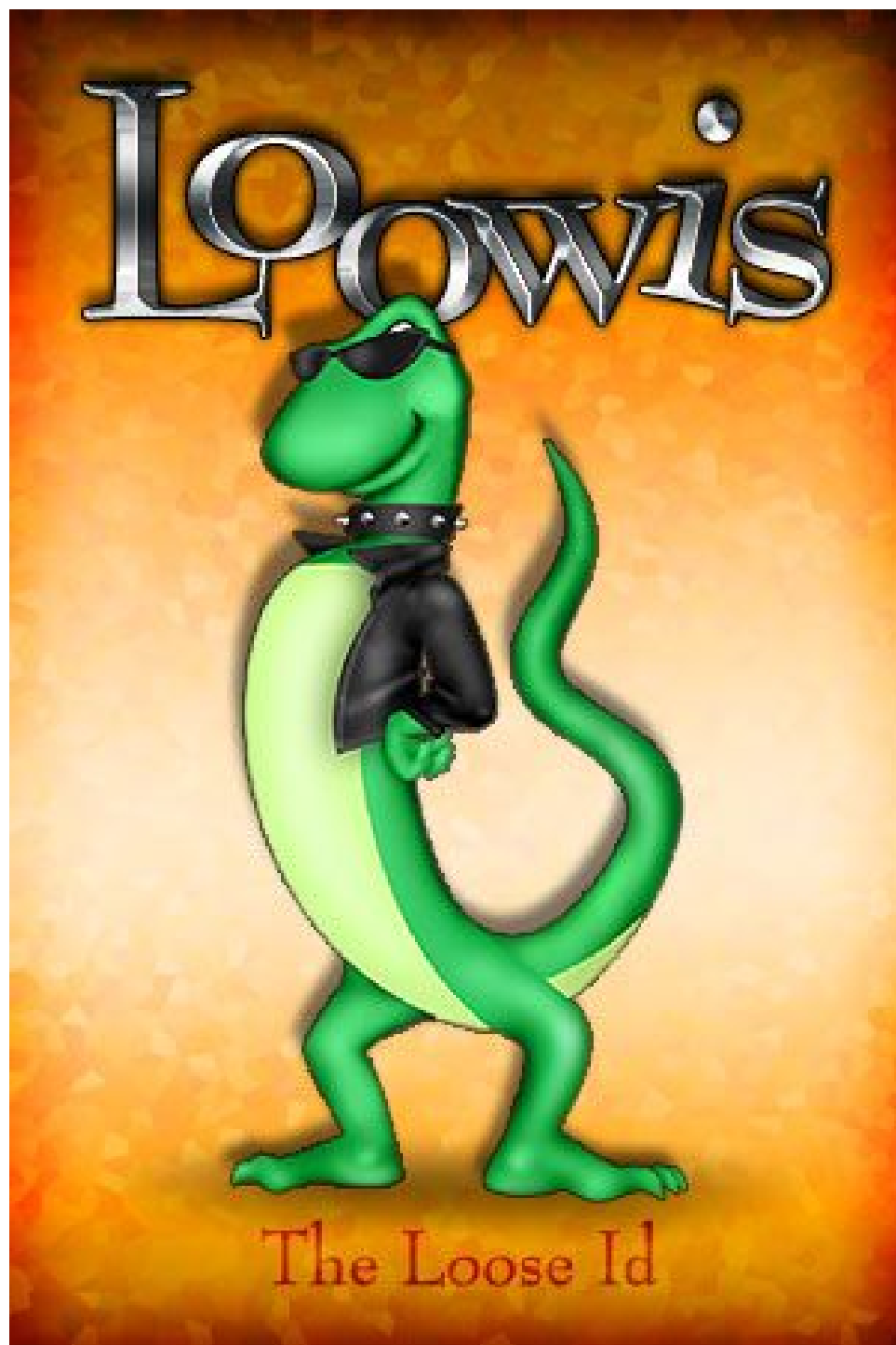
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## Chapter One

Standing at the top of the deep-cut steps down to the beach, Benec hunched deep inside the collar of his cloak, scowled to himself, and muttered dark things against all women. He tossed a few pebbles down the incline and listened until he could no longer hear the rat-a-tat of their fall.

A fine day for a man to be stuck outside, indeed! He stuffed his hands into his jerkin's pockets and shivered miserably. The cold wind cutting up off the sea was a proper killer. A hot cup of tea would have gone down something wonderful, but there was no one to make it or bring it, and he'd not go back inside the stronghold before nightfall for his life's worth. Sounded like a city's worth of beehives had been moved in there, all preparing for the next day's wedding. Cooking, cleaning, decorating, sewing --

He shuddered, remembering worse things yet. Two ancient dressmakers brought up from the village had scurried this way and that, arms full of cloth and mouths full of pins. Somewhere in the middle of the mess, Rose was being dressed like a doll -- he knew, for he'd passed by the wrong door in search of the pantry and had gotten a horrifying eyeful.

*Women!*

The other men had escaped down to the beach, rakes in hand, planning to dig clams for their dinner. He'd turned down the offer to join them; his right hand still ached from the splinter he'd gotten gathering driftwood last eve. He hadn't much felt like joining them anyhow; he'd rather be alone.

*Well, almost alone.* A while ago, the strange Catkin, Edge, had slunk past him on all fours. She'd given him a long, blank stare, stood up on her legs in a full stretch, then curled up bonelessly on the path before him. Chin on her forearms, eyes half-slitted, she watched the men digging clams, far too lazy herself to lope down the steps and join them.

He would have liked to pet her, to touch that light down of golden fur, but didn't care to have his hand bitten off. Like her wild cousins, Edge had very, very sharp teeth that she didn't mind showing all at once in big smiles that made him instantly nervous.

He glanced quickly away, down toward the shore. From that distance, Cloud looked no bigger than a lizard. He'd rolled his trouser legs up to his knees and was racing circles around the others grubbing in the sand. "He's still a child," Benec muttered aloud. "Too young for all this."

Edge rolled over on her back and looked curiously at him. "No, I'm not talking to you," Benec snapped. "I might as well talk to the waves and expect them to answer me back. Might as well do that as try to talk some sense into Cloud or the prince."

He kicked at the edge of the first step, glaring down at the men on the beach. "It's the strangest thing in the world for Cloud to go and do such a thing," he mumbled. "Hasn't he seen the best of men turn to mush when there's a woman involved? It stops being 'I think' and 'I will' as soon as a poor fellow says 'I do'; then, there's nothing but 'Yes, dear,' and 'No, of course not, darling.' How many times did we laugh at that?" He tossed his hands up in exasperation and made a sour, ugly face. "What is his response? He turns right around and falls into the trap himself."

Edge yawned, blinking at him.



“What, am I entertaining you?” he demanded. “Should I go on?”

She shrugged.

“Well? Just look at him playing down there, jumping around like an overgrown colt!” Benec burst out, glowering. “Back when Cloud first came to Amahpre, he was greener than unripe figs! He listened to me when I tried to teach him how to survive. And see? He’s still alive. I thought he’d grown a bit, turned into a man. Behold what happened when he stopped listening to good advice. Faugh!”

Benec threw another pebble down the steps. “Human women are faithless, Edge, and fickle, bound to break your heart and suckle every coin from your pockets. I taught him that. And what does he do, first chance he gets? He slings a wedding noose around his own neck. Young idiot!”

Edge idly inspected a handful of finely sharpened claws.

“Oh, don’t flash those pig-stickers at me. You chose to come all the way out here from wherever you started, and I don’t see you dragging a mate along by the scruff. You should know it’s a finer life when you’re not tied down.”

The Catkin puckered her muzzle slightly. She scratched at the surface of the rock with one claw. After a long pause, she shrugged.

Benec shook his head, his gloom deepening. “I’d have sworn that Cloud felt the same way. But look how fast he lost his head, heart, and hand to that red-headed Rose. If it happened to Cloud, could it happen to me? Could I be such a fool? I can’t tell, but I don’t think so ...”

He raked a hand through his hair. “No, surely not. Women! I’ve seen them beautiful -- and not been enticed; I’ve seen them smart -- and not been bothered with them; and I’ve seen them ladylike -- and not wanted to go near them.”

Edge rolled over lazily and batted at his boots with a paw. “What about me? You take me?”

“Not likely!”

“You break my heart,” she said dryly.

He gave her a dark look. “Let me assure you, cat, if I ever do completely lose my mind and decide to wed -- which I warn and promise you I will never, not ever, do! -- it will be to a human, for a start.”

Edge tilted her head to one side, quizzical. “So picky. What pleases you, then?”

Thrown by the question, Benec exhaled slowly. Besides ... her ... he’d never had a woman that satisfied him in the whole of his life. After exposure to a harpy like Tirsah, who wouldn’t be soured?

He’d had his chances. Every dirty city street in Amahpre, the King’s City, had at least a dozen harlots, professional or not, tagging gamely along after any man who looked like he might have a copper to waste. Sometimes they said as much, sometimes not, but everyone knew they were available for the right price.

Thin to the point of being gaunt, dressed in tawdry rags with eyes like flint, the women still had full breasts to flaunt and a way of curling around a man like a sly kitten, pouting and tugging at his arm if he proved reluctant. He’d gone with a pretty one a time or two, but without fail, he’d lost his nerve or his interest and sent the trollop off with a swat on the bum and a coin he’d warned her to spend on food, not ale. Had he been a smaller man or less seen in company with the prince, he’d have come in for some jeering at his “monkish” ways.

“No woman at all is the best woman in the world,” he informed the Catkin. “I need no whores or hags in my life. I’m fine just as I am. Alone.”

“You think?” Edge stood, stretching languorously. “I show you different.” And in a trice, she was on him.

She moved in the strange way of the Catkin, boneless and supple, almost too fast to see. Her hands, fingertips rough with callus, slid up his calves to his thighs. Somehow -- he never

knew how -- her body followed her hands, gliding up his torso. Her downy, bare breasts pressed tight against his skin as she rose higher, hands gripping only lightly, climbing him without any effort at all. Weightless.

Rooted to the spot, he gaped at Edge's wild, fey face as she twined her hands deep into his hair and locked her ankles behind the small of his back. Her lips touched his, small and warm, tasting of spicy ginger and cloves. Her kiss was not gentle. She bit at him with her sharp little teeth, startling his mouth open.

It had been too many years since someone had kissed him like that, as if she would devour him whole whether he willed it or not. And he did not choose it now!

"No," he protested into her hungry mouth. Not out there, on the bright cliffs, with all to see -- no, not with *Edge*, the wild Catkin he barely knew. He managed to wrest his lips away from hers, objecting wordlessly.

She laughed, wild and free. "This is not your liking?" she purred, arching her throat back in pure pleasure. She wriggled her pelvis against his. "But you lie! You want me now. This is what Catkin can do."

Benec fought for air. His cock, which had been behaving itself quite nicely, rose up stiff and tight against the outline of his trousers and pulsed in rhythm with his heart: *want, want, want!* Moisture dampened his forehead as he fought with the sudden surge of lust. Was it a sort of magic or witchery that the Catkin possessed? Could she put thoughts into his mind? He sensed that perhaps she could. He suddenly knew things about her he would not have dreamed or guessed at before. Such raw sexuality, so much heat and passion -- she could devour a man whole and not be satisfied. He could see her tipping him onto his back and mounting him, rising high and sinking down deep on his cock, or, like the cat that she was, on her hands and knees, glancing back over her shoulder at him, grinning a feral grin as he mounted her, gripped her with his hands, and sank fully inside ...

“No!” Benec struggled up through the mist like a drowning man, fought away from the images, and, with a tremendous effort, reached between them to drag her hands away from his hair and his head.

As if he’d made a wonderful joke, the Catkin laughed full-throatedly. One easy twitch of her muscles and she arced away from him, landing on her feet coolly, as if she’d been napping in the shade. She slicked back the rumpled short fur on her back.

Benec strained to control the quaking of his muscles. “Take your witchery off me,” he rasped.

Edge shook her head carelessly. “Go find your other self and get her to help.”

“I have no other self.”

The Catkin sniffed. “Says you,” she informed him, curling into a neat ball. Once again she seemed more cat than woman; even her eyes changed in some indefinable way. “I say different. You will see. In time.” She chortled.

Disappointment and relief surprised him with equal keenness. She’d never meant to -- thanks be!

Edge apparently found his gaping mouth exquisitely funny. She rolled over on her back to laugh at him and exposed her belly -- a perfectly normal, sexless cat’s belly -- to the warm sunlight. “Mouth can shut now,” she teased him. “No more lips to kiss.”

His face burned hot. She howled with laughter. “So shy!” she managed between giggles. “Old-man little-boy!”

“You little vixen!”

“Not vixen. Catkin. Catkin queen.” She purred luxuriously, stretching long and slow in a lazy arc across the sand-dusted stones. “Good kitty. I belong to another; he will say so when he loves me true.”

Benec’s eyes flew open wide. “You --! Who?”

“I never, never tell.”

“And just what would this mysterious *he* think of what you’ve been up to today?”

Edge shrugged one small shoulder. “He not like it. I go make up to him soon. But you had to get mind woken up, yes? Mind *and* body. You have a body of great power, Benec. And so much shame, you like old lady!” she cried in delight. “Edge had to wake you up. Else you *never* move! I move you good.”

She jumped lithely to her feet, scrambled to the edge of the cliff, and peered down. The long, slender tail attached to the base of her spine waved gently. “Clams!” she exclaimed in delight. “Buckets of clams!”

“What?” Benec followed her rapt gaze and flinched. Lorn, Paedro, and Cloud were already halfway up the hike to the top of the cliff, lugging buckets and baskets heaped to the brim.

He backed away hastily. “Lovely, perfect, the icing on it all! Watch my dust, Edge; I’m not staying here to get tied up in a chat with lover boy.”

“Says you.” Edge had eyes only for the approaching clams. “More for me.”

Thinking fast, Benec scrambled back. Run he would, but where? If he went around the front, he’d bang into Tirsah pottering in her arbor. He couldn’t escape down the cliff to the beach. The stronghold tempted him, but -- ugh!

He cocked an ear to listen for the men. What, were they running up the stairs? Another few seconds and they’d reach the top. No bushes to hide behind, no trees to climb, nothing but stone, stone, stone, and that huge, low table -- wait, wait! The table. It would have to be the table.

He eyed the thing in active distaste. One vast sheet of slate dropped atop two rough-cut granite blocks. Short granite blocks. Perhaps, oh, two feet between table and cobblestones, and who knew what sort of spiders and beasties lived under there?

Oh ...! There was nothing for it. Benec dived and rolled beneath the vast sheet of slate, wiggling and kicking to wedge himself deeper in.

Faugh! He'd been right. There were spiders. In plenty.

Paedro gained the terrace just in time to catch a glimpse of Benec's feet disappearing beneath the table. He chuckled quietly to himself. Poor Benec! He couldn't have pleased them better had he tried.

"Did you see where he's hidden?" he whispered to Cloud. The boy grinned and winked at Lorn, flicking his finger toward the slab.

The chieftain nodded, dropping his baskets of shellfish. He lifted his hands and examined them. The basket straps had cut into his flesh, leaving red and white wheals.

Cloud nudged him. "Are you hurt?"

"Nay," Lorn growled. "Old hands, old bones. Time was I could play like a rowdy on the beach from sunup to sundown. Not any more."

"Then sit down, Chieftain!" Paedro dropped onto the stone slab and thumped the sun-warmed surface with the flat of his hand. "There's time to rest a bit."

Lorn eased down, careful of his boots. "Hope this'll hold our weight," he muttered to Paedro. "Hope more that Tirsah won't catch us using the astrologer's table this way. Oof!" He dropped to his seat with a grunt.

Cloud stretched out full-length atop the table, tucking his hands behind his head. "A fine day," he said dreamily. "A shame Benec isn't here to enjoy it with us!"

"I could stand to have him here," the prince agreed. "We have so many important things to talk about -- ouch!"

"Clams! Clams!" Edge dropped to all fours and wound around Paedro's ankles, gazing up pleadingly. "Give me!"

"You want some, do you, little Catkin?" The prince snatched up his basket and held it just out of her reach, teasing her. "Why did you bite me, then?"

"Not bite hard," she pouted, her eyes fixed on the clams. "Give me!"

Paedro took one clam from the basket and balanced it in his palm. “We worked hard to gather these. Why should I give you one? No, no, no claws now! We’ll make a bargain.”

Edge eyed him suspiciously, her tail swishing back and forth. “What bargain?”

“Sing for your supper,” Paedro requested. “Give us one of the old stories.”

“For one clam? You crazy.”

“For half of my basketful of clams.” He held it up to tempt her. “Well?”

She hesitated. “No fiddle.”

“No matter. You can sing without it.”

“Half the basket?” Edge kneaded the rock, thinking hard. “Bargain,” she said at last. “You still crazy.”

“Enough of that, little purrer. I heard enough of you at the dance to know what a fine musician you are. It’s been too many long years since I heard a Catkin sing the old stories, and I’d pay a higher price to hear them again.”

“Which song?”

“You choose,” he said, giving her a pointed look. *Sing the song I asked for earlier*, he mouthed, *and you will have all the clams you can eat.*

Edge smiled a Catkin’s strange smile and dropped to her haunches. She wove slightly back and forth, purring. The sound grew higher and shriller until, suddenly, it became the first wailing note in a key no human could ever reach:

*Prideful singer, prideful tongue,*

*Cost her love when she was young,*

*Cost her love, and then her life,*

*For refusing to be the gray tom’s wife.*

*Moonsister, moon’s sister, moonsinger.*

*Queen of cats, she bade him leave,  
 And prideful puss, she was well pleased,  
 Yet tom yet swore she'd be his wife,  
 And came back that eve with a sweet silver knife.  
 Moonsister, moon's sister, moonsinger.*

*Now proud silver lady -- go weep, and go pray.-  
 Moonsister! Moon's sister! Moonsinger!  
 Weep for pride held too dear, for love flown away.  
 Sing, moon's sister, moonsister, oh, sing!*

The Catkin finished her song with a scream of grief and rage that drenched the air, silencing all but the sea for a long moment. Paedro had gone pale, but applauded, slowly at first, then with enthusiasm. "Well done!" he praised. "A fine job, Edge."

She plunked down on her haunches and wound her tail around her feet. "I sing for Catkin queens once," she informed him. "Give me clams now."

*And so on, and so on, and so forth, Benec grouched. The whole world's obsessed with weddings. Just once I'd like to hear a song about a bachelor setting up house for himself and doing quite well, thank you!*

Wedge under the table like a cork in a bottle, Benec tried to wiggle into a more comfortable position and failed utterly. The tight space might be bearable for a small woman or a child, but Benec was miserable. His feet had already fallen asleep, crammed as they were against the table supports.



*If that doesn't figure. Can't just pass by, no! They have to stop and laze around in the sun. If they stay much longer, I'm going to be permanently bent in this angle!*

Benec decided that he didn't like Catkin songs. Who would, when they sounded like the wailing of banshees? Yet some strange power in their music seized a man somehow -- and had made him listen against his will.

Benec scowled in disgust and blew an inquisitive beetle off the tip of his nose. "Oh, really! If it were a dog howling like that, they'd have shot him on the spot to put him out of his misery," he muttered under his breath. "I'd rather have listened to a raven screeching, come what might, after such a bad-luck omen ... but love songs -- hah!"

Paedro lowered the basket so that Edge could delve into it. "Here's your prize, little one. Not just clams, but you've earned mussels and oysters, too."

Edge attacked the shellfish as if she hadn't eaten in weeks. Eager to get at the sweet, fresh meat, she banged them against the table until they cracked open. Chips of shell ricocheted everywhere, some into Benec's face, sticking to his hot cheeks.

"Stop it!" he hissed. "Stop!"

She hissed back at him.

Paedro struggled not to laugh. Not only trapped, but pelted by shells! Benec must be about ready to spit, his nerves worked up to a razor edge.

"Best we get these open," Lorn said abruptly. "Go to spoiling soon in the shells. I'd as soon not waste our afternoon's work."

"Up and at it, then, lazybones." Paedro reached a hand out to Cloud. "Do you have my knife?"

"I do, at that." Cloud passed it over -- small, silver, and sharp -- and dug out his own prized blade, made of burnished bronze.

Lorn pulled a stone blade out of its carrying-loop on his boot. "Stone's not so good as metal," he grunted, "but it'll hold a charm. Haven't cut my fingers by mischance in years.

Each man dug into his own basket, selecting the best-looking of the clams they'd harvested. They inserted their knife blades into the tight seal between the two halves of the shells and levered, popping them open with a sucking sound. Scooping out the soft, slimy innards, they tossed the shells over the cliffside and dropped the meat into a fresh basket half-filled with salt water. They amused themselves with tossing Edge a fresh bit every now and then and watching her scamper after it. Good work, satisfying work. Work that took a good long time to finish.

Trapped underneath the table, Benec would surely go crazy before they were halfway done. Paedro knew he would be listening desperately for any sign that they were getting even near finished and heard through keen listening every word they had to say.

The prince judged the moment to be right when he started hearing the small scratchings and scrabbings of Benec trying to change positions. He winked at Lorn and Cloud. "Now, Chieftain, what was that you started to tell me down on the beach? Your niece Tirsah is in love with Benec?"

*THUNK!*

The men barely stopped themselves from howling at the unmistakable sound of Benec's skull cracking into the underside of the table. He must have nigh jumped out of his skin!

Lorn's face was a mask of concentration as he brought out his practiced lines. "Odd enough, and with Benec, yet. Never would have thought it, me."

"Who would have?" The prince cracked open a fresh shell. "Are you sure that she loves Benec?"

Lorn raised his shoulders in a shrug. "Only repeating what I heard. Believe me or not."

"But it can't be! Is it possible that she's trying to fool you, perhaps building up to a prank?"

Cloud sighed overloudly. “No ... It’s not just Lorn saying this, Paedro. I’m sure of it myself.”

“But how do you know?” Paedro persisted. “Did she tell you, or do you just suspect it? Forgive my doubts, but you must admit that’s a pretty hard story to swallow.”

“Well, it’s a strange, sad story. I wouldn’t tell it now, but ...” Cloud pretended to be sunk deep in thought. “If you want to hear it, I’ll tell it.”

“I do.”

“Lorn’s seen it for himself, but it was Rose who told me,” Cloud said. “She came to me last night and asked me, since I knew Benec so well, if there was anything that could be done. Tirsah’s been in torment ever since she laid eyes on Benec again. She saw how his time away had changed him -- turned him from a boy to a man -- and she lost her heart, like *that*.” He snapped his fingers.

Paedro tossed Edge an entire shelled oyster and watched her dive for it. He schooled his voice to sound deeply concerned. “That makes no sense. Tirsah is far too strong-minded - - and a mage, to boot -- to be fortune’s fool like that. Mages know how to guard their hearts. And tell me this: if she loves him, why has she been so sharp with him?”

“Confused her, didn’t it?” Lorn said, looking up. “Now hating, next loving. Shook her. Didn’t know up from down.”

“So she snapped at him just as she always has,” Cloud put in soberly. “Rose says Tirsah told her she wished she could have bitten her tongue in two when we arrived and she greeted him so harshly, and she wishes she had been able to fall through a hole in the ground. Now she doesn’t know what to do. She can’t take those words back, and every time she tries, she finds herself scolding him yet again when he goads her.”

“Benec knows nothing about any of this?” the prince asked. “What, is he blind? I must have been blindfolded myself. Now that I look back on the time we’ve spent here, I can see it clear as daylight.”

"You haven't seen a fraction of it," Cloud informed him. "Rose told me -- and she wept herself, pitying her cousin -- that whenever she's alone, Tirsah grieves for him and all her lost chances."

"Hasn't she said anything to him?"

"No, nothing, and she's vowed that she never will."

"But why not? What does she have to lose?"

"Ha!" Cloud rolled his eyes. "Everything, if you ask her. She and Benec are as much alike as peas in a pod. She knows how he'll react if she dares mention a word of it to him -- just as she would if you put the slipper on the other foot. No, she won't say a thing. She'll go out of her way to treat him harsh as ever, just so he won't suspect."

Paedro cut a piece of mussel in two and handed one half of it to Edge, who promptly batted it under the table, then seized the other half and ate it. He barely noticed.

"If Tirsah won't tell him, someone should."

"What point would there be in that?" Cloud protested. "He'd make a joke of it and never let her live it down."

"Huh." Paedro laid his knife down gently and gazed into space. "You're right, you know. I'd pay for the rope to hang him with over that. Benec would be a fool to turn her down. Tirsah is the finest woman I have ever known, and I mean that with everything that's in me."

"And she's the smartest woman who ever lived," Cloud added.

"Smart in everything except for falling in love with Benec," Paedro sighed. "Ah, well, when heart comes up against head, heart wins it every time that I've seen. Perhaps we should go to Benec ourselves."

"Bad idea! He'd burst a blood vessel. Tirsah will get over it in time, don't you think, Lorn?"

“Not much!” The stoic chieftain rolled his eyes. “Listen, you. My niece, she’s got a good heart and a hard head. If she can’t have Benec, which she won’t, she’ll break her heart over it. No use fretting. Just the way things are. Lot of bother over nothing.”

Paedro laughed dryly. “I wouldn’t mind if she’d bother me like that. In fact, I’d toss the rest of you cur dogs off the cliff and carry her away on the best horse I could find. But there! Her heart’s set on someone else. And I doubt he’ll ever know what he’s missing out on.”

They sat in gloomy silence for a moment, finishing the last of the shelling. Paedro wiped his knife on his jerkin and stood. “If you’ll allow it, Cloud, we’ll go and speak to Rose about this after the evening meal. She might have an idea or two. I think highly of Benec, but I wish he could take a good hard look at himself and then think twice about Tirsah. She’s worth more than any treasure in my kingdom. I wonder how quick he’d be to discard such a jewel if he knew its real value.”

He made a “that’s enough” signal with his hand. “Speaking of meals, shall we return to the house? We’ll dig a pit and roast these shellfish that are fit for the kings we are.”

They stretched, working out the kinks in their sore muscles, shouldered their baskets, and walked lazily around the corner. There, at last, they bent their heads together and indulged in a fit of gleeful whispering.

“He’s swallowed it whole; I’m sure of it! If that didn’t shake him up, nothing will!” Cloud exclaimed.

The prince pounded his hands together. “Oh, I’m confident! But we *must* make sure the same trap is set for Tirsah. Mims and Sela are ready and willing?”

“They know what’s what.” Lorn’s teeth flashed white in a broad grin. “Ohe! Haven’t had so much fun since I was a boy!”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Paedro promised. “Wait until they’re both head over heels for each other -- that’s when the real fun begins.”

Cloud's eyes lit with unholy glee. "Shall we send Tirsah to bring him to us for the meal?"

"Excellent!" Paedro clapped Cloud on the shoulder. "You do that. Onward, men, onward!"

Edge batted an empty shell around the cobblestones, enjoying the hollow sound it made and the comfortable, tight fullness in her belly. She pretended for a few minutes that the shell was a mouse, then grew bored and tossed it over the wall into the sea.

She jumped lightly onto the table and coiled herself in a tight circle, thinking. After a moment, she poked her head over the side and peeked underneath.

Benec stared wild-eyed at nothing at all, his hands clenched into tight fists. He muttered something soundlessly, repeating it over and over again.

Edge observed him with a scientific interest, trying to read his lips. Then she meowed very softly.

Benec yelped, nearly bashing his head again. Through the spiderwebs, the Catkin's face appeared, grinning devilishly. "Men are gone," she said, withdrawing out of sight.

She heard a mighty series of coughs and splutterings; then Benec's boots shot out from underneath the table. He wiggled out crablike, shoving himself backward on the stones until he popped out like a cork from a bottle. His face was red as a boiled lobster where it wasn't caked with cobwebs, and his chest heaved as he hugged the open terrace and sucked clean, cold air.

Edge folded her arms and legs beneath her and lay on her brisket, watching him with interest. Still gasping, he dragged himself up by the table's edge just far enough to sit on the cold stone and wheeze. His voice was just loud enough for her to hear now. "Spiders," he repeated. "Spiders, spiders, spiders, spiders. Tirsah. *Tirsah? Tirsah!*"

Suddenly sorry for him, Edge butted her head into his arm. He all but jumped a furlong, hand flying to his guts as he ricocheted to his feet.

Offended, she narrowed her eyes and hissed at him. Benec's limbs shook as he dropped back onto the table. "Forgive me," he said after a moment. "If it was you who stole my brandy flask, could I have it back? Please?"

Edge gave him a cat's smile, then relented and dropped her chin across his knee with a small sigh. After a moment in which she was sure he didn't know whether to scream, run, or both, his hand fell lightly against her skull. He scratched tentatively behind her ears. She purred, encouraging him.

After a moment, he spoke. "It can't be a trick, can it? They were serious. Their pity was real. I could hear it in their voices."

Edge purred on, smiling quietly.

"Rose told them all this. Rose!" he said, amazed. "She wouldn't lie. They might, but she wouldn't, and she'd know I could check their story with her. It must be true. But it's unbelievable -- I can't believe it! Tirsah! In love with *me*?"

Edge draped one hand over his knee and flexed her claws lightly. "Strange," she said lazily, twisting her head about so he could reach the spots that needed another scratch.

He obeyed unconsciously, fingers digging deep into her mane of curls. "How did this happen, Edge? Have I slept a season away, like a prince in a children's story? Tirsah in love with me? She hates me. She said so! Didn't she?"

"Said many things," Edge murmured. "Skritch left ear harder, please."

"What? Certainly." What was the daft Catkin purring like that for? he wondered as his fingers did what she commanded.

*Tirsah.* Had he been blind? Looking at everything through a new set of eyes, he began to wonder. Maybe she'd always loved him -- even through all the years they'd been apart -- and maybe she'd only let on now that her passion for him had never died, after all. Maybe

that was why, as they'd grown older, she grew colder to him -- because she loved him all the more. *A broken heart has sharp claws.*

He brought a picture of her to his mind and stripped the image of a monster away, forcing himself to see her as if for the first time. Her face. Free of anger, it was ... beautiful, her eyes and smile warm as the sun's light. The hair he'd long since thought of as an uncombed bird's nest was a thick, rich mane of curls the color of bronze. His hands ached to bury themselves in that hair as of old, and feel how soft it would be. To kiss her soft, sweet lips and taste them, like honey and rose petals combined. To run his hands down her strong yet dainty arms and end with his vast hands clasped around her small wrists. To move those same hands to the laces of her gown and undo them to reveal the strawberry-red-tipped breasts beneath; to lower his head and suckle at one of them while, at the same time, he loosened still more laces, opening her skirt and slipping his fingers inside ...

The familiar feelings swam over him. It felt as if his head had been packed with those awful cobwebs, now slowly peeling away. There were things that he suddenly knew he should remember -- and yet he didn't. He shook his head hard to clear it. "What's happened to me, Edge?" he asked, fingers going slack in her curls. "I hate her, too. Don't I?"

"Ask her yourself." Edge jerked her head up in alarm. "'Ware! Tirsah coming down here!"

"What?"

The Catkin scrambled off the table, landing on all four paws. "Tirsah coming!" She straightened onto her hind legs and shook back her fur, suddenly looking so human that it was alarming. "I go, *now*."

"Edge, wait!" Benec lunged after her. He made a grab and missed. "Why run? What's wrong? Is she hurt?"

"Likely hurt *me*!" Edge made a dash for the keep. "I rather take my chances with all pins-on-the-floor!"



The door to the keep slammed after her. Benec reached it only in time to slap his open hands against the surface and hear the distinct sound of a lock clicking into place.

He whirled, back to the door, thinking fast. The arbor. Tirsah had been in the arbor. She would come around the side.

He backed up to the table, stepped on top of it, and scanned the side path. He couldn't see her yet, but a Catkin could sense a pacing ant a hundred miles away. Wait -- yes -- there she was, there! Head up, eyes blazing, and her hand clenched into a fist around a digging knife, a fast and furious dagger of a woman aimed directly at him.

Tirsah! The sight of her struck him dumb. He *had* been blind before. The mage was as beautiful and storm-tossed as the ocean in autumn and, he suddenly realized, had just as much power over him as a sailor caught in a tempest. When had that happened? Just now, or long before?

She stormed up to the table, planted her hands on her hips, and barked up at him: "Close your mouth before you eat up any more flies, and get down here where a decent person doesn't have to break her neck looking up at your stupid, gawping face!"

He shut his mouth with a snap, feeling a hot blush staining his cheeks. His legs collapsed beneath him with embarrassing speed, so that he nearly kicked her, as he fell onto the stone table.

She stepped back as if he had the plague. "What are you staring at, you clown?"

Blush or no blush, Benec couldn't stop himself from gaping at her. She was so small! How had he never noticed? He'd always thought her to be tall as a warrior, but how tiny she was! "Little" Rose had at least six inches on her! And as for beauty ...!

Tirsah tapped her foot angrily, eyes flashing. "Lost your voice? My prayers have been answered. Listen, you great oaf, because I'm only going to say this once. Much, *much* against my will, I've been sent to call you to the arbor for a dinner of roasted clams far better than you deserve!"

“Thank you, Tirsah,” he managed at last. “I’m sorry you were bothered. I wouldn’t have troubled you -- to take you away from your work --”

Her face registered instant shock. She sputtered for a half-second, struggling for words. “I went to about as much trouble to earn your thanks as it took you to thank me,” she said through gritted teeth. “If it had been all that much trouble, I certainly would not have come!”

He looked up hopefully, searching her face. “Was it a pleasure, then?” he dared to ask. Suddenly, he wanted nothing so much as to reach out and take her hand in his.

Tirsah shook her head, face baffled and angry. “You’ve lost what little mind remained to you, Benec! Not hungry? Suit yourself.” She turned her back on him and stomped back around the side path, muttering to herself as she went.

Benec watched her go, every step of the way, until she was out of sight. Then, breathing a frantic prayer of thanks to whoever or whatever might be listening, he struggled up from the table and made a beeline for the arbor. His head buzzed with the strange new thoughts. Dear *lady* -- beautiful -- furious -- beautiful -- but how would he ever bring himself to make sense of it, much less her? How? And how would he survive if he did not?

## Chapter Two

*Of all the things*, Tirsah grumbled as she rammed her digging knife back into its belt loop. *Of all the times*. She'd only just managed to eke out a few minutes to tend to the last of her arbor's needs before winter; snatching a few precious minutes during the wedding preparations was a difficult enough task, if you please. She'd almost been finished tying on some sorely needed luck-charms for next year's crop when that jackanapes of a Cloud had shaken the trunk of the tree she'd climbed into and nearly startled her into falling.

"The prince asks that you go and call Benec to the evening meal with myself and the other men," he'd requested politely, shading his eyes with a hand while he looked up at her. "Right now, if it's possible."

She'd looked at him, at her handful of charms, then back. "You must be joking!"

"No joke, my lady. It's a request from the prince. A royal request. And as you're the chieftain's chief liaison to Paedro ..."

*Call Benec in to dinner?* She fumed. Nonsense! As if the men wouldn't be stuffing themselves silly on a roast of the mussels and oysters she knew full well they'd dug up on the beach. Why couldn't they have called Benec themselves? He'd been on the terrace. They

must have nigh walked past the end of his nose with their baskets of shellfish. Or did they plan to be served?

Cloud had dodged in time to miss the rain of charms that came hailing down at his head. Now she wished she hadn't aimed to miss. What a lot of nonsense!

She sighed heavily, dragging a dirt-smeared hand across her forehead. No good heading back to her arbor; the day was nearly past and gone, and so much remained to do in the evening hours. The arbor would have to rest as it lay for the winter, and if there weren't enough bushels of fruit next summer to make the sweet preserves that the men liked so much, well, they would know the reason why.

Surely they wouldn't be foolish enough to expect a prepared meal as well. Sela had been mewed up in the pantry and buttery all day, cooking like a madwoman. More, she'd had to defend her territory against the seamstresses, who'd turned out to be "tasters" -- a bite of this, a bite of that, and oh, dear, was that the marzipan sculpture for the wedding?

In between shooing them out, the faithful old serving woman had been digging amongst barrels, boxes, and firkins, trying to scrounge up enough special treats to make a wedding feast worth calling a feast. There might be bread, cheese, and watered wine laid out on a board for those who wanted it, if they were lucky.

Tirsah ran a hand through her hair, dragging it away from her face. Her skin was moist; she'd caught the warmth of the sunlight all day in the tops of trees, and then she'd gotten overwarm letting Benec have a piece of her mind. Thirsty, she was, and a draught of cool wine would be perfect, now that she came to think of it. Mayhap she could sneak into the pantry and draw a cup without putting Sela to the bother of even noticing her ...

\* \* \* \* \*

Mims giggled behind her hand, almost unable to stop. Her eyes sparkled with unholy mirth. "-- And then one of those rascals had the bright idea to send Tirsah out to summon him for the evening meal. You should have seen it! Her face was nigh red as a boiled crab!"

“But she went?”

“Oh, that she did. Benec’s ears must still be ringing.”

“Bad girl, to stay and watch that! Here, pass me the cloves. Mercy! Wonder if there are any left in the box?”

Mims stretched up on tiptoe to pull a small, red-painted box down off one of the highest shelves. She gave it a desultory shake. It rattled. “Some, at least.”

“I hope it’s enough.” Sela pried the container open and peered in. “Maybe half a handful left. I’ll add a pinch to this ...” she mused, mind running away with cookery.

“Add the lot!” Mims dipped her fingers in, pulled out a clove, and popped it into her mouth. “There’ll be merchants come spring,” she protested when Sela gave her a severe look.

“We’ll not be counting on that, and we’ll not waste goods in my kitchen when we can make them last. Hold on to what you’ve got until you’re sure of what you’re getting, my girl.”

“Oh, oh, gray and grouchy.” Mims made a grab for the spice box. “What’s wrong, Sela, wishing it was your own wedding coming up?”

“Perhaps. Are you wishing it was your own?”

Mims’s mouth flew open. She might tumble as much as she liked, but a fatherless girl wasn’t likely to get a husband, and they both knew it.

Sela met her shocked glower with a blank look. “Truce for now,” she said after a moment. “We’ve business at hand. You know shouting makes Tirsah thirsty. She should be in here any minute, looking for water or wine. Do you remember what to do then?”

Only Mims’s love for mischief overcame her pique at Sela -- just. “We talk only of Benec, and we praise him, praise him to the skies,” she said sulkily.

Sela leaned in close enough to smell the clove Mims was chewing. “Most of all, we exclaim over how shocking it is that he’s gone and fallen in love with Tirsah,” she warned. “No tangents, and don’t forget yourself.”

“Don’t fret.” Mims blew a sharp, spicy-smelling kiss at Sela. “I know my lines by heart.”

“Your wicked ways’ll be the death of you one day, young miss -- hush!” Sela stopped in the middle of her scold. “Is that Tirsah’s footstep out in the hall?”

“How you can hear anything beyond all this kitchen clatter is beyond me,” Mims grumbled. She padded to the door, peeked out, then tumbled back, squealing. “She’s coming!”

“Very well. On my cue, then. One, two, three, and quick then -- now!”

Mims let out an ear-piercing screech. She raised her voice to a pitch that could wake the dead and call them home to dinner. “What? Are you sure of this? Benec is in love with Tirsah?”

Sela gave Mims a warning look to stop her incipient fit of giggles. “That’s what I’ve been told,” she said.

“Go on! Who told you that?”

“The prince, for one, and young master Cloud. *And* Rose! How’s that for proof? Here, if you’re going to hang about and gossip, make yourself useful. See if you can’t find some of that preserved chicken we stored in salt last spring.”

Mims groaned, but hopped down off her comfortable perch and went to rummage in the recesses of the cupboard. “When did they talk to you?”

“Just this afternoon, before they went clamming.” Sela lifted the lid of a kettle and breathed in the steam. “Look for some dried oranges, too!”

Mims emerged from the cupboard with a broad grin. “News like that and you send me to look for salted chicken? Come on, Sela, be a dear. Tell me everything.”

“Minx! If I tell you, will you help me?”

“Done!” Mims cozied up to Sela and twined her hands beneath her chin. “Come on, then. Benec is in love with Tirsah? What could have brought that on? When did it happen?”

“Ach, you little nuisance! If you must know, he came to the knowledge during his years away. There’s precious little comfort there in the cold city, and a man’s heart turns to thinking of home. The more he thought about her, the more he realized her worth, until his hate melted like a handful of snow in the hearth. Do you know, he actually came back here hoping to ask her to marry him?”

“Ooh!” Mims bounced eagerly on her heels. “She popped that bubble quick enough. Did you hear how she lashed into him the second he showed his face?”

“Hear about it? I was there, if you’ll remember. Ah, me.” Sela lay down her spoon and sighed. “Poor lad. He took care not to let it show, but I’ve rarely seen such hurt in human eyes.”

“Still, that’s all one. I told the prince and Cloud straight away that if they cared for Benec at all, to tell him to forget all about Tirsah.”

“Sela! Why did you do that? Benec’s not so bad.”

“Do you think he has a chance of winning our proud lady’s heart?” Sela gave Mims a knowing look. “She’ll never see that he’s changed, even if the rest of us do.”

Mims snorted. “I suppose that’s true enough. I know she thinks she’s too good for anyone. I’ve never seen her not able to find fault with any man, honest or crooked. If he’s handsome, she says he must be a fool. If he’s smart, she says he must be cold as a monk. If he’s good-natured, she says he’s got something up his sleeve.” She tossed her red curls in contempt. “Heaven forbid she let one of them get close enough to get a good look at him, anyway. First judgment, last call, that’s Tirsah.”

“She sees most men as little less than beasts,” Sela agreed, tasting a small spoonful of something that smelled wonderful. “What happened to Anno at the hands of men ...”

“Or that we can guess ever happened to him, as if he or she would ever tell,” Mims said. “I have my ideas, but --”

“Hush!” Sela said sharply, giving the girl a pinch. “To speak that way about your uncle! And about Tirsah, when it hurt her so to see him come home in that state.”

Mims shivered. “Did you ever hear the like of that scream when he first got here?”

“Not since Tirsah was born, and her mother died at the same moment.” Sela bit at her lip. “A dark day that was, and a dark day when Anno returned to us. Tirsah doesn’t say anything about her pain, but you can tell what it costs her. Every time she speaks with Anno, she comes back with shadows under her eyes. It’s broken her heart. Do you know, I think that’s why she won’t marry. She sees Benec as she sees all men from the King’s City: vile. You can’t love a man without a heart that has faith in his being decent to you.”

“Bosh! Tirsah never found room in her heart for a man even before Anno came home.” Mims shrugged off Sela’s concern. “Magic this and magic that, as if she’s the only one in the world to master a charm. Twenty and six, and not married. It’s a scandal, it is.”

“Listen to you!” Sela scolded. “You positively enjoy this, but I worry for her. What’s to become of her when she’s old as me? If Rose doesn’t bear Cloud a son, there won’t be an heir to follow Lorn here as chieftain. Of course, if there is a boy, she can stay with the pair of them --”

“Huh. Maybe, maybe not,” Mims said cynically. “What if Cloud says no?”

“He likes her well enough.”

“He does now, but he might get tired of her mouth someday. And what if she decides she doesn’t like him?”

“Oof!” Sela rolled her eyes. “I don’t like to think about it. Such a shame, that Benec hasn’t a maiden’s prayer of winning her heart. If you could see how he loves her -- how his eyes follow her where she walks. It cuts him to the quick when she’s sharp with him.”

Mims nodded. “I have seen it. I’m only amazed that she hasn’t. Thinks she’s so smart and doesn’t even spot that! Here, what was I looking for a moment ago?”



“Pressed chicken. It should be stored in a small barrel with a wax seal on the lid. Probably near the back.”

Mims disappeared back into the pantry. “Here’s the dried oranges,” she called. “Only about a quarter of a cask. What do you want them for?”

“They’re for adding to the wedding cakelets. They’re supposed to bring luck to a marriage.”

Mims emerged and handed Sela the dusty container. She wiped her hands on her skirt. “Use them all. You tell me often enough that I’ll never get married, and it’s sure that Tirsah won’t, if she won’t take Benec.”

Sela lifted the lid and looked into the cask. “I suppose I should use them all,” she said slowly. “Mims, if Tirsah could just be made to see reason --”

Mims scoffed. “Don’t waste your time. Tirsah’s just begging for a long, lonely life, and she’s brought it all on herself. What a waste! You can tell she’s still virgin ice.”

“Mims!” Sela gasped, horrified. “And you unmarried!”

“I wonder if she’s even ever been kissed.” Mims hugged herself. “I’ll bet she’s never had a man squeeze her until she squeaked!”

Sela bit back a smile. Extemporizing a bit, Mims was, and ought to be scolded for being so unmaidenly, but she had a sneaking feeling it wouldn’t hurt to add a bit of spice to their talk. “Nor to feel whiskers tickle your lips when he steals a kiss,” she added naughtily.

“Or to see a certain spark in his eye, and know he’s thinking about stealing another kiss.”

“Or to feel his heart beating when you’ve laid your head on his chest.”

“To be picked up like you weigh a feather’s worth and spun around until you think you’re flying!” Mims twirled in a lazy circle. “Or to dance all night and never want the music to stop!”

“Or to feel his hand take your own beneath the tablecloth,” said Sela. “To see the look in his eyes when he sees you coming home to him.” She raised a hand to her cheek. “To know that he loves you, only you.”

“To know you’re the most important thing in the world.”

“A treasure beyond price.”

Mims snapped her fingers in disdain. “What’s magic to that? She doesn’t know what she’s missing, to be kicking dirt over a decent man who dares to love her. But who’d dare to tell her that? Not me, thank you very much!”

“She and Benec were made for each other, you know,” Sela said, staring pensively at the orange morsels. “Like two halves of a broken shell. I can’t bear to think of letting this chance go.”

Mims raised her eyebrow. “Got any suggestions? I’ll gladly listen to them. Maybe we should go tell her about it and hear what she has to say. Just let me find a suit of armor and we’ll be all ready.”

Sela slowly emptied the oranges into a bowl of batter. “No ... no. I’m just a foolish old lady, dreaming a girl’s dreams. I’ll go see Benec myself and tell him to give it up. He may not believe the prince or Cloud, but he’ll believe me. Better to break his heart gently than have it dashed on the rocks.”

“It is a shame.” Mims filched one of the orange bits and slipped it into her mouth. “Nice man, a magic-worker, and smart as a priest, even if he does look like a horse. Hmm. Probably hung like a horse, too. What do you think?” She dodged Sela’s outraged swat at her naughty words, giggling.

“You’re spreading it a bit thick.” Sela pointed to the cakes, but glared meaningfully at Mims.

*The bigger the bait, the bigger the bite*, Mims mouthed back shamelessly before she went on. “Well, so much for that love story, eh? Poor, proud Tirsah,” she mocked. “Here’s to her long life sleeping in a cold bed.”

She made a face. “Do you smell that?”

Sela sniffed the air in alarm. “Mercy! The bread’s burning! Mims, how hot is that fire? Oh, quick, quick!”

The two women scrambled over each other to snatch up cloths and yank the scorching loaves out of the clay wall oven, instantly forgetting everything else.

No conscious thought had guided Tirsah. One minute she had been walking calmly toward the pantry, the next second she had been crouched behind a barrel of rough red wine standing just beside the door. She’d wondered, half-bewildered, if her legs had given out or if she’d bolted for it like a spooked rabbit.

As her burst of adrenaline wore off, she rubbed at one ear with the heel of her palm and glared at the two women just inside the kitchen. What was this madness?

Tirsah watched them numbly. *It’s the stink of burning dough that makes my eyes water*, she told herself. *I would never cry over the cackling of an old hen and a saucy chick. If I made the fire to burn just a bit hotter, it was only to silence their squawking and let me get out of here.*

She backed away on hands and knees, all the way back out onto the rough flagstones of the corridor. The cold of them burned her hands. She jerked them away and pressed a palm to each cheek. Were her fingers that chilled, or were her cheeks that hot?

She fumbled for the wall and pulled herself upright. “It can’t be true,” a voice she vaguely recognized as her own murmured. “It must be a trick.”

She swayed and leaned on the wall for balance. Her limbs refused to cooperate with her. “It can’t be true,” she murmured. “Oh! Rose! Rose will know. Yes, Rose ...”

She turned her head around shakily to gaze up the stairwell that led to the room she shared with her cousin. One step at a time, she edged up the stairs. "Cousin?" she called stiltedly. "Are you there?"

"Tirsah?" her cousin's soft voice responded. "I'm here. Are you coming up?"

"Coming," Tirsah managed to reply through numb lips. She reached the top of the stairs, clinging to the wall.

"Tirsah?" Rose questioned, as yet out of sight. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing," the mage responded vaguely as she topped the stairs. *Everything is wrong*. "May I come in?"

"Of course. When have you needed to ask?"

Her cousin's slender back was turned to her. By some mercy, the seamstresses were off on an errand, and she was alone. Bits and pieces of wedding silk fluttered around her slim shoulders and circled her small waist, pins holding the whole of it together. Tirsah gazed at it in mild confusion. She couldn't guess what effect they were aiming at by cobbling the thing together like that.

"What do you think?" Rose asked timidly, turning. Her eyes widened into small circles. "Cousin! Tirsah, what's wrong?"

Tirsah lifted a hand to her hair. Somewhere in the back of her mind she realized that she must look like a madwoman, her curls tangled into elf-knots, skirts besmirched with soot, and cheeks smudged with salty tears.

"Tirsah!" Rose insisted, fear in her voice. "Tell me, what's happened to you? Did one of the men --"

Tirsah lifted a hand that trembled in the air. "Stop," she managed to say.

Rose froze. Did she sense what Tirsah was about to ask?

"Tell me," Tirsah said, raising her face to her cousin. "Tell me honestly, and only once. Does Benec love me?"

Rose's face went white as milk, whiter than salt. Her lips parted slightly. She stared at her cousin, agony written in her face. "Cousin, I didn't want to hurt you --"

"Tell me!"

Rose flinched as if every one of the pins in the dress had pierced her skin. "Yes," she whispered at last, voice low. "Yes, he loves you."

Tirsah felt herself turn cold, hard as a woman carved of marble. "Thank you," she said. "Don't follow me."

Turning slowly, as if it pained her, she went out the way she'd come.

She heard only the sound of the sea washing in her ears. Memories ten years old swam to the surface of her mind, threatening to take it over. *No ... no ...*, she thought dimly. *What this means ...!*

*I can't think of it. Perhaps I can escape my fate. Work. I must work, must think of something else.*

She would go to the terrace and begin to decorate it for the morning's wedding celebration. Not her own. It was too late for that.

Benec loved her?

He loved her.

It was the end of her life as she knew it. And it could be the beginning of --

She dug her hands into her hair, resisting the urge to curl up into a small ball and weep on the stairs. She could not.

Dared not.

*Work, Tirsah. Yes, work, as you have always done. Perhaps --*

*And then tomorrow ...*

*When tomorrow comes, deal with it then.*

*But not now. Not now ...*

Rose put out her hand -- too late. Her cousin didn't see it at all, didn't see it as if it didn't exist. "Tirsah!" she pleaded in a whisper. It was as if she didn't hear her speaking; for Tirsah, Rose's quiet voice probably did not exist.

"Tirsah!" Rose whispered as loudly as she dared after her cousin, knowing that it was useless.

Heedless of the pins in her dress, she sank to her knees. Pain lanced through her ribs and arms as the sharp points sank home. "Tirsah!" she cried again, hot, helpless tears slipping out between her eyelashes. "They told me to say it, Tirsah. How can I refuse my father, my prince, my husband-to-be? They didn't know. They don't understand! Tirsah, come back. Come back!"

There was no reply from the stairwell. She hadn't expected one.

"I'm sorry, Tirsah," she wept. "I'm so, so sorry ..."

## Chapter Three

The clock had tolled midnight when Mims managed to slip out of Sela's clutches at last, pretending to go and fetch another roll of cheesecloth from a far storage room. Once safely out of the kitchen, she lifted her skirts and fled.

She fanned her skirts around her bare legs as she ran. The kitchen was hot as a blast of air from a whale's spout! She'd tied a net around her hair, but at least half a dozen sweaty curls had managed to slip loose, clinging to her forehead and neck. Her good blue kirtle reeked of a dozen different kinds of smoke and had gotten smudged with everything from orange batter to beer. She'd swear they had fixed up a score of dishes already, and Sela looked in a fine way to keep going until the dawn.

Well, not Mims and it please you! She'd escape down to the beach for a lovely cold swim. Then, if they were still awake, mayhap she'd go comb her hair in front of Ione's servants' windows and see if they'd come and talk to her for a bit ...

Lost in dreams, she pulled up short and shrieked out loud when a hand snaked out to grab her arm. "What's the rush, missy?" a lazy voice hissed close by her ear.

"Brach! You near scared the life out of me!"

The bravo grinned at her, appearing wickedly pleased. "Looks like you could stand to have some life poked back into you," he said with a tug at one of her damp, dangling curls. "You look wrung out as a dirty dishrag."

Mims pulled her hair free in a flash of temper. "And that's what you stopped me for, to call me names? Some of us have been working tonight, and what's more, working hard."

"Ooh, protect me, lords and ladies," Brach exclaimed in mock horror. "The kitten's got claws!"

"Yes, and I scratch. Either let me go or say you're sorry."

"Can't apologize for telling the truth. Poor little kitty, 't isn't your fault. The old biddy had you trapped in her kitchen all night, yeah?"

"Working like a slave." Mims shook her head in an effort to dislodge the stubborn curls clinging to her cheeks. "Oh! Sometimes I'd like to cut all of these rotten things off!"

"Don't you ever do that. I like long hair on my ladies." He moved his hand in a light stroke down her arm. "You do look awful hot."

"And tired," she pouted, giving him a sideways glance. "Maybe too tired."

"Not you, Mims-girl, you've got ginger enough to match your hair." He pinched her cheek. "If they've worked you too hard, how about we go play for a bitty while? I got me a bucket of cool water, flagon of wine, some bread and all out in the arbor, and a blanket to sit on. Bet you'd like to go out there with me."

"The arbor? Why would I want to go there?"

"Because --" He leaned forward to whisper a few naughty suggestions in her ear.

Mims burst into laughter, raining a flurry of light blows on his chest. "You rascal! Oh, I'd never dare!"

She slipped a few steps away, then turned to glance over her shoulder at him. "Well? Are you coming?"



\* \* \* \* \*

It was no good! Benec had made up his mind at last. A man couldn't think in the chieftain's stronghold, what with the noise and clatter of folk making last-minute wedding preparations. He'd have to go down to the beach if he wanted to get his brain in working order and going forward, instead of crablike. Mayhap he'd see if there were any whales in range to have a chat with; their slow, calm ways of thinking could settle the uneasiest mind.

He'd already done one daft thing that night. He had a feeling he'd be regretting it for weeks -- no, months -- possibly *years* -- to come. If he didn't clear his head, he had no idea what he'd do next. He only hoped that no one else would be fool enough to venture outside on such a cold night. If not ... well, he'd have to face them some time.

The fresh, cold air of approaching winter near snapped off the tips of his ears when he stepped out onto the terrace. By the Lady! The ocean air tasted like frozen salt. He shivered, tucking his hands beneath his arms and, now more than ever before, wished he'd a hood on his cloak to pull up over his head.

"Ohe, Benec! Over here, man!"

Benec cringed, then cursed under his breath. Apparently he wasn't the only madman about. He turned toward the ocean; there appeared to be an abundance of fools enjoying the sort of night any sane man would spend by the fire. He inhaled deeply and sighed. Best get it over with, then.

"Ohe, men," he called back, waving dispiritedly. "What's come about?"

"Join us!" Paedro beckoned. He and Lorn stood at the head of the cliff steps, huddled deeply in thick woolen cloaks, standing companionably side by side for all the world like old friends cracking jokes together. Despite himself, Benec grinned as he made for them. "What's this, bachelors' corner?"

"Just so." Lorn jerked his head at the stronghold. "Rose's at vigil tonight. Explained to the prince here 'tis custom for our girls the night before they're wed."

“And so we’ve got the nervous groom out here in our company.” Paedro made an amused gesture toward the steps. Cloud sprawled across the first one down, his back propped against a stone. He’d loosened his collar despite the cold and looked both green as moss and white as death. One hand clutched a bronze flask with the prince’s initials monogrammed in the center.

“Brother-in-arms.” He saluted Benec, hand wobbling. “Come to have a drink?”

“Nervous, you said?”

Paedro smiled and shrugged. From the smell of him, he’d been nipping at the flask, as well.

Cloud favored Benec with a lopsided frown, speaking with slurred words. “You looks strange. What’s you done to yourshelf?”

Benec’s hand flew automatically to his head. “Nothing!”

Paedro looked up and, for the first time, focused directly on Benec. His eyes widened. Polite as ever, he said nothing -- nor did Lorn -- but their mouths trembled, as if it took every drop of control not to howl with laughter.

“Go ahead,” Benec pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let it out before you hurt yourselves.”

“Not at all,” the prince replied, smile suspiciously bright. He coughed. “An interesting haircut. Who did it?”

“Myself,” Benec growled. “With my dagger, before you ask. I borrowed your razor for my shave, Lorn, before you ask, so you’re to blame for that job. When did you last sharpen that artifact?”

“Been a while.”

“So I suspected.”

Paedro surveyed him in great interest. “I didn’t realize you had a face beneath that furze bush you’d cultivated.”

Benec's response was short and to the point.

Paedro tutted. "Such language to your liege." He raised an eyebrow at Benec's gesture in response. "I can only assume that losing four or five pounds of an overgrown mane has given you a headache, so I'll pretend I didn't hear *or* see that."

"Good," Benec growled, narrowing his eyes. "Because liege or not, I'm taller than you by half a span."

Paedro circled around behind him. "I'm also going to assume that you didn't mean to lose *quite* so much hair, but that every time you tried to get it even, it was just a bit shorter on one side, and so it went --"

"Assume anything you like!" Benec growled. He nudged Cloud's shoulder ungently with the toe of his boot. "Look, you, if I ask him to step out of the way, will he lose his footing and go tumbling down to the bottom?"

"Nay. Not that bad off, not just yet." Lorn, who'd brought his threatened attack of laughter under control without comment, gave Cloud a friendly clout on the ear. "Shove off, boy. Let Benec pass."

"But why pass?" Paedro wanted to know, barring the way. "Stay and lift a flask with us. It's an important night for a man, the night before his wedding."

"Not I. We've seen this before. Yon boy holds his liquor just about as well as a sieve. I'll be on my way before he starts bringing that brandy back up for a second look at it."

"Since you put it so eloquently, pass." Paedro wrinkled his nose. "Here, Lorn, do you need a hand?"

The chieftain was attempting to haul Cloud up bodily. "Nay! Rather be down here than up in my own home," he grumbled. "Fripperies, folderol, wedding nonsense. Oof! How much d'you weigh, boy?"

Benec and Paedro exchanged glances, sighed, and lent a hand. The three of them managed to wrestle Cloud's flailing limbs upright.

The boy grinned foolishly. "Here I am, not even a duke, and I've got two kings supporting me," he exclaimed.

"But someday a king -- when I'm gone and my girl gives you a son." Lorn dusted the boy off. "How about that, eh?"

"I love Rose. Love, love, love." Cloud wobbled about to gaze at the cool, pure light streaming from the moon. "See? Like that. Sing, moonlight, sing, moonsinger, oh!" he warbled off key.

Paedro made a face. "You'll do. But I think we'll take care to keep you sober."

"You had better. Otherwise, he'll drive her screaming into the night within the hour, especially if he keeps on singing." Benec grumbled. "Would someone stifle him?"

The prince slung an arm around Cloud's shoulder and put a gloved hand over his mouth. The boy giggled and struggled fitfully to get free. "Better?"

"Not exactly, but hold him like that until I'm safely down on the beach, will you?"

Paedro quickly held up his hand, allowing Cloud to wiggle free. "What's amiss, Benec? Truly, have we hurt you by poking fun at your hair? Time was that you joked with the best and never took it personally. Or is there something more upsetting you?"

"Spit it out, Benec," Cloud burbled. "You've gone all glum. Glum, glum, glum."

Benec dealt him a scowl that time and again he'd been told could curdle milk. "Leave it to you not to notice, you louts, but I have changed while you were looking the other way and picking your noses." He glanced to the side. "I'm not the same man I used to be."

"Agreed, sir." Paedro adjusted his cuffs coolly. "You are, by far, much more ill-tempered than usual. Quite cross."

"Oh-oh, Benec's cross. Cross, cross. Do you think he might have been crossed in love?" Cloud giggled.

A positively impish look flickered over Paedro's features. "Him?" he asked slyly. "I doubt it! There's not a drop of red blood running through his veins; it's all ice water."

Benec gaped at them. If they knew he knew, they would never let him live it down. They couldn't know his plans. Not yet. Not until he'd at least spoken to Tirsah! "Have you completely lost your minds?" he blurted out.

"Maybe there's something in the brandy to make us drunk," Cloud sputtered.

"And look here!" Paedro plucked up a corner of Benec's cloak and examined it narrowly as a tailor. "He's missing something more than hair, I see. Gone, too, are the stains from a dozen meals and a few rolls in the dirt that used to decorate his clothes!"

Cloud rolled over, caught the edge of Benec's cloak, and took a deep sniff. "A'mercy, brother. *Soap?*"

Benec snatched his cloak away from the two mockers and retreated with what dignity he could. "The world must be coming to an end," he spat with withering scorn. "A man decides to clean himself up a bit -- for his friend's wedding only, mind you -- and he's got to suffer through this. See if I don't go rolling through the morning's catch before I come to the nuptials, you ingrate!"

Cloud hooted and toppled over, boneless as a rag doll.

"Here, don't go killing yourself the night before you're married!"

Cloud wiggled himself into a more comfortable pose, his cheek flat against the rock step. "You look like a mummer," he said sleepily. "Silly old clown. Got your face paint done wrong! You're frowning inshtead of shmiling."

Benec exploded. "I've had enough of this! Move him out of my way before I kick his sorry carcass aside and let it fall where it might."

"Pity you can't go visit your lady's chamber to soothe your temper." Paedro raised a flask. "That is, if you had a lady. Here's to the bachelors!"

Benec roared like a bear, finally driven past all endurance. "That's *it!* Lorn, if you would, come down to the beach with me. I have a few things to say to you that I'd rather these drunken popinjays didn't hear!"

Cloak flying, he stormed recklessly down the steps, jumping from one to another. Lorn made haste to follow, near slipping as he strove to keep up. At the turning that would take them out of sight, he paused and flung up an arm in salute -- then they were gone.

Cloud whooped with laughter, slapping his knee. "That was better than the first time!" he exclaimed, wiping the water from his eyes. "He's completely fooled! Here, do you think he's going to ask Lorn for Tirsah's hand?"

"Ah, not yet. He won't have screwed his courage up that high this soon." Well pleased, Paedro offered Cloud a hand up. "You play a fine drunkard, by the way."

"I thank you." Cloud tossed the hair out of his eyes. "If there is any real brandy in a flask hereabouts, I wouldn't mind a sip. It's bitter cold tonight."

Paedro shrugged. "Nothing to stop us heading back inside, if you like, but as it happens I do have a drop of spirits here." He turned his flask upside down and screwed off the false bottom, revealing another spout. "Here's to love, my friend, for all's fair in that honorable game."

"To honorable love," Cloud said, his eyes drifting back to the moon. "To Rose."

"To Rose," Paedro agreed, tilting back the flask. "Long life and happiness to you both!"

## Chapter Four

“Awful, hateful creature!”

“Aw, now, don’t take on like that.” Brach grabbed lazily at Mims’s arm and missed it on purpose. “Just a little joke for a little missy.”

She tossed her sopping hair over her shoulder. “You dumped a bucket of water on my head!”

“So?” He caught her easily on the second try, turned her about to face him, and grinned, daring her to stay mad. “Said you was hot.”

“And now I’m *freezing*.” She pouted.

“Yeah?” Brach dipped his head to hers and kissed her the way he knew a woman liked, all open mouth, with his hands a-roaming over her back. A kiss that promised better things quickly on their way. He’d have pulled her closer to him, but she was wet as a drowned rat, and he didn’t fancy getting soaked himself. Yet.

He pulled back and lifted her chin in one hand. “How about I warm you up, then?” he asked her, his eyes hooded. “How about we go up to your room, pretty miss?”

Her lips parted. “You wouldn’t dare,” she breathed, looking more excited than any girl he’d had in years.

“Just you watch me,” he boasted. Maybe he’d pull her close after all, give her a taste of what he had in store --

But no, she pulled away from him, impish as an elf, eyes dancing. “Maybe,” she allowed. “If you can catch me!”

“Oh, so that’s how it’s going to be?”

She pelted away, squealing in delight. “Can’t catch me!”

“You don’t think so?” Brach’s blood heated nicely as he ran after her, checking the length of his stride to let her best him by just a little. ’Twas more fun to be chased than caught, at least so early in the game, and he wanted her in a good mood.

He wished she wouldn’t make such a racket, though. The sound of her feet slapping against the stones sounded like cannon shot in the otherwise quiet night.

He glanced up as they went around the side of the manor, searching for the window to Ione’s quarters. She’d said he’d know it by the candle left burning on the sill.

Sure enough, she had the taper lit and waiting. He caught a glimpse of a pale face watching as he chased Mims past. Had to be Ione. He tossed up a quick wave, hoping she’d seen it.

Ione withdrew slowly. He’d done it -- actually done it! If she hadn’t known the girl was Mims, she’d have sworn it to have been Rose. Damp, the little slut’s curls lay sleek and flat as the hair of the chieftain’s daughter.

“Victory will be yours, my lady,” a voice whispered into her ear. She restrained a shiver of distaste at the tickling lips, reining in the urge to slap their owner away. Chirre presumed far too much upon a promise that she had no intention of delivering.

“Do not touch me,” she ordered him. “Brach has returned; we must act.”

“My lady, if I’ve displeased you --”



“Quiet!” She flew from him in relief to dig through a heap of cloth, hunting for her veils. “Brach will be reaching Mims’s room soon. We must fly. Down to the courtyard, and then to Paedro. Hurry, fighead!”

Her fingers closed on the thickest of her veils, but to her dismay her hands shook so with anticipation she couldn’t pin it on firmly. Chirre’s touch would be most unwelcome, but -- “Help me!” she ordered.

Chirre gently lifted the fabric from her hands. He draped it across her head and fastened the pins with a deft touch. Then he *dared* to smooth a hand over her hair! “I would do anything for you, my lady.”

Ione’s palm itched to slap him, but -- no time. Later -- later -- but just then, they must move swiftly. Timing would mean everything in the world, and she had no time to waste.

Mims beat Brach into her chamber by the barest of spans, stopping herself by slapping her palms into the far wall. She spun around to face him and laughed like a child for sheer delight.

Brach grinned. She couldn’t resist a dare, his Mims. Look at the boldness of her! She’d brought him to her own sleeping place, directly next to Rose’s chamber. Just as Ione had wanted.

He took a quick glance around. Good bit bigger than the quarters he’d been given. Looked smaller, though, crammed with clutter from floor to ceiling as only a girl’s hidey-hole could be. Cakes of forbidden cosmetics, strings of beads, ribbons, and combs littered every possible surface. He couldn’t see the flagstones for the clothes strewn about.

Grinning like a witch, Mims touched a match to a lantern that hung from a hook in the corner. “What, you’re going to chase your prey all the way to its burrow and stop the hunt there?” she teased.

Brach swung the heavy door's lock home with a clever, silent touch. "Eh, you're too smart for me. I can't get through the maze you've got built up in here, can I?" he quipped, playing for time while he searched for --

There, on the bed. A length of deep blue silk. Was it a scarf? It'd do. He made a grab for the thing and whipped it around his face, tying a sturdy knot in the back. It stank of cheap perfume that made his nose sting, but, to his surprise, he found he could see out just a bit.

*Must be this is what it's like for Ione, he thought. No wonder. You can see the world, but it can't see you. Pretty smart!*

Mims planted her hands on her hips. "What, are you playing blindman's bluff now?"

*Ah!* Brach stumbled forward, pretending clumsiness. "Lady, lady, I can't see. Lady, have you a kiss for me?" He chanted the old dance rhyme, making grabs at the air as if he were trying to catch her. "Lady, lady, I can't see. Lady, have you a kiss for me?"

She clapped her hands together, enchanted. "I'm by the window. Can you see that?"

Brach wagged his head back and forth in wide sweeps. "Lady, lady, I can't see. Where's my lady love? Won't she take pity, and help an old blind man?"

He grinned beneath the scarf as her arms circled round him. "Can you find me now?" she whispered enticingly.

*Now!*

He seized her by the wrists and held her fast, enjoying her sharp cry of pain. "Lady, lady ... I can."

"My lord!" a voice whispered from the shadows, startling Paedro out of his reverie on the terrace where he and Cloud had lingered to enjoy the night. Cloud was the calmest bridegroom he'd ever seen, and Paedro could not help but admire his spirit.

When he'd asked, Cloud had only laughed and said that it was on account of the love he had for his intended. How could he be afraid of something so wonderful? And how could

Paedro not be amazed that something such as what Cloud had found still existed in their world?

Would he ever find it himself?

It seemed almost a travesty for his aunt's pet weasel to intrude upon thoughts that were nearly sacred, and so he spoke sharply to the little creature. "Chirre? What in the Lady's name are you doing out here?"

"Master Prince, I beg you, spare me a moment," the small man hissed, darting glances back over his shoulder. His voice scratched around the edges, painful to listen to. "I've come bringing my lady to you."

Ducking and bowing, he ushered Ione's slight figure forward. Her face could not be seen for the thickness of the black veils she wore, but her small body was rigid with a great tension -- or fear?

"Aunt, what ails you?" Paedro asked, suddenly concerned. "Are you ill?"

"Only in spirit," she barely spoke aloud. Without warning, she stumbled forward and fell on her knees before him, catching the toes of his boots in her hands. "My prince, my prince, have pity on me!"

"My lady, my lady!" Chirre squeaked, flapping his hands.

"Is she hurt?" Cloud asked in alarm.

"Back, both of you." Paedro knelt and took his aunt by the arms. "Ione, dear aunt, stop this. Please. Tell me what's happened."

She withdrew from his touch as if it burned. "I would that I could forget it forever."

Paedro leaned back on his heels, rested his hands on his thighs, then turned the palms up, waiting. It was her choice.

A tremulous sigh came from under the veils. "Be it on your head, then. You have mistrusted me in the past, but I will show you, Paedro, that I mean you no harm. Tonight, I have seen a terrible thing."

Ione rose unsteadily to her feet, leaning on Chirre's arm. "If it were only about you, or your kingdom, I would have come to you in private, nephew." She pointed at Cloud. "But it concerns him, too. And Rose, may she be forgiven."

Cloud stiffened. The prince put a warning hand on his chest. "Is she the one who's hurt? Has she done something foolish for her vigil? Does she need our help?"

"Vigil!" Ione laughed. "She's holding no vigil. And as for hurt? Better that she were dead than this."

Cloud would have seized her then if Paedro hadn't shoved him back. "Aunt, be plain. Quickly, now!"

Hands shaking, Ione tugged her veils back and stared at them from eyes filled with misery. "You planned to be married tomorrow, my young lord?"

"I still plan to," Cloud said warily.

"You know that he does."

"No, I don't know that. Not anymore. Not once you know what I know." Ione took Paedro's hand in her own and clutched it like a child begging for comfort. "There has been bad blood between us in the past, but you were kind. You gave me a second chance by bringing me to the islands. This is how I can discharge the debt I owe you for sparing my life -- by sparing your friend's honor."

She turned to Cloud and took his hand in her free one, linking the three of them together. "Child, you cannot marry Rose tomorrow. For the love of decency, you cannot."

Cloud's face drained of color. "Give me a good reason, before I challenge you like a man to a duel," he breathed.

Ione covered her eyes with her hands. "Cloud, forgive me. She's betrayed you. Tonight, I saw her with another man."

Brach held Mims fast and ground his silk-covered mouth against hers. He swallowed all the screeching she tried to make, muffling it until the only sounds that came out were gasps and moans. Not many people thought of it, but fear and passion were like tears and laughter; only those who knew the cause could tell a difference between the two.

“Come on, now,” he ordered against her stubborn mouth. “Stop fighting me!” Games were one thing, but Ione’d have more than his head if this didn’t go off like she wanted!

Mims was skinny, but strong. It took just about all the strength he had to keep her from struggling away, stamping on his feet, or scratching his chest to ribbons.

The window was closed; it needed to be open, and that gave him an idea. He gripped Mims extra hard and swung her around into the shutters, using the girl’s head as a club. The old wood gave easily, swinging open wide to crash into the outer walls.

The blow dazed her into lying limp in his arms for a moment. Just what he needed.

Brach reached out to shove Mims’s lantern a little closer to the window. Mayhap Chirre couldn’t see them in action from the courtyard. He’d best get there fast or the show would be over, especially if Mims got in a lucky kick.

He thrust his hands beneath the damp neckline of the girl’s collar and tore her kirtle open. He dragged it off her shoulders, then down her arms, leaving her nearly naked to the waist. Her breasts, small but firm, puckered at the cold air.

The chill brought her out of her daze. Before she could gather wit enough to scream, he pressed one palm over her mouth. “Keep it closed, or I’ll pinch your nose shut and smother you to death where you stand. Understand me?”

Her eyes flew open wide enough to show white all around the center. She believed him. He felt the smallest movement that could have been a nod, or just her muscles trembling. “I got a dagger hid here, where you can’t see it. You don’t give me what I want, I’ll stick you through the ribs and cut your heart into chunks. Yeah?”

Again the tremble. "Kiss me," he ordered. "Your hands on me. I mean what I say; I'll kill you. Do it, wench! Now!"

Paedro had once seen a man speared through the belly during a sparring match. He'd gone seven steps before he'd realized he was dead. His face had looked like Cloud's.

"What?" the boy asked, dazed. "What did you say?"

Ione gripped Cloud's arm, her face soft with sympathy. "Rose is false to you, child. I saw it with my own eyes."

He shook his head. "Not my Rose."

"Everyone's Rose, not just your own."

"Unfaithful?" Cloud made a strange face, as if the word were bitter on his tongue. "She -- how did you know? Where did you see this?"

"Could you have been mistaken?" Paedro asked, dreading her answer. "Your veils are thick, aunt."

"I saw what I saw!" Ione's eyes flashed. "Listen: I had gone from my chamber to visit with Sela in the kitchen. She wanted my advice on how royalty would present the courses for the wedding feast. Chirre came with me. He saw it, too. They were in Rose's window. I saw her. Unfaithful!" She gripped Cloud's wrist. "If I could think of a stronger word, I would use it. She's lied to you. They've all lied to you."

"What was she doing?"

"Do you think she was combing her hair, that I'd come down here and raise the hue and cry? *She was with a man.* In her own window, the shameless little slut."

Chirre, his eyes fixed discreetly on the stronghold, gave Ione's right arm a gentle squeeze. Ione let out a deep sigh, masking relief as grief. Brach must have given the signal. At last!

Cloud had gone gray as ash, his features cold as winter ice. “How do you know it was her?”

“How could you mistake her?” Chirre asked meekly.

“Chirre!” Paedro reprimanded.

“Nephew, no.” Ione put out her hand. “He saw it, too, and his word vouches for mine that it was Rose. Is anyone else here who could speak in Rose’s own voice to call out a name that wasn’t yours?”

Cloud broke at last. He pulled away from Paedro’s grip, bolting for the stronghold.

“Follow him, follow,” Ione ordered quickly. “Go, go! See the truth for yourself!”

Paedro charged after his brother-in-arms. Through the cold night air, around the side of the stronghold, to the place where Cloud stopped abruptly, staring upward with a look Paedro had never before seen on a man’s face, not even during the heat of the worst battles. Almost afraid, the prince turned his gaze up.

A woman, a small, slender woman, sprawled naked -- or nearly naked, her shift shoved off her shoulders and up above her thighs -- on the windowsill, clutching at a man with a length of silk tied around his face. His fingers dug into her bare back, where they trailed deep red scratches on her skin. With the lantern-light so dim, it was impossible to tell who he might be, but there could be no mistaking that long, smooth spill of wine-red hair. Rose, and no one else, taking a stranger in her arms the night before her wedding. Ione had spoken the truth.

Brach tore his mouth away from Mims’s and glared at her. Stupid wench! She touched him, sure -- timid as a deer. “Like you mean it!” he urged her. “Lively, now!”

She shook her head. Tears seeped from her eyes, both tight shut and every muscle in her body all a-tremble.

“Too scared?” he jeered. He thrust his arms beneath her, lifted her like a feather, and held her half out the window, tilting her backwards. “How about now?”

Mims’s eyes flew open as she felt nothing beneath her but air and Brach’s arms. She flailed desperately at him, grabbing at his clothes for a handhold, anything to clutch on to. “Don’t drop me!” she begged. “Don’t drop me!”

“Then hang on to me,” he mocked. Her arms flew around his neck, and her legs locked behind his back. *Now*, he thought in satisfaction, *that’s a little more like it*.

He got a little closer, trying to nuzzle Mims into liveliness. What ailed her, anyhow? Much as she switched her skirts around? He shoved up her skirts and eased himself in. This was the ride of a life. She’d liked it well enough before. Why not now?

Ione could barely stop herself from patting her hands together in glee. It looked better than she could have dreamed it, and she would have sworn she could hear Cloud’s heart cracking into shards like a dropped goblet.

“Rose,” he whispered, then shrieked, “*Rose!*”

*Idiot child! Hush!* Alarmed lest he wake the household -- including Rose! -- Ione clamped her hand over his mouth and fought against the boy’s enraged strength. “Not here,” she begged. “Paedro, help me!”

Brach heard the hollering. Satisfied, he flung Mims from him. She landed on the bed in a tangle of limbs, nearly striking her head on one of the posts.

He unwound the scarf from his face and came to stand next to her as she sprawled, gasping for breath. He ran one hand lustfully down the length of her smooth thigh. “You did good, kitty,” he said, and laughed at her. “Look at that mouth, hanging wide open. Did I scare you?”



He leaned over her and leered at her bared breasts, ready to get on with some proper fun now that Ione had had her show. “How about a kiss, to make it better?” he suggested, climbing on top of her.

He laid his lips on Mims’s. For a moment, they were still and cold as death beneath his. Then, she bit.

He screeched and slapped at her, but she ground down until he landed a blow to her face. Only then did she let him go.

“Whore!” he cursed, scrambling off the bed, “I ought to beat you purple for that. Or maybe I’ll just teach you to act like a grateful lady, since it looks like you don’t know how to appreciate a man.”

Mims spat blood in his face. “I’d rather die!”

Brach recoiled, his stomach twisting. The blood, hot and slimy, clung to his skin. “Slut! I ought to teach you a lesson you wouldn’t ever forget, but you ain’t half worth it.” On an impulse born of anger, he stepped back and dug into his pocket and pulled out his angelus coin. “Whores get paid, after all.” He shoved the money between her lips. “Swallow it down, slut. You say anything to anyone, and I *will* kill you. You hear me?”

He picked up the scarf and wound it around his arm. Who needed Mims, anyway? She could keep that puny coin. He’d have a hundred more like it from Lady Ione. Then he’d buy the red-headed wench for a slave and cut off her own lip. See how well she liked that!

Let her go for a while, though. He’d go down to the tomb and meet Chirre, like they’d promised. See how Ione had done. He smirked at that thought, even if it did hurt his mouth. He’d just bet he knew how well Ione had done!

Together Paedro and Ione dragged Cloud out of earshot from the stronghold. Ione kept her hand firmly pinned over the boy’s mouth, but the fight had gone out of him. He shook

like a tree caught in the wind from the ocean, a trembling so violent that it nearly damaged Ione's fingers.

She exchanged a glance with Paedro before releasing the boy. To their relief he remained silent, though he stared at the pair of them as if they could somehow save him from what he had seen -- turn back the clock and make it all not true.

*Stupid fools.* Ione softened her face into an expression of pity. She pulled the strip of gilded leather from her sleeve and ran it between her palms, waited until both Paedro and Cloud were caught by the glinting gilt embroidery of the mage-worked sigils and runes in it, those that could influence a person's mind and bring them around to her way of thinking, then let out a soft sigh and shook her head. She spoke sweetly for both the boy's benefit and for Paedro's.

"How false she has played you. What games they've played with your faith and your trust. Do you see now why you can't marry her, Master Cloud?"

Cloud shook his head, unable to speak. But, ah! She could see that as he watched the strip of leather slide between her hands, his shock began to alter, to *change*; he began to feel the soul-searing insult to his pride instead of the wound to his heart. Just so.

She put two fingers under the boy's chin and tipped it up until he met her eyes. "You won't marry her, I know," she soothed him. "But she's wronged you. I know of a way to go about canceling the nuptials and taking your revenge all at once."

"Aunt ...?" Paedro asked slowly.

She stroked the leather and smiled at him. "Ah, nephew ... you must admit I have some skill at this. For once, let it serve your purposes. Will you listen to what I have in mind?"

Ione held her breath as Paedro frowned, lost in thought. From the moment he had lifted his eyes to the window, her nephew had changed, subtly but terribly. Those who thought the prince to be gentle and mild, forever sacrificing himself for the good of others, only knew the smallest part of him. Like an iceberg, nine-tenths of him lay below the

surface, and that the most dangerous part. The same blood in her veins ran through his, deny it how he might. He believed her when she said the chieftain's family knew that they passed off a common whore as an innocent bride to the prince's favorite. It went beyond insult to a man. It was treason against the crown.

"I have been kind to them, and this is how they repay me," he said, quietly, at last.  
"Ione, I will listen to you and do what you suggest. Cloud?"

"And I." Cloud's voice shook still, now with anger. He appeared to understand all that Paedro said, and all he did not say, and more. "Anything."

"I have a plan. Say nothing. Do nothing." Ione held up a hand to stop their protests.  
"Only until I give the word. It will be easy enough to do. And this is how we go about it ..."

## Chapter Five

Just past midnight and much against her will, Tirsah returned to the kitchen. She crept in silently as a Catkin, carrying one small candle to light her way. She shielded the flame with one hand and kept a careful eye on the path she trod.

Normally, the mage had the night vision of an owl, but she'd seen the mess earlier. Sela's orderly workspace had gotten wildly disarranged, casks here and kegs there wherever you might step, and it only would have gotten worse as the evening progressed. Navigating that night-blind would have been as dangerous as sailing over reefs, and she had no wish to crush her bare toes against a barrel, thank you kindly.

In the midst of her cooking frenzy, Sela had begrudged a very narrow, winding path that led from the clay bake oven to the banked hearth and circled around the ancient work table, which groaned under the weight of feast dainties. The architect of the mess had herself fallen asleep on a low kitchen cot, barricaded behind a stack of emptied crates. Soft snores drifted up, mingling with the low hissing from the nearly dead fire in the hearth.

Poor thing! She'd not even removed her shoes or loosened her belt before collapsing. And if Tirsah knew Sela, her current state would just be "resting her eyes" for a moment before stubbornly getting back to work.

Tirsah dug into her belt pouch for a small, rune-stitched bag of dried chamomile and angelica, and tucked it gently into the crook of Sela's neck. To salve her conscience, she sketched a blessing over the old woman.

"Sleep well and sweetly," she whispered. "Don't wake, no matter what you hear, until the sun rises. Rest until the morning wakens you."

At Anno's request, she'd hidden what she now sought to keep it out of the way of wedding preparations. Unfortunately, someone, thinking it unimportant, had shoved the small cedar casket behind a barrel of flour and stacked three jars of preserved plums on top.

After searching for a while in vain, Tirsah found the thing at last. Weak with relief, she ran her hands over the sides in search of the lock hidden in a small detail of the cunning carving. If one didn't know where to look, they'd never get the box open -- mage work, and the best of its kind.

With her finger on the mark, she reached for a key worn on a black thread around her neck. It looked nothing like a key of the usual sort -- more like a bit of filigree coin -- but it slid smoothly into the tiny hole. The lock clicked open, soft as a mouse's footfall.

The interior of the box smelt old, musty, and unpleasant, without a hint of the good cedar it had been made from. The three dusty wine bottles it held clinked gently against each other as Tirsah rolled them over to examine their labels. She nibbled at her lip for a long moment before finally choosing the smallest one, made of red glass and stoppered with a great deal of melted wax.

It sloshed when she picked it up. Nearly half-full, she judged. It would be enough.

She cradled the bottle in the crook of her arm, close to her chest, and padded to the solid wooden door at the back of the pantry. It stood just a little ajar, inviting. She slipped in, taking care to close it behind her.

She stood then in a tiny room bared of everything. A trapdoor in the floor had been opened and pushed aside a bit, not far enough for entrance, but enough to allow speaking. It

was a second opening to Anno's quarters, a secret even better kept than the locked door in the corridor. Who would venture into a pantry, after all? And so long as there was wine, who but a servant -- a trusted member of the family -- would be expected to fetch it? Anno was yet safe with the second entrance.

"Father?" Tirsah whispered. No response. "Father?"

Her voice seemed too loud in the tiny chamber, echoing against the stone walls before it leaked out the small air vent in the opposite wall. Still no answer. "I know you're down there," she said. "And that you're awake. Just as you knew I'd be here."

"Did I, daughter?"

"Why else leave the door unlocked and pull the trap open?" Tirsah retorted. She cradled her bottle in her arms and sat on the floor with her legs crossed beneath her skirts. "How have you kept yourself this day?"

"I sailed for the Eastern Lands and brought you back a selkie carved of white jade." She could just hear Anno settling onto the steps that led up to the trapdoor, tucking his cloak about himself. "Then I flew on the back of a gyrfalcon all the way to the Amahpre markets and bargained with a gypsy for a firkin of butter." He laughed, a little bitterly. "And yourself?"

Tirsah fingered the bottle. "Wedding nonsense."

Her father made a thoughtful noise. "For once, we're both lying."

Her cheeks warmed. "Perhaps."

"Perhaps, nothing. I know."

"There's nothing to know."

"Little liar," he scolded, but kindly. "You cast off an aura of upset. The air around you feels like the sea before a storm."

"I'm concerned about the wedding ritual, that's all."

“Understandable. I forget ...” Tirsah heard a rasping sound, as if he rubbed his unshaven cheeks in thought. “Have you done this before?”

“Once or twice. There’s nothing to them except standing by as a witness to vows. I’ve not done a full ceremony.”

“And the daughter of the chieftain requires something grand, yes?” Anno mused. “What have you chosen?”

“Oceania’s Wedding.”

“Truly?” He sounded surprised.

“You don’t think I can do it?”

“Peace! I know you, daughter; you’re capable. But the ritual is quite complex. I only wanted you to be aware of that.”

“I’m well aware, trust me.” Tirsah arched her back, stretching a little of the day’s stiffness out of it. Limber though she might be, the floor stones in the pantry were far too rough to sit on for long.

As she stretched, the bottle in her lap clinked lightly against the stones. She froze, praying that her father hadn’t heard it.

No such hope; Anno’s had ears far too sharp to miss a thing. “Tirsah,” he said warily, “what have you brought?”

“Nothing! Nothing of import. Only ...” She shifted uncomfortably. “A bottle of the Seeing wine.”

“Tirsah ...” His voice was heavy with disappointment. “I thought we’d had this out long and long ago.”

“We have. I know. But --”

“Never again. I *told* you that!” He stood. She could just barely see the top of his curly head down in the darkness now, and the faintest gleam of candlelight off his eyes as he peered up at her.

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't have good reason."

He didn't know what she knew. He couldn't understand why she had to try and see why what happened had happened. If she failed to understand the path to tread, all would be lost. But she couldn't tell him. It was her own burden to bear, and she'd do it alone.

"There is no reason good enough. I was fool enough to let you try it even once."

"Perhaps I just wasn't ready yet."

"If you've forgotten, the last time you sipped that brew, you nearly died!"

"I was only twelve."

"Nearly died, I said, and you remember it well! Bad enough that you never grew another inch again. I've no way of knowing what seeing wine might do to you now, and I will not let you take the chance."

"Father!" She gripped the bottle tight in frustration. "Please. I'll beg you if you want."

"You know I don't want that. I've said no, and I meant it. You will not drink that wine, tonight or ever again."

Tirsah shut her eyes tightly. She fingered the wax seal on the bottle and took in a deep breath. "Try and stop me," she said quietly. "With or without your say, I mean to do this."

"Tirsah!"

She dug her fingernails deep into the sealing wax. It crumbled away easily. The cork was loose and fell away as a leaf from a tree. The sharp, bitter smell of the wine rose to fill her senses, sending her head a-spinning. It was foul, dangerous stuff -- homemade, distilled not of grapes, but of kelp, shot through with shark's blood and herbs that only Anno knew.

"Tirsah, don't. For your life, don't do this," Anno ordered urgently. He crawled up the stairs a short ways, hesitating just at the line of light. "I cannot -- cannot come into the light to stop you -- but daughter, please!"



"I will do this." She lifted the bottle and sniffed at it, shutting her eyes to stop the rush of blood to her head. "I've much less chance of hurting myself if you help me. Don't you think?"

"Why?" Anno pounded the flat of his hand on the step. "What is important enough to risk your life for? Tell me that first."

"Nothing," she whispered. "Nothing, and everything. Tell me, Father: why are we here? Where did we come from?"

"Tirsah, stop this!"

"Answer me first."

"Why try to distract me?" he burst out, frustrated. "We have always been here."

"Yes, but where did we start? What's it all about?"

Anno was silent for a long moment. "Only if you could See the past would you find an answer for that, and that Gift does not exist," he said at last. "Mages can see the present dimly, the future in puzzling riddles on the Heskit board, or in taunting dream-visions, but no one sees the past. We remember the past by carrying it into the future, and by teaching our children the old ways, the old stories and tales. I taught you all this at my knee when you were barely tall enough to reach it.

"And all that we know is our family has been here for hundreds of years, one chieftain after another. We don't know that we'll continue. There have always been men in the world, and Gypsies, and the halflings -- the Catkin, selkies, strange beasts of the forest, and more things existing that we've never even thought of."

He half-laughed. "Such as young Edge, who favors us with her presence. Don't think she'll stay with us forever, Tirsah. She's a gift, and a temporary one at that. No matter how she acts, treat her with respect. The Catkin were once the greatest of the races, and I wouldn't be surprised if they come back around into their powers some day. If they have fallen low, history tells us that they always rise just as high again."

"You won't distract me, either, you know," she said softly. "Though it was a good try. You taught me too well for that."

"Much to my regret." Anno raked his hands through his hair in frustration. "Tirsah, what do I have to do to convince you of the danger you're placing yourself in?"

"Nothing, Father; I'm determined. Help me try again. Just one more time. There's something that I have to know."

"Tirsah, no."

"I'm strong enough by now. I know I am."

"You've not heard a word I've said, daughter!"

Tirsah rested her hot forehead against the cold bottle and shook her head. "I must try," she said stubbornly. "Help me or don't, but I will do it."

"Then tell me why."

"No!" She couldn't -- she wouldn't.

*What do you do with years of hate, when suddenly you discover there's no more reason for hating? Where does it go? I can't love him -- not after all these years, and all the pain he's caused me!*

*That's why you hated him in the first place, a quiet voice inside taunted her. Because he didn't love you back. Not enough. And you brought this, all of this, upon yourself.*

"Choose, Father. Time's up."

"You won't give this up, will you?"

"No." She thrust her hand down the trapdoor. "I have the wine. I want your bronze goblet."

"That's my way of Seeing," he argued. "How do you know it's yours?"

"How do you know it's not?"

Anno let out a long, ragged breath. “How can any man stand up against you?” he murmured bitterly. “Be it on your own head, daughter.”

“As you like it.” She opened her palm. “Give me the goblet.”

The cold weight of the bronze cup fell into her hand. She drew it back and stared at the thing. “You knew all along! You knew, and still you --”

“I knew you would ask,” he said wearily. “I hoped you’d be convinced otherwise.”

“But you know me too well. Thank you,” she whispered.

“There’s no virtue in the cup, you know,” Anno murmured as Tirsah poured the wine out carefully as she could, lest she waste a drop by spilling it. “Only in the wine. You could use half a seashell and get the same results.”

“For luck, then.” Tirsah drew the bottle back carefully and set it aside. The wine was thick as soup, and as deep a red as old blood. It settled with perfect stillness, shining as a mirror, and reflected back her two anxious eyes peering in at it. “Are you ready, Father?”

“Against my better wishes, yes.” In the shadows, she saw Anno’s two hands come together in an incantation sign. “Do it.”

Quickly, before she lost her nerve, Tirsah lifted the goblet to her lips and drank deep, swallowing almost half of the thick red liquid.

Her mind fragmented. Shattered into a thousand pieces. The cup clattered to the floor.

*Oh!* She hadn’t thought it would work so quickly. Her heart beat fast. Too fast. Throbbled like the tides inside her chest. Her vision blurred. Went dark.

Cleared into a different world.

*A dove flew into an open grave ...*

*Two street players, dressed in rags, chased a small child down an alley and demanded the coins he held in his hand ...*

*A dog, so thin that his ribs showed, chewed at the carcass of a freshly killed fawn ...*

*The breath from a woman's lips blew out a candle ...*

*A great storm from the sea tore away vast chunks of the chieftain's island ...*

*A small barn cat protected an old mare from a two-headed snake ...*

*A raven speared a mongoose through the heart ...*

*A man's hand cupped her cheek, thumb gently stroking the bone; his breath warmed her cool lips as he kissed her; their bodies slid together, smooth and sleek as heated glass, in a marriage-bed embrace. Naked and slick with the sweat of their lovemaking, they clung together with arms and legs tangled one about the other. He, much larger than she, took great care not to crush her even as they wrestled and kissed. He lavished worship on her body, suckling the hardened nubs of her nipples and then the mounds of her breasts in his mouth, one after the other. His hands stroked her mons, gently caressing over the slit between her legs. One finger dipped in, teasing at her clit, causing her to arch up beneath him with a soundless wail of pleasure. Soon, they rolled so that she was on top of him, guiding his swollen cock into her slick, waiting channel, and he drove deep inside --*

"Tirsah!"

The world jerked sickeningly to the left. Tirsah's eyes cleared. She looked into the cup, and saw blood. Her stomach lurched and rose into her throat.

"Tirsah!" Anno insisted. "Speak to me."

She fumbled blindly, down in the depths of the trapdoor hole. Anno's hand, warm, solid, and *real*, closed about her own. "Daughter, speak to me!"

"Father," she heard her own voice speak, divorced entirely from her racing thoughts.

"What did you see?" he pressed. "You were moaning."

"I saw nothing," her faraway voice said, lying without pause. "The wine gave me a pain in my head."

He didn't believe her; she felt sure of it. "Daughter --"

"I said I saw nothing!" Tirsah dropped his hand as if it burned and rose quickly, if unsteadily, to her feet. "I must go. It's late, very late. I have much left to do."

"Tirsah!"

"Leave it, Father!"

He drew in a deep breath. "Fine. For now. But not forever. I know you're hiding something."

"And you're imagining things." Tirsah shook her skirts out with a quick, practiced snap. "I'm only busy. Do you need anything tonight, Father?"

"You're not fooling me, you know."

"I'm not trying to fool anyone." She picked up the wine bottle and corked it easily. "I'll melt fresh wax on this before morning."

"Tirsah ..." Anno growled. "Ohe, have it your way, girl! Only promise you'll come to me if you need help."

"I promise, but I won't need it." She put her hand through the trapdoor and squeezed his fingers. "Rest now, Da. I'll come to you after the ritual and tell you all."

"I'm sure you will," Anno muttered. "Go your way, then. Leave me." He pulled the trapdoor shut with a slam. She heard the muffled sound of his footsteps as he stalked down the steps and vanished into the depths of the cellar. She'd angered him, then. Fine. Let him be so.

Tirsah doused the candle between her thumb and forefinger and stood in the dark, her breath coming hard and fast now that Anno could not hear it. She felt the wine yet, flooding through her veins and filling her with things never yet dreamed of. She could See wherever she looked, as she'd never Seen before.

A stone was no longer just a stone, but a thing that sparkled and lived in its own stolid, sluggish way. If she concentrated, she could smell the granite. If she closed her eyes, she

could See the men who'd hewed it from the cliff centuries past -- short, thick-set men clad in rough leather, working with stone axes and hammers of bone ...

She opened her eyes wide, gasping for breath. *What have I opened within myself? As if I didn't have enough to worry about! And why now?*

She swallowed hard. *It's too much. Once I might have dreamed of this, but not now. I'm a mere mage, nothing greater than that, and I was content. I was!*

"Great things are given when great things are expected of you," Anno barked through the trapdoor, startling her into a violent flinch. "Remember that, Tirsah."

"I don't need your help!"

"There's a different tune to sing. Something happened when you drank the wine. I could feel it. I could almost See it myself. I *know*."

"You don't know everything," she flung viciously at her father. "And if you won't go away, then I will!" She cast the bottle aside, picked up her skirts, and fled, the door left open wide behind her. *The sea -- I must get to the sea*, she thought, frantic with need. *Let the ocean clear my head, and let me learn what I need from what I Saw -- from what I See. Please, may it clear my head!*

Though, of course, she knew that it wouldn't. Anno had warned her, though she'd refused to hear him. He'd been right and true as the moon and the tide: her life had changed forever with one sip of wine, and she only just began to See how it would never be the same again.

Edge uncurled herself from the foot of the steps as Anno crawled back down them, wearied and sickened in spirit and body.

"I hear all this!" She lashed her tail. "Why you permit such things? Why you let her do it?"

"I had to." He sank into his chair and dropped his head into his hands. "Edge ... little Edge, you would not understand."

She bared her teeth. "I understand much." Tail switching, she stalked between his feet and glared up at him. "You say you know own mind, then let others say no, you need this. Do this. Do that. Liar!"

"I am not!" he protested. "It was her time. I would never have given her the cup otherwise."

"You say it has no virtue."

"Not on its own. But if a Seer touches it ..."

"So, you do lie!"

"I told you, you would not understand."

"And I tell you, I understand more than you think." Edge laid her hands boldly on his thighs. "I tell you something else, Anno, something true. You not a stupid man, mage-love. You know I want you for mate."

"*Edge*," he protested, the air escaping from his chest. "Now is not the time --"

"Not now? Then when? You not know this?" she asked, incredible skepticism drawn on her face.

"No -- I -- yes, I did know, but -- Edge!" He caught her chin between his fingers. "I will not permit it, little one. You know that."

She flexed her claws angrily into his legs. "Why not?"

"I have told you and told you again!"

"Reasons that matter not to me. Catkin queens can have as many mates as they choose. I choose you. Why you not let me give you pleasure? Heart is full of pain. I can soothe, just a little, just a while. Why not take my gift?"

"I have forbidden it! Let that be enough, Edge."

The small, wildly beautiful Catkin looked around herself with a moue of distaste. “Forbid yourself too many good things, Anno-love. So dark, so cold, so ugly down here. Why surround yourself with stink?”

“Because I deserve it,” Anno ground out. He closed his eyes to block out the sight of her, too beautiful for such as he. “I am helpless to aid my kinfolk in this tangle because I once grasped at what I wanted without thinking of the consequences. I thought I could best a magic I was fundamentally incapable of conquering. I wagered all the magic I had in a gamble to stop darkness taking over the King’s City, and the effort burned my soul so greatly that I lost everything but a few crumbs of my power. If I dare to take you, what will I lose next? Can you not understand that?”

Edge growled. “Enough!” She raised herself on her arms and caught a wrist in each hand. “Stupid man,” she grumbled, using his hands to raise herself nimbly as a dancer onto his lap and sprawl with a knee on either side of his hip. “Stupid, stupid man. Not have enough sense to know what you need. Men! All the same, Cat or human.”

“Edge, stop this,” he warned, desperate anger lighting his face.

She sneered at him. “You stop! This is, what you say, rubbish. This is folderol. You forget my nose is sharp. I smell Seeing wine, fear, need. Need to forget, to clear head, to renew. Like dipping dried-out sponge into pool.”

Anno shook his head, eyes wide. “By the Lady, does my word mean nothing to you?”

“You not want me? You say so, you are double liar.”

Anno let out a low growl. His hungry hands stroked down the fullness of her wild, unfettered arms and the sleekness of her belly -- then pulled back as if she burned him, as well she might have done. “Edge, no, no, and again, no, regardless of how I might want you! You are not my mate. I buried my heart with my wife many years ago.”

The Catkin snorted daintily. “You bury your heart, maybe, but not everything else! Your rune says what is. I am your mate. You are mine.



“I give you Catkin gift,” she whispered, cupping his cheeks. “Catkin queens mate for the time-that-is, not time-forever-and-always. Who knows what tomorrow brings? Not even you. I choose you for-now. I give gifts to you.”

Anno struggled to pull her hands away. The soft, velvet touch was far too sweet and tempting for his own good. “Wretched, fallen angel, you choose not to understand!”

He tangled his hands deep in her tumbled curls and pulled her to him so that her cheek rested against the skin of his chest. He breathed as if he’d raced three times around the island. “You cause me such grief with your love, Catkin,” he accused without anger. “Have pity on me, little one.”

She shook her head. “I not say sorry,” she defied him. “You not sorry.”

“No.” He said, voice choked. “I am not sorry, little wild one, for I could say I loved you, too. And that may be the end of us.”

She stuck her chin out. “Not if I say not so!”

“You may have no choice.” He grew cold despite her warmth, memories that had temporarily washed away on ecstasy flooding back into his mind. She had done her best, beloved one, but she alone was not enough to hold back the night.

She knew it, too. Burrowing her cheek against his shoulder, Edge moaned and keened softly to herself. All that he could offer was to hold her until they were parted, as he knew they soon would be. The gods played games with their lives, and they were merely pawns with their next move soon approaching.

And Anno, once so great, could not see what that move would be.

## Chapter Six

Near dawn, when at last Anno slept the sleep of the justly weary, Edge dared to leave him and slithered out into the kitchen, bent on an errand of her own.

The warm room had gone all to sleep, fires banked, almost dead. Sela's snoring, the only sound left to hear from the only person still about, issued soft and low from a small cot in the corner, where she'd collapsed for a "rest" -- and fallen sound asleep. Edge peered at the old woman, satisfying herself that Sela slept like a dead one.

Perfect.

The Catkin crept to the overburdened worktable filled with wedding dainties and surveyed it, deep in thought. She'd scavenged an old mesh bag from Anno's cellar and brought it along, strung around her neck, in hopes she'd be able to fill it brim full. A lucky hunt, with so much to choose from!

She clawed a handful of chopped meat out of a wooden tub, sniffed at it, and wrinkled her nose. Tainted with vinegar and cloves! Why would someone spoil good mutton that way? Still, it was food; it would do. She shoveled the messy handful into her sack.

A scoop of dried peas, cherry preserves, a dripping honeycomb wrapped in soft kelp, three rounds of warm bread, and a bite-sized egg pie joined the mutton in her sack as she

crept around the table. She struck where it pleased her, seizing clawfuls of whatever took her fancy or looked as if it might appeal to a less discerning palate.

How much room remained in the sack? Edge jostled it. Enough for ... oh, a cold breast of roasted chicken, a hunk of smoked salmon, and perhaps a few broiled gizzards wrapped in bacon. She deliberated over snatching a marzipan tower off the huge, gilded wedding cake, then decided against it. Sela had already patched her masterwork once and sworn she'd strip the skin off anyone who dared touch it again. Sound sleeper or not, Edge knew Sela would start bolt upright at the sound of sweet almond paste cracking.

What else? Wine?

She padded down to the far end of the table and stared at the rows of bottles, flicking the tip of her tail back and forth. The scribbles and scratches that men called writing looked like spider tracks to her, and the bottles were of dark blue glass that prevented seeing within. After some hesitation she reached out and took one of the smallest, which had a decorative net of tin draped around its neck. She clawed the cork out and sniffed. Pfaugh! Peach brandy!

Not *her* taste, but some liked it well enough. Edge recorked the bottle and added it to her sack. She had to shove it down a bit and smash the other things together, but it fit, with just enough give to pull the string tight and tie it in a knot.

She dropped to all fours, clutched the bag's neck between her teeth, and padded out of the kitchen without making a sound. But instead of choosing the turn that would lead her into the heart of the stronghold, she veered left and shouldered her way through a small swinging door into a narrow, little-used servant's hallway. Over the years it had gotten littered with old crates, empty casks, and bushel-baskets full of worn, ragged clothes. The tumble of clutter was no problem for the nimble Catkin; she climbed over the piles easy as a beam of starlight -- clawed up one side and skittered down the other.

When she reached it, she found that the door at the far end, warped from years of disuse, had gotten stuck again. It stuck and squealed in protest as she scraped it open wide enough to let her out. Would it wake Sela? No. Too far away.

She didn't bother to shut it. Who else would come that way so late at night? Who ever came that way but her?

On the outside, the small door was well-hidden. She'd only discovered it herself by accident in her ramblings around the lighthouse, where it lay all but buried behind the tangled branches of a cliff pine. She had to drop to all fours to wiggle through.

Beyond the thick trees the rocky ground dropped away at an angle anyone but a Catkin would find difficult to climb, then smoothed out into a plateau some twenty feet away. A very small building of rough-cut marble, perhaps twenty feet by twenty feet again, sat in the middle of that plateau, surrounded by a fence of stones piled one on the other and mortared together. The tomb of the chieftains.

Edge made a face at it. She did not care for that small building. Neither did she have a choice about heading for it.

She took a better grip on her sack of food, set her paws against the rock, and began to slide. She skidded down the incline, gathering speed, and at the last possible second used her momentum to vault over the rough fence.

She landed on all fours, the pads on her palms and soles absorbing enough contact shock to break a human's bones. Not just shock from the fall -- the spirits who haunted that place didn't like intruders, and did what they could to drive them out. Only children, madmen, and determined half-felines could manage to make their way in without the proper rites.

Edge shook herself in disdain and shrugged off the greasy feeling of ghostly hands that grabbed at her ankles. If intruders ignored the haunts, they would also soon be ignored; they always played the same little games, and Edge always won.

*Edge is mightier than any ghost!* she boasted, and proved it by lifting her pointed chin in silent challenge at the ancestral tomb.

Coastal folk did not bury their dead as plainsmen or city dwellers did. What arable land they did have they needed to produce food, not taint with corpses, and as for the rest of the land -- unyielding rock! To throw corpses into the water would poison it and frighten away the fish. Bury a body on the beach, and the tide would uncover it. They could burn their dead, but the wood they had was needed for building ships, or for heating their homes during the harsh winter if they were too poor to afford coal from merchant ships.

So for hundreds of years, they'd built those houses of the dead above ground, out of things quickest to hand: stone and mortar made of quicklime and sand -- and kept them sealed tight save for arrow-thin slits that let in scouring ocean winds to strip their corpses dry. Every wall had runes and charms any place a mage could possibly carve or mortar one in, to keep the ghosts from rioting out.

Edge padded around the side and eyed the solid door and latch suspiciously. She'd gotten a nasty shock or two in the past when she'd dared to touch the things. Instead, she raised a paw and dragged her claws across the wood.

*Scratch-scratch, scratch-scratch-scratch.*

She felt a sense of hesitation in the air, then a gentle breeze like a shrug. The latch popped open. Edge gripped her bag between her teeth again, gave the door a careful push with her shoulder, and crawled inside.

A small fire of driftwood burned in one corner next to what looked like a heap of litter and old rags. The heap moved as Edge padded forward.

"Hanri!" a hoarse old voice cried out. The rags shook themselves and unfolded into the shape of a woman, stumbling to her feet. "Hanri, is that you?"

Edge sat down on her haunches and laid the bag on the floor. "Is only kitty," she said with a gentleness unusual for her. "Recognize me now, Berry?"

“Oh.” The ancient collapsed into her bed of rags so suddenly that Edge pricked up in alarm. Had she fainted? No, she was putting a gnarled hand to her forehead. “I thought you were Hanri. Forgive me, kitty?”

“I forgive.” Edge nudged the mesh bag toward her. “I bring food. Wedding feast tomorrow, all prepared tonight, and left out to be ready for morning. Wanted you to taste.”

“Eh? Smells good, kitty!” Berry grabbed the bag. She picked at the knot until it came loose, and after a long, careful look at the jumbled contents, she thrust in a hand and brought it out dripping with minced meat, smashed egg pie, and bread crumbs. She shoved the food into her mouth, barely chewing each hungry bite.

Three handfuls later, she stopped herself and dragged her hand along her skirt to clean it. “Thank you,” she said, her voice a little stronger. “I’ll save the most for later. But this --”

She lifted the brandy bottle up to the firelight, fascinated as a child with a new toy. “Hanri’s favorite,” she murmured to herself. “I’ll keep it for him, when he comes back. He’s been gone a long time. Do you know how long it’s been? Since before I met you, I think. I can’t remember how many years. But he’ll be back. He swore he would.”

“He will be back.” Edge began a low-level, purring thrum in the back of her throat to soothe the old woman. She put one paw on the aged knee. Just behind Berry’s head, a small cubby -- a tiny hole, like hundreds of others, that held bones long since crumbled to dust -- had been decorated with the rough likeness of a young, square-featured man, and the name *Hanri de Narbon*.

A long story, Berry’s, and a sad one, but Anno had told it to her one cold night not so long ago.

Thirty years since, Hanri de Narbon had gone out with some other fishermen, hoping to rake in a good share of swarming tunny. There’d been a squabble among the men on the decks. In the confusion, Hanri got knocked overboard somehow. Likely, they said, he’d taken

a blow to the head, for he'd been a good swimmer, but he never surfaced alive. Berry had walked the shore for days until his body washed up at last.

In the end, the quarrelers hadn't been punished. Lorn's father, chieftain at the time, considered the disaster a true accident and judged the men had suffered enough by losing their good friend.

Berry disagreed. She plucked the lifelock from her hair, refused her widow's pension, and fled to the Wild Lands. No one knew where she went, or why she'd oft be gone for months at a time. When she returned to the villages, a little more seamed in face and wild in her hair and dress each time, she'd forever hunt out the young fishermen, seize them by the shoulders, and ask if they'd seen Hanri. When they denied it, she'd quiz them about justice. Did it exist? Was it a lie?

Once, she returned from a long time wandering with an infant tied carelessly to a board on her back, a baby girl she left near the lighthouse for Anno to find. Anno named the child Mims and saw to her raising as a cousin to his daughter and Rose, even before her resemblance to Berry became clear. Berry never seemed to remember that she had borne a daughter; she never asked after Mims. Should they cross paths, she frowned a little quizzically and nothing more.

Her pattern never changed. Berry wandered Kirree for a few weeks, then retreated to the tombs to rest and regain her strength for another long, footsore trek into the wilds. Almost everyone had forgotten her birth status. They knew her only as mad old Berry, the filthy vagabond, come to wreak havoc for a few weeks out of the year and blessedly gone for the rest.

Edge liked the old woman. She stank like nothing else, and she was addle-witted, but she needed looking after. Old she might be, and twice or three times her own size, but just a kitling underneath. And who knew better, except the gypsy-kind, than a Catkin what it meant to be reviled for who you were?

“Pretty kitty,” Berry crooned. Her broken nails clawed at Edge’s back in a crude attempt at petting. With a yawn, Edge sat up and began to groom the smudges and dirt from the old woman’s arms, partly because she needed it and partly to hear her laugh when the Catkin’s rough tongue tickled her.

“Will you wash away my soul as well as my dirt?”

“Too much dirt. I never get that far.” Edge dealt the old woman a gruff love-pat and frowned at the remaining mess. She ran her claws through Berry’s tangled, elf-knotted mane of hair, smoothing it down.

While she worked, Berry fiddled with a piece of thread that dangled from her sleeve, winding it around and around her fingers. “A wedding tomorrow, you said? Hanri and I have only been married for a handful of months. Who’s being wed?”

“City man and Rose.” Edge lapped at her hand and rubbed it over Berry’s face. “Hold still.”

Berry closed her eyes in obedience. “Rose. The pretty little thing with red hair like silk?”

“Same.”

“I saw her some hours ago, asleep in the Queen’s Cave. I would have stayed there -- sometimes I like to sleep on the beach so that if Hanri comes back I’ll see him right away -- but I didn’t want to disturb her. She looked like a fairy princess, but she’d been crying. Why should she cry? Do you know?”

“No.” Edge leaned back and eyed Berry critically. The old, mad creature would never pass for clean. She’d worn most of her dirt for so long that it had stained the skin beneath. Still, she had made a small difference with her efforts.

Berry reached out to scratch Edge between the ears. “Are you a good friend, and true to me?”

“Good friend, yes. I do not betray you ever.”



Berry paused. Her gaze shifted, as if she looked at something far away. “Will you hunt with me tonight, Kitty? Come with me to find the cheaters and the liars down in the village. I know they must be there. They always tell me no, no, that was their father who went fishing with Hanri, but I know their faces. Will you help me get the truth out of them?”

Edge bumped Berry’s hand with her head. “Stay here and sleep,” she coaxed. “Warmth and food in plenty, and I keep with you until Rose’s wedding.” *Too cold out for old women such as you*, she thought in disapproval.

She patted down Berry’s bed of rags, kneading and purring. “Tonight is not a night for hunting.” She nuzzled a once-soft bit of fluff. “Tonight is for lying warm together and sleeping.”

“But there must be justice! There’s a pain in my gut like the hunger-worm, forevermore chewing at me. I must find the ones that do wrong, and think that no one knows. *I know*. Please, help me to catch them!”

“Tomorrow,” Edge crooned. “Sleep, tonight, sleep ...”

Berry’s eyelids were sliding shut. “But if they escape,” she protested. “What if we miss them?”

Edge rubbed her cheek against the old woman’s hand. “Peace,” she whispered. “No such thing can be. You have hunted justice so long. When you are needed, it will come, fetch you, say ‘this is lady that we need; she knows right from wrong.’ Berry must not fear, not worry. Sleep, old one, sleep.”

Grizzled eyelashes drifted to rest against a withered old cheek. After a moment, Berry’s head slipped to the side, her cheek lying against Hanri’s resting place, and she slept.

Edge gave a long sigh and laid her head against the old woman’s foot. Not half as good as Anno, but warm and soft....

“Hsst! Chirre! Chirre!” a voice bellowed.

Both Catkin and old human eyes flew open.

“What goes?” Edge hissed, irritated at the disturbance. She uncoiled herself and planted a firm hand on old Berry’s chest to stop her from leaping up. “Stay here. I go see.”

She crept to the door, opened it just a crack, then crouched down and peered out. A thick morning mist had rolled in off the ocean, but she had eyes sharp enough to see through it. She saw the noisemaker clear enough to chirrup in anger at his presence. *What he does here?*

The man sat on the stone fence, drumming his heels against the wall. He stank of lust, hate, fear, and dark things. Edge recoiled in instant repulsion, recognizing him. *Bad man!*

“Chirre!” he bawled again. “Chirre, where be you?”

A slight figure slithered out of the mist behind the first man. “Right here!” he whispered in a fine fury. “Be quiet, Brach! I’m only just behind you.”

Brach turned his nose up. “So you are. Thought I smelled weasel.” He pulled Chirre’s hair and bounded off the wall, so full of himself that he nearly burst at the seams.

“Quiet! Quiet!” Chirre waved his hands in a futile plea for Brach to be still. “Are you going to start talking -- softly -- or dance about in circles all night?”

“We got plenty of time! It’s all taken care of, least from my point of view! Whoooooooooooo!” Brach yowled.

Chirre almost struck the bigger man. “Hush! What if we’re overheard?”

“Down here? Not much! Who’d be wandering around tombs? Nah, they’re wrapped up snug in their beds up to the stronghold. I made sure before I came down here.”

“Maybe so, but you don’t know if they’ve woken since then.”

“Oh, shut your mouth!” Brach sneered. “You worry like an old granddam. Now, you want to hear about it or not?”

Chirre's eyes flashed dark. "Only because my lady asked me to. Unlike you, I know how to obey a command."

"Puling jackrabbit! Give me the angelus coins first."

Chirre gave one small, dry laugh. He patted at his vest pocket. It chinked with the sound of cash money clinking together. "I've got them here. One hundred. And if you're thinking to kill me and toss me over the cliff, Ione knows where I am. If you want to face her after killing her lover and stealing her coins, go right ahead. Do you dare?"

Brach had paled, but he shook his hair in renewed scorn. "Lover? Hunh! I doubt that," he snorted. "Fine, if you don't trust me, I'll tell you my story. Rich folk! They got no clue how to do what needs to be done, so when they're in need they call on us poor boys. If you're smart, you get a good price out of it. And I earned every one of them coins."

"I'm sure you worked very hard for it," Chirre said dryly, pulling himself upright. "You stink like a pig in a trough. You've sweated like a draft horse."

"Good, honest sweat! *You* smell sweet as soap. Ione's lover, you said? Ha! Now, I had a night's work, in case you didn't notice."

"Sacrifices like that you don't see every day."

"You want me to whack you, smart-mouth?"

Edge ran a small pink tongue over her lips. One hundred angelus? Not even Lorn had that much in his treasury. A good whaler might earn the value of one of the coins in a lucky year.

Berry's fingers bit deep into the flesh of the Catkin's arm; her eyes round and wide with worry. "It's a fortune," she whispered. "What are they doing with it?"

Edge laid a gentle finger across Berry's lips. "Husssssh. Soon we know."

"Who is Ione?" Berry plucked at Edge's fur.

Edge caught the old hand in her own and stroked it, purring steadily. "Ione is bad woman," she whispered. "Listen careful, Berry. Maybe justice come to you tonight."

Brach startled, twisting around. "You hear that? Sounds like that nasty cat. Wish I had my arrows!"

"Hurry! If someone's here --! Tell me the details. *Just* the details."

Brach scowled. "Shut your face, worry rat. I heard that noise again just now. 'Tis only the wind. Like I said, there ain't no one out here this time of night. They be good little fisherfolk, asleep in their beds with red-striped nightshirts on. You'd think that in a village this size, we might see a man sneakin' from here to there with a lantern, or a lady lookin' all careful-like out a window for her lover. But no! I swear, they were all raised on lectures from priests and had the fun purely catechized out of them. Dulled into sleep, is what I say. No adventure in them a'tall."

"Unlike you," Chirre said sharply. "I saw you up there with Mims. You might have killed her."

"Didn't."

Chirre sniffed. "Be that as it may, a blind man could see she didn't go willingly as you'd sworn she would. Is there a risk that she'll talk?"

"Her?" Brach barked out a laugh. "She won't blab nothing! I made good and sure of that. She knows what I'll do to her if she tells. She'd rather be alive."

"You didn't tell her the whole plan --"

"Course not! And?" He jabbed at Chirre. "How'd it go over, mister tell-nothing-ask-everything? Spill a few beans yourself, why don't you?"

"It looked convincing enough from below," Chirre begrudged him. "They forgot about me as soon as Cloud caught sight of the window, but I heard the whole thing. Ione filled

their ears with that story about Rose being unfaithful. Once they saw you, that was it. They thought Mims was Rose, right enough.”

“And?”

Chirre smiled, displaying small, crooked teeth. “As Ione laid it out, they agreed. Both Cloud and Paedro will be there when the wedding starts, but it’ll never finish. The bridegroom’s to expose his would-be bride as a whore, with Ione to vouch for it. Then, the prince accuses Lorn of treason for deceiving him. Both of them crushed under one blow.”

“And the end of it is --”

“Ione expects a full pardon from her nephew for saving him from such shame in the nick of time.”

Brach hooted. “Damn me, if he only knew. And?”

“Rose’s life is as good as over. Ione plans on claiming her for her handmaiden as payment for her insults.” Chirre smirked. “Humiliated and shamed, Lorn’s rule will be weakened, and when the old man dies --”

“Which won’t be long coming, if I know our lady.”

“-- we will be the new chieftains. And then Ione goes after Paedro, to challenge him for Amahpre.”

“Ha!” Chirre struck his hands together in glee. “Can’t nothin’ stop us now. Nothing!”

Edge lashed her tail in fury. She had heard enough. She cared as little as a cat might about the chieftain and his daughter, but they were kin to Anno. *Her Anno!*

“Make ready,” she whispered to Berry. She flexed her claws. “When I say *go*, do as I will tell you ...” She listened carefully, then --

“*Go*,” Edge whispered.

A banshee screamed.

Both men whirled as the door to the tomb burst open. A towering scarecrow of an old woman poured out of it, arms raised to the sky, mouth open, screeching fit to wake the rest of the corpses. Close behind her, a lion vaulted out of the tomb, balanced on the fence, and launched her lean golden body at the pair of them.

They fell like skittles under the blow, the wind knocked out of them. Brach's head slammed into rock. As the bursts of light cleared from his vision, he stared directly into the slitted, snaky eye of that rotten Catkin, showing all her teeth in a smile that almost made him wet himself. She had one paw pressed tight against his throat and one on Chirre's, her claws out and dug in just far enough to prick through the skin.

The old woman loomed over the pair of them. The stink of her almost drove his dizzy head to give up the fight for wakefulness. She planted her fists on her hips and leered down at the pair of them.

"What do we have here, then?" she pronounced, rolling the words over the tongue as if tasting how savory they were. "Thieves? Conspirators?"

"Pretty kitty," Chirre's voice shook. "Pretty kitty! Let us up, and I'll give you some fish."

"Edge, hold them fast!" the old woman commanded. "Do you know them?"

Edge increased the pressure of her claws just a fraction. "I know these. Friends of chieftain's guest."

"Nay!" Brach blustered. "Not us. We're just passing through --"

He kicked up with both legs and struck the Catkin a solid blow to the hindquarters. Chirre screamed like a woman as her claws skittered across his neck, leaving deep furrows.

Brach ignored it. Her claws were off his own throat, at least. He rolled to the side and scrambled up, launching himself forward.

Sudden pain exploded on the side of his head and knocked him back down to his knees. The old woman stood above him, clutching the remains of a solid glass brandy bottle like a club. "That," she said, "that was very stupid. Don't you hit my friend."

"He not hurt me," the Catkin growled, crawling awkwardly to her feet. "Berry, give me rags. I tie these offal up. Tie them good!"

Berry twisted Brach's arms behind his back. She yanked off a length of tattered skirt and started to bind his wrists, tying knots in a figure-eight that he'd never be able to undo on his own.

Brach struggled like a badger in a sack, launching first one way and then the other. "Give me that bottle!" he hollered. "Give me that bottle, and I'll let you have the beating of your life!"

Edge took the bottle from Berry's hand and, with one easy movement, let him have it where it hurt him most. He hit the ground rolling and came up choking as a noose of knotted rags slid over his head and tightened around his neck.

"No more talk of beating," Edge said dangerously. She secured the knots around his wrists and tied the tail end of the noose to the wrist bindings. "Try to break free, you strangle," she warned him, nose to nose.

That close, he could see the sharp, fierce pain that twisted her own face. He spat at her. "Got you, anyway," he leered. "Hope I broke you."

"Not broken yet." She darted two fingers into a fold of Berry's tattered dress and came out with a shredded leaf. She stuffed it into Brach's mouth and struck him a blow to the guts that made him gasp and swallow.

"Devil-cat! What was that?"

The Catkin gave a wicked laugh. “You see soon!” She retrieved a second pinch of the leaf, dropped it into Chirre’s gaping mouth, and worked his jaws until he swallowed. “Berry, you tied this one?”

“Trussed him up like a side of meat. He’s bleeding like a stuck pig!” Berry reported, obviously hugely satisfied.

“Good.” The Catkin drew herself up onto three legs and bared her teeth in a snarl. “Get into tomb. Now!”

“Nay!” Brach struggled in instant terror, tightening the rope around his neck until he nearly choked.

Chirre shook his head wildly, heedless of the bleeding slashes in his throat. “I’ll not go in there,” he rasped.

“There’s ghosts in tombs, and dead men still rotting!”

“Maybe two more, you not hurry. Maybe I finish taking your throat out. Maybe I pick your eyes out and chew them up, gone-gone!” Edge snapped her teeth a hairsbreadth from Brach’s face. “You move! And Berry, Berry --”

She caught hold of a tatter on the old woman’s sleeve. “Ssst, ssst,” she hissed, turning from the men. “Not speak loud, no, no, say nothing, but he hurt me. Hurt bad, and I cannot go.”

“Go?” Berry drew fearsomely tangled eyebrows together.

“Hsst!”

“But where would you go?” Berry protested in a hot whisper. “We’ve got them, kitty. Justice will be done tonight!”

“Even so. One must fetch Lorn. He makes justice here.”

“No!”



Edge caught Berry's chin between two careful, blood-stained fingers as the madwoman reared up indignantly. "I do right in this," she insisted. "My leg -- broken. I can guard cowards but cannot go up steep hill. You must go bring justice back here."

Berry shook her head, wild hair slinging back and forth. "The chieftain dealt me *in*justice before."

"Yes. Now he make up for that old wrong. See? We have bad men who do him harm. They tell him truth, and he will believe. All we can do is kill. When they are dead, what left? No. Go bring chieftain. Please, Berry."

The old woman bit her lip until it went white and bloodless. "But I've lost my gold circlet," she said, small and lost. "I'm so old. How's Lorn to recognize me?"

"No fear. Go, go, hurry! Bring chieftain back here. Justice comes tonight, I swear it."

Berry ran her hands down her skirts. She gave a shuddering nod. "All right, then. You guard these rabble well. Slice 'em open if they take another false step!"

She seized a fallen branch from the rocks and squared her shoulders; turning about, she began to haul herself up the sharp incline, scrambling like a crab.

Edge watched her until she was only a tiny dot among the rocks, then turned back to the two soldiers with a smile she knew looked like that of a shark.

"Go inside," she breathed, enjoying the looks of sheer terror on their faces. "Maybe, if you lucky, the ghosts will not eat you. Maybe *I* eat you. Move, now!"

## Chapter Seven

What other mage in the world had the power to make salty water sweet?

Benec leaned on his elbows on the well top and gazed thoughtfully into the glassy deeps of a stone water pit set at the near-edge of the terrace. Sunk deep into the side of the cliff, the pit was said by some to go all the way to the ocean. He supposed that some time in the dim past a master-mage must have caused the thing to be built for reasons of his own, though they escaped a practical mind.

In his youth nothing drinkable had ever been drawn from it, no matter what charms they'd tried. Lorn had kept the brackish pit boarded up.

Yet under Tirsah's hand --! Full to the brim with the finest drinking water: sweet as rain, sound as crystal, and heartening as brandy. She'd done the impossible and never even bragged about it that he'd heard of. Could there be another woman in the world to match her? He didn't think so.

Why -- how -- had he missed it all those years?

He reached for a handful of the sweet water and paused, caught by his reflection. Blast it all! Those drunken jackanapes were right. He'd utterly butchered himself in his attempt to

clean up a bit. Far better to have looked for a barber, or at the least a sympathetic fishwife who owned a pair of shears. Sela. Mims. Anyone.

He regarded his reflection with increasing gloom. The job he'd done with his hunting knife made him look as if some legendary beast had made a meal out of his hair, chewing off all the length save for ragged ends that barely reached his chin. Far too short. He felt naked.

At least the shave hadn't turned out as much of a botch, though it'd been years since he'd attempted the feat. He ran a hand over his cheeks and realized glumly that they'd already grown rough with stubble.

But worst of all, without his hair to hide behind, he realized exactly why Tirsah had once joked, laughed, and said he looked like a horse. He'd tossed her into a haystack for that, and dived in afterward, rolling and tickling her until she took it back, but she'd been right, hadn't she? He half expected himself to break into a neigh at any moment.

Disgusted, he dashed his hand into the water and shattered the reflection. Go courting -- him? It'd take more than a miracle for his lady to look on him with favor. It'd take the direct intervention of the gods and the Lady.

*If you happen to be listening*, he offered halfheartedly to any force that might have a little sympathy, *a bit of help would be appreciated. Hey?*

No response. Of course.

*Eh, well. It's not as if I expected an answer.*

"Hanri?"

The thin cry rose out of the morning mist, startling him. He twisted around on the rim of the fountain and looked behind him. No one in sight.

"Hanri?" The lost, lonely whimper sounded like a kitten seeking its mother.

Puzzled, he rose and scanned the horizon. Empty, so far as he could tell. "Who's there?"

"I can hear you, but I can't see you. Where are you, Hanri?"

"It's Benec! I'm by the fountain on the terrace."

"I can't climb that far!" A heavy thump followed, the sound of something dropping hard to earth.

He scrambled to the edge of the terrace and peered down the cliff stairs. No one there. "Speak again!" he urged. "It's hard to tell where you are in the morning fog."

"Come find me," the voice pleaded. "I'm on the shells."

Shells? Wait -- the crushed-shell path that led around the stronghold! He pelted around the side. Sure enough, someone had fallen down against the slope in a tangle of rags and outstretched arms.

He edged his way down, skidding in the slippery shards and near colliding with the poor soul. He took in a breath, and the stench hit him like a fist -- an overwhelming wave of unwashed body and soiled clothing.

Still, he held his breath and made to help the pitiful soul. "Easy now, easy," he soothed, hunting for a way to lift the creature up. "Are you hurt?"

The figure raised its head uncertainly to him, peering out between snarls of gray hair. Berry -- who else could it be but old Berry? What on earth was the poor old thing doing up there at that hour?

"Hanri?" she quavered, looking at him without truly seeing his face.

"It's just Benec, the whale-singer," he said gently, careful not to frighten her. "Do you remember me?"

Tears ran down her weathered old cheeks, streaking from a pair of startling blue eyes. "You're not him. Are you? No. I'd know his face. Hanri? Have you seen my husband?" She put up one leather-rough hand to touch his face. "You look a little like Hanri."

He put his long, lean hand over her gnarled one. "No, old one, I haven't seen Hanri. When I see him, I'll tell him you were looking for him."

It wasn't a lie. The first thing Benec planned to do after crossing over into the sea of spirits would be to hunt Hanri de Narbon down and give his shade a sound thrashing, accidental death or not. *I won't die and leave Tirsah alone. Even if she won't have me.*

Berry gripped his fingers tight enough to grind the bones together. "You promise?" she asked hoarsely, searching his face.

"I promise."

"Good." Her mind and her eyes wandered elsewhere, tracking something just over his shoulder. "Good."

"Here, can you stand?" He managed to free his hand from her grip and took her by the arms, trying to raise her up. After a moment, when she realized what he was doing, she awkwardly pulled her legs up beneath her.

"Nothing broken, is there? Wait, lean on me. There you go," he coaxed. "Good girl."

Steadying herself with a hand on his arm, she gave him an almost lucid look. "You're as full of honey and dung as ever, young Benec."

Startled, he laughed out loud. "Not so young anymore, either." She narrowed her stare. "Your voice doesn't crack any more. It's all deep. You've grown up, haven't you? Do you have a lady, Benec? You do, don't you! *Oh!*" She sucked in a breath. "Oh, oh! I remember now!"

The wind tingled suddenly cold on Benec's neck. "Remember what?"

"Nothing." She backed up in alarm. "Berry's said nothing. Remember that. I didn't say a thing! You didn't even see me! Wait, no!" She pressed her hands to her temples, squeezing her eyes shut. "No. No, no, no. Wait. You must say you've seen me. Go tell him."

"Tell who?"

Her gaze flittered this way and that, lighting on nothing. She shook her head faster and faster. "My brother. The chieftain. I remember now, I was looking for him, to tell him ..." she

faltered. "To tell him something. Go get him, Benec. I need him *now*." She snatched up a handful of his jerkin. "Please, Benec!"

"Calm down, calm down!" he soothed. "He'll be busy right now, Berry. His daughter's to be married this morning."

"Doesn't matter. Go get him for me!"

"Berry, it does matter. He won't be able to come out." *I'm not much of a hand at this comforting*, he thought wildly. He was too big, too clumsy, too male; besides, his Gift didn't work on menkind. *Wish Tirsah were here. Wait, perhaps she -- no, she'll be preparing for the ceremony. Blast!*

He ran a hand through his hair, snorting when his fingers flew wide past the tips of the locks. "Is it important, Berry?"

She hesitated.

"Important enough to bother a king on his daughter's wedding day?"

"I don't know. I can't remember!" she wailed. "She told me, she said I had to get Lorn right away! Only I got lost, and I couldn't find Hanri, and now I can't remember!"

Benec let out his breath. So that was how the land lay. Probably some village scamp looked to make a joke out of the old madwoman.

He took her hands kindly as he could. "I'll make a bargain with you, Berry. I'll go and tell Lorn you want to see him, and he'll come to you as soon as he can."

*After the wedding*, he thought. *Lorn will be glad enough to know his sister's well; he probably will come to see her.*

Berry eyed him long enough to start his nerves jangling. If she got truly upset, he'd have to summon help to calm her down, and who knew what a hitch that would throw into the wedding preparations?

"Do you promise?" she asked at last. "He'll come soon as soon can be?"

“I’ll even swear it on my Gift. The very minute he’s free. But the morning’s cold. Won’t you go and rest until then? You could sleep in my quarters --”

Berry reared back as if he’d handed her a snake. “Never! Not ever will I go in the chieftain’s house! You tell Lorn that. He has to come to *me*. He’ll know where to find me. Aye.”

She settled her collection of rags more firmly around her skinny bones and nodded with the hauteur of the queen she might have been. “You go do what you said, boy. I’ll wait for Lorn.”

And with that she retreated regally as a noble, all her tears forgotten. Benec could almost imagine her attired in ermine and lace instead of loose threads and torn strips of sailcloth as she trailed over the clamshells. If he’d had a hat, he might have removed it in reluctant admiration. Whatever else she might be, Berry remained a person to reckon with.

Still and all, he exhaled in deep relief when she’d gone. No one would have thanked him if Berry had lingered to disrupt Rose’s wedding morning. Probably.

Or *should* he have gone to fetch Lorn, quick-like?

No ... no. Clinkings and clankings began to issue from the stronghold, the first sounds of the household waking up. Female voices, thankfully sane, chattered from an inside room. He took a glance at the sky. Not quite day; a red sunrise lingered yet. They’d be busy in earnest soon.

After the wedding, he’d warn Lorn that his sister hunted for him. That would do, he decided. It couldn’t be urgent, after all.

Berry, and whatever she was going on about, could wait ...



## Willa Okati

Although a relative newcomer to the field of e-publishing, Willa Okati has been writing since before she was old enough to pick up a pen. She thinks she knows where those dictated stories are hidden, but she'll never tell.

Willa has always had a passion for Shakespeare and for fantasy. Combining the two in "The Finest Line" is a dream come true. The story of Benec, Tirsah, their family and friends has been a glorious experience.

Willa is also very interested in the paranormal: magery, Wicca, New Age philosophy, transgender studies, and of course, writing. You can drag her away from the computer if you really fight, but you'd better be prepared for a battle.

Just so she doesn't sound entirely dull, Willa has her fun: she is a practicing member of the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) and is involved in her community. She is owned by far too many cats, all of which have serious attitudes, and addicted to anything made out of chocolate or involving coffee. She is quiet, but has a very wicked sense of humor that springs out when you least expect it.

A secretary for eight years, she now writes full-time -- and wouldn't trade it for the world.

She loves to hear from readers, and always responds. You can contact her at [willsheornillshe@gmail.com](mailto:willsheornillshe@gmail.com) or visit her website to check out her work at <http://www.willsheornillshe.com>.

\* \* \* \* \*

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

*Silver Fire*

by Jeanne Barrack

Available Now from Loose Id



## Silver Fire

“Mirelle. Mirelle. Now. Now,” the voice demanded. “Come to me now.”

She stood by the bed on the cold floor where the dream had left her before. The promise of passion and excitement filled the deep and velvety, compelling male voice.

She moved toward him. The gown she wore shimmered with an opalescent gleam. Light filled the corner where he sat. He leaned forward, his entire body taut, straining as if by his very will alone he could draw her near.

“Relieve this longing I've endured for so many years. Ease this ache in my body and soul for you. Come to me and fulfill our need for each other.”

The tension in his voice was stretched tight as a string on a harp. She took another step toward him, then faltered.

His startlingly handsome face, revealed by the light, robbed her of her breath. Some divine artist had sculpted strong, masculine planes. His long, blond hair skimmed his shoulders. A simple, polished metal band held his hair back. The golden strands gleamed, gilded by the moonlight. His eyes struck blue lightning. His shirt gaped open to the waist, displaying a firm chest dusted with hair. He seemed to shimmer in the light.

She stepped closer to him, then stopped a few feet away. She knew that if she reached out and touched him, she would solve both the dream's secret and her entire future, yet she was afraid. What if the dream ended as it had the previous nights? Should she take a chance?

“Stretch out your hand to me,” he pleaded. “If you feel that you will die if you can't touch me, then stretch out your hand to me.”

Hesitantly, she reached out. An unseen puppet master pulled her strings, yet she had no wish to cut them. She would let the dream take her where it would.

As if drawn by those same invisible threads, his hand reached toward hers. The instant they touched, the room blazed with light, then abruptly returned to darkness. In a state of

shock, she tumbled into his lap. Her head lolled back, offering her throat to his lips. Not wasting a moment, he took advantage of her vulnerable position. As he glided his mouth along her tender flesh, her skin tingled as if charged with electricity.

“I knew you would taste like this. Honey and spice. Do you taste as sweet everywhere? Let me see.”

A swift movement pulled her nightgown off her shoulders, baring her breasts to the moonlight.

“Yes.” His mouth came down on a soft, plump breast. “Like I dreamed, but better.”

She had lain compliantly in his arms up till then, dazed by the dream and the light, but now she shared the overwhelming urge to taste and touch. Her right hand reached out and drew his mouth to her lips.

*This is a dream. I can do anything I like. I can really let go.*

She touched his body with an unfamiliar boldness. As their lips met, the sizzling energy that accompanied their first contact increased, and Mirelle glowed from within. Thrusting off his shirt in a near frenzy, she brushed her aching breasts against his chest and shifted restlessly, trying to straddle his lap.

“Easy. Slowly, slowly. We've all the time in the world now.” He pulled away a bit and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Mirelle shook her head.

“This is a dream. Who knows how much time we have.”

“‘Tis no dream, my sweet.”

“That's exactly what you're supposed to say ... What is your name, anyway, and who are you?”

“Jareth set Morath -- Jareth, son of Morath, and your destined soulmate.” He gathered her into his embrace once more.

Now Mirelle drew back in his arms.

“My soulmate? Wow, I really got a winner with this dream.”

Jareth grunted with frustration. How to convince her?

“There is, perhaps, one way to prove to you that 'tis no dream. Come. Let me make love to you.”

Gently, he drew her to her feet and led her to the bed. As she stood up, the nightgown pooled onto the floor. Though naked, she felt neither fear nor shame before him. Only eagerness.

*I never expected my first time to be with a dream lover, but why not? All the pleasure and none of the pain.*

He pulled the coverlet down and she stretched out, waiting for him. His gaze locked with hers, he tore off his pants and boots. Mirelle gazed avidly at his erection and smiled with complacency. It looked like the “Snow Queen” had already aroused him.

He spoke then, as if he could read her thoughts.

“The Snow Queen? If she ever existed, she's melted away.”

Settling down beside her, he caressed her lips with his fingertips.

“I know this is your first time. If it weren't, we would never have reached this point. I'll try to be gentle, but please forgive me if I can't control myself. I've waited for you such a long time, I may not be able to hold back.” His fingers threaded through her loose curls, wrapping them around his hand like gossamer chains.

“Don't hold back, because I won't.”

He swiftly rolled her under him, her legs falling open at his urging. His manhood nudged against her thigh. Raising himself up on his elbows, he looked down on her.

“I will go as slow as I can. You deserve my greatest care, Mirelle.”

Brazenly, she clutched his taut buttocks, pulling him more tightly to her.

“No, Jareth, don't go slow. Go fast. Now.”

He took her words as a signal. His lips covered every inch of her silken flesh. He turned her onto her stomach and let his tongue travel down the slopes and valleys of her uncharted form, then moved her over on her back once more. As his questing fingers reached her inner core, she almost flew off the bed.

Their love-play continued and the electricity they generated took on a life of its own. Whenever their lips joined, sparks formed -- red, blue, green -- a rainbow. The room became brighter and brighter with the magical display of their ecstasy.

Bracing himself, he plunged through her thin shield. He held himself still, kissing away the tears that fell from her eyes.

“Should I go on, dear one?”

She didn't speak, just nodded her head. Amazing. The pain had already faded away.

*Of course, because this isn't real.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*What people are saying about*

## **Silver Fire**

*Silver Fire* is a treat for the senses and Ms. Barrack can really write sex! She has created a beautiful, fanciful and dark world filled with magic and magical beings. Ms. Barrack makes excellent use of descriptive language and has created a beautiful and exciting erotic fantasy story that I could not put down.

-- Kim, *Coffee Time Romance*

*Silver Fire* kept my interest from beginning to end. The pages flew by as I became lost in the story and did not want to stop reading...Jeanne Barrack has created a world where visits will be eagerly awaited by the reader. While this is my first time reading a story by her, I look forward to many more.

-- Elise Lyn, *eCataRomance Reviews*