

The Finest Line 3: The Victory



Loose Id

Willa Okati

Praise for the writing of Willa Okati

The Finest Line 1: The Sighting

Cleverly written, with plenty of witty charm, readers will enjoy the first installment of The Finest Line series, *The Sighting*.

-- Patricia Green, *Romance Reviews Today*

Steamy and soul-stirring, *The Sighting* chronicles the ebb and flow of the relationships of at least two couples and takes readers along on their struggles. Betrayal and malice also make an appearance, making *The Sighting* a suspenseful read.

-- Michelle, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Ms. Okati has created suspense and drama for us to read. Like pieces on a chessboard, moves are made that could bring victory or defeat. I often wondered what new twist this author had to offer us.

-- Candy Cay, *Coffee Time Romance*

Tirsah and Benec are two explosive personalities that clash often. It was a delight for me to read. The secondary characters are just as fun... This is a wonderful first installment in this series, and I'm looking forward to reading more about Benec and Tirsah in the next one.

-- Luisa, *Cupid's Library Reviews*

The Finest Line 1: The Sighting is now available from Loose Id.

THE FINEST LINE 3: THE VICTORY

Willa Okati

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content, graphic language, and mild violence.

The Finest Line 3: The Victory

Willa Okati

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © September 2005 by Willa Okati

Excerpt of *Wolf Island* copyright September 2005 by Cher Gorman

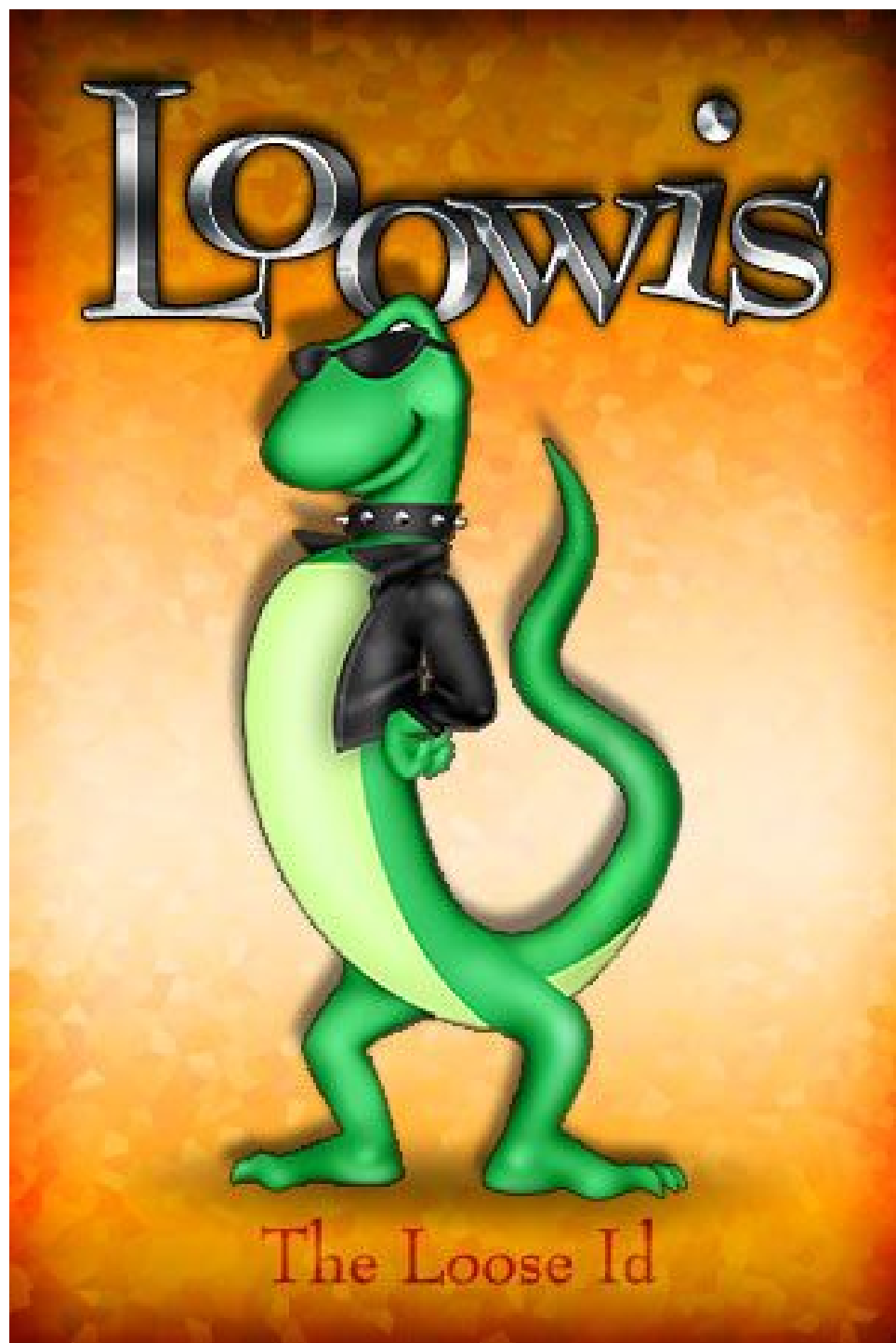
All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 1-59632-173-3

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Olivia Wong
Cover Artist: Jet Mykles



www.loose-id.com

Chapter One

“Are you ready, young miss?”

Rose raised her head unsteadily. She blinked at the strong sunlight that poured into the mouth of the Queen’s Cave. Morning already? It seemed just moments past that she’d come down to begin her vigil.

Sela’s sturdy, homely figure stood in the mouth of the cave. Her arms were heaped full of soft, worn swaddling cloths. She clucked at Rose just as she had when Rose was a small girl who had needed to be coaxed out of bed.

“It’s day, child! Your nuptial day.”

Rose put a hand to her face and closed her eyes against a sudden wash of dizziness. “I remember,” she murmured. “How late is it?”

“Daybreak. Why -- Rose! You didn’t spend all night down here with nothing but that thin kirtle on, did you?”

“I --”

“You blessed little lamb!” Sela hurried to swaddle Rose’s thin, cold shoulders in several thicknesses of towel. “You’re near frozen. Ohe, ohe, it’s as well you’ll be a married woman after today, for I’d never let you try such a foolish thing again, and I’m certain Cloud won’t. Keeping vigil, indeed!”

Near numb with cold, Rose allowed herself to be coddled. While Sela rubbed life back into her limbs, her gaze drifted down to the stone dais that she’d spent the night on. The faintest, oldest of deep, rust-red marks stained the rock -- the legendary birth blood of selkie mothers spilled in times almost too far gone to remember.

She brushed one of the ancient birthing bloodstains with her fingertips. "That'll be from me, soon enough," she whispered. "He'll want a son, won't he, Sela? Men do. A son as soon as possible. I could be with child before the month's out."

"There'll be time enough for you to think about such things later," Sela snapped, attempting to towel dry Rose's wet hair. But Rose noticed vaguely that the old woman wouldn't meet her eyes and she continued to scold.

"Rose, girl, didn't you even think to fetch along a shawl? I could lock myself away on bread and water for not checking up on you. But you said you'd take care of things yourself, and I was that busy cooking, and ... What Lorn would say if he found out, I don't know. You could have caught your death."

"Sela, hold." Rose shook herself free of the anxious arms. "It's well. I wanted to do this." *Penance*, she thought to herself. *It's what I deserve for what I've done to my own cousin; I've betrayed her and Benec, and all at the prince's whim ...*

Sela would never understand ... and Rose couldn't speak of it. To do so would compound the sin against the mage she adored as a sister and betray her yet again -- to the woman they both loved better than a mother.

"I wanted to do this," she repeated.

"Ohe, girl." Sela tucked the drying cloths more snugly about Rose's sodden skin. "You've had your way, and now I'll have mine. Up to the stronghold, and I mean trot! A hot bath is what you need now to warm you up and put your hair and skin to rights, and you'll have one in time if I have to fetch the water myself, ladle by ladle."

Rose surprised herself with a laugh. "Cold water's good enough for me, Sela."

"Huh!" Sela's lips firmed. "That's as may be, but if you think you're using it on your nuptial day, my lady, you've another think coming to you, and make no mistake."

* * * * *

By some miracle of strength and will, Sela managed to make the threatened bath materialize in plenty of time before the ritual. The Lady only knew how, for they'd not even aired out the winter bathing pit yet, but she had it filled to the brim -- and with hot water!

Job done, Sela brushed off her hands, seemingly well satisfied. "Here, let me help you with that kirtle. How filthy it is! We'll have to throw it away." She clucked as she unwound the cloths she'd swaddled Rose in and pulled the thin garment over her head.

Naked, Rose padded to the edge of the bath, extended one leg, and trailed her toes in the water. Pleasantly warm, like a puddle of rainwater on a summer day. She caught sight of her reflection and paused, gazing curiously. Was she a girl or a woman?

It didn't matter. Did it? No. She shut her eyes, suddenly weary. What use thinking about it? She would do as Sela bid her ...

“Best get in before it goes cold,” the old serving woman chided. “Here, I’ll fetch what you’ll need.” She turned to a shelf filled with soaps and bath salts, nodding at the soft splash as Rose entered the bath behind her. “There’s a good girl, then.”

Rose sank down in the warm water. Deeper ... deeper ...

Sela turned back around and laughed to see that Rose had sunk down to her eyeballs in the water. “You put me in mind of a baby seal.” She commanded kindly, “Come here, then, Miss Otter, and I’ll wash that mess you’ve made of your crowning glory.”

Someone had left the soap jar ill-corked and lying on its side, but Sela managed to scrape out just enough of the good, chamomile-based soap to make a proper job of washing Rose’s beautiful hair. She lathered a generous portion into both her palms. “Quickly, if you please.”

Rose bobbed over, loosed her hair from the remains of its bonds, and wet it thoroughly. Unbound, it reached to her knees and would have to be scrubbed clean in sections. As Sela began, Rose relaxed against the side of the bath. Her eyes drifted shut.

“Did you sleep at all last night?” Sela asked.

Rose gave her head the faintest of shakes. “I dozed.”

“Hold still. You should have rested a bit.” Sela scrubbed industriously. “You’ll have needed your sleep, I’m thinking.”

“Perhaps.” Rose arched her neck. “Sela?”

“Yes, miss?”

“I’m to be married today.”

“I know that, miss.”

Her small, young hands came up to seize Sela’s old, wrinkled ones. “No one will tell me about what happens after the wedding,” Rose said soberly. “I’ve seen births, Sela. I know how children are born. I know that men and women marry to make children. But I don’t know how, for no one has ever -- will ever -- tell me.”

“Young miss!” Sela jumped up and backed away. “I’m not the one to --”

“Then who?” Rose stood, white foam cascaded from her hair down over her young breasts and gently rounded hips. Desperate words, more than she’d ever been able to speak at once, poured from her lips. “Sela, what am I to do tonight? Wait for Cloud to teach me? That’s all that I can suppose, from the bits of gossip I’ve heard.”

“It’s a husband’s duty.”

“But what of a wife’s?” Rose begged. “Please, Sela. You were wed once. I’ve heard there’s pain. I must know what to expect.”

Sela knew her face had gone scarlet. “Pain. A little, yes,” she stammered, “but not so much as some sorts of hurts, and if your man loves you as much as Cloud does, then --”

"But why is there pain? Where? I don't understand!" Rose brought her hands down hard to slap the surface of the water and splattered them both. "If I'm to be married and be a grown woman, why will you not treat me as one?"

"Because I cannot. It isn't my place!"

"Then whose is it?"

"Ohe, ohe," a calm voice murmured, a blessed sound that broke the tension between young maid and old woman. "What's come about here?"

Tirsah stood in the door to the winter bath, a tin in one hand and a length of ribbon in the other. Mage's paint decorated her face and fingers. She must have been preparing for the nuptials. Shamed, Rose turned her back and hid her face in her hands.

"What's amiss, Rose? Sela?"

Of all the folk in the world, Rose could not -- *would not* -- tell Tirsah. But to her horror, Sela bent down and whispered in Tirsah's ear.

"No!" she protested too late.

"Ah, I see." Tirsah laid her tin of paint down and gave Rose a long, unreadable look. Rose turned her face away again. Her cousin came and knelt by the edge of the bathing pit. Rose felt Tirsah's small, cool fingers come out and touch her warm face. "Why do you blush, little one? Are you ashamed?"

Rose shook her head stubbornly.

Tirsah sighed. "Ohe, silly girl. What's to be done with you?" She drew Rose close to her side of the pit and worked to finish the job of cleansing her silky lengths of red hair. "If you truly want to know what the night side of marriage is all about, as you should, then I'll be the one to tell you," she said quietly. "I'm at fault here, for I should have told you long ago ..."

Rose sat still and quiet and listened to all that Tirsah had to say. At times she felt the color in her cheeks faded utterly; at times it flamed hot and bright. Tirsah's voice never altered from its quiet, matter-of-fact pitch. She might have been speaking of marketing day in Kirree.

But her hands ... they trembled, just the slightest bit, and Rose understood in a new way just what she had done to her cousin and Benec by betraying them to Paedro's jest. Her eyes filled with unwonted tears. She shook her head.

"I didn't mean to frighten you. I tried not to," Tirsah said repentantly. "Little girl, it's not at all the nightmare that you must be picturing."

"I'm not, Tirsah. It's not that."

"Even so," Tirsah insisted. "Truly, I promise you, I -- I'm told it can be wonderful. And it's what a wife does to please her husband. There are some who don't like it, but ..." She turned her hands palms-up. "It's part of the choice you made. Men make the rules for marriage, and this is one of them."

Rose glanced down at her small, fragile body. "You're a mage. Don't you have any charms to help me?"

"None that would do you any better than taking long draughts of honey wine during the wedding feast. And as for being a mage, what do you imagine would be my fate if I were bound to a man? No more, no less than yours."

Rose turned her face away and shivered.

"Listen, you. Much as it pains my man-hating soul to admit it, Cloud loves you more than life. He'd never hurt you, for all the world and every bit of wealth in it, so he'll not hurt you tonight. Can you trust me for that?"

Rose half smiled.

"There, you see?" Tirsah tousled her cousin's wet head. "Think on it this way: the marriage bed is like foxglove. Take it the right way, and it cures a sick heart. Take it wrongly, and it's poison. Do what pleases him, but do what pleases you, as well. You're your own woman, and even if he calls you wife, you still belong to yourself. Never forget that, no matter what the laws say."

She cupped Rose's chin in her palm and kissed her small white cheek. "Do you understand? And that," she said, "is the word of an uppity woman who refuses to know her place and has led a very happy life this way. Let him dispute it who will. Any takers? No? Good."

The tears Rose had been struggling to hold back spilled over. "I'm sorry," she whispered, leaning her head against Tirsah's. "I'm so sorry."

Tirsah was genuinely surprised. "What for?"

"I can't tell you." Rose buried her face against Tirsah's shoulder. Tirsah held her regardless of smeared makeup and stared in puzzlement at Sela. *What does she mean?* she mouthed.

Sela looked out the door. "It's less than an hour until time," she said after an awkward pause. "Tirsah, will you see to drying her hair with a bit of magic?"

"That I will." Tirsah gave Sela a look that promised a thorough questioning later, then gently disentangled Rose's clinging arms. "Come, we'll hurry now. You'll be as lovely as the princess you are, all dressed in purest white."

Rose pressed her palms to her eyes for a long moment. "I'm ready," she said in a small voice.

"Good." Tirsah accepted a drying cloth from Sela and held it out with a regal grace. "Come and make yourself ready to be married, Princess of Kirree-on-Sea."

Sela gave a stifled sort of snuffle. "Ohe, I'm sorry! But I'm that proud of you, Rose." She dabbed away tears. "I couldn't be prouder if you were my own daughter getting wed today."

Rose smiled at the old woman -- a sad smile, Tirsah thought, wiser than the one she might have bestowed an hour before. The girl rose from the pool with the grace of a goddess ascending from the sea, hair floating out behind her like the rays of the sun and clinging smoothly to her bare thighs in a silken waterfall. Tirsah knew that Sela saw what she did, what the prince and Cloud had both also seen: a woman beautiful enough to steal a person's breath.

Rose walked, naked and calm now, to Sela, and pressed a kiss to the old serving woman's cheek. "Good and faithful servant," she whispered. "Better than a mother to me. You'll approve of me today."

Then she turned to Tirsah. "Cousin?" she asked, reaching for the mage's hand. "If you'll let me, after the wedding, there's something that I should -- I must -- tell you. Will you come to me when I ask for you? Please?"

"Of course." Perplexed, Tirsah kissed Rose's cheek again, a little hurriedly, and scooped up her can of paint. "I must hurry now. Will you be well until after the ritual?"

Rose nodded. "Well enough."

"You're sure?"

"I am." Rose gave her cousin a gentle push. "Go on with you now. You've given me strength for a wedding gift. I'll give you a better gift later."

"Will you, then?" Tirsah arched one eyebrow. "I'm intrigued. I'll be sure to come when you call me then, won't I? And see now, you've made a liar out of me. Here I am not only hurrying but eager to see my cousin married. Can you beat that?"

I can, perhaps, Rose thought as she watched her cousin hurry away out of the bathing room and into the maze of the stronghold. She had decided -- she would tell Tirsah the truth. All of it.

She owed her cousin nothing less.

Chapter Two

“Blessed morning to you, Ned!” one old salt saluted to an old crony as they tied up their coracles on the chieftain’s quay. “Come to see the show?”

“If we don’t freeze. Here, you ladies, stop fussing with your finery and out of the boat, every one of you. ’Tis a long walk up the hill, and we’re late as it be. So, Ram! All by yourself?”

“Aye, the wife’s laid up. Made me promise I’d bring back a full report.”

“Henpecked as ever, eh?”

Ram pulled a face. “Ah, shut your trap. Oh, oh, ’tis cold out ’ere today! Too cold, if you’re asking me. But then, there’s no one ever does!”

Ned blew on his fingertips; each one burned with the hard frost of the morning. “This had better be worth the watching, and that’s all I’ll say. Women! Are you and your cronies coming, or chattering all the morning long?”

“Coming soon as we can, husband, so stop your complaining and get along yourself. We’ll get there no later than you will!”

“Is it true they’ll want us in the arbor, then? Hunh! Why d’you think they want to hold a ritual out in the cold?”

“Nowhere near big enough indoors, is there? Not with room to hold near the whole village all at once.”

“Then they’d have better waited until spring, when folk could gather without catching the frostbite,” Ram grouched, stamping his feet hard as he climbed, likely to warm his frozen toes inside their sturdy boots. “Lady bless all of us and curse all hasty youths, that’s what I says. Couldn’t wait for warm weather, could the young laddybuck? Who is he, anyhow, to be taking our lady Rose away from us?”

“Ah, hush yourselves, you sour old men,” Ram’s pretty young wife chided the pair of them as she finally caught up. “Winter’s eve is the luckiest time ever for a wedding. The chieftain’ll have a grandson by this time next year, just you watch!”

The older men colored. “Hush,” Ram growled, stumping on. “Not fitting for you to talk about such things.”

“And don’t we have three youngsters of our own safe at home? How d’you think we got those, Ned -- by wishing?”

“Eh, well,” Ned allowed after a bit, “get through the ceremony and we’ll have a fine bit of celebrating on the chieftain’s penny.”

“Not one to stint the ale, is Lorn.”

“Nor beef on the spit.”

“There’s the spirit,” Ram’s wife approved as they approached the arbor, “and none too soon, for we’re here. Hush now, and file in quiet as you can. They’re near to starting!”

* * * * *

Any minute now, the ritual would begin, and --

Darkness, all was darkness. Anno ground the heels of his hands against his face. If his inner Eye remained blind, then neither would he see anything through his physical eyes.

Things he knew he needed to know -- but what? How did he even come to be aware of such urgency? What was hidden from him? Was it Ione’s malignant presence? Her ladyship reminded him far too much of the dark powers he’d once come up against and lost to.

He hurled his bronze Seeing cup into a corner. No help would ever come from that vessel again; he knew that after one touch of Tirsah’s lips, it would give him no allegiance ever again. Once he’d held it again, he had known it had chosen a new mage to serve and would do his bidding no more. His Heskit set was all he had left, and it lay stubborn, silent, and still on its table. If only he were stronger!

He beat at the tops of his thighs and let out the howl of a dog raging at the moon. “Have pity on me!” he raged at the powers that had deserted him. “Tell me what I need to know, or leave me here in the blessed dark and quiet. But one way or the other, free me!”

Silence.

Click, click. Click. Click.

A quiet, almost phantom sound of carved bits of ivory tapping against one another as they moved.

His Heskit set -- it had to be!

Anno’s cramped muscles flared into spear points of pain as he wrenched around to lunge for the small camp table where the set lay. It seemed a much farther distance to run

and much higher than it should be when he collapsed before the pieces on the table and stared eye level at them.

Click. Click. Click. The small scrimshaw pieces glowed with a faint, ghostlike aura. Was that his imagination? No, they did, and they moved! The queen, the knight, the mage, the king, the rook -- each shifted from square to square as the pawns danced between them. With a slight shift of power, the battle turned, and ...

The carved mage stood a little apart from the tangled pieces. Surely he imagined that a small face watched him from inside the carved cowl. The figure hung back three spaces from the conflict and waited. Yes, waited!

Anno swallowed, his throat paper-dry. He recognized the piece as his own, unable to move until he moved. If he chose to attack, the queen might be saved. Retreat, and she would fall. All it -- he -- had to do was move forward three spaces. But he could not. It would not -- not until he moved as well. The way in was the way out. He had asked for answers and they had been given, together with a choice bitter as death.

Well? the small piece asked him. *What will you do now, O wise mage? Choose quickly -- time is passing!*

* * * * *

Gathered together in the arbor, the fisher-folk of Kirree-on-Sea stamped their feet and rubbed their arms in a vain effort to stave off the bitter chill of the morning air. Even the softest heart among them hoped the wedding would be over with soon, all the sooner to be celebrating, with the blessed warmth of the stronghold to duck into and good ale to heat their blood.

They hadn't long to wait. No sooner had the last of the stragglers tucked himself into the back of the crowd than there came a great gust of wind off the ocean.

The blast set men and women to gasping from the cold, and when it stopped -- ah! No one saw how she'd done it, but their lady mage had appeared from nowhere, somehow come to be among them where no one had been the moment before.

"Look! Look at Tirsah!" men and women alike hissed and whispered. "The mage! Look!"

Calm and quiet as a statue, Tirsah stood and allowed them to stare their fill. She knew she was a sight worth looking at. Far from her usual gamin appearance, she appeared a proper mage at last. She'd decorated her hair half in braids and half in loose curls, and had woven still-damp kelp through it as a maiden might do with ribbons. Tiny shells hung off the ends of her braids in the way a saucy wench might add bells to entice her lad by the tinkling music she made when she moved. But far from jingling, Tirsah's shells clacked one against the other with a sound like a hundred pulse beats. More, she had painted her skin

white with salt paste and colored her lips a green as deep as the sea. She made her eyes, lined in rich blue, stare blankly as a doll's over the crowd.

She hid a smile when she saw it took a moment before the fisher-folk realized that the roar of the sea had risen to fill their ears. Her braids and curls slid backward and forward over her shoulders and face with the rhythmic noise; they flowed in with each wave and ebbed with the tide.

Those that didn't gawk at Tirsah's hair gaped at her robe. Wide enough for three women to huddle beneath and made of the most marvelous fabrics -- oddly angled slices of material pieced with such skill that they looked painted on rather than stitched together with ordinary thread. Deep corundum blue, Catkin's-eye green, heart's-blood red, deep sun-colored yellow, fire orange, and a black so saturated that it must have seemed to swallow the light. A breeze sprang from nowhere to skirl and toss it like a sail, swirling it about her motionless body.

"It's Oceania's Wedding," she heard an old woman whisper under her breath. Over a thousand years ago, or so the story had it, the goddess Oceania herself had married a mortal and given up a bit of her immortal glory for a fleeting human lover. Their wedding ritual had been conducted by her chief mage, a strange creature born of the sea and given wholly to its strange magic. Only the best mages ever born could perform the ceremony as it should be done. Anno had managed it twice, and it had been accounted as a hero's feat to him.

Tirsah gave the faintest of smiles at their murmurs. *A grand choice! If they had to lose their darling Rose, then they'd send her off in proper style. Let that upstart Cloud boy know what a prize he'd got, eh?*

She threw her arms forward, the cloak belling together; when she drew them back, a simple wooden table, no wider than the span of a child's arms and no taller than a Catkin, had appeared in front of her.

A perfect conch shell, purest white and smooth as ivory, rested upon it. She picked it up, put the tip of it to her green lips, and blew gently as a mother's kiss. The most marvelous of deep, bellowing sounds issued from the shell, a sound rich and round enough to vibrate in a man's very bones.

The banner that hung on the right turret of the lighthouse fluttered back and clung to the stone, revealing the smallest of doors in the stone. There, illuminated by a gleam of warm red sunlight, stood their beloved little Rose, beautiful as a woman could be.

Rose stood still, trembling, and looked out over the villagers she'd known her entire life as she waited for Tirsah's second signal. She could almost hear the women sighing, their work-worn hands touching wind-roughened cheeks as they drank in the sight of her.

What was that they were saying? Snatches of phrases floated to her with the breeze, and she blushed. *So tall and slender, with a skin like purest cream and, crowning all, her deep copper hair drawn artfully back in a tumble of waves and golden ribbons. And her*

dress! Pure white velvet that begs for fingers to caress it, to feel the deep, warm richness of the fabric cunningly fashioned like the drooping petals of a rose with little Rose's flower-like face at the center.

She peeked at the crowd through her eyelashes. Were those her seamstresses, close to the front? The two old women wore looks of immense pride and seemed to sit up a little straighter, small, proud smiles lighting their faces. Their thoughts were clear: they'd made a masterwork, and they knew it.

The last notes of the conch's call ebbed away on the sound of the sea. Recognizing the signal to move, Rose stepped forward lightly, the velvet petals of her wedding gown fluttering around her limbs. She was careful to let her small, bare feet make no noise on the grass and kept her eyes downcast, fixed on the white ribbons wound around her fingers.

So modest, she heard the fisher-folk murmuring. Shy. A perfect creature. Everything a woman should be.

Rose came to a stop just short of the wooden table and held herself perfectly still once more, waiting for Tirsah to give the next signal.

Deep within her mind, she thought, *A statue. I am a statue. A statue is not afraid. It's marble and not flesh; that's as beautiful as they say I am, molded by the hands of a man, as I know I am.*

As if from a great distance, she saw Tirsah lift the conch horn to her lips a second time and heard the deep bellling note sing out again ...

A gloved hand jerked the second banner aside. Cloud stood in an adjacent tiny doorway, his men crowded up tightly behind him. Feet apart, hands planted on his hips, he raked the crowd with an angry, pointed glare from fore to aft and back again. Their admiration of Rose made him feel ill -- and strengthened his determination. Though he had been drilled on what to do, he deliberately disobeyed his instructions and did not move forward, as he should have, to join Rose at the marriage table.

He saw the fisher-folk stirring at the sight of him, clearly puzzled. Again, on purpose, he had ignored the protocol and hadn't dressed himself like a groom, but in soldier's gear: leather coat and breeches, boots and gloves, and a sturdy homespun shirt of indigo. Knowing that he looked like a man ready to go to war, he folded his arms over his chest and glared at the fisher-folk, daring anyone to challenge him.

After letting a long moment pass, Cloud stalked forward to the wooden table, his men following behind him single file. He came to a rude stop, scuffing his feet deep into the turf, eyes turned away from Rose. "Get on with it," he ordered Tirsah as rudely as possible. "Well?"

Tirsah never blinked. She lifted the conch horn to her lips a third time and blew a final note, short and sharp, then held the shell aloft and balanced light as a feather on her palms. The sound of three waves drifted in and out, the third wave ebbing away into silence.

The mage's hair fell still upon her shoulders. The wind ceased to billow and toss her robe about. The quiet became so deep, so solid, that the cold rushed in again and made Cloud's skin prickle.

Tirsah's expression revealed nothing to him. She brought her arms forward in a sudden rush that made them all jump. The horn-shell flew from her hands --

* * * * *

Locked inside the tomb, Edge folded her paws in front of her and sank her chin onto them with a deep, worried sigh. Berry had fallen asleep at last, near the two filthy, foul-smelling soldiers. Their snores chafed at the Catkin's ears and scraped along her raw nerves.

The sharp pain in her leg had faded to a meaty, throbbing ache. She felt too hot, as if her fur had become too heavy for her; her eyes were sore and dry. Her throat burned for a taste of water, but there was none. When would someone come?

She raised a weary eye to the small windows at the top of the crypt and the bars of sunlight streaking through. When would the wedding be? Soon? Surely Lorn would come sooner. Berry had said that he would. Without him, Rose would be lost.

Edge's eyelids drooped despite her best efforts to keep them open. The soldiers slept for the moment. Maybe she would close her eyes, just a little while ... just while she waited for Lorn to arrive ...

* * * * *

Ione hid behind the thickest-leafed of a clump of hawthorn bushes and knotted her fists together in a corner of her skirt. She leaned forward for a better look, straining to see through the veils she dared not remove. Her pale hair and white face would have shone out like beacons. She should not have come. But she had to see for herself!

"You've done right; you'll see," she'd murmured to Cloud, petting his cheek. "She never loved you. She only used you. Remember that."

She thought he would. Still, as she watched and waited, she gnawed her lip until it bled. Would they -- would they --?

* * * * *

Anno's legs shook violently as he stumbled through the corridor, one arm flung across his eyes to block out the too-bright light. *Come, you're nearly there. Go. Go!*

One step at a time.

He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Couldn't see.

Walk. Walk!

He lifted one foot, put it down on the stones, and steadied himself with a hand. Not good enough!

Faster. I must go faster! The white queen is almost lost. The game is nearly over. I've been stupid all this time! Open your eyes, mage!

Run!

* * * * *

The horn shell hit the flagstones with an almighty crash and shattered into a dozen pieces. Each shard glowed with a still, cool radiance. Rose flinched at the noise; Cloud did not. Muscles worked in his jaw as he stared at the broken shell.

Tirsah plunged her hands without fear into the sharp-edged pieces of shell and stirred them about until she found what she was looking for. She held it out for all to see: a slender length of silver ribbon that glinted at them like a winking eye. A ribbon drawn from a shell; the silver cord of life, drawn from the sea.

Rose put out one slender arm. White velvet petals of fabric fell back to bare her skin, seemingly in naked supplication to the mage.

Cloud's face darkened. He tugged off his left glove and dropped it to the floor, where it landed in a puff of dust and lay like a small dead thing freshly killed. He thrust his arm at Tirsah with the force he'd use to fling a spear at her.

Rose turned her beautiful eyes on him in surprise as their audience rumbled unhappily. A man might not move with the grace of a woman, but he'd offered the wrong arm. He and Rose should have been linked as mirror images. Instead, they stood at cross-purposes. Opposed, not matched.

Tirsah's eyes flickered angrily. She glanced ever so slightly to one side and, without thinking, sought out Benec's familiar face in an unspoken question.

Benec lifted his shoulders in a faint, baffled shrug. He nodded his head toward the couple and scowled worriedly.

Tirsah bit at her lip. The ritual forbade her to speak. She straightened her shoulders and exhaled a long, determined breath. Perhaps Cloud had been away so long that he had forgotten, or suffered from nerves, making him both hostile and confused. She'd seen more than one groom too rattled to concentrate on the niceties of ceremony. It wasn't right, but correcting him would likely put him still further on edge. Better to proceed as if nothing were wrong. Keeping her movements graceful and deft, she took up the silver ribbon and wound the ends around Rose and Cloud's outstretched wrists once, twice, and three times, binding them together life to life and combining the two into one.

The next part would be theirs to play out. But Cloud did not, or would not, lower his arm as he should have. Instead, he narrowed his eyes at the silver bond and turned his wrist this way and that, as if to test the strength of the ribbon. Crimson-cheeked, Rose gave the cord the meekest, most timid of tugs to remind him they should let their arms fall.

At her touch, a spasm shook the young man, a terrible tremble that rolled down his body from face to feet. Was that passion? Fear? Not anger, surely!

He snatched Rose by the wrist and jerked their arms down hard together. Rose stumbled forward, nearly losing her balance, and smothered a shocked cry of pain.

“Cloud!” Benec erupted from his seat to collar the boy. At his side, the prince put out an arm to block his path to the couple.

“Go on!” Cloud barked. “Are you surprised? Do you think I’m at fault here? Or did you come for a nuptial ceremony? Well?” he challenged Tirsah. “What will you do, witch?”

Tirsah’s eyes blazed angrily; her lips parted --

Paedro stood and put a hand to the sword at his waist. “Do as he says, mage.”

Tirsah hesitated, glancing back at Benec.

“Now!”

Face tight with fury, Tirsah reached down to the table and brought up a small silver bowl. She flung a small pinch of the contents at Cloud and pushed the bowl into his hand. Salt, pure white sea salt, a symbol of Rose’s dowry as a daughter of the ocean.

Cloud looked disdainfully at the smirch of white dust on his dark shirt. He brushed it off, deliberately and slowly, and scuffed his boot against the dirt, grinding each perfect crystal into the earth.

Tirsah whirled to the prince, shaking her head. His expression, always so warm and friendly before, had gone cold. “Continue!”

She jabbed her finger at the salted earth, making her meaning clear.

“Continue, I said!”

Tirsah glanced at Rose. Her cousin had gone white and bloodless, eyes open wide. She looked back at Tirsah in pleading and fear. Tirsah flashed her teeth at the prince with a savagery that promised nothing good in store for him later. She plunged her hand into a pocket of her robe, pulled out a small, still-warm round of bread, and gave it to Rose.

Rose timidly offered the warm, fragrant bread to Cloud, watching him as a doe watches the hunter. He cast a haughty eye over the morsel. Bread, the staff of life, and salt, life’s preservative. He should have held out the bowl of salt and let her drop the bread into it.

Instead, he dropped the bowl. It hit the floor with a crippling clink that dented the silver and rolled away into the rushes. Rose cried out and reached for it in vain with the hand that held the bread.

Cloud snatched the food from her. He sniffed at it, pursing his lips like a sour merchant judging it for freshness, then stuffed it into his mouth. Three quick bites, and their wedding luck disappeared down his throat in one swallow.

"No, no!" one fishwife dared to cry out, wounded to the heart by his coarseness. Her boldness broke the ritual's spell. The fisher-folk surged to their feet nearly as one, shouting and waving their anger at the upstart boy who *dared!*

Lorn fought his way to the altar and seized Cloud by the collar. "Boy! What do you mean by this?"

"Shut your mouth, old man! You, mage! Proceed!" the prince shouted over the protests of the multitude. He openly pushed against Benec to stop him from struggling forward. "All of you, watch!"

An unlit taper near to hand burst into a high, hot flame that billowed close enough to singe Cloud's hair. The stink from the pomade he'd used to slick it back rose up strong and acrid, like roses gone rotten. A ripple of heat fluttered Rose's hair but damaged not a strand of it.

Tirsah caught up the candle -- the torch -- by the middle. It should have been too hot to grasp. The beeswax had gone soft enough for her fingers to leave impressions. Yet she held it up and sketched a rune in the air to break the rite which kept her from speech. She thrust the torch at Cloud. "Take it. Or do you think it'll burn you? Take it!"

He snatched it from her grasp. His face paled an instant, ashy gray, yet he held on to the blazing brand long enough to thrust it beneath the silver ribbon that bound him to Rose. It snapped easily as a cobweb -- as did their marriage, barely even begun.

Rose shook like an aspen, staring. Her lips parted in a silent cry.

Benec ducked under Paedro's arm and ran to support Rose as she threatened to fall. She hung limp as a doll in his arms. "Ceremony be damned! Have you gone mad?" he protested. "Abusing a girl like this!"

Paedro gave him a look he'd never even turned on an enemy. "I will remember that, Benec!" The prince pivoted to the horror-struck crowd and scoffed at them. "Pay attention, every man, woman, and child of you! Watch and listen, and may your precious Lady grant that you remember well what you see here this day!

"You -- mage!" He seized Tirsah by the wrist and dragged her forward. "Come and put your hands on these two. Marry them!"

"Never at your command." Tirsah spat at him. "If I had a sword --"

Paedro, who had never touched a lady in anger in all his life, grabbed Tirsah's face between finger and thumb, gave it a cruel shake, and pushed her roughly away. "She refuses her duty, Cloud!" he mocked. "A fine mage for such a chieftain as Lorn, wouldn't you say?"

"A perfect match!" Cloud snatched Rose out of Benec's safekeeping. He gripped her hard by her forearms, his fingers clearly sinking deeply into the flesh. She shook so with fear that he had to hold her upright. "If the witch's magic isn't any good, then let's hear the words from you, prince."

"No!" Tirsah shouted.

The prince ignored her. "Cloud, do you take this woman to be your wife?"

He was pleased to see Cloud look with open hatred at the slip of a girl in her wedding dress. Tears trickled over her cheeks, trailed down her neck, and disappeared between her small breasts. Terror and confusion warred on her features.

"Cloud, what have I done?" she cried.

"Everything that you should not have!" Paedro raised his hand as if he would strike her. "Rose -- innocent, virgin child -- do you take this man to be your husband?"

"Rose, no!" Tirsah cried.

"I would!" she whispered, her eyes wide with confusion and fear. "Cloud, why do you treat me like this?"

Paedro wheeled on Lorn and gripped the old man by the arms. "Chieftain! Are you, without any doubts, any reservations, determined to give this *maiden*, this *girl*, to my trusted friend?" He laughed full-throated. "No matter, we don't want her anymore. Take her back again!"

"Cloud!" Rose twisted herself around and begged her would-be husband for mercy. "Tell me, please, what I've done! Let me try to right the wrong!"

"You ask the impossible. As if you don't know!" Cloud threw Rose away from him. Landing hard, she crumpled into a heap.

"Rose!" Tirsah flew to her cousin's side, lifting the small face with gentle fingers and crying out at the sight of the scrapes and bruises that marred it. She protected Rose's body with her own and turned on the prince and Cloud with the rage of a mother tigress. "How do you *dare*?"

"I dare to tell the truth," Cloud rasped. "How dare you try to pawn this whore off on me?"

"You've gone mad!"

"I am the only one who sees clearly! You think she's innocent. You all do!" He took a step back. "Rose, whom you would have made my wife! You dress her in white velvet when you know that she should be wearing red rags and in a whorehouse, where she belongs!"

He might have struck out at her, if Benec had not suddenly been in his way. "Come through me, if you want to get at her!" the tall man roared.

“So you’ve had her, too?” Cloud choked and wrapped his arms tight around his chest. “You, and the soldiers, and the whole fishing village! Every merchant that she’s come across with a penny to his name or a ribbon to trade her favors for!”

“Tirsah, do something!” Benec beseeched the mage.

“Can you not shut his mouth?”

“There are no more words to say.” Cloud drew in a deep, shuddering breath. “I have no choice. From this moment in time, Rose, you are dead to me.”

The words fell like the death knell they were. Rose had promised herself to Cloud as wife, but he had rejected that promise. He would be free to go his way, to find another woman and marry her while Rose lived cast aside. She would never marry, never bear children. A thousand years of the chieftain’s lineage ended then and there.

Tirsah raised her hands to the heavens with an enraged howl that should have brought down storms to kill the prince and Cloud where they stood. Among the crowd, the fishermen’s faces had gone white and vacant with the shock. Wives sobbed into their hands, and children screamed with terror fast becoming hysteria.

Lorn, who’d watched all and said nothing, turned at last, with a face like death, to Paedro. “Thought we’d struck a vow as friends,” he said, his voice flat and lifeless. “Why not come to me yourself, in quiet?”

Paedro sneered at the old chieftain. “You’d have liked that, wouldn’t you? I should have given you a chance to keep things quiet? No! I stand behind my true friend’s choice, and commit it to law. Your daughter is a whore. This small village knows your secret, and soon our world will know, too.”

“Not while I live will you spread those lies!” Tirsah flew up and slapped Paedro open-palmed across the face -- a woman’s blow, meant to shame him. “Treason be damned, and you as well!”

She slapped Cloud harder still, knocking his head to the side. “Blood for blood!”

“Witch, I’ll pay you out for that!”

“Will you?” Tirsah gripped him by the belt and shook him hard. “Cloud, Cloud! Tell me who’s filled your head with such lies!” She pointed at Rose. “How can you believe such a thing of her? She’s so shy she could barely even look at you, her betrothed, in the eyes. Call her a whore? Call the sea dry land first! What’s possessed you to do this?”

“What possesses me?” Cloud burst in disbelief. “The truth that we saw with our own eyes -- the prince and I -- the truth that your precious Rose spent last night clutched between the lusty thighs of a common man! *Your princess is a whore!*”

The air exploded.

Terrified, Tirsah turned to seek out the source of the blast. Wind gusted in fierce blasts from nowhere. A blazing fireball roared from the ruins of the marriage candle and shrieked into the roof. Live sparks rained down on the crowd. Terrified, they screamed and covered their heads.

“Enough!” The roar of a bull, the bellow of a horn, the keen of a woman, the howl of a man cried out -- the sound of it consuming the air until there remained hardly any left to breathe.

Suddenly, a thin man -- thin? no, wasted down to skin and bone -- dressed in a thick black robe, stood with his arms raised to the sky. He wore a look of fury such as none had ever seen, on a face that no one, not even his family, had witnessed in the daylight for three years.

“Father,” Tirsah whispered.

Master-Mage Anno had returned at last.

Chapter Three

“A ghost!”

“Nay, not a ghost, but a devil!”

“Is it truly Anno?”

“It can’t be! Anno is dead!”

The master-mage staggered forward, one hand before his eyes to shade them from the harsh morning light. He seized Tirsah’s altar for support and sagged against it, dragging in deep, rasping breaths.

“You’re dead!” a burly fisherman bellowed. “Demon!”

Anno’s face twisted. A deep roar began in the middle of his chest and burst with the force of flood waters: “Get out!”

He knocked the altar to the earth with a mighty sweep of his hand. “Get out! There is no wedding, and this is not a free show. Out! Your master-mage is not dead, but alive. I have returned, and I command it!”

The burly fisherman leapt from his seat as if devils pricked his heels. His wife cried out in a panic to scramble after him. A mad rush of fishermen, women, and children moved nearly as one, colliding against one another in their rush to escape the chieftain’s isle.

Strong arms caught Anno before the last of his strength deserted him -- strong, lanky arms. A strange man hauled the master-mage awkwardly to his feet and steadied him. “Best lean against me or Lorn,” the man murmured in Anno’s ear. “It’s good to see you again, you old fraud.”

Anno twisted his head to look. “Is that Benec?”

“The same.” Benec jerked his head. “How much of this did you see?”

“All of it, and not enough. We’ll speak of that later, all of you, when I understand it better myself. What matters,” he said, raising his voice as he turned to the prince and Cloud, “is that I know who you are and what you have just done to my niece. Speak up and defend yourselves against this insult, if you can.”

Paedro glared at him from maddened eyes. He caught up the bowl that had held the wedding salt and hurled it at Rose, striking the side of her face. The sound of her scream was pitiful enough to soften any man’s heart, but Cloud only shivered once and turned his head away.

Sela fell to her own old knees beside her beloved girl. “Hush, my sweet, my honey lamb,” she soothed frantically, stroking the blood-streaked face. “Tirsah, Tirsah! She bleeds.”

“Beast!” Tirsah lunged for Paedro, sharp fingernails extended like claws. “Beast, I’ll carve up your own pretty cheeks for this!”

Paedro caught her by the middle and shoved her roughly back. “Attack me again, and I will call it treason.”

“And what am I to call the cut on my cousin’s face? She’ll wear that mark for the rest of her days.”

“That pretty face you guard so closely bought a dozen men and brought them to her bed. I know this is true. I’ve seen it. She’s earned every scar I choose to give.”

“Come closer, boy, and I’ll show you scars.” Tirsah feinted at his eyes. “Come on, if you dare!”

“That’s enough from you!” Paedro turned on the chieftain. “Enough from all of you. We have the proof, and the law rules in our favor.”

“That’s easy enough to say when you are the law.” Anno supported himself against Benec’s strong arm. “Tell us what this proof is, and let us judge for ourselves.”

“Father!” Tirsah protested. “How can you --”

He waved two fingers at her. It was a tiny, almost invisible gesture, but enough to make her subside.

Paedro shook his head. “No! First, give me proof of who you are. How do I know that you’re not one of Rose’s lovers, brought in to cover her dirtied footprints? Prove yourself, and I’ll answer your challenge.”

“What, should I work a miracle for you?” Anno straightened to let the sunlight fall on his face. Each long, thin feature, and the gravel-rough voice, were unique to only one owner. He smiled faintly at Paedro’s sudden shock of recognition and flash of guilt. “Here’s your miracle: Anno, the long-lost and none other, speaks to you. You know my face and you know my voice. You don’t doubt for a moment, within yourself, that I am who I claim to be. There’s your proof, and take it as you will.”

Rose cried out softly, startling them all. Tirsah stifled a sob in the back of her throat at the vicious look of hatred on Paedro's face and the way that Cloud turned his back on the girl.

The sudden, warm pressure of a hand on her back made her jump. Benec. His giant's hand nearly covered her shoulder to the collarbone.

"Here," he whispered, a little awkwardly. "You're covered in her blood. I've a kerchief, a clean one, in my pocket. Do you want it?"

Tirsah couldn't lift her eyes from the sight of his hand as he touched her without thinking twice or thinking hard thoughts. "Yes," she said at last. She took the scrap of dun-colored cotton from him. "It'll be ruined."

"No matter." Benec knelt clumsily and patted Rose on the back, a man no doubt unused to such tenderness and even less used to hunkering his long, lean body up so close to the ground. "Bear up, little one," he soothed, not bothering to lower his voice. "It'll come right."

"Right? For a woman doomed to wear the mark of a whore?" Paedro snapped. "You come too close to insubordination for your own comfort!"

"Call me into court if you like!" Benec tried to wipe a tear away from Rose's cheek. "Come on, show me your strength, little innocent."

"I can't." Rose choked, her voice strangled with tears. She struggled up onto one elbow and presented her battered face to Cloud. "Cloud, I was alone last night," she pleaded, voice thick with tears and hurt. "I swear it. Why won't you believe me?"

Cloud swallowed. "Jade and liar," he said hoarsely. "I saw you. What could you say to convince me otherwise?"

Anno snorted impatiently. "Where's the man you say you saw with her? What of his story? Surely you didn't let him get away?"

Paedro looked away and cleared his throat. "My aunt saw to him this morning. She sent him away after he'd sworn a vow to enter the Brotherhood as his penance. This wasn't the first time he'd been with Rose, and neither planned on it being the last time they came together, married or not."

"Name him!" Tirsah challenged in bald disbelief. "Name him, if you even know who he is. Why not drag him out here and strike him with your fists? Why not shame him in front of every soul that lives here? Because he's a man? A man, who's to be excused for a little randiness and let off with a tap to the wrist, but not a woman, who's expected to be as pure as I know my cousin is? Bring him here, if he exists at all!"

"He exists, but he is no longer our concern," Paedro said, lips stiff.

"On the contrary, I find his absence concerning indeed," Anno said, quiet and dangerous. "Without him here, I find there no proof at all of your accusations. Have you nothing else to build your case on? Do you think me a fool?"

Cloud slid a dagger from his waist and ran his thumb down the length of it. "I have proof enough for you," he said, and struck too quickly for Benec to pull Rose to safety.

The blow caught Rose's ruined rose-dress by the neck and slashed it open to the waist. Without the laces to support the bodice, the silk petals fell away from Rose's shoulders and left her bare as a newborn child.

She let out a wail of shame and cowered away from Benec, instinctively covering herself with her hands, hunching forward. The spill of her hair slid over her shoulders in a protective curtain that bared her back.

"Look how she blushes, just like a virgin," Paedro jeered. He took her head in one rough, gloved hand and forced it further down.

Cloud ran the tip of his knife lightly across the pale, otherwise perfect skin of Rose's back -- skin marred by a dozen deep, angry red scratches. "I saw these put here," he murmured. "Tell me, now. What are they?"

"A few faint marks. Nothing like the scar that you've left her with," Tirsah blazed.

"Marks from what?" Cloud looked up, eyes empty, dead.

"Tell me, mage, are you a chaste woman who wouldn't know? I saw these marks made by a lover's fingernails."

"Those are never --"

"By the Lady, look at them!" Paedro burst out. "What more proof do you need that she was with a man? Have you ever seen anything more like a lover's scratches?"

"I don't know, O innocent lamb," Anno spoke up dryly. "Tell me, if you're so pure: how do you know what such things look like?"

Paedro gave the master-mage a dark look. "I am a swordsman," he enunciated, as if Anno were stupid. "I have lived in Amahpre and on the march, with warriors and rough soldiers who used whores and filthy camp-followers like dogs. I have seen these marks time and again on the shoulders of bragging fools who stank of having a whore up against a wall."

"Have you now?" Anno rubbed his chin. "If I rend either of your shirts from your shoulders, will I find scars?"

Cloud stood. He deliberately shrugged his shirt from his shoulders and turned around slowly, slowly, so that they could all see his whole, unblemished skin. When he finished his circle, he dealt the darkest of glares to the master-mage. "I am innocent."

"Perhaps, or lucky. Your proof is no proof at all."

"I am innocent," Cloud repeated stubbornly. "She's not. Beautiful Rose, guilty as a thief. Why, Rose?"

Anno touched his daughter's arm, apparently to silence her burst of indignation. "Why what, Cloud?" he asked quietly.

“Why did you betray me?” he begged the girl who would have been his wife. “I waited so long for this day. I’ve waited for fourteen years, ever since I was old enough to know that my mother was a whore. Did you know that?”

He swayed slightly. “I was just five years old when she died. They’d laid her out on a kitchen table so that the servants could take one last look before they put her in the tomb. I didn’t know, then, what dishonor meant.

“She’d been dressed all in red, and she had a wide band of velvet around her throat.” Cloud put a hand to his own neck, dusky from the sun, long and supple. “My mother had a beautiful throat. She wore necklaces of gold and always laughed because they were too big to fit properly. But when she died, her neck was swollen and purple from chin to chest. Even the velvet band didn’t cover all the damage.

“They’d tried to close her eyes, but I could see that her dead eyes were staring from underneath the lids. I wanted to open them, but they wouldn’t let me. The servants held me back. I didn’t know why.

“Then my father said I had to kiss her goodbye. I did. Her face was cold. So cold. Then, after I’d kissed her, my father unclasped that velvet band and let me see the rope marks on her neck. She’d hanged herself, he said, after he’d caught her with her merchant lover, trading her favors for another pretty necklace. He’d killed the merchant himself, but my mother fled him. She hung herself in the stable. He only found her because the small-cats were crying at her feet.

“When he’d told me that, he held me up and took my hand in his to trace the rope marks, and ...” Cloud swallowed. “He told me, then, what happens to whores. He made me swear that when I married, it would be to a woman I knew was pure as the light falling from heaven. I thought I’d found her. I thought I’d found sweetness in Rose.”

He reached out a hand in mute appeal, face full of pain. The distance between them was too great for his fingers to reach her. “So beautiful ...” he said, his voice catching. “So gentle ... so kind ... why doesn’t the inside match the outside, Rose? A man could drink in the sight of you from the sunrise to the sunset, and need no other water ... till he realized that it was salt, and it would be the death of him to drink deeply.”

He dashed his hand against his eyes and turned his back to her. “This is all that I have to say to you. What you do with yourself from this day forward, it’s yours to choose.”

“Mine to choose?” Rose asked softly from underneath the veiling of her hair. She lifted her head to show eyes like burnt holes in her blood-streaked face. With nothing to lose, she dared at last to speak. “You leave me neither a wife nor a widow nor a maiden, and you say to me, choose?”

Paedro stamped the ground. “No more! Hush your mouth. Don’t you know what kind of mercy I’m showing you? I will let you live. By law you should be stoned to death!”

He wheeled on Lorn. His voice shook. “And you, Lorn. I could declare war on your lands. I could take away your chieftainry. I *am* being merciful, and you have nothing to say?”

Lorn rubbed his hand down the length of his face and glanced blankly up at the prince. He looked every one of his years. "What would you have me say?"

He stood and faced Paedro man to man, hands tucked into the pockets of his jerkin, and spat at him. "Devil take your mercy, and you with it. I'll have none. Now, get off my lands before I chase you out!"

The prince sucked in an enraged breath. "And may it fall on your own head! My lady aunt was right, though I didn't dare believe her. You've done this to cause a war between us.

"All of you!" he raved. "How long have you plotted against me? How you must have laughed when you saw us coming up the hill, to think that I'd played right into your hands. All of you are as guilty as she is, and every bit as foolish! I see it all now, how you cozened me with cheats and lies, instead of attacking with the honest spears and swords of honorable men. You know you could never win against me if it came to battle. You, with less than ten score of peasant men against my thousands? Did you think to use this as a start to your challenges against me, Lorn? An unlettered, unlearned fisherman? Fah!" He panted with fury. "Dogs, all of you! Defend yourselves if you can."

"Treason was never in our thoughts," Anno rebuked him without fear. "I speak for all of us, and my brother as well. But if you would hear the truth, hear this: better an ignorant fisherman who is a man, than a puffed-up boy who thinks he's a god."

Paedro's hand lifted, fingers clenching into a fist. Tirsah flashed to stand a little in front of her father. "Will you strike a master-mage again?" she taunted. "Tell me, what does your law say about that?"

"To strike a true mage is death -- but to land a blow on a charlatan is a blessing." Paedro shrugged one shoulder and smiled a small, cruel smile. "And to capture a dark mage is worth a king's reward. I was blind, Tirsah, but now I see, and I see clearly. Only a dark mage would work against his or her own kingdom. You've built this land up strong in the hopes that you'd be tough enough to attack Amahpre. A child could see through your games."

"Dark magery?" Tirsah shrieked. She waved her hands around her. "What wrong have we done by feeding our people, by making our land produce? Would you rather we gave you salt water to drink and raw clams to eat? It would have been the best we could have scratched up without our magery."

"Yes, and every bite and sup I've been foolish enough to take poisons me!" Paedro flared. "I know without a doubt, Tirsah, that you and that loathsome-looking Anno have been laying your magic as a trap for me. Without my aunt, I would have been lost.

"No," he said flatly. "Rest assured that I'll speak to the villagers and find out all the proof that I need to take you and your father back to the city as my prisoners. Be ready, Tirsah. Be ready, Anno."

"Get off my lands," Lorn breathed. Then, louder: "Get off my lands! Take your lying mouths and your rotten hearts and go!"

“Gladly.” The prince sneered. He caught Cloud by the arm. “Follow me. There’s nothing more for us here. Benec, come!”

Benec froze. He hesitated, flicking his eyes first to Rose and then to Tirsah. Neither looked back at him, the one weeping and the other trying her best to comfort. He looked at Lorn, at Anno, at Sela.

Paedro turned impatiently. “What are you waiting for, man? You of all people should be shouting for joy. You’ve won all your arguments against women. Come!”

Benec swallowed, his throat dry. “No,” he said roughly. “Our paths part here.”

Dark red suffused the prince’s face. “Think carefully, Benec,” he said, his words laced with meaning. “You would do better to come with us.”

“No.” Benec’s voice gained strength as he looked again at Tirsah. “I’ll stay here.”

Paedro bit deeply into the flesh of his lower lip. “Then I invoke the right of a prince,” he said harshly. “Lorn, I deny you the right to cast me off your lands. If Benec stays, then I stay, welcome or not.”

Tirsah put a quick hand on her uncle’s shoulder. “So says the law,” she said, “but that’s as far as it goes.”

“Truly?” Lorn cracked a thin smile. “All right. Stay on my lands, but not in my house. Not on my charity. Go sleep in the shepherd’s bothy, Prince, or out in the fields, and may you rest easy as we will for what you’ve brought on us.”

“Enough.” Paedro sneered. “Cloud, come! Benec, think better of yourself, or say goodbye to us forever. You have until sunset tomorrow. Think about how best to make peace with us!” he warned them. “Think, or be prepared for war.”

“And the first to die shall be the whores,” Cloud said softly, without looking back. “Think on that, Rose, and make ready your soul.”

Finally, clearly at his limit of patience, Anno rose up like an avenging god. “Leave this place!” he roared, raising his fist. “Leave before I blast you out!”

The two men walked with straight backs all the way out, unafraid of Anno’s master-magery.

So, Benec thought. It would be war between them.

* * * * *

Ione had not dared to move. She’d held herself as still as the dead, save for a pulse that pounded dangerously in her temple. *Anno that was reported dead -- all the spies swore to it - he lives! How did I not sense him near?*

As the prince and Cloud passed by Ione’s hiding-spot, she dared to reach out and grab them. “Nephew!” she whispered. “Come with me, quickly!”

"Aunt?" Paedro stared at her. "Devils take you! I thought I'd told you to stay well out of this."

Ione interrupted him. "Yes, yes, you did, but I worried for you." Her quick mind had flashed far ahead of their arguments and hastened to the crux of the matter. She stroked his hair. "You've done a masterwork today, my darling, but there's no time to linger. If we strike out now, we can be back in Amahpre before the snows start in earnest. Hurry!"

Paedro shook off her hand! "Amahpre?" he demanded. "Aunt, what are you going on about?"

"The city!" she exclaimed, too excited to heed the irritation on his face. "Surely you'll leave this place now!"

"Not yet, I won't. Not until Benec leaves with me." Paedro sketched a curse-sign against the chieftain and his family. "Nor yet the chieftain, the master-mage, and his dark-mage daughter. I'll pay them out for their insults."

Ione drew up short. "Paedro!"

"What now, woman?" He stared at her in frustration. "Well? Speak!"

"You ..." Ione faltered. Her nephew's wild eyes seared into her flesh. Her strip of leather, suddenly old and worn-looking, slipped from her sleeve to lie limp on the ground. *He's gone beyond me*, she realized. Sick, cold moisture beaded her forehead. "Nephew --"

"Hush!" he snapped. "Go back to the stronghold, woman. They may have barred us, but they haven't yet barred you. Fetch us food and drink, blankets and the like, and bring them to this ... bothy ... they mentioned. And hurry!"

"But Paedro!" she broke, desperate, scrabbling at his sleeve. "We must go to Amahpre - - we must -- my pardon!"

"Your what?" He looked blank. "There's no pardon for you, Ione. I've exiled you as you deserve. Don't be a fool!"

Something hot and white rolled across Ione's mind. For half a moment she reeled; then she straightened herself and curtsied ever so formally. "As you wish, nephew," she replied as she might in court. "Wait for me. Until I return."

He gave her half a nod, already deep in other plans. "Good. Go on, quickly now!"

As she moved silently away, she saw him turn to Cloud. "We're agreed, then, and you're with me?"

Cloud shut his eyes. "Aye," he whispered. "I am."

"Good! Tonight, then, we go into the stronghold and take them by surprise. This is what we'll do ..."

* * * * *

"Are they gone?"

“Gone, and the best of good riddance to them.” Benec dug deeply into his hip pocket and produced a crude leather flask. He reached over Rose’s head and nudged Anno’s shoulder with the bottle. When Anno gave it a blank look, Benec mimed drinking and nodded his head in encouragement.

Anno put the flask to his lips and took a long draught. He nearly choked. Brandy, and the cheapest, strongest sort at that. Benec flushed red in embarrassment, but as soon as Anno could breathe -- and he breathed more easily, with the liquor blazing a hot trail down his throat -- he waved the tall man’s shame away. “Peace. It was a help.” All the same, he handed the flask back.

With an effort, he gathered enough strength to look down at his niece. “Does she live?”

Sela wrung her hands together in her apron. “I don’t know. Anno, you ...” She patted Rose’s bloody face with gentle hands. “Wake up, my honey, my lamb,” she crooned. “Rose, open your pretty eyes ...”

Lorn rubbed his face. “What of her scratches?” he asked. He pointed at the marked shoulders. “Brother?”

Anno sagged. “You believed them, didn’t you?” he asked quietly. “Every lying word.”

“Course not!” Lorn bristled. “Only I don’t --”

“For the sake of mercy, Uncle,” Tirsah said wearily.

“Anyone can tell you’ve never played the dressmaker’s dummy. Rose is innocent of all but having a wedding kirtle made by women too old to see where they stuck their pins. Here, look!”

She fumbled at her waist and drew out a long, sharpened needle. Too quick to be stopped, she set the point into the flesh of her arm and dragged it through the skin.

She held up her arm. The mark she had made and the half-healed red lines on Rose’s back were identical. “See? If she lives, Lorn, I had better see you down on your knees to beg her pardon for doubting her.”

“Daughter!” Anno put out his hand. “Please. She’s awake.”

“Oh!” Tirsah clapped her hands to her mouth. “Rose --”

“Hush, now, hush,” Anno soothed. He sank to his knees beside his small niece. Deft and tender, he lifted the fallen silk petals of Rose’s dress to cover her modesty again. “Little girl, sit up and dry your tears. I believe you, as do we all here. You’ve nothing to fear from us. There, yes, there, hush, I have you safe now ...”

“Why?” Rose wept against her uncle’s chest, her beautiful face helpless with grief. “I don’t understand.”

Benec cleared his throat. “But I do,” he rumbled grimly.

Anno shook his head. “We’ll hear from Rose first, Benec.” He lifted Rose’s chin up. “Little one, who is there that would want to hurt you so?”

Rose swallowed and pulled her ruined hair away from her face with shaking hands. "If there is someone like that, only he knows his name. But now everyone knows mine, don't they? And Cloud is gone forever. Whoever that enemy is, he won, didn't he?"

"Maybe not. Maybe." Benec sighed. "I could catch them in a lie, little kitten. Our trouble is that they don't think they're lying. They believe in what they saw."

He raised his hand hastily to cut off Anno's protest. "I believe her, too, trust me. But they must have seen something. Someone they thought was Rose. And who told them about it, who led them there? Ione. And don't go telling me you don't know exactly who *she* is."

Anno nodded wearily. "It must have been so. Ione, who hates her nephew. Ione, who would do anything to destroy him."

"And what better way to do that than to make him think he'd been betrayed by friends? Loyalty is Paedro's lifeblood. It's why he hasn't had Ione executed for the things she's done. No doubt she used this as a way of making Paedro trust her. I know that filth. She's planned to use this to get back into his good graces. That's the heart of it, I'd swear."

"But how?" Lorn shook his head. He appeared to have aged ten years in the last half-hour. "How's one woman got that sort of power?"

"From what they accused us of. Dark magery." Anno scoffed. "Did they think I couldn't recognize it once I saw it? And though I can't see so well as I used to, I have an idea. Revenge is indeed a dish best served cold, and the better planned, the better ended." He grinned feral, deliberately flashing his pointed teeth. "Make no mistake, I'll see that they get all they deserve. The three of them, together ... I have a plan. Rose fainted when they left. Let them think that she died."

He shook his head at Tirsah's cry of dismay. "No, hear me out. We put on heavy mourning for her, plan a funeral, make a casket, and have a stone carved out. We let rumors slip out about how she died and that she'll be buried in the ruins of her wedding dress. People think more kindly of the dead. They'll remember a 'poor innocent lamb' who perished without any sort of trial at all. In the meantime, we find out what really happened."

"But --" Tirsah protested.

"It will work. Think about it. No one misses what they have until it's gone. Cloud will hear these rumors just like everyone else; he'll realize what he's lost and start to doubt what he was told, even what Ione fooled him into thinking he saw. Paedro, too. When we're able to prove Rose's innocence, they'll be crushed under that blow. That's how we make them suffer most."

"But when it's over?"

"When it's over, I know what to do then. Will you trust me?"

Lorn hesitated, clearly torn between confusion and trusting his brother's wisdom. "As you'll have it," he agreed at last.

"I'm with you, too." Benec straightened, albeit unhappily. "You know it's a hard enough choice. They're my brothers-in-arms, no matter how misled, and that's a strong bond. But I won't stand by and see this sort of wrong done to a lady. Whatever help you might need, count on me for it."

"We'll waste no time." Anno rose and took Rose gently by the hand. "Come, niece. We'll hide you away before anyone thinks to come back and see you still alive. You can stay in my cellar. No one will look for you there, I promise. We'll bring candles and furs in to make it a fine nest for you."

Rose looked to Tirsah for guidance.

"Go with them, cousin," she said, her voice a bare whisper. "Die so that you can live again."

Supporting her in turn, Lorn and Sela bore Rose from the ruined hall. Anno followed. He gave Tirsah a last look over his shoulder, one that seemed to speak volumes, though in a language Benec could not read. Tirsah bowed her head and folded her hands, the curtain of her hair swinging forward to hide her face.

Benec swallowed hard as his heart hammered in triple time against his ribs. Alone. They'd left him alone. With her. There could not have been a worse time in the wide world.

When the last footstep had faded away, he turned back to Tirsah. He meant to muster up his courage and begin by comforting her, but her back was stiller than carven marble. Slowly, slowly, she raised her hands in the air. She tilted her throat back in a perfect, pale arch. Then, with all the breath in her lungs, all the rage in her soul, and all the magic she possessed, Tirsah opened her mouth and *screamed*.

Chapter Four

The world went mad at the sound of Tirsah's scream reverberating off the walls until it seemed to come from a thousand throats, each keening out a grief beyond bearing. Benec pressed his hands to his ears to block it out, to no avail.

Overhead, heavy iron spikes thick as a man's arm, which pinned the chieftain's heavy banners to the walls, began to rust through with a hideous squeal that almost, but not quite, drowned out Tirsah's awful keening. Thick red dust cascaded down in fountains as the spikes crumbled apart. Banners that weighed a thousand pounds writhed and whipped away from the walls.

Benec jumped back just in time to avoid being struck by a thrashing tassel. It hit a young tree instead and smashed it into splinters. Just as quick, half a ton of sailcloth and beryls crashed into the arbor and destroyed it utterly, threshing out centuries of life and dust in a cloud thick enough to whiten the air.

What felt like a handful of pebbles struck Benec's back and knocked him to his knees. He twisted away just in time to dodge a sudden hail of wall stones that wrenched themselves from their places in the outer lighthouse wall and hurtled, screeching, into the ruined trees and earth.

Benec wrestled his way free of the choking rubble to hasten to Tirsah's side. She seemed unaware of the chaos her voice caused, even as she shrieked out her fury. Her fingers had hooked into claws, locked into place an inch from her temples; her lips widely parted, the horrible, shrill notes poured from her throat without need for the breath of life to feed them.

Benec had heard a ghost scream when he was young, but it couldn't compare with Tirsah's wail; ghosts keened only at Death's command. This -- *this* was the sound of Death, grieving itself raw over a life cut so short, so fast, so wrongly.

He tried to seize her by the shoulders, to shake her free from the mage's waking nightmare, yet when he touched her, he recoiled. Her flesh felt hard as marble, unyielding as stone, and cold as a corpse.

Where he'd put his hands, the mark of his fingers remained as if carved into her skin. Drops of blood welled up to fill his fingerprints, then ran over and streaked down her arms in crimson tears.

Then, the honey bees came.

Their angry buzz filled his ears with the roar of an army on the riot as they flooded in from nowhere at all, coming by the swarm. More bees than he'd ever seen before, more than he'd ever thought could exist. Every hair on his body rose and tingled in horror as some of them flew so close that he could see their barbed stingers and the glistening drops of poison on each one.

A chill racked him as he realized that though the bees swarmed about him, close enough to touch, not a single one so much as brushed his sleeve. The hive mind had fixed itself on Tirsah, and to Tirsah they went.

They landed first on her bloodied robes and sucked up the red drops with tiny insect feelers. Encouraged, more and more landed, then landed on each other. Soon they covered her from eyelids to toes, even around the ridges of her mouth, and darted inside to crawl on her tongue.

She rose slowly -- or did the thousands and thousands of humming wings lift her instead? -- and stretched her arms to the skies, a rough woman shape made out of thousands of bees. She keened the same agonized plaint around the dozens of insects that darted in and out of her mouth and plunged down her throat.

Benec's guts roiled. If she lost her grip on the magic and the bees turned on her, there wouldn't even be enough left of her body to bury after the venom had done its work. His own poor magic didn't stretch far enough to let him communicate with a hive mind. He couldn't order them to cease, even if he could overpower Tirsah's hold on the things.

Where is Anno?! He wanted to tear his hands through his hair, but barely dared to let his chest rise and fall with each breath lest the bees turn on him. Couldn't Tirsah's father feel the rampant magic? But, no, perhaps he couldn't -- no one had come in answer to her screams or run to see why the walls exploded.

No one heard. No one knew. No one would come.

And so, Benec made the only choice he could.

If I die, I die.

He reached out one hand, as slowly as the moon swam across the sky at night. *Tirsah. Tirsah!*

He laid his fingers atop the bees. The feathery feel of their wings and the rumbling, vibrating buzz that shook each insect's body near broke his nerve. They moved and melted

away beneath his palm until he touched Tirsah skin to skin. Her flesh felt warm and soft. He shook her.

“Tirsah!” Bees flew to him and landed on his lips. He tasted honey. “Tirsah -- wake up!” She opened her eyes. Stranger’s eyes. Golden-bright. They met his own --
-- and suddenly all was darkness ...

He had never seen such blackness, never felt such an absence of light and air. *Where am I?*

A fresh chill raised the fine hairs on his body. *Tirsah!*

A cold hand pressed itself over his mouth. He choked and fought back out of pure instinct. The hand clung to his lips without the slightest effort, even when he flailed his head backwards. Another cold hand came out to rest on his shoulder. The stranger said nothing.

Though he shook with the bitter chill and fear, Benec struggled to calm himself. “Who are you?” No words came from the stranger, but without warning cold lips brushed his own. He flinched back as if he’d been burned, and thought he heard the faintest ghost of female laughter. “Tirsah?” He strained his eyes to see. “Tirsah?”

A body collided against his back. He gave a hoarse yell and bucked forward, but it was no good. The creature, whether Tirsah or some wild selkie, had him caught fast, pinned with slender arms as strong as iron. First floating or levitating against him, then seeming to stretch far taller than her true height, she was able to reach what she would otherwise be unable to. Lips pressed against his neck and suckled his skin with a patient ferocity, never making a sound, not even breathing.

Benec ceased to fight, but could not stop his limbs from shaking. Despite himself -- the fear, the cold, the stranger’s utter lack of caring at whether or not he wanted her -- his body began to play traitor against him at the feel of the woman’s icy lips on his throat.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice strained. He tried to reach back, to touch --

It bit him! Hard and sharp enough to let him know that it was not pleased.

“You won’t tell me.” The woman’s teeth, still locked onto his skin, shook him lightly.
No.

She slid her cold hand once more over his mouth and stopped any further words from him. A finger like an icicle tapped his lips and drew away. The creature made a sound -- a long, satisfied sigh exactly like the wind as it howled over the ocean by night. He heard a small hiss as her hand slid down, over the jut of his hip, to --

Benec bucked despite himself, a cry blocked vainly by his sealed mouth. He felt the creature’s chest ripple lightly, laughing at him. Her teeth nipped him a second time. She drew one finger down his leg, enticing him. Her touch inflamed. His cock began to throb with the need for release. Again despite himself, he began to move, the burning and freezing touch of the woman’s hand a burning ecstasy almost beyond bearing.

Her free hand caught his leg and pinched it fiercely. The message was clear: *Be still!* Did she want him to explain himself? He moaned behind his sealed lips, begging for speech. As if impatient, she tapped them again.

"I cannot be still," he gasped. "Lady, have mercy on me, please."

The pinching fingers hesitated.

"Please," he begged, near choking on the pulse in his throat. "Can you not feel what you've done?"

He heard a soft murmur of laughter at his back -- and his mysterious seductress left him just as she had come. Not another sound marked her passing.

"*No!*" Benec turned in wild circle, his own footsteps deafening in the otherwise utter silence. "Lady, no!"

No response.

"*Lady!*" he roared. "Come back!"

Her ripple of laughter filled the air. He turned his head sharply in the direction her voice seemed to come from and reached his arms out in supplication. "Woman, woman, don't leave me like this!"

The woman sighed carelessly. *Why not?* she seemed to ask.

"You've seen to it that I'll surely die without your touch!"

A soft swish -- did she shake her head?

"I need you!" he ground out. "No other woman's touch has ever brought me to anything like this."

The figure seemed startled. *What? Why?*

"I'll only tell that to one person!" he retorted.

Too bad. Feet pattered on stone, leaving him for good --

"Because there has only ever been one woman that I wanted!" he roared. "I think that woman was you! If you'd tell me your name, I'd know it to be true. You're the only one who could do this. Tirsah! Tirsah, don't leave me alone like this!"

Silence.

He heard a long, soft sigh, a wisp of breath through slightly parted lips, then, at last, what he had ached for: the pressing and molding of her body against his.

She treated him no more gently than before. Her cold hands caught his wrists in grips of steel and thrust them high above his head. Small, slender legs, entirely bare, locked about his waist. He strained to bend his head to her, to devour her face, her throat, her breasts with kisses, but she held him at bay from the waist up.

"What are you doing to me, woman?" he ground out. "Are you punishing me?"

She nodded. *Yes.*

"Then I'm sorry," he hissed. "Sorry for everything that I have ever done to you. Sorry for everything that I will ever do. Sorry for everything I haven't done. Mage, read my heart. Know that I'm speaking the truth. Then, for the sake of mercy, have pity on me and let me love you.

She flinched. For a long moment, her movements ceased.

Then slowly, slowly, she released his wrists and brought her cold hands down to touch his cheeks. He felt her release of breath and her small nod.

Yes.

The woman -- Tirsah -- leaned forward, pressing her small breasts against Benec's chest. Cool lips pushed fiercely against his own, small, sharp teeth nibbling as a delicately pointed tongue flickered across the seam of his closed mouth. Startled, he opened up to let her delve inside. With a small, hungry noise, her kiss became rough and eager, as if she craved the taste of him and couldn't get enough.

It took but a moment for the shock to pass, and then Benec was returning her kiss, passion for passion. His cock strained for release, desperate for the tight warmth of her cunt that he remembered from so long ago.

Tirsah gave a little laugh as he bumped impatiently against her. She rubbed herself against his straining prick, teasing without mercy. Benec groaned in frustration. "Let me," he whispered, voice ragged. "Tirsah, please."

Again, he heard her chuckle, this time with a note of triumph. Chilly, wet hands slid across Benec's shoulders and down his back. Tirsah moved into position, then hesitated. He could almost see her challenging smirk. *Well?*

Still, he hesitated -- something he would not have done in years past. He had to be sure this was no trick, that she wouldn't pull away again. "You're sure?" he said between gritted teeth, struggling for the last scraps of his self-control.

She laughed a third time, this time a loud peal of triumph and amusement. Wicked, eager fingers nimbly undid the buttons of his trousers, sliding them down and out of her way. Slick as an otter, Tirsah raised her body against Benec's and sank slowly down over his cock, taking it deep inside, every inch of him. At the sudden shock of clenching heat, he drew in a sharp breath, then let it out, shuddering with pleasure. "Ah, by the gods, Tirsah!"

Her internal muscles clenched around the length of his cock. She gave him a small kick with the heel of one foot, her meaning very clear: *Move!*

Letting out a rough cry, Benec let himself go. Unable to stop himself, he let his hands roam wildly over Tirsah's shoulders and the soft curves of her ass, pulling her to him and drawing back, only to thrust forward again. Small as she was, Tirsah remained as strong as he remembered her, clinging on and giving back as good as she got, each clutch of her fingers and clench of her pussy inflaming his hunger for more and still more of her touch. Their mouths ate hungrily at each other, tasting salt and the unique flavor of their skins.

It had been so long, too long, that Benec knew he would not last fit to satisfy them both. "Sorry ... so sorry ... next time ... I promise," he ground out, pulling her close as possible.

Did he imagine it, or did she nod a *yes*?

Whether she did or not, he could hold his climax off no longer, not for her sake nor his. The orgasm hit him with the power of a tidal wave, washing over mind and body. As his seed burst forth, he felt Tirsah jerk with her own moment of bliss, devouring him and all that he had to give.

Unable to help himself, Benec fell forward with a great sigh, shaking hands still roaming over Tirsah's skin. "Beautiful witch," he breathed. "I lo--"

The world exploded.

Gasping, Benec opened his eyes.

Stillness. Silence, save for the harsh rasp of someone breathing. Himself. Dragging in lungfuls of cold night air. No, not night -- morning. Early morning once again.

He pulled himself up on one elbow and stared about in bewilderment. He lay on his back beneath an apple tree, perfect and whole. The stronghold stood tall and sound before him, not a one of the stones missing. The chieftain's tapestries hung where they always had.

He heard a small, quiet sigh and looked up to see Tirsah, sitting with her legs crossed, not four feet away beneath a red-fruit tree. She looked back at him. "Do you see now?" she asked, her voice rippling in the still air. "I've given all that I can. The choice is up to you."

On an impulse he took the few steps toward her, straightening as he went, unfolding his long limbs taller and taller until he towered above her. She looked up and up, calm, unafraid, watching his face with all the inscrutable patience of a Catkin.

Wonder. Awe. Fear. Confusion. All those and more warred within him. A part of him was seriously tempted to seize the green-mage by the shoulders and shake her hard for frightening the soul from his body. Another part tacitly admitted that wouldn't be the wisest course with a mage, and certainly not with Tirsah.

The greater part of him wanted nothing more than to reach out his hands in silence, asking for her own, if she chose to give them. And so he did, suddenly tired of playing at games. She dropped her gaze to his palms and tilted her head a little to one side, as if she'd read the lines there.

Finally, she bit her lower lip and took in a small, sigh-like breath. She lifted her own small hands, placed them in his, and let him pull her up onto her feet.

When they stood together, Tirsah was shorter than him by two full feet. She had to tilt her head far back on her neck to look up at him. A beautiful face, Tirsah's, the mouth so warm and made for smiling. Her hair curled softly about her face in thick, glossy masses the

color of wheat. His hands ached to bury themselves in that hair; he would, if he could, lower his face to hers and steal a kiss from those lips so made for it.

She returned him stare for stare, unabashed. He remembered his haircut and felt himself blush to its roots.

Her hands pressed his lightly, recalling him to the fact that he held them. Distracted, he looked down at the tiny things in fascination. So small, yet so strong, callused, yet beautiful as no others could be. Some strange daring took him unaware. Without thinking, he found himself bending over to press a light kiss on her knuckles. She tasted like tears.

"You're so short," he said suddenly, awkwardly, his lips against her fingers.

That startled her into a laugh. "Next to you, giant, everyone is short."

Unable to believe his own courage, he bent over farther and laid his head in the crook of her shoulder. She smelled of marble and roses. "There's nothing in the world that I love more than you," he said quietly, feeling her begin to tremble. "Isn't that strange?"

"Life is stranger than any tale ever told," she said, her breath warm against his ear. She did not move her arms, did not put them around his neck as he yearned for her to do.

He kissed the smooth curve of her neck, his lips warm against her cold skin. "With all my heart --" He pressed his lips to the hollow beneath her ear. "-- with all my soul --" He kissed the high bone of her cheek. "-- and with all my strength, I love you."

She drew back as smoothly as a Catkin, and Benec suddenly found himself put at arm's length. She laid her hand over his mouth. "Not yet."

"When?"

"When you have earned it," she said, shaking her head. "And that's not yet."

"Then tell me how to do that, too. I've promised this much so far. I'll go as far as I must."

"Will you?" She eyed him up and down. "Will you truly?"

She dipped into a pocket of her embroidered mage's robe, a tiny pocket so cunningly sewn that no one would have guessed it to be there, and drew out a miniscule bottle of black glass that she held out to him.

He took it. The burning cold of it startled him so that he nearly dropped it. "Put it in your pocket," she instructed. "Keep it there. Come to me tonight, in the Queen's Cave, and drink it then, if your mind is made up still."

"Tirsah --" He gave in to his need to run his hands through her rich hair, gratified by her soft intake of breath and the way her lips parted at his touch. "As much as I need you, surely you hunger for me the same."

She pulled away. "And if I do? It's not yet time. Drink it, see what you'll see, and then see if you see me. I mean what I say, Benec. This is how it shall be, or not at all."

"The only way?"

"The one and only." Her eyes glowed at him. "Do you agree?"

"I must, then." He inhaled deeply, frustrated. "But I don't understand."

"You never do, at first." A faint minx's smile took some of the sting out of her words. "Soon you will. Will you come tonight?"

He closed his hand tightly around the bottle and slid it into his pocket. The cold of it burned through his jerkin. "I'll come," he said simply. "I promise."

He backed away as his lady wished and straightened his clothing. "Go comfort Rose," he suggested to distract the pair of them. "I'll go down into the village and spread the word that she is dead."

"Dead only to live again, or so Father says." Tirsah smiled wryly. "Trust me, Benec, and come to me tonight. If you do, you'll understand. Tonight, you'll see it all."

As he left -- to his credit, with only one longing look back at her over his shoulder -- Tirsah folded her hands demurely in front of herself and listened to the wild churning of her heartbeat in her ears.

Tonight, she thought to herself, *tonight it ends -- and tonight, after too long, it begins again ...*

Chapter Five

Hidden from sight by the overhanging branches of thick trees that came down from the coastline in a heavy arc to cover a vast strip of water, both shallows and deeps, Ione struggled with the oars of a coracle far too large for her. She was bent on one thing only: flight from Kirree. She hadn't dared return to the village for her horse, nor to the stronghold for food or supplies. Paedro would have found out. And then --

Her hands shook near too hard to grip the rough wooden paddle. How had he slipped her grasp so hard, so fast?

His gray eyes had held only madness. She'd intended to produce only a desire for revenge in him, enough to induce him to follow her lead.

Her only hope was to reach Amahpre before him. To seize it before he returned. Surely she had enough loyal retainers among the courtiers. Even among the palace staff. There remained a slim chance. If she sat the throne before he rode back in --

She worked the paddle frantically, cursing it with all the fear in her heart and breath in her lungs. Ione's hands were ill used to such rough work, but she set her teeth and struggled on against the current in the growing dusk. She could almost wish that she had brought Brach along, and imagined he would wish the same when it was discovered that she had flown.

No matter. She did *not* need them! She was making excellent progress, if slower than she'd like.

Row through the night and stop at the first coastal settlement that presents itself in the morning, she decided. Surely I'll be able to find servants and horses to travel south from there.

The boat jostled and came to an abrupt stop. Ione exclaimed sharply, bringing her oar around to club at the banks. Had she run up against some obstruction?

To her horror, an arm shot from the water and seized the oar. It broke with a crunch like bone and left her with a short piece of kindling in her hand. She had a brief glimpse of something that flashed and rolled white -- eyes? teeth? -- before it vanished again into the shallows.

Ione refused to scream despite her shock, scrambling instead into the middle of the coracle, as far away from the water as possible. The mages! They'd discovered she'd stolen their boat. What devilry had they set on her now?

"Show yourself!" she ordered, lashing out with the broken oar. "The queen commands it! I'll nail your head to the walls of my castle!"

A deep laugh rumbled behind her. She shrieked and jerked around, but saw nothing save for a slight ripple in the water. "Show yourself!"

The thing laughed again. "As ye wish, lady."

A pale blue hand slipped up over the prow of her boat. The remains of the oar fell from her suddenly cold, nerveless fingers as she stared at the creature's horrible face. It looked like a beast she had seen once in a picture -- a selkie. Not beautiful, as legend would have him, but fierce and ugly, with a mouth full of sharply pointed teeth.

"We deals kindly with the chieftains," the thing growled, moving in with deadly grace. "An' we do things differently this far north. Eh, lady? Eh? Eh?"

The hand reached for her.

Ione never had a chance to scream.

Chapter Six

Anno hurried up the small, narrow set of stairs leading from his chambers, sickened yet relieved to be away from the ruined dove's new bower. He'd left her in Sela's capable hands to bind up her wounds and soothe her for the time being. Pitiabile child, she'd want no man about her, no matter how well intentioned, when she came a little more to herself.

He hoped that Sela would have the wit to give Rose the sleeping draught he'd brewed to bless the girl with a few hours' escape into dreamless oblivion. Only a small time to breathe, but perhaps it was enough to let him discover his next, best move.

One thing he found himself grateful for, though the selfishness of it was shameful -- in her concern for Rose, Sela'd forgotten to ask him the questions that burned on her tongue. In time, they'd all want to know what had pulled him from hiding. Well, in time he might know how to answer.

Talents he'd once taken for granted came back easy as breathing, and he barely had to tug at the mage's power. He closed his eyes and tested the air of the stronghold, searching for his kin and for the enemy.

Lorn sat and stared out the window of his bedchamber. Anno decided he'd go and have a quiet word with his worn, tired brother later. Meanwhile, both the prince and Cloud lurked and sulked within a cold, filthy-smelling bothy on the edge of Lorn's isle.

Good, Anno thought with a vicious satisfaction. Let them stay there a while yet, until they learn a little humility. If nothing else, it is gratifying to see them there. But what of my daughter?

Speaking of his daughter ... Dark magery -- faugh! Anyone who dared to think such a thing of Tirsah would be better off to get down on their knees and kiss the rich, healthy soil of Kirree in apology. Though she did have mage strength in plenty, to be sure, and seemed to be using it to hide herself. He increased the power of his search, and --

Ha! His eyebrows shot up. Such an aura of power as clung to the arbor! He had never seen or felt such a display, not even in Amahpre. She'd fair circled the place with ring after ring of spent magic, solid as a wall to those who could feel such things. Few master-mages dared attempt such a feat.

But Edge -- what of his small, wild friend?

Nowhere.

He frowned. How had he missed her? Was it because she was a Catkin and not of the menkind? He opened his mind wider and searched again.

Nothing.

Alarmed now and reckless, he opened his mind wide and combed the stronghold, and then the island, for his fey love. No trace. Had she fled him, then -- so soon, and without a goodbye? Because he'd left his cellar? Would she be so cruel?

No -- no -- wait, just there -- he caught a glimmer of the golden light that was Edge. He sagged with relief. Still on the island, then. But ... in the catacombs? Why would she have gone there?

Anno, Anno, master-mage! So sure you know it all! Think back just a little! He grew utterly still. His Heskit board. As the pieces had moved over the board before he left his cellar, what of the dances they had led? He'd watched the white queen, but ...

Blind! I have been blind! The black queen could become rogue if it moved to a certain square. Had it? He thought so. And from there? A rogue trap that would ruthlessly attack opposing white pawns.

He swore harshly at himself. *Blind!* He had to find Edge.

He knew where she would lie. But did she yet live, or had her resting place claimed her for its own?

Anno arrived at the tombs fast as he could run there. The hill, steeper than he remembered, near tripped him as he skidded to a halt at the tomb fence. To right himself, he put out a hand and touched it.

In the same instant, he snatched his hand back with a shout of pain. He blew on his singed palm and stared at the tomb, unable to believe the sharp report of his senses. The haunts were active in daylight! No, more than active. Never had he seen them so agitated, not even at darkest midnight or on midsummer's eve.

Only one thing would cause such an uproar. Someone had gone inside to disturb them. Someone living, who yet remained there.

"Who's there?" He prayed to hear Edge's insolent answer, but received nothing.

Wiser now to the ways of the haunts and too hurried to recite the proper charms, Anno wrapped his good hand in a fold of his cloak and nudged the gate open just wide enough to let himself in. "Is someone inside?"

He tried, in vain, to see any clues with inner and bodily eyes. The haunts were far too noisy in their protest for him to get a clear glimpse of what had angered them. "I am not a happy man or mage at the moment," he warned, "and if you've desecrated the tomb, rest assured you'll wish you had not. Edge? If someone's within, speak!"

The tomb door had been shut tightly, though the lock had not been secured. Anno pushed down on the latch, nudged the door open, and peered in.

Was that breath he heard, where none should be?

Angry now, he shoved the door open wide. "Who's there?"

A hand shot from nowhere and grabbed his wrist in a vise. The shock hit him first and the stench second, foul and rotten enough to knock a man down. It came from the thing that had taken him by surprise, a wild-eyed creature -- a moon woman? One of the haunts taken flesh? It let out a hoarse, rattling screech like a raven's cry.

They grappled for a brief moment as he struggled to free his arm. The creature turned into a whirlwind of hands that slapped and feet that kicked. Long, thick, broken fingernails scratched and tore his flesh wherever they managed to land a blow. Luck alone saved his eyes when the beast struck at his head.

He covered his face with his free arm and ducked, yelling, "I am Anno, the chieftain's brother and the master-mage of Kirree-on-Sea! I'll warn you once and not again!"

The creature drew up to a sharp halt, hands falling limp. It cocked its head to a side and peered at him with eyes gone rheumy with age, through a tangle of matted gray hair. "Anno?" it asked in a voice that crackled with disuse. "Little brother?"

A second shock set his heart to pounding in his throat. "Berry?" He seized the creature's face between his hands, pushing its wild strands of hair aside to better see beneath. It was a ruin of a face -- seamed and cracked with age, dirt and spittle crusted deeply into the wrinkles. Its toothless mouth gave a broad grin. "Anno," Berry crooned, swaying gently. "Baby Anno, baby brother ..."

"Berry," he repeated, his mouth dry. It had been five years or more since he'd seen her last. She had been bad off then, but had at least had a whole kirtle to her name then, not the rag-tag accumulation of old jackets and night dresses she now wore one atop the other. "You live here?" he asked, aghast.

Her blank gaze shifted. "I've maybe slept here once or twice," she answered evasively. "If it's cold."

He glanced behind her. Piles of rags, each dirtier than the last, their stench as strong as hers, lay heaped up as far back into the gloom as he could see. Pieces of dried and rotten food

littered the flagstones. Some had grown maggoty; more had passed that point and withered into husks. “How long have you been in Kirree-on-Sea?”

She shrugged, humping her shoulders up. “A few days.”

Two turns of the moon and no less, he’d wager.

“I’ve been seeking Hanri.” Berry peered at him in renewed hope. “Have you seen my husband?”

The old sorrow bit gently at him. “I have not, sister,” he said, stroking her shoulders. “Be patient a little longer.”

Her mouth turned down at the corners. “He’s been too long already,” she mumbled. “But I’ll find him someday soon.”

“Yes, yes, in time ...” he soothed her, listening with half an ear to the humming of the haunts. They didn’t seem to mind Berry’s presence. It was others, mewed up with her, that they shrieked to be rid of. *Disquiet*, they protested in screams only he could make out.

He stepped forward, picking his way carefully among the piles of refuse. “Who else is here, sister?” he asked, voice light. “Have you company?”

Berry wrinkled her forehead. “I was supposed to tell you something,” she mused. One filthy finger stole to the corner of her mouth. She chewed on the nail. “Or Lorn. Only I fell asleep. I forgot. I don’t know.”

Anno took another cautious step. He’d forgotten just how vast and dark the tomb was. *I’m an old man*, he thought in sudden disquiet. *What have I gotten myself into? Oh --!*

He’d bumped into something warm. Alive.

Adrift in a half dream, Edge opened her eyes. Strange what an effort it took! Something had woken her, but it wanted more strength than she’d have to turn and see. A mouse, likely, come to sniff at her canvas sack of food.

She shifted in irritation. *Scat, mouse! Go away or I eat you up. Munch, crunch, all gone.*

Her gaze drifted upward to the tiny slit of a window at the very top of the crypt wall. The bit of sky she could see was a crisp, pale winter blue. Surely Lorn would come soon.

The mouse nudged her again. Now it was poking its cold nose into her side! She twisted away from the thing. *Go away, mouse*, she sulked. *When I feel like it, I catch you and eat you in three bites!*

Must be a big mouse, big enough to kneel down at her side. It smelled of the outdoors. Though it had a cold nose, it had a big warm hand that touched her cheek.

“Sweeting, are you hurt?” Herb-scented breath brushed her cheek.

The mouse spoke?

Edge turned her head sharply to one side and struggled to focus on the rodent, but found instead that she glared at a pair of rough, muddy winter mocs. Not a mouse, then, but a man. Lorn? No. Long, lean shanks clad in loose, dark breeks came up out of those mocs, and Lorn was short.

Long legs. That struck a chord in her muzzy head, but why? She made to lift her head and look up at the stranger's face, but her cheek only shifted on the pillow of tattered cloth she'd made for herself. Frustrated, she struggled to find the right Man's words, but could only come out with a rusty meow.

"Edge, Edge, speak to me, little wild one," the strange man coaxed as he stroked her cheek. The touch felt sweet and good.

And the voice, now, that was familiar, if not the body. Rough and ragged as a lion's purr. If she could only think clearly --

Oh. *Him*.

Anno caressed his small, wild friend with growing concern and a curiosity that burned high and hot. Could the tomb be her common den when she left his side? No, not possible. Her fur always remained clean, if rumpled, and she ever smelled of the ocean winds that blew over the arbor, not of the crypt's filth and rot.

But again --

He thought of his Heskit set in wonder.

Time for that later. Anno shook himself. First, he must needs care for her ills. Heat rose from Edge's skin as from coals in a hearth. Too hot for a Catkin. Her eyes, narrowed for a better look at him, were hazed and cloudy with fever.

"How are you hurt?" he asked, stroking her shoulder gently as he might.

She hissed at him. "I am well," she growled. As if to prove it, she scrabbled among the rags and lifted herself heavily onto her forelimbs. She managed to push one of her hind legs up behind her and put her weight on it -- but when she made to move the other one, her foot skidded, out of control, and the leg collapsed beneath her. She fell hard onto her elbows, and a mewl of pain forced its way out between her teeth.

Yet after all that, she had the pride to glare up at him and give another warning hiss. "I am well!"

Foolish kitten! "That you most certainly are not," Anno retorted. "Hiss all you like, but I doubt you've the strength to back up your threat, and I will have a look at your wound."

Edge slashed at him with one hand, claws bared, and struggled up on three limbs. "No, no! No time." She jerked her chin at the darkest of the tomb's corners. "See to *those* first." The indistinct shapes Edge gestured to looked at first like nothing more than thick bundles of trash, but then ...

Anno's lips parted in surprise. Not rags, but men! One tall, one small, both bound hand, foot, and neck with whatever rags must have come first to hand. Both lay sound asleep -- drugged, from the smell their bodies exuded. One snored and the other breathed raggedly, his throat caked with dried blood.

Berry chortled. "We caught them," she boasted. "I went to get Lorn this morning, and a man told me he'd come. Did he send you instead?"

"What?" Anno tore his gaze away from the men. "Yes," he said after a moment. "I came in Lorn's place."

Edge gave him a suspicious look. "He say why you come?"

"No. At least not as was told me," Anno murmured as he leaned in for a better look at the pair. The smaller man's wounds were from claws. "Edge, did you do this?"

She narrowed her eyes into slits. "After they did this," she said, twitching her tail away from her injured leg.

"She was protecting me," Berry said importantly. She elbowed her way between the Catkin and her brother, pointed at the men, and gave Anno a sunny, toothless grin. "They are *very* bad fellows."

Anno touched one man's throat wounds with the tip of his finger. Deep, but not deep enough to pierce his windpipe. He looked somehow familiar ...

"Are these the two city men who came along with the prince and his company?"

Edge shrugged in disdain. "Came along, but not with."

"What have they done? Did they break into the tomb?"

"You ask," Edge suggested with a devious glint in her eyes. She bent forward and nuzzled the taller man under his chin. "Wake up," she breathed. Then she yowled in his ear.

The soldier woke with a violent start and struggled instinctively against his bonds. Every jerk of his arms tightened the loops around his neck.

"Calm down!" Anno shouted, trying to lay hands on the fool.

He'd half choked his life away before he ran out of air to fight with and slumped on his side, wheezing. "Who are you?" he rasped. "Stinkin' cat, you still here? Just you cut me loose and let me have a crack at her!"

"No more violence here today." Anno drew back and folded his arms over his chest. One didn't have to be a mage to recognize a dark soul. Even fighting for breath, that one lusted after his Edge's blood. "Did you damage her leg?"

"Hurt her? Ha!" he jeered at Edge. "Got you, didn't I? Here, you a mage?" He eyeballed Anno's dark robes. "Y'are! You just look how she's got me tied up. She's gone and assaulted one of the king's men! Isn't that a hanging crime? Well? You going to stand there and gawk all day, or get to upholding the law? Cut me free and let's cut us a rope!"

Never a mention of his friend's near-fatal wound, Anno noted, and if he thought he'd a chance of being cut free, he was madder than first impression led one to believe. "I believe that abusing an intelligent animal is also a hanging offense," he said mildly and hoped Edge wouldn't take offense. "So we come to an impasse."

"On her side, are you?" The bravo threshed again at his bonds, snarling curses on mage and Catkin.

"That's no good, you know," Anno chided. "You'll only strangle yourself. Why not calm down and let me hear your side of the story? She's offered to let you speak for yourself, and I'll grant that if you wish it."

"Well, cut my neck loose, at least," the man spat. "Can't half talk with this thing on me!"

Edge gave her head the slightest of shakes.

"Perhaps later," Anno allowed. "Start talking, first. Then we'll see."

The man shut his mouth with a sulky snap.

"What's your name?" Anno asked. "That's easy enough. What brought you here, to Kirree-on-Sea? Be warned that I won't even think of untying you unless you give me a reason."

The man breathed stertorously for a moment, then spat on the floor. "I'm called Brach," he ground out. "Come with Lady Ione from Amahpre, to be her guard while she's exiled."

"And your friend?"

"Chirre? He's not my friend! Just another one of Ione's toady boys. Come to be her val-lay, *he* says. He's got other plans, but I don't plan on talking about those."

"I haven't asked you to. But haven't you noticed he's badly hurt?"

Brach twisted around to look at his companion. "Scratches," he shrugged them off. "Throat wounds bleed heavy."

Anno tightened his lips. "How was he hurt?"

"That cat!" Brach's eyes brightened. "Hey, you going to hang her for that? There's a reason, hey?"

Edge hissed at him, showing all her teeth.

Anno waved his hand. "I'll pass no judgment before the whole case is heard. The day grows short, and so does my patience. Speak clearly, plainly, and tell me what's brought you here today, or I'll finish you off just from general principle. Speak! Why have you come to the tomb?"

Brach's eyes shifted. "Didn't come here on my own account, did I? I was asleep in my bed, and this crazy old hag and cat jumped me, no warning. They drug me down here."

“Mmm.” Anno studied Chirre. “And you make a habit of sleeping fully dressed, with your shoes on?”

“I --”

“You’re telling me that they dragged you from your bed, but allowed you the chance to dress and button your boots? Do you expect me to believe that?”

Brach’s eyes glinted with confusion. He covered it with anger. “I said what I said! Who you gonna believe -- a dumb cat and a crazy old hag, or a king’s man? That’s what it comes to. I reckon Paedro won’t be happy hearin’ about this.”

Edge abruptly extended one arm and placed her paw, claws extended, over Brach’s mouth. His face twitched with sudden fear, and he went silent. “Ssssh,” she hissed. “Enough.”

She glanced at Anno in scorn. “This one dances with words all day if you do not say no. I tell you what and why and how; then you question them. Agreed?”

Anno studied her. Edge as he knew her was one creature. Yet all knew that as a race the Catkin were notorious liars out of the sense that truth was what you wished to make of it.

Her tail twitched irritably. “My oath,” she snapped. “When have I played you false? I tell no one you were hidden in cellar, not ever. I speak truth now. Believe me or don’t.”

Anno hesitated -- then made up his mind. There were ways and ways to weigh the truth of what she said, and he had his own suspicions about the pair of men. “Go on, then, young Edge.” He folded his arms inside his sleeves as might a Brother of Justice. “Tell me what they’ve done.”

“You gotta be joking!” Brach roared. “She’s a liar!”

“And so are you, thinking I’d believe you slept with your marching boots on,” Anno returned with disdain. “Edge?”

The Catkin coiled her tail around her good leg. “Treason,” she said simply. “These two make treason against Paedro. Blasphemy, too. They come to grave wall, speak foul words, make mock of haunts, then laugh and brag about treason, thinking no one hears. But I hear it all.”

“Where were you?”

She blinked at him. “In,” she said, gesturing around her with a tilt of the head.

“Why?” When she made no answer, he pressed gently. “Laws forbid anyone to come in here except the dead and mages to lay them to rest, Edge. Surely you know that.”

She made a slight moue of distaste. “No blasphemy to do good,” she pointed out. “I come for her, to give her food and body warm for night time.”

Anno glanced at his sister, rocking slightly on her haunches. She looked back with bleary eyes and nodded. “Mad can stay in tombs,” Edge reminded him, her voice silky. “Dead, mages, madmen. Check your law.”

He put a hand over his mouth to conceal the start of a rueful smile. *Never try to outwit a Cat.* “Very well,” he said, schooling his face back into sobriety. “Go on.”

There was nothing in the world to compare with a Catkin’s smile for the ability to unnerve. She bestowed a particularly generous grin on Brach before she went on. “They plan to ruin wedding morning, slander Rose, insult Lorn chieftain, crumble stronghold. This one -” She nudged Brach with a scornful claw. “He says he takes one hundred silver angels from Ione to do it.”

Anno’s eyes flickered. One hundred? It was a king’s ransom in coin. He leaned forward to Brach. “If you don’t mind?” He rummaged with his long, skillful hands through the man’s pockets, ignoring his spluttered curses and jerking about. He found the bulky leather bag in the inner pocket of his jerkin, a huge lump under his clothes like a cancerous growth.

Anno weighed the bag in his hand and frowned. Far too light for a hundred silver angels. He undid the drawstring and tilted it a little, stirring the contents with one lean finger.

He laughed. “You didn’t look in here, did you?” He scooped out a handful and held the coins out. One silver angelus and a dozen clipped coppers. “You’ve been cheated, boy. Did you think to trust a double-crosser?”

Over Brach’s anguished wail, he tucked the bag into his robe. “Is there more, Edge?”

“Much more.” She leaned forward on one foreleg and favored him with a bit of her toothy smile. “I have told you what. Now I tell you how and why.

“Ione hates Paedro for what he did. Exiled her. Yes? So she says, I will do him harm. Not care how many else she hurt to get to him. So she and these, they plan. Paedro is friend - loyalty, he cares for nothing else so much. He thinks Lorn is friend; trusts him.

“They make it seem that Lorn is enemy by making marriage deal look a cheat. Trick Paedro into thinking Rose is whore.” Edge’s lips curled back over her teeth, and her tail lashed in anger. “*He* force mating on Mims!”

Anger washed over Anno in a mighty wave. He whirled on Brach to see the soldier cringe in a clear admission of guilt. “Do you mean rape?” he demanded, eyes ablaze.

He took the bravo by a handful of bindings and twisted them tight. “Do you know what the penalty is?” he ground out into Brach’s face. From the man’s look of terror, he was either well aware of it, or had a vivid imagination. “I swear I will see it done myself. Edge, go on!”

“Gladly,” Edge purred. “Quiet one takes Paedro and Cloud to see it from below; they think she is Rose. They laugh about this and say, what fools they are, they will call Rose down as a whore and make stronghold fall under weight of lies.”

She pricked her ears back. “But I hear all this, and I pounce! Take them hostage. Send Berry to warn Lorn what goes and stop wedding.”

She looked at him in eager expectation. “So he has done? He sent you?”

Anno would have given his newfound freedom to say yes ... but he could not and closed his eyes for grief. Edge needed no more answer. She hackled and loosed a vicious snarl that blanched Brach fish-belly white and sent him cringing back against the wall.

Berry whimpered in alarm. "I spoke to someone," she insisted. "They said they'd send him. They did!"

Every hair on Edge's back bristled high with rage. She lashed out and sank her claws deep into a pile of rags. They tore with a wet sound like the rending of flesh. She hurled the tattered streamers in the air. "Wedding went on!" she wailed in accusation. "Happened just as they said! Failed, failed!"

Anno swallowed. "It did." Whoever Berry had spoken to, they wouldn't have understood the import of her task. Who would listen to a madwoman? But he, the master-mage, should have known, somehow -- should have seen more clearly. *Blind, blind!*

He rubbed his forehead. "Cloud accused Rose of being a harlot and cast her aside, neither maiden, wife, nor widow," he said softly. "He made his claim at the best -- the worst -- time, with Rose already wed to him, and he not yet wed to her. He might have gone free, but she would have been bound forever."

Edge drew up short in her attack on another bundle of cloth. "Would have been? You say *would*. What *is*?"

Anno cut a quick look at the soldiers, then at Edge. He made his choice, praying that she would understand and forgive him later. "Rose is dead, little Catkin."

Edge began to growl, a frantic rasp in and out. "Not so!"

"It is so." He put a hand on her and felt her tremble in the wind. His hair fell forward to cover his face and shield it from the prisoners. She seemed so heartbroken that he dared to wink at her. She stared back, dazed with grief, yet a light dawned deep in there -- he was sure of it.

He stood up and plunged ahead. "She died of shock and shame. Shame that I see now was unjustly levied at the hands of these two scoundrels and at the command of the prince's aunt. Oh, I see it all now."

Brach quivered in panic. "That don't mean anything!" he shouted, desperate to save his own skin. "You ask Ione. She'll tell you the truth."

"If we could find Ione," Anno returned. He had not seen or heard of her that day. Had anyone else? He thought not. Even as he spoke, he felt the conviction that he spoke truth. "She's fled from Kirree-on-Sea, or escaped, as you prefer, but she's left you two to take her blows. Without a moment's regret or a second thought, she has abandoned you."

Brach's face went blank with the dumb shock of the stupid. "She can't have done," he faltered. "We done what she said. She promised she'd take care of us."

"The more fool you for putting your trust in one you knew was a traitor," Anno scoffed. "But you!" He nudged the smaller man with the toe of his boot.

Chirre made no sign that he'd heard. His eyes had opened and fixed, unblinking, on the tiny window slit above the grave barrows.

"Awake now, yes, and awake all this time, I've no doubt, though I've not heard a word out of you. Not even a request for bandages." Despite himself, Anno found he'd grown concerned about the smaller man. "You have nothing to say in your defense?"

Chirre lifted one hand and felt at his neck wounds. After a long moment, he shook his head and said nothing.

"Thinks he's Ione's lover," Brach jeered. "Got your heart broke, Chirre? Good! Good! I hope you get your neck bones broke, too! I hope when I dangle on a rope, you dangle right alongside me!"

"Hold your tongue!" Anno put his hand out with a sharp snap. "You've confessed, Brach; and Chirre, your silence is your answer."

Anno drew the hood of his cloak over his head. "The evidence is heard and confirmed. Judgment is rendered. You'll go now before the chieftain of Kirree-on-Sea for a sentence."

Edge nodded and hissed long and low, satisfied. "Good!" She made to stand up, but gave another pained mewl when her injured leg touched the flagstones, a meow that became a wowl of anguish when it gave way and she collapsed.

Anno was at her side in a heartbeat. He put his hands to certain points on her body and pressed on the nerves that would ease her pain. "Rest easy," he soothed. "We'll take you back to the stronghold and see you mended. You've done the best night's work of your life, little Catkin."

He straightened. "Berry?"

His sister scurried to his side. She whimpered anxiously and tugged at his sleeve. "I thought they'd come," she pleaded, begging him to understand. "They said they'd come."

"I know." He smoothed a straggling gray hair away from her worried face. "You're not to blame in this, Berry. I need your help now. Will you give it?"

She nodded eagerly. "I can help herd the two bound men back to the stronghold. Only, not inside. Can I do that?"

"Perfect, sister." He tugged at the gray wisp of her hair, as he'd done when they were children and her curls were red, and earned a smile from her ruined lips. "We'll begin by wrestling these oxen to their feet."

"You'll follow me," he warned them, "and you'll follow close, without a struggle. Do you understand?"

Brach spat at him. Anno narrowed his eyes into slits. "Show your bravado while you can. Your punishment comes on quick wings, and it will not be a pleasant one. The chieftain is most upset about his daughter's ... ruin. Do you understand me?" He bared his teeth. "And should he be kind, I have the right to demand you next, and I will not be gentle in the least! Berry, are you ready?"

His sister nodded. She'd bent and gathered up an armful of leading reins. "They won't get away." From the look of the sturdy, wiry muscles in her arms, he had no doubt that they would not.

He bent and scooped up the Catkin gently as he might, easing her onto his back. Her pointed chin nestled into the crook of his neck. "Little love, are you comfortable?" he whispered for her ears only.

Her eyes slitted open. "You dare ask that?" she mumbled. "You owe me much, Anno."

He dared to caress the soft curve of her cheek. "And I shall pay, little wildling," he said quietly. But that would be for later. First -- most important -- they would see justice done. "To Lorn!" he commanded and flung open the door of the tomb.

Chapter Seven

Lorn sat on the terrace, his old bones hunched up on the astrologer's table, soaking up the last drops of twilight as it faded. On both hands, he was counting all his cronies who'd shown up for the ritual that morning. Dozens, all old men like him. Older than men might expect to live and still be hale as they.

Good times we've had, he thought, wistful-like. *What with Anno and then Tirsah's maging making Kirree such a fine place to live. Have had it better than my father or any of my father's fathers, so we have.* They hadn't lost a single sailor for years. Fish near leaped into their nets, and lobsters crawled into pots of their own will. Not only had they good, sturdy storage barns; they'd filled them to the rafters with potatoes and golden grain. Women bore child after child, and all lived. No one feared winter anymore.

Even with his girl Rose to have been married and gone, he'd still figured on a pleasant season of snows. And soon's spring came on, might have been a grandchild on the way.

Bah! He struck his knee. Useless to think on it. Wouldn't be any good news a-coming. More like armed soldiers on the march from Amahpre, pikes ready just in case the old man put up a fight. Making sure Kirree-on-Sea went down quiet.

The last drops of twilight vanished. Days drew short now, close to winter, but it seemed that particular day had gone faster than it ought. Was it only that morning that things had come crashing down? Hard to believe.

"So here's where I find you," Tirsah's soft, warm voice said behind him.

"Ohe, you." He jerked his head. Anyone else, he'd have minded their intrusion in his quiet time, but Tirsah -- well, she had a good way of comforting the bereaved, somehow, and though she could be a thorn in his side, they knew each other's ways.

"Sailed away on the dreamers' boat, had you, Uncle?"

"Daft wench." He thumped the table beside him. "Sit by a lonely old salt for a bit."

"I might dare it." She flung herself down carelessly as a child and swung her heels. "Ohe! That stone's not half cold. I daresay the old philosophers who built these star-charting tables would have spitting fits if they saw us using them in this fashion."

"Old things have seen worse," Lorn grunted. He'd other things on his mind. "My daughter?" he blurted. "How's she keeping?"

"Asleep for now. Beyond that ..." Tirsah stretched out her arms. "Who knows, Uncle?"

"And the others? Saw Benec go down to the village. Has he been ... eh ..."

Tirsah took her uncle's weathered hand in her own. "He's been down there all day," she said gently, "spreading the word that Rose is dead. He's working the villagers around to remember how good and pretty and kind she is -- was."

Lorn tore his hand from hers. "What next?" he spat. "Anno had better have something planned. Else what's to become of my girl?"

Tirsah stuck out her jaw. "Father's never steered us wrong, not when he's out and well. He's got something hidden up his cloak sleeves. I'm sure of it."

"He had better." Lorn glared at his hands. "Know what I spent my day with? Do you? Cut down scrub trees and made a bier for my daughter. My only child, who's still alive. Ohe, *Rose!*"

Tirsah patted his back, thumping with her small fists. "Lorn, Lorn!" she crooned. "It'll be well. Don't take on so."

"Ohe, brat, how *can* it be well?"

"Trust Father. And if he doesn't come through, well, then I'll go after those hot-headed rascalions with Sela's best iron fry pan!"

Lorn laughed despite himself.

"Do you think I'm joking?" Tirsah gave him a tip-tilted grin. "You just watch, Uncle, for here's a prophecy from the lady mage: A little longer, and the tide will turn. Wait and see."

* * * * *

As it fell toward the horizon, the sun took the ocean with it. She couldn't let that happen. She had to keep the water high in her little cove. Had to get clean before night, when the moon would come out to see her shame.

Lift the sponge and bring it down. Up and down, up and down. Mims set her teeth to keep herself from screaming as she dragged the rough sponge across her face for what felt like the hundredth time. In truth, she'd lost count. Scrub and scrub some more. Her legs and arms were raw, and she'd washed her secret places until they bled. She still didn't feel clean. Couldn't get clean. Could still taste blood, and the bitter tang of the coin *he'd* pushed between her teeth.

Whore, whore, she cursed herself as salty ocean waves crashed in and flowed out between her thighs. The shift she wore, stained with old blood and new, floated and sank in the water like a drowned maiden. *It's nearly night! They'll be looking for me -- I have to get clean --*

"Mims?"

She shrieked and dropped her sponge into the water. A man's voice -- was it him, coming back for her? Had he found her out? Freezing wet hair slapped her in the face as she turned about, frantically hunting out the speaker. She had to claw the salty locks from her eyes. When she finally laid eyes on him who'd spoken, she let out another scream and sank into a crouch beneath the water.

The man stared, then turned his head hastily aside and gestured for the younger one to do the same, though there was no need. The lad had turned red as lobsters and whipped about to face the cliff.

"Where have you been to get yourself so dirty that you need that sort of a wash? Don't be afraid -- you're covered," the man said coaxingly.

The water bobbed around Mims's chin. "Please," she said, her voice wobbling. "Please leave. Can't a body take a bath without an audience?"

"It wasn't our wish to offend." The lad shook his rough carry-net at her. "We were only looking for shellfish."

Mims stared at them, baffled, and slowly growing angry. Now her muzzy brain recalled -- they were the ones who had good as killed her cousin that morning. Men! Vicious as boars, and just as good at rutting!

"I wouldn't give you fire if you were freezing to death," she spat with all the hatred in her heart. "You were raised here; you should know that if you want shellfish, there won't be any on the shore until morning." Mims struck the surface of the water with the flats of her hands, splashing them with icy salt water. "What do you want from me? Do you think I'm a slut, too, to watch if you like or don't like?"

"I haven't even looked at you since we came upon you. I told you, I didn't wish to offend," Paedro said.

"Be that as it may, you've offended! Go away! Go away; let me alone!" Mims sank up to her eyes into the cold water.

"Just as you like, then. Cloud, come!"

Wary, Mims stared after them until they were halfway up the rock steps. Were they truly gone? At last, she could fumble for her sponge, but -- too late! The tide had washed it out. She'd never find it again. Her fingers touched nothing but sand.

And so she wept, burying first her face and her hands, then her head in the water. Then there was dark, only the sweet dark ...

* * * * *

Cloud stumped after Paedro. Bitter cold and hunger gnawed at his innards. Yet just up the cliff, warm lights burned in the windows of the chieftain's keep.

"I'm sorry," the prince muttered. "I'd thought there was a chance of gathering food. When we attack, we'll make sure to provision ourselves."

Cloud shook his head. "The cold, Paedro. We'll not survive once true night falls."

Paedro paused one step above and turned to face him. "And what?" he asked, weary. "Should we demand that Lorn shelter us? We don't even know what they've done to Ione. She should have come back to us before noon, but here it is night time and where is she? Taken, no doubt. We don't dare go in until we have sword in hand."

"As if they'd let us in. And did I suggest it?" Cloud rubbed his fingers against his eyes. "Back to the bothy, Paedro," he said softly. "If we freeze, then we freeze."

He saw the prince's look and knew what it signified. "Such loyalty," Paedro said, roughly thumping Cloud's shoulder in commiseration. "If they hadn't betrayed us so, you'd have a woman's soft arms to lie in tonight instead of filthy goat's straw. We'll have our justice, and that soon, Cloud, I promise."

"Come on, then." Paedro jerked his head to a side. "Up the steps and past the stronghold, and to our own 'palace.' We'll walk together."

Cloud fell into step next to him. "Past the stronghold," he murmured darkly. "I've no stomach to meet with any of them tonight. Go quietly, Paedro, to escape their notice. We're nearly there."

"For your sake, Cloud. I will."

* * * * *

"Hsst! Do you hear that?" Tirsah stiffened like a hound at the sound of the hare, every hackle raised. "Listen!"

"Nothing there, bratkin."

"Quiet, you old goat!" The diminutive mage bent her head and strained to hear over the rolling roar of the ocean. "There!" she exclaimed. "Tell me, who do you hear coming up from the beach?"

Lorn listened, then swore. "Be hanged! Paedro and Cloud!"

Tirsah kicked the table. "Those little lumps of goat shit! Didn't you tell them to stay out of the stronghold? And they come marching up to it bold as brass!"

"Already thinking we won't put up a fight, eh?" Lorn surmised. He glanced at his niece.

She folded her hands prim as any court lady and grinned savagely. "Why not teach them otherwise? Best they learn that these dogs still have teeth to bite with."

Lorn thumped his knee hard. "Comes to the same end, I reckon. Take a chunk out of 'em, Scrap."

"Just you watch me."

"But Tirsah -- goat shit?"

"Can you think of a better description? I was being polite," she said virtuously. "There! I saw Paedro's cloak. They're on the final turning. Oh, I plan to enjoy this. Count it with me, Uncle: three -- two -- one."

The men spoke to each other in quick, low-pitched voices as they mounted the top of the steps and did not, at first, catch sight of the two on the table until Tirsah coughed.

Paedro's head swung around in search of the noise. When his eyes lit on the two of them, he froze and stared. His sudden stop alerted Cloud. The boy's lips parted in dismay. "Lorn?"

It was obvious that Paedro only recovered himself with an effort. "By the Lady! What are you doing here? Trying to frighten us with children's tricks?"

"Why're you climbing where you've been ordered out? Playing children's games of hide-go-seek?" Lorn demanded. "And you, *boy*? Mouth hanging open like that, for shame. What're you supposed to be? A frog?"

"Ohe, yes! Shut your gums before you catch flies. Or aren't you hungry enough for that yet?" Tirsah smiled sweetly at them. "You should've seen what Sela laid out for the wedding feast. Minced lobster with a buttery sauce and pine-smoked salmon. Orange-clove cakelets. Loaves hot from the bake-oven and cheese smooth as velvet. Honeycombs and sugared rose petals. She'd even prepared a subtlety made of sweet almond paste."

Cloud's stomach growled. An embarrassed flush stained both men's faces.

Tirsah's eyes sparkled with malice. "We'd intended a feast for a king, but, ohe!" She turned her hand palm down. "It all had to be thrown away or burned, of course. It's bad luck to keep a wedding feast when there's no wedding. But cheer up! Perhaps you can fish some flounder bones out of the ashes and have that for your dinner. You've not had a bite today, now, have you?"

Paedro's face worked strangely. "You know we haven't. I sent my aunt for food. What have you done with Ione?" he rasped. "If you've laid one finger on her gown --"

Tirsah scoffed at them. "That nasty piece of work? Gown and lady, both foul as crows. I wouldn't touch her if you paid me, and I haven't seen her since yester night. Uncle?"

"Nor I." Lorn stood and squared his hands on his hips. He gave Paedro a disgusted once-over. "Raised you, did she? It shows, man."

Paedro went white to the lips with rage. "You're old," he choked. "If you tell me now, I'll show pity."

“Pity?” Tirsah spat. “There’s that for your pity!” Before Lorn could stop her, even if he’d been inclined to, she snatched up a double handful of sand and flung it into Paedro’s eyes. “And that!”

Paedro covered his eyes with his arm and scrambled back, roaring.

“Lorn!” Cloud yelped, panicked. He made a futile grab at the wiry mage and got kicked for his pains. “Call her off!”

“Ha!” Tirsah spat at the prince, breathing hard. “Show me pity, will you? I’m a mage, above the law, and what’s more, I’m an islander. My loyalty’s to the chieftain if to any mortal man, and never to you, outlander!”

Paedro lowered his arm warily and glared at her. “That will change,” he warned. “I’ll find my aunt, wherever you’ve chained or sent her. Don’t think I won’t find you out.”

“Can you believe this?” Tirsah asked the heavens in disbelief. “He adds insult to injury like cherries to cream. More luck to you! I haven’t seen your aunt, but I’m lucky enough to see you for the first time since you ran from the ritual like a baby from a bugaboo, and we’ll have it out, if you’re brave enough.”

“I’ve heard and said all I intend, girl.” Paedro jerked at his cloak. “Get out of my way before I forget myself.”

“Oh, fancy, fancy,” Tirsah jeered. “Hurrying back to your stinking bothy? Rushing back to a dinner of straw? Well, that’s fit enough for a pair of donkeys.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “It’s a fine prince you are! How’ll you like it when this little story comes riding into the King’s City on the lips of every minstrel I can pay to tell it?”

White dents flared on either side of Paedro’s nose. “You’ll do no such thing. Not if I have to put a scold’s bridle on you myself.”

“Just you try it!”

“Woman, don’t tempt me,” Paedro growled. “And move aside.”

“Make me, if you dare!” she challenged.

“We’re in a hurry,” Cloud said softly. “Please.”

Lorn rolled his eyes. “In a hurry, in a hurry,” he snorted. “Awful hurried to be wed. Rushed just as hard to get unwed. Don’t you know your own mind, boy?”

“He knows it better than you know your own daughter,” Paedro fired back. “We’ve no time to waste on arguing.”

Lorn’s eyes darkened. He spat on the flagstones. “I *knew* my daughter pretty well, I’d say. Give me my choice on it, you’d be on your way to joining her.”

Cloud pulled up short, hands on hips. “What new trick is this?”

“Aha, aha!” Tirsah jabbed her finger at Cloud. “Did you see that? He’s going for his knife!”

“Threaten me, will you?” Lorn bristled.

Cloud's eyes widened. "Truly, I didn't!"

"Planning on another murder, I'll wager, but I'll have that, if you please!" Tirsah made a lucky grab and snatched the bronze dagger Cloud had been so proud of.

"That's my knife!" Cloud made a futile lunge for it. "I was nowhere near the thing!"

"Neither will you be," Tirsah promised grimly as she tucked the blade into her kirtle. "Not unless you knock me down to get it. You don't think much about hurting ladies, though, do you? With the sharp of your tongue or the flat of your hand?"

That dart went home. Cloud swallowed hard and spread his hands, obviously struggling for words.

"Leave it." Paedro shoved him back. "They're trying to bait you. They're too weak for any other weapons."

"Weak? Try me, dog!" Tirsah slapped the unwary Cloud across the face with the full flat of her palm, hard enough to leave a livid handprint on his white cheek. "I could rub your whey-faced carcass into the dirt without half trying."

Paedro thrust himself in front of Cloud as a shield. "Control your mage, Lorn," he warned.

Lorn rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He laid a hand on Tirsah's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "No," he said after a moment. "Don't think I will."

The lady mage laughed gleefully and folded her arms across her chest to gloat at the prince and Cloud. "No, I've a mind to be calm now," she said with deceptive sweetness. "It's just occurred to me. I'll wager my best herbal they don't know."

Lorn bared his teeth. "Wager they don't. Didn't put myself out to go and tell them, did I?"

"Nor I." She glared at the men. "Brave, are you? You think you can scare the world, yet you don't count on the ways of women, do you?"

She held out her closed fist. "I've got something here that could stop your hearts. Would you care to find out what it is?" She flashed her fingers open and closed. "How brave are you now?"

Paedro's eyes flicked to her hand despite himself. He'd caught a glimpse of something odd closed within her fingers. "What's this nonsense?"

"Nonsense?" She gave them another half-second's peek at what she held. "Have a look, then." When he hesitated, she near laughed him to scorn. "A big, bad soldier, are you? Are you frightened of a little girl's toy?"

"No," Paedro retorted flatly -- yet he had to lick at lips gone suddenly dry. He glanced at Cloud and grew instantly alarmed at the look on his friend's face. Had he recognized what Tirsah held? He'd almost seen what it was himself ...

"Show us, then," he ordered, pulling his chin up.

Tirsah's smile near chilled Paedro's blood. "As my lord wishes," she mocked. "But remember, you asked for it. You asked for all of it."

Slow and deliberate, her fingers uncurled and she thrust her palm out at them. Cloud choked and turned his head hastily away. Paedro swallowed.

The mage held out a delicately braided strand of hair, cut away close from its owner's scalp. It uncoiled and spilled out over her hand, trailing nearly to the ground. A slender braid of deep auburn red, woven through with a glinting thread of beaten silver. A life-lock, cut from its owner when that person died.

Murder, Tirsah had said. Her meaning sank in now.

"Rose's?" Paedro asked hoarsely.

"No one else's." She tossed it at Cloud with a flick of the wrist. It fell, lifeless, to curl at his feet.

He stared at it. "How?" His voice shook.

"Idiot." Tirsah glowered. "What do you think? The pair of you killed the one I loved better than a sister! She died of her broken heart this afternoon. How do you like your justice now?"

"We had proof!" Cloud cried out.

"What proof?"

"The proof of our own eyes!"

"Your own eyes? Your trust in a sight seen in the dark, in a stronghold not familiar to you? Did you even think to ask her the truth? Did you find the man and ask him?"

"Ione --" Paedro protested.

"Ione's your aunt. Not the prince you're so proud of claiming t'be." Lorn crossed his arms on his chest and stared at them. "I be chieftain here, at least for now, and I judge you were in the wrong on this. You've given us mortal insult." He raised one wiry arm and struck Paedro across the face with all of his strength.

Blood poured from the prince's broken nose. While he choked and struggled for breath, Lorn stepped back passively.

Paedro wiped blood from his lips. "You know what you've done here, old man?" he asked, voice strangled.

"Ohe, aye. And now, you know what you did this morn." Lorn beckoned for Tirsah. "Come on, brat, back into the stronghold for a warm night's sleep on a full belly. We'll be seeing you again, and that soon, Paedro. Make ready."

The chieftain deliberately turned his back on Paedro, leading Tirsah away in stony silence. They left behind them only the echoes of their words, the blood that streamed down Paedro's chin, and a fragile, silver-woven braid draped over Cloud's black boots.

The boy knelt and picked it up, balancing it across his palms. "It's light," he murmured. "So light. Not even the silver thread gives it any weight."

Paedro's hand fell on Cloud's shoulder, leaving a gory handprint on the leather. He wiped impatiently at his face and cursed aloud as he bumped his broken nose.

Cloud gave him a blank look and held up the braid, as if questioning its existence.

"Leave it," Paedro ordered. "Don't you understand? Lorn's declared war on us. We must get in there *now* and find Ione! Cloud, do you hear me? Cloud!"

* * * * *

Just past the corner, Lorn leaned against the wall and listened intently. His heart beat fierce enough to feel it hammer against his ribs.

Tirsah, on the other hand, preened, as distinctly satisfied as a kitten nose-deep in a cream pan. "Don't fret," she insisted. "Now if we haven't given them something to think about!"

Lorn shook his head. "It's not that. Didn't know you'd cut her life-lock."

She gave him a wicked smile. "I didn't. I snipped a strand from the back of her head and wove it together with a bit of embroidery wool. They don't know that, though, do they?"

"Devil woman!"

"Never underestimate a lady, Uncle." She peeked around the corner again. "Look at them. 'Twas just what they needed. Now they know what they've done. No, Lorn, don't fret yourself. I know it'll be right."

She cocked her head. "My ears are sharp tonight. Listen there -- that's Benec's step, coming up the shell walk."

Lorn glanced out to see the lanky man approaching. Well, well. "He'll add a bit of fuel, think you?"

"He had better. Hush now, and let me listen."

* * * * *

Paedro tugged at Cloud's shoulder, trying to wake him from his daze. Easier to shift a wet sandbag! He sank into a crouch, his face bare inches from his friend's, and shouted into his ear. "We must move, Cloud!"

The boy shook his head slowly.

"Listen to me!" He gave Cloud a rough shake. "We did what we had to do. Ione told me it was so. We agreed on it. All three of us."

Cloud frowned. His gaze drifted away from Paedro.

The prince shook him again. "Not for my sake, Cloud, but for your own we must move! We have to find Ione. She was right; we must make for Amahpre as soon as possible. We can raise a fighting squad and come back to do things properly, but if it's just us against a stronghold and a mage -- two mages -- no, wait, we need Benec! Where's Benec?"

A tuneless humming filled the air, along with the heavy sound of wet boots slapping onto the flagstones.

"Here, maybe." Benec appeared out of the lowering evening fog and leaned against the wall of the stronghold. He tilted his head to one side and gave them an unreadable look. "Depends on who's asking."

"Benec!" Paedro gave Cloud one last futile shake, then gave it up. He made for his brother-in-arms in relief. "I'm that glad to see you, man. I'd have gone out to look for you in a moment."

"You might have tried the village. I've been there since forenoon." Benec ignored the prince's outstretched hand to drag his forearm across his face. His short, spiky hair and the rough shadow of beard on his cheeks were wet with chilled sweat. He gave Paedro another odd look. "Where did you think I'd be?"

"I'd thought --"

"That's a novel idea. Thinking. You should try it more often."

"What ails you?" Paedro asked flatly.

Benec shrugged and toyed with the wheat-colored life-lock that dangled oddly free from the rest of his shorn hair. "Nothing of import to you, I wouldn't think."

"I suppose you saw that?" Paedro demanded, pointing after Lorn and Tirsah. "He's declared war on us!"

"You, not us. And has he? Good for him, then."

Paedro spluttered. He gestured at his bloody face. "Look how they've insulted us! And, yes, I say us! Are you my man or not?"

Benec yawned without covering his mouth. "Not. You've freed me from city service, if you'll recall." He raised an eyebrow in wry amusement over Paedro's expression. "Besides which, you, I'd never be friend nor fighting man for an auntie's boy. If you can't eat what you dish out, better not complain."

He jerked a thumb at Cloud. "So what's wrong with the puppy, then? Not an attack of conscience? Last I checked, he'd had that delicate organ removed by a surgeon in veils."

Cloud drew his brows together, seemingly dazed and confused. "But we're still sword-brothers, aren't we?"

Benec tilted his head to the opposite side. "Would you look at that? It speaks. Go and tell it that I'm no brother to anyone faithless as the weather."

"Not even friends? I said I'd dance at your wedding."

"By the Lady, I'm astonished that the word doesn't choke you." Benec pushed away from the wall and stalked toward the crouching boy. "I'll dance on your grave first."

Paedro barely saw him move, yet suddenly Benec's long, strong hand had wrapped around Cloud's neck tight as a noose and yanked him from his feet. He held him just a half-inch off the ground, feet kicking as he struggled and choked.

"How do you like it?" Benec asked dangerously. "You've been up here, comfortable as you please, and I've been walking the village since forenoon. I've knocked on every door, visited every boathouse and every market stall, gone down on my knees to talk to every child, and I've told them that Rose, their lovely girl, is dead and cold and on her way to the tomb tonight."

Cloud's fingers scrabbled at Benec's hand. Benec gave him a fierce shake. "I've not done yet!" His eyes flashed. "I've talked till my throat's worn out, telling every single soul there how you accused her without evidence, without justice. How she died from the heartbreak of it." He gave a vicious laugh. "There's not a soul down in that village that doesn't hate you worse than the devil. If Lorn hadn't called it war, they'd have done it themselves."

Paedro stiffened. "Fishermen --"

"Got something against peasants now?" Benec sneered at him. "Those peasants know how to use a harpoon and a gaff better than you know that oversized pen-knife you call a sword. They've brought in whales without losing a man in the chase. How do you think they'll manage against one scrawny boy and a puffed-up frog? Rose might be dead, but you won't be long following her. I'll be happy leaving the fates to judge you both with as high a hand as you used on that innocent lady."

With a twist of the fingers, Benec dropped Cloud easily as though the younger man were a small-cat. He fell in a clatter of limbs onto the stones, the breath knocked out of him.

Benec wiped his hand along the line of his trousers as if he'd dirtied it. "Don't worry, though, lads -- I made them promise to let me have first chance at you." He cracked a malicious grin. "If you don't turn tail and run, I'll be seeing you on the shore at dawn, just as soon as I can chase you down there. We'll have a little scrap to find out who's in the right and who's next in the grave."

Paedro shook with fury and despair. "You're throwing in with the enemy, Benec?" he asked in a low voice. "Treason?"

"Just the opposite, I'd say." Benec turned with an insolent shrug. "Write a will, boys. And don't think to run. Good luck. Goodbye." He looked back over his shoulder. "Or follow me now, if you want. It's all the same to me." He laughed at the woebegone look on Cloud's stricken face and at Paedro's quaking rage. "Didn't think so."

He ambled away, humming again under his breath, casual as a Catkin. He pulled open the door of the stronghold, stood drinking in the gentle, dim glow of lamplight from within, inhaling as the scent of roasting meat escaped, and slipped inside, chuckling to himself. The door slammed behind him, as cruel as a slap to the face.

“He was serious,” Paedro gritted in impotent rage. “Cloud. Cloud! Stand up like a man! Don’t you understand, now that you’ve seen this? Cloud!”

Cloud sat back on his heels and let Rose’s red life-lock slip from his fingers. He stared at it. “Yes,” he said slowly. “I hear you.”

Paedro reached down to tug him up. Cloud clumsily obeyed as Paedro buffeted him around the shoulders to knock away the dust of his fall.

“The world’s gone mad,” Cloud whispered. “What if I lose, Paedro?”

“You won’t lose. We won’t be here for you to lose.” Paedro took him by the shoulders and pressed his fingers in deep. “We’re going to find Ione, *now*. Then we’re going back to the city. Do you understand me?”

“For what good it does us. None.” Cloud stared over Paedro’s shoulder. “Ask them where she is,” he said, white to the lips. “They probably know.”

“What?” The prince twisted around. He roared with rage. “They *dared!*”

Chirre and Brach, his aunt’s men, had come to him. Bound as prisoners. And not alone.

Chapter Eight

Chirre and Brach half walked, half stumbled forward, heads low, hair swinging into their eyes. They'd been tied and wrapped in dirty strips of cloth and were covered with sweat and grime and were bloody besides. Just behind them, a bizarre creature, long and thin-legged yet bulging out in odd places, followed close. It shoved at the men's backs with one hand and kept a tight hold on their leading ropes with the other. Beside it, something humped and bent as an ape, fluttering tattered rags, scampered crabwise along.

Paedro's hand flew to the dagger at his belt. "Benec!" he yelled, voice cracked at the edges. "*Benec!*"

"What is that?" Cloud fumbled for his lost knife. "Paedro!"

"I don't know. *Benec*, man, come back and help us!"

The solid oaken door remained shut. More, they heard the faint snick of a lock sliding home.

Cloud fell to his knees and scrabbled in vain among the tumble of debris on the terrace for a branch, a stick, even a twig. Something to defend them with.

Paedro moved slightly in front of him, his own silver knife unsheathed, at the ready. "Stay there," he warned his friend. "I carry the responsibility for your life."

"Time for that to change," the monster said, startling them. His voice was rougher than rock and smooth as velvet.

"Demon!" Paedro shouted hoarsely. He thrust out his hands in the sign against evil. "Get back! Cloud, stay put."

"No!" Cloud clutched a double handful of sand, meaning to throw it into the thing's face.

The creature tilted its head. Its own features were well hidden behind a dark cowl, but they both felt the weight of its eyes, heavy as a hand, as it examined them.

“Desperate?” it asked and laughed. Cloud’s double handful of sand flew from his fingers on a gust of wind to cascade harmlessly to earth.

The boy barked out a short, sharp curse and backed away, rubbing his hands against his thighs. Paedro raised his knife a second time and feinted at the creature with a yell to warn it off.

“What is the difference between man and beast?” the creature asked softly, not at all impressed by Paedro’s curved silver knife blade. It laughed again. “Dilly, dilly, come and be killed. I’ve been looking for you all this while.”

Paedro flipped the knife in his hand and switched to an overhand grip. “Perhaps. Who did you seek?”

“I seek that which is found. Paedro and Cloud.”

Paedro narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Who sent you?”

“Myself and no other mortal man.”

Cloud shook his head. “There are plenty of creatures in the world beside mortal man,” he said. “Who sent you? What do you want from us?”

“All these questions about me,” the creature observed with another laugh, an unpleasant one, “and not a word about my prisoners here? Aren’t they your own men?”

Paedro felt himself flush a dark red.

“Has a cat stolen your tongue?” the creature mocked. “Tsk, tsk. If you want so much to know who I am, why then, here!”

He bent and deposited something on the flagstones. It wobbled grotesquely and slid loose into a heap, then put forth arms and legs and struggled to stand, clumsy as a newborn foal. The creature’s companion bobbed anxiously around the imp, tugging and pulling uselessly at its unsteady limbs.

Paedro’s gorge rose sharp and acrid in his throat. “What are you?”

“Wrong question! And here, turn for turn, is what I’ll put to you -- but will you listen?”

“And if we say no?”

The prince’s blade buckled and crumbled to ash in his hand.

“Perhaps you’ll think better of it,” the creature said mildly. “What, you still don’t know me?”

“It’s dark,” Paedro snapped. “Your face is hidden. How could I know you?”

“Hmm. What was dead is alive; what lived is near death,” the creature murmured. “Ohe! Have a hint, free of charge.”

It waved its hand in a gentle circle above the carpet of sand and debris on the flagstones. Dragged by some invisible force, a patch of detritus drew together in a small,

perfect circle with a ring of bare stones surrounding it. When the last bit fluttered into place, the whole of it burst into flame, burning higher and hotter than any clump of bracken could have possibly done. The light it cast was clearer and stronger than lamp or torch and showed the creature for what it was at last.

A man, only a man, taller than either Cloud or Paedro, yet shorter than Benec. Two companions hid behind his voluminous, shabby black mage's cloak. It had been made for a far heavier person, while he was thin as a lathe, but he wore the thing as if he'd been born to it. Dark and lean, he gave the impression of a starved panther stalking its prey.

"Magery!" Cloud blurted.

"Astonishing. It thinks," the creature observed, voice dry.

"Anno," Paedro breathed. A far different Anno from the weakened, wasted creature they'd seen that morning in the arbor. Anno, a mage in all his power.

He grinned at them, his white skin reflecting back the moonlight. "Good evening, my princes of fools."

Paedro's face blazed with the light of a fanatic. "The master-mage, pretending to be dead all this time. In hiding. When we could have used you. Where? Where did you tuck yourself away?" He stopped short. "That's where they'll have Ione," he murmured as if to himself. He seized Anno's robe by the collar, fists shaking. "Tell me! Where is she?"

Anno plucked Paedro's hands away easily as bits of spiderweb. A narrow face poked out from behind the mage, a golden face with vast, slanted cat eyes. It hissed at the prince and displayed a muzzle full of sharp teeth.

Cloud drew back. "The Catkin?"

"A friend of mine," Anno allowed. He smoothed his hand across the top of her skull as she slunk forward, her normal easy grace marred by an ugly limp.

Their third, the hunched apparition, huddled behind his mage's robe still, whimpering. Anno clucked soothingly at it. "Be easy," he said in a low voice. "Our friend is shy of too much company, but, Cloud, perhaps you remember Berry?"

The boy bit off a startled curse. "I see you do," Anno said. "As I recall, you look a bit like Hanri did; you were a particular favorite of hers in your youth. Odd that you didn't recognize her right away."

Cloud shook his head. "It's been more than ten years," he protested. "I didn't know her that well."

"Hmmm." Anno pressed his lips together. "How well, then, do you know this Chirre and this Brach? Why so little concern for their welfare?"

Paedro and Cloud flinched in surprise. They'd nearly forgotten the two men, so silent and still. They hadn't reacted to the sound of their names, not to the flicker of an eyelash.

Paedro waved his hand in front of Chirre's face and got a blank, unseeing stare into the distance for his pains. "Have you mage-worked them?"

“Not a bit of it. I expect they just don’t feel like saying anything at the moment.” Anno put one hand under Brach’s chin and lifted it high to peer into the man’s eyes. The bravo gave the mage one quick, hate-filled glare before he stared, determined, off to the south.

Anno withdrew his hand. “Tell me, Paedro. What do you think these two have done? Do you know?”

A muscle worked in Paedro’s jaw. “No. They’re Ione’s men. They follow her. She chose them from her manor staff.”

“Ah, yes, the aunt you’re so concerned about. Soldiers, are they?”

The prince frowned. “No. As I recall, Brach is a bravo. A bodyguard. Chirre was a valet or perhaps an under-footman. I’m not sure. After Ione had chosen, I detailed them as her protectors.”

“After an interview, of course.”

Paedro’s glance shifted slightly to the left. “Ione interviewed them.”

“Did she? And you didn’t check her story?”

“No, I did not. I trusted her word on it,” Paedro enunciated. “Who’s on trial here -- these men or my aunt?”

Anno held up a hand to calm him. “Cease. I’m only making a point.”

“I fail to see what that is.”

“You will.” Anno gave a flicker of a smile. “If you don’t, you have even less sense than I generously credit you with. But peace, enough. I’ll tell you what they’ve done. Here, you two!” He turned to address Chirre and Brach, though they stared away, stubborn as donkeys. “Everything I report you’ve admitted already. If you object at any point, why, then, speak up and let us know.”

Brach’s lip curled. Chirre made no reply and gave no indication that he’d even heard Anno speak. His eyes remained fixed toward the ocean but seemed to see nothing at all.

Anno gave a slight shrug. “Let that stand as your testimony, then.” He turned to Paedro and Cloud and laid a hand on either of the prisoner’s shoulders. “Listen now, and I’ll speak a true tale to you who cry ‘treason! treason!’ so easily. Let me tell you what these men that you have trusted have done.

“Rape,” he said, his eyes glittering. “Rape of my kinswoman Mims, and that is only the beginning ...”

* * * * *

Tirsah pressed her hands to her hot cheeks as she ducked back around the stronghold, headed back to the terrace. Mayhap the cold nip of the night air would ease her excited blushes some. What fun that had been, to see Lorn stand up to Paedro!

She'd plans of her own for later on. Plans she'd Seen might work. Plans she dared not even think about -- yet which she'd set herself to try -- oh!

She was too worked up to go back to Rose just yet. A walk. She needed a quick walk to calm herself. Once fast around the island should do it; then she'd return. She trotted quick as she could, soaking up the cold air. She amused herself by kicking tiny pieces of crushed clamshells off the path to see how far she could loft them on the point of her toe, imagining that they were certain somebodies she might name.

"No!" a man's voice shouted, near startling the heart from her chest.

Tirsah pulled up short. That had come from the terrace! Surely the prince and Cloud didn't still loaf about there. *What, wasn't one beating enough? By sea and shore, I'll give them another taste of the back of my hand, the rascallions!*

Indignant, she stormed forward just far enough that she caught a glimpse of the terrace.

Her mouth dropped open. *What? What's this?*

Tirsah pressed her hand over her mouth as Anno went on. *Oh*, was all that she could think. *Oh, oh! Mercy!*

She could barely make out a word here and there, but her eyes were sharp enough. As the master-mage spoke, occasionally moving his hands in slight, precise gestures, she saw all the color drain away from the prince's skin. Cloud stood like a man bound to a target. Once or twice he shook his head faintly, as if he struggled not to believe what he heard.

Anno's hands came down with a clap on Brach and Chirre's shoulders. The prince threw back his head and turned his face to the sky. Cloud sank to his knees and buried his face in his hands.

Oh! Tirsah turned and ran faster than she'd done since she was a girl. "Uncle!" she shrieked, not caring who heard. "Come quick! Ohe, come!"

* * * * *

"No," Cloud begged behind the hands that hid his face. "No, Anno, no!"

Paedro licked his lips. "Catkin, do you swear by your people that this is the truth?" he asked hoarsely. "Please."

Edge curled herself around Anno's feet and kneaded the cobblestones with her finger pads. She dipped her head and purred, eyes gleaming maliciously at the prince. "By my people: truth."

Paedro shut his eyes tightly.

Cloud seemed to crumble in a little further on himself. "Why?" He knotted his hands into fists against his face. "Tell me, Anno, why!"

“Because she told us to,” Chirre piped abruptly, gaze fixed far into the distance. The soft voice startled them all; they looked to him quickly, but that was all. His lips shut firmly. He’d said what he intended; there would be no more.

“For a hundred worthless coins, these are the ones who raped and betrayed.” Anno folded his hands into his sleeves. “Wrong begets wrong. They’re guilty of their sins, but you are the ones who caused Rose’s death. Do you deny it?”

“They better not,” Brach sneered at Cloud and laughed, a wild, ugly sound. “Holler all you want, boy; it don’t change the truth. We might have set her up, but your hands is the ones dripping with blood. Think on that while you’re stringing me up. Maybe we’ll swing side by side, yeah? Yeah? Why not? You killed your wife, boy!”

A shudder racked Cloud from head to toe. He curled his fists deeper into his eyes and said nothing.

“Anno,” the prince warned -- pleaded -- jerking his head at Brach.

“Why should I silence him? He speaks the truth.”

Anno seated himself casually on the astrologer’s table. He folded his hands beneath his chin and rested his elbows on his knees. “We’ll put Rose in the tomb tonight,” he remarked. “You’ve seen many a dead body, I’m sure, on the battlefield and such. What did you do with the bodies of the men you killed there? Stripped them of what trinkets they might have, then left the rest for a raven’s feast? Hmm?”

Paedro nodded. “That’s usual.”

“But was it kind?”

“That didn’t enter into it,” Paedro protested. “Their purpose had been to kill us.”

“As your purpose had been to kill them. Meaningless,” Anno muttered. “Did you ever stop to think who cleaned up after your mess? Village women, who dared crawl out from their root cellars after all the noises of combat had faded. They’d lift their skirts and pick their way through the bloody maze to look for a familiar face. Sometimes, they’d find it.”

“And we have nightmares still, all of us,” Paedro ground out. “Why do you torment us with this?”

“Because I will forever have nightmares of *her*, tumbling down in her ruined dress of rose petals stained with blood,” Anno said. “I’ll remember her piteous face that once rivaled the moon for beauty, gone slack in death. I want you to remember that, too, so mark me, and mark me well. Instead of a soft bed and a husband’s arms, this is what waits for Rose tonight:

“A bier, hewed of heartwood, where she’ll lie cold and alone. A fine sort of bridal bed for a new wife, don’t you think? Washed in seawater and dressed in the simplest kind of kirtle, made of white sailcloth and sewn together with twine. Her life-lock has been severed, as I see.” He nudged at her fallen braid with the tip of his toe. The silver thread whispered against the stones.

"Tirsah will melt a pewter cauldron full of beeswax over a brazier of coals, sprinkled with dried rue and salt. She'll tilt Rose's head back and hold her lifeless lips open. It's my task to take a copper ladle and dip it time and again into the melted wax, to fill her mouth with it. It takes far more than you would think," he said, watching Cloud grind his fists against his face and hearing his breath increase in speed.

Suffer, he thought, pleased. And I am not done yet.

He went on, relentless as the tide. "This is done to keep her shade from crying out after her death, from finding and driving you mad. Look how kind we are to you!" he mocked. "We have a grave mask ready, and more wax seals it firmly to her flesh. We'll wrap her body in a silken sheet, carry it to an empty burrow in the tomb, and seal it up to lie lonely forever. This is what happens when a chieftain's daughter dies. This is the night's work you've given us. Now, tell me: are you satisfied?"

A muffled sob broke behind Cloud's hands.

"Father? Father!"

Anno wheeled around. No one in sight yet, but he could hear the sounds of feet crunching over the noisy crushed shells. "Tirsah?" he called back. "On the terrace, daughter."

Two burst around the corner almost as one -- old man and young mage. Tirsah had snatched her skirts up in her hands to run faster, flashing glimpses of suntanned ankles and calves. "Look, there they are, just as I told you! There!"

Edge took one look at them and collapsed at Anno's feet with a wail fit to wake the dead. "Tirsah!" she howled. "Hurt! Hurt!"

The small mage, merely a flash of white, blazed past Paedro and landed on her knees by the Catkin's side. Strong, slender fingers stroked Edge under her chin and lifted her head. She bent forward, the curtain of her hair hiding both their faces from sight.

Lorn hurtled to a stop in front of Anno and the prince, neither out of breath or disheveled by his run, old though he was. "What goes? This one came pelting in, said you're still here. Said you'd found --"

"As I have." Anno mocked the city men with an elaborate bow as he drew back to reveal Chirre and Brach. Brach flinched at the sight of the chieftain, and beads of cold sweat appeared on his forehead. Chirre said nothing, did nothing, seemed to hear nothing.

"Uncle, Edge's leg is broken," Tirsah rose up to accuse. "Whoever's done this is going to feel the back of my hand across their face!"

"In good time." Anno put a finger to his lips. "First, tell me this: where is the lady Ione?"

"Gone," Lorn snapped. "I'd come out from the --" He faltered for a half-second, barely long enough for anyone to notice. "-- from the stillroom for a moment because I hadn't seen Lady Foul all the day long. Wondered if she was hurt or ill. Not much! Searched the

stronghold myself. Every scrap of clothing, every trinket, every shoe gone, down to the buttonhooks. Quarters are cold. No fire's burnt today. She's gone, long gone."

A sharp shock visibly coursed through Paedro's muscles. "So." He swallowed hard. "It's true, then."

"True." Lorn's lips curled. "I'd just found out when Tirsah ran in with her own news, and it was up sails and out here without a moment's pause."

"Clever lass," Anno approved of his daughter. "Did you hear us as well?"

She shook her head. "No. I only saw these men bound up." She jabbed a finger at them in scorn. "And that one going to his knees. I ran for Uncle straight away."

"Well?" Lorn demanded, gesturing between the tall mage and the two prisoners. "What's come about? Tell me quickly!"

Anno cast a quick glance at the rising moon. "Time is short," he muttered, then sketched for them the briefest of outlines while the prince shut his eyes and Cloud's shoulders began to shake. It was enough. When he had finished, Tirsah burned with a high, hot anger, and Lorn seemed to have aged another ten years.

He ran a gnarled hand over his face and ended at his mouth. "They believe this?" he asked hoarsely, with a nod at the prince and Cloud.

Anno inclined his head.

Lorn gave a short, sharp bark of laughter. "Well, prince? What d'you say now? Who's the betrayer now? Want to tell me?"

Paedro's face had changed in the last few minutes, carved deep with lines of grief and guilt. He accepted the blame, and despite his righteous rage, Anno could not help but admire that.

"What should I say?" the prince answered plainly. "I am guilty. My friend --" He laid his hand on Cloud's shaking shoulder. "-- is guilty, too. But I beg you -- I'm his sword-brother. If you want a life for a life, take mine."

A hot answer leaped to Lorn's tongue. Yet from the corner of his eye, he saw his brother give the smallest shake of his head.

Cloud pulled his hands, hands that shook, away from his face. He dashed away one salt drop and then another that rolled down his frozen cheeks. "Not Paedro's life," he said with a deep breath. He stood. "Take mine. They might have thought it up, but it was me who did it."

"And I'm not equally to blame?" The prince gave his head a sharp shake. "Cloud, don't."

"I will!" Cloud pulled at his jerkin and tore it apart to the breastbone to expose skin still brown with the last of the summer sun. "Do it, Anno."

The brothers exchanged a glance over his head. Anno made a tiny “shush” motion with his hand. “That’s a bold offer,” he said after a moment. “Can you make Rose live again if you lay down your life?”

“No,” Cloud shivered. His hands curled into fists where they held the torn pieces of shirt apart. “I wish I could. You don’t know how I wish it.”

“I might have an idea.” Anno rubbed at his chin, sunk in thought. “Very well.”

No one saw him move; his hands were too quick for human eyes to follow. Only Edge saw a blur as he darted his hand into his belt, and a flicker of moonlight against the sharp stone blade that he snatched out, but all the others knew was that there had been no knife in Anno’s hand, and suddenly there was, pressed to the skin over Cloud’s breastbone.

Cloud gazed down at the knife, a wicked curve of flaked shale sharpened to a razor-keen edge. Something almost like relief flickered over his face. Silent, he touched the top of the blade with a gentle hand and moved it away from the bone to the soft spot between his ribs where his heart rested. He put his hands over Anno’s and nodded.

Anno pressed at the knife. The wicked, curved tip -- only just the tip -- slid in easily as through silk. Blood spurted and ran in a thin crimson trail down Cloud’s chest, soaking into the waist of his trousers.

Anno lowered his mouth to the boy’s ear and whispered. “Are you still brave enough?”

Cloud’s gaze was level. Rather than pull away, he pressed down on Anno’s hands and tugged the blade toward him. Startled, the master-mage held back, his strength, greater than Cloud’s, kept the knife from digging further between the boy’s ribs.

The prince broke. “Stop!” There was a flash and flutter of movement, and they saw that Paedro had somehow managed to snatch Tirsah’s pruning knife out of her unguarded pocket. He held it over his own heart, tip poised over the killing spot. “I told you I was responsible for his life,” he swore under the weight of the mage’s stare. “Life for life, Anno!”

His meaning was clear. When Anno’s knife sank home, he would push the pruning knife into his own heart. It was a dull knife, worn and blunted from a summer’s hard use. It would be a messy, ugly death, and Anno knew that Paedro knew it. He could tell a good knife from a bad one.

Anno stopped cold, thinking. His own rage urged him to sink his own knife deep, down to the hilt, and cleave Cloud’s heart in two. Let Paedro finish himself, as well. End it all! And yet the calmer part of himself cautioned and counseled better plans.

The moonlight glinted off the rivulet of blood trickling down Cloud’s ribs. For a moment, a split second, Anno could see his own reflection in it.

The mage let out his breath.

The tip of the knife slid out of Cloud’s chest and flickered in the moonlight. It darted too quickly to see, and Anno stepped back. The knife disappeared as he folded his arms. “Put your blade down, prince,” he said grimly. “I have chosen.”

Cloud shook his head, bewildered, and looked down at his chest. Just over the heart, Anno had carved a rune unfamiliar to him, interlocking slashes delicate as lacework and deep enough to scar. He dabbed at it, hesitant. "What is it?"

"Foolish boy, that you have to ask! This marks you as an oath-breaker. A man not to be trusted. A scar to remember your actions by for the rest of your life." Anno scowled. "Paedro, did I not order you to put your knife down?"

The prince shook his head. "Not until I've given myself a mark like that one."

Anno snapped. "You want a mark? So be it! Tirsah!" She rose to her feet, a question in her eyes. "Take that knife from his hands and punch a hole through his earlobe."

Her glance flickered from Cloud's bloody rune to Paedro. "Father?"

"He wants a mark. Give him one. Would you rather I did it?"

Tirsah deliberated. "No," she said after a long moment. "Give me your head, Paedro."

Willingly he bent it to her. She slipped the pruning knife from his hand and pulled his cheek to her breast. Cold, strong fingers seized his earlobe. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly as the blade burrowed through his flesh to tickle warm and wet against his throat.

Tirsah stood back and gazed at her handiwork in thought. She picked up the long end of her life-lock and snipped off a bit of the cord. Paedro made no sound as she forced the blunt end of the silver thread through the wound in his earlobe and tied it in a firm knot.

Anno smiled in tight approval. "Well done. Ohe! Is that enough for you, you noble men? A little blood spilled?"

Cloud traced his fingers over the rune and clenched his fist. "You know it's not."

Anno glanced at Lorn, who nodded. His daughter measured him up, then gave him a faint, affirmative gesture. They'd trust him to judge wisely and well.

"Swear to do what I tell you," he ordered. "Will you?"

Paedro felt at the wound in his ear as Cloud traced the still-bleeding rune in his flesh.

"Yes," they said, one voice following the other so closely that they might have been from a single throat.

The tight knot of tension began to uncoil in Anno's stomach. "Your aunt is a fugitive from punishment," he said flatly. "We will send seekers after her, and we will punish her. Agreed?"

Paedro swallowed. "Agreed. But I want to have a part in the sentencing. Please."

Anno inclined his head. "As you like. But I warn you that *I* will have the final judgment. And as for these two ..." He turned to face the prisoners in distaste.

Brach had paled a sickly green and shook uncontrollably. The stench rising from him told Anno that the coward had lost control of his bladder as well as his nerve. His conspirator stared yet at the horizon, eyes and mind both far away.

“Chirre goes chained into the wine cellar until we’ve found Ione,” Anno decided. He touched Brach’s cheek and enjoyed the way the overgrown bully flinched away from his touch. “Send this one back to the city. Let him go in the prisons there. But before that, for the crime of abusing my kinswoman against her will, I want the full punishment. All of it. Are you agreed?”

A muscle jumped in the prince’s cheek. “As you wish it,” he said. “The full punishment. At your hands or mine.”

“No!” Brach screeched. He fought against his bonds, arms and legs lashing like a windmill. Edge snarled and moved in a flash to sink her sharp teeth deep into his calf. His legs shot out beneath him; he struck his head on the stones and lay still.

Anno leaned over the fallen man and pressed two fingers to the pulse in his neck. “Alive,” he pronounced. “He won’t escape this way or that.”

“And you!” He darted a finger at Paedro and Cloud. “Stay well away until we’ve put Rose’s body into the tomb. Do you understand? I won’t allow you another look at her. You’ve done enough to her today. But when I come to tell you we’ve finished, then you will come and keep vigil until the morning light breaks across the sky and the tide turns again. Understood?”

Cloud lifted his head, pale as death itself but determined. “Is that all?”

Anno regarded him. Ohe, a keen lad. He knew the balances weren’t equal yet, even yet -- not yet --

“Not quite all,” Tirsah spoke up bold and clear as she slipped in front of Anno. A mage-light shone in her eyes, and something indescribably ancient and foreign clung to her, come from nowhere at all to inhabit his familiar daughter.

“There is one more thing. Father, give me your authority.”

Anno’s blood ran colder than liquid snow. He thought he recognized the strange mood that had come upon her. Had the Lady Goddess --? He couldn’t tell. She gave him a sideways glance, an ancient look that sent a chill down his back, but left him no wiser. Neither did it leave him any choice.

“Speak as I would speak, daughter,” he said simply.

Tirsah’s lips curled up at the corners. “Remember you promised,” she reminded the prince and Cloud. “Anything we gave you as punishment, you would do.”

Cloud bent his neck, ignorant of the change that had come upon her. “Do what you want, Tirsah. I am willing.”

“Yes, and I’ll cure you of deciding so quickly, won’t I?” A faint ripple of white light coursed over Tirsah’s small face. “Very well, boy. Tomorrow morning, when the light breaks, come back to the arbor. There, you will be married again.”

Cloud flung his head up. “You?”

"Not to me, fool!" she scoffed. "I wouldn't have you if you came with all your pockets stuffed full of gold. No. I have someone else in mind."

She touched Lorn's shoulder. "Once, when a serving woman came to us, not long after I was born, she brought with her a child."

Anno's eyes flicked open wide. Tirsah shook her head gently. "It's all right, Father. I have a purpose here." She looked back at Cloud in challenge, a velvet glove encasing an iron fist. "No one but those family here have ever seen or heard that child since she came here. She has, for nearly a score of years, lived inside the wine cellar and not seen the light of day."

"Why?" Paedro blurted, baffled. "Why not let her join the rest of you? If she was born out of wedlock --"

"She's ... different," Tirsah said. "Mad. Mad as the wild wind. Always has been and always will be. She cannot tell between nightmares and the waking world, and what she fears, she fights. We've kept her in the cellar so that she wouldn't slip out and kill us while we slept. There were times when only my father could soothe her."

"That's where Anno was?" Paedro asked quickly. "Caring for the child?"

"No child, but a woman now, and her name is Briar," Tirsah replied. "And yes, he did spend his time in the cellar, but no longer. From now on, you'll care for her, Cloud." She smiled, malicious and sweet. "Just as you promised."

Cloud's skin was white as chalk, and he paused for a moment that went on for ages -- but at last he nodded, sealing his vow.

"At sunrise," he said in a small, husky voice. "I'll be there."

Anno squeezed Tirsah's shoulder in warning. "And that we will call enough," he rumbled. "Time passes quickly by us. You and I must see to putting Rose's body inside the tomb. Lorn, come to me later. First, see that these men are secured."

"Do it myself," Lorn growled. He had been watching Chirre and grew ever more irritated by the small man's utter silence and lack of reaction. "Hear that, you? Look at me!"

He grabbed Chirre by the chin and forced his face around. The loose cloth around his neck fell away to show the four sore, angry red furrows Edge's claws had left behind. Lorn's eyebrows shot up. "Bless the Catkin," he murmured. "For killing my daughter, you'll wear those marks till they're stretched out by a noose. What d'you say about that, then?"

Chirre turned dark pools of eyes on him and was silent.

Disgusted, Lorn dropped the prisoner's chin. "Enough," he ordered. "Come on, all of you. Inside." He looked down at his elder sister, still clinging to the edge of Anno's robe. "Berry, will you come?" he asked, putting out his hand. It had been a night of miracles; mayhap there'd be one more.

Berry whined and scuttled back behind Anno's cloak. The noise, the shouting -- it was all too much for her. She shuffled uneasily to her feet. "I'll not," she quavered. "But this

Briar -- go gentle with her -- whoever -- she -- is --" Her nerve broke and she ran, lofting an unearthly scream from the sea to the sky. Nimble as a girl, she tumbled over the stone railing and vanished into the night.

Anno felt Tirsah shiver and gasp, felt the faint rush of air as the Lady Goddess left her to follow Berry.

"Father," she whispered, "what have I said?"

He squeezed her shoulder. "It'll be right, daughter," he murmured. "Leave it for now. I'll explain later, for I think I understand.

"Now," he ordered to the rest of their company. "Inside, as the chieftain commanded, for there's much we must do tonight. Now!"

Chapter Nine

Hours later, alone and ignorant of how the tide had turned against his friends, Benec ambled down the coastline and mused to himself how odd it was that in all his twenty-nine years, he'd rarely gone down to the beach at night when lovers roamed. White sand and blue sea were more to his taste; he didn't care for icy black waters and a superior moon.

Tirsah loved both equally, though, as he recalled.

An icy blast of winter wind thrashed against his back and cut through the sturdy wool and leather he wore as if they were silk and linen. *That* cleared any remaining old-lady's fog from his mind. He muttered a rough city oath to himself and bolted for the widdershins entrance to the Queen's Cave, making it just in time to escape a second howling blast.

Safe, he peered out at the harsh wind, strong enough now to lift the trailing vines around the cave mouth and whip them around like angry snakes that seethed out from the harsh crags of the cliff. He became suddenly and uncomfortably aware that behind him the yawning width of the Queen's Cave stretched out black and silent, and that anything, or anybody, could wait in there.

He whipped about to press his shoulder blades against the wall and stared ahead. Utter blackness greeted him.

"Tirsah?" he whispered, the small sound loud in the cave's uncanny silence. "You there, brat?"

She'd said she would meet him. Hadn't she?

He shuffled a few sideways steps further in. Blast it, why hadn't he thought to bring so much as a candle? Even a rush light would have been welcome. "Tirsah!"

A single candle winked into life.

Benec yelped and flung his forearm up against his eyes. The candle was *bright* after the cave's blackness.

When the pain subsided, he lowered his arm and stared in avid curiosity. It had been years since he'd set foot in the Queen's Cave. The old place looked much as he remembered it: a wide, round room shaped like a rough-edged lozenge, the walls full of niches handy for squirreling things away in. More than a few cowrie shells lay stuck here and there, waiting to be claimed, and in the back, where the candle shone ...

His breath caught in his chest. *Tirsah*.

A single candle, stuck in a niche directly above the long, flat dais at the back of the cave, burned bravely. Somehow -- with magery? -- she'd covered the coarse rock with thick, flat-leaved vines, heaped thick upon each other until they made a soft nestling bed fit for a princess. And truth! -- a princess was what they received, for Tirsah lay in the midst of them, her eyes closed and her face still as death.

"Tirsah?" He forgot his fear, his cold, his dislike of the night, and ran to her. He put his hands to her cold skin and felt of her wrists and the curve of her neck, searching for a pulse. Was she dead? Surely she wouldn't have left him like that.

No. No, she hadn't. She lived. Benec let out a vast breath of relief and slumped back on his heels. He gripped Tirsah's cool hand for comfort. "Are you trying to give me a heart seizure?" He didn't expect a response and wasn't disappointed not to get one.

Instead he surveyed her, puzzled and fascinated. "What are you on about this time, you pain?"

The mage had laid herself down among the vines in a strange fashion, arms folded over her chest as would a corpse ready for the tomb. Her chin was tilted back and held stiff, belonging to a body that felt no discomfort.

Yet that same body nestled deep into the vines, tendrils and leaves curling over her limbs and cuddling them within a green embrace. She'd wrapped herself in a simple loose robe of white wool too large for her by art or accident, edges loosely tossed one over the other and left untied. Her small, slender feet were bare, as were her hands. The robe had rucked up just a bit, and gleams of warm, tanned skin peeked through at ankles, wrists, and neck.

Benec shivered. "What are you trying to prove?" He reached out to touch her a second time, to pull the robe more securely around her, and instead found that he ran his fingertips down her arm from shoulder to wrist, marveling at the cool, firm feel of her skin.

He found himself aching, instead, to pull the robe free and gaze at her in the candlelight. To drink his fill of her small, rounded breasts and the soft golden hair that would curl over her sex ...

He dimly recalled from his time in Amahpre that fashion dictated a lady's complexion should be smooth and pale as a white rose. Tirsah's arms were browned by too much sun and marred with small scratches and scars from climbing in her beloved trees. City custom had it that women should dress with care, always observant of the whims and fancies of Amahpre's

leading dressmakers. They'd never racket about in a simple wheat-colored kirtle or a mage's robe, and it please you!

Benec snorted softly. The "fashionable" dames he'd seen looked like exquisite little china dolls, powdered, painted, and squeezed beyond recognition as women. Thank you, but no, thank you; he'd be happier any day for a chance at that golden-haired, strong-limbed, waif mage with her lovely, warm face.

The candle sputtered; Benec's eyes flickered upward. It was well enough -- a fault in the wick, perhaps, that had caused it to falter, but it still burned. One small, fierce point of light to stave off the darkness.

When he glanced back down at Tirsah, she had moved.

Benec bit back a startled gasp and flinched away from her. *How* --? He'd never heard a thing, not a rustle from a single leaf, but now she lay on her left side, her knees drawn up across each other, one arm cast over her chest and one flung back next to her cheek, fingers twined into her hair. The white robe had slid open at neck and thigh and displayed the tops of her breasts and long, slender legs tanned a pale honey-brown. Just enough to tantalize him. Just as he had yearned.

He wondered if she knew what a picture she made, lying among the vines like a wanton wife fallen asleep waiting for her husband. His blood burned at the thought. Just so he'd like to find her late at night. He would slide into the bed they shared, take her in his arms, and wake her with kisses. He'd take her hand and guide it to his sex, swollen hard with want of her ...

He gave his head a sharp shake, knowing he'd do well to be wary. He'd stake his life on it that she'd laid him a trick or a trap laced with sweet temptation. Though not a little regretful, he tugged up the sleeves and collar of her robe and pulled the hem down over her legs, covering up every inch of her honeyed skin.

She sighed, the barest release of breath, and snuggled down against the hand that pillowed her cheek. Suddenly she looked so young, so startlingly small and helpless, that he might have sworn her to be the child he remembered, worn out from a day of tagging after Anno and sleeping where she'd dropped on a soft patch of grass.

Baffled, he shook his head and sat back from the dais. Did she mean for him to wait until she woke, or was there something he was meant to do to wake her?

You're the strategist, he almost heard her mock him in a high good humor.

"So I am, but this isn't like any campaign I've ever fought before," he informed her.

Truly?

The exposed skin on his arms rippled up into goose-bumps. "Tirsah?" he asked uneasily. "Lass, did you speak?"

Nothing. Of course not. She wouldn't be after making it easy on him, would she?

"I'd hurry if I were you, saucy," he advised, rubbing his arms. He'd soon be cold as her, even if he had buttoned himself up snug in leather and wool. At least the wind couldn't pierce the cave.

He wrapped his arms around his chest to hug a little warmth close -- and his fingers brushed something small and hard tucked deep into his waist pocket.

What's this? He fumbled into the recesses of the pocket, swearing when his clumsy fingers couldn't get a decent grip on it. After a moment of effort, he managed to scrabble it out into his palm and recognized the thing at last: the bottle Tirsah had given him earlier.

No, not a bottle, either. A vial. Too small to be a bottle. Some clever-handed craftsman had fashioned it cunningly out of black glass and sealed it with a tiny, tightly wedged stopper of ebony-colored cork. He gave it a shake, listening to it slosh.

Drink, the silent voice suggested.

He glanced at Tirsah. "That was you, wasn't it?"

Drink.

The stopper was nearly too tiny for his oversized fingers, but he managed to pinch it between the nails of forefinger and thumb and work it loose. A sharp, bitter smell rose to assault his nose. Aniseed? He sniffed carefully. No ... not aniseed ... something altogether foreign, yet just familiar enough to taunt that he'd smelled it before.

Drink, the voice insisted.

He gave Tirsah a wary look, tilted his head back, raised the vial to his lips, and drank.

Ahh -- cold, cold, cold! The small swallow of liquid burned his throat all the way down to his gut, bitter as wormwood, sweet as honey, and cold as a dead maiden's lips. He drew in a lusty breath as it hit his stomach sharp and painful as a knife between the ribs. Without thinking, he grabbed at his middle with both hands and dropped the vial to the cave floor. It shattered, fragmenting into dozens of onyx shards.

The stabbing pain in his gut faded just a little bit, but he breathed heavily as if he'd been running. With an effort, he leaned over and picked up one of the tiny splinters of black glass, smelling it again for traces of any killing herb. The bitter tang was nothing he recognized, but he for all that he could feel the potion eating at his throat and stomach, burning like acid. "Is this poison, Tirsah?" He laughed despite himself. "Did you bring me down here to kill me for love of you?"

His fingers slipped as another wave of pain seared his innards. The glass was sharp, and it bit deep into the pad of his forefinger to draw the blood instantly. A trickle of red ran down his finger into his palm, down his wrist, and into his sleeve. It, too, smelled strange, sharp and bitter.

He stuck the forefinger in his mouth to suck at the wound. The blood tasted strange. Myrrh ... perhaps myrrh?

His head swam; his limbs had gone slack. Perhaps the dram was poison after all. It didn't seem like such a bad way to die.

What does this mean, Tirsah? he wondered, muzzy-headed.

Gentle as a dream and unstoppable as the tide, the cave dissolved around him.

"Lady, lady, I can't see! Lady, lady, have you a kiss for me? Lady, lady -- pfaugh! Tirsah!"

He heard merry laughter. "I got you, Benec! I got you!"

"I'll tie your braids in a knot for that, girl!"

"Catch me first! Teach me how to call the whales!"

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Why don't you teach me how to grow a plum tree out of a twig?"

"I can't teach you that." Tirsah paused. "You think you're something, don't you, Benec?"

"Reckon I do." There was the soft sound of a quick, stolen kiss. "You do, too, don't you?"

"Rascal!"

"Well?"

"I'll never tell."

"Bet you will. Some day."

"Ohe, Benec -- we shouldn't be down here."

"They won't miss us. Tirsah, Tirsah, just for a minute. By the Lady --"

A soft gasp; a long moan. "Benec, no! We mustn't."

He heard himself laugh, a little out of breath. "Tirsah, we'll both burst. There's no harm; we're wed even if no one knows. Just a little closer, up against me, ohe, please, just to hold you for a while."

"Benec, Benec," she sobbed. "It'll spoil it all, this wanting! But it's a hunger; can't you understand it? I've needed you for long and long ..."

"And I you, lass. No one would ever have to know," he pleaded. "Just us, Tirsah, just for now. Have pity on me ..."

"Benec ..."

"Oh, gods, Tirsah. Beautiful. So very beautiful. I dreamed, but never did I think you'd allow me to go so far."

"Touch me, Benec. I'm not made of glass. I won't break. I've craved the feel of your skin, bare against mine, for more days and nights than I can count."

"Shameless hussy, aren't you?"

"Are you complaining? Benec, there are better things to do with that chattering mouth of yours, you know."

"Your father would skin you alive if he knew you were this lusty."

"He's no fool. Neither am I. I've long since made up my mind that I want this. I want you. Now, Benec. Don't make me wait any longer. Let me touch you."

"Ahhh -- Tirsah!"

"So big ... like the rest of you. Soft. Hard. Wondrous."

"And you ... please, Tirsah, may I?"

"Do. Do, now, before I burst from wanting it."

"So tight! Tirsah, I might hurt you."

"A little pain is worth a great deal of pleasure. Let me guide you."

"Tirsah!"

"Yes ... just there. You know what I want, Benec. You ache for it as I do. Fill me and seal the bond between us. Make me yours."

"Wench! You strip a man of all good sense and self-control. Ah, gods! Tirsah -- there's no turning back, once it's done --"

"I know. Stop talking. We always knew this day would come. Cease doubting and kiss me. Kiss me while we take what we both want and need ..."

"You needn't worry, Master Never-You-Mind!" Tirsah gave a sharp, bitter laugh. "I'm not with child after all. Go and prance off to Amahpre just as it pleases you."

"Tirsah, it's not my choice to make. I've been called. I'll be back within the year."

"Not your choice? You could have said no! But you jumped at it." Her voice broke on a sob. "You never thought once about your love. Never thought about the child we might have made together. We laughed about that once. You forgot it all at once! So go, Benec, go -- but I won't be waiting for you to come back. Do you understand?"

"Tirsah, you daft wench! I'm not after abandoning you forever. I'm just --"

"Only forever, Benec. If you go, it's forever, unless the impossible happens."

He felt empty, as if she'd drawn an endless chasm open between them.

"Make your choice, Benec. Once and for always."

The memory of old rage filled him. "Then I'm gone, brat! And I'll be back to talk sense into you inside a year."

She burst into tears. "No," she wept. "No, you won't, because you'll forget, Benec. Don't you understand? You'll forget ..."

Forget ...

Forget ...

Benec opened his eyes. His mouth hung open as he sucked in huge gulps of cold, musty cave air. Cold sweat damped his forehead and ran down his back. His right hand ached as if he'd gripped a red-hot poker, and he shook like an old man with the ague. Every muscle and every sinew ached as if he'd been running for days. Or for years.

Tirsah's eyes were open. She gazed at him, still as deep water and able to wait forever for what he might have to say. "You," he rasped as he shook his head to clear it. "Why?"

She blinked. "You know why."

His temples throbbed. "It was real, then? All of it happened as I saw it?"

She moved her head, agreeing. "Every bit."

"That's why you never married."

"And it's why you never truly wanted another woman. Some small part of you must have known." She sat up with the fluid grace of a Catkin and wrapped her arms around her knees. Unbound, her hair hung down her back in a waterfall of wheat-colored silk. Wide, sad eyes regarded him. "Don't ask me. Not yet. Open your hand, Benec."

He looked down, startled, to see that his hands had knotted into fists. His sore fingers opened painfully one by one. In one palm lay two slender, perfectly formed rings of black glass. The shards of the vial he'd broken were nowhere in sight.

Fascinated, he brought his palm closer to his face to study the rings. They were barely warm, but he thought he could see the last bit of fire in their centers. How hot had the glass gotten for the pieces to fuse? They had left twin scars on his palm, but aside from the stanching puncture in the pad of his finger, he'd not been cut once by any of the shards.

Tirsah smiled at him, a secret little smile, and he knew he might as well save the breath of asking how she'd done it. She'd never tell. His lips quirked unwillingly into an admiring grin. That was Tirsah, through and through.

"Words are words," she said as she nestled her chin against her knee. "Some words are just sounds on the air, made up to fill the silence. Some words have power. When people say things without thinking, they forget what they might invoke. Sometimes things are listening; sometimes they answer."

"As they answered you?"

She nodded.

"You'd willingly have spent your life alone?" he blurted out, hurt.

"I knew that Amahpre would hold you, Benec. I was too young." She shrugged one slim shoulder. "I have my plants ... my growing things. I had my cousin, and if I didn't have my father, at least I knew where he was. It was enough."

"You must have swallowed your tongue when you heard I was coming home, alive, after so many years," he said quietly. Hesitant, not quite sure if she'd accept his touch, he reached out and brushed her hand with his fingertips. "Tirsah?"

She made a soft, sighing noise.

"Were you angry?" he asked, half fearful of her answer.

"No." She shook her head. "I was *glad*. And afraid, because I knew that with you here, it would begin all over again. Do you know what it was you drank from the vial? Tears. Tears that I shed ten years ago, and tears that I shed three nights since."

Benec ran his tongue over the inside of his mouth. He could taste the bitterness of them yet.

Suddenly weary, he leaned his head against the curve of her knee. Her skin smelled like honey balm. "I'm forever sorry, Tirsah," he murmured against her soft skin. "No wonder you've been so hurt by Rose's abandonment. You've lived it all through once before and never told a soul."

One small hand stroked his head. A long, soft breath of air slipped from between her lips. He closed his eyes.

"Come and lie beside me, Benec," she whispered suddenly. "It's cold in here."

He jerked his head up to stare at her, not believing what he'd heard. She gave him an unreadable look in return, then drew back, close to the wall, and laid her hand in the warm hollow her body had left in the vines. "Will you come to me?"

Strangely shy, he crawled onto the dais. His legs were too long for it and hung off the end as he shifted his weight into the vines. They made a softer bed than he'd expected, the thick green leaves almost like velvet.

She raised herself on one elbow and touched him, running her hand down his neck to his chest. She was so full of life that it flowed over and left a tingling trail on his flesh wherever she touched.

Her soft hand slipped further down, to the lowest part of his stomach. She touched him intimately, her hand running across the bulge of his cock, hard as stone, throbbing and aching for want of her. Moaning softly, Benec caught Tirsah's other hand in his own and lifted it to his mouth for a kiss.

"Tell me this, witch," he murmured against her palm. "When you took us inside the bee-dream, was that real or illusion?"

She laughed. "What do you think?"

“Mmm.” He drew one small finger into his mouth and lapped at it. Callused, it tasted of roses. She gasped softly. “I think, brat, it was what we made of it,” he said. “I think you showed me what you thought of me in more ways than one. But --”

He lowered her hand swiftly to cup her breasts. “I think that it’s my turn now,” he said, enjoying her soft breath of surprise. “You’ve made me your mate in your way. Let me claim you now, in my fashion.” He pinched her nipples ever so lightly, tweaking them into stiff peaks. Her hand lingered on his cock, which pulsed and twitched under her touch. “Just the thought of you brings me to this state,” he rasped.

He had meant to wait, but it was no good; he had to taste her. He slid his fingers under the edges of her robe to pull it open and bared her breasts to his sight. Small, sweet raspberries that ached for his kiss. He dipped his head and laved them with his tongue, thrilling to the sound of her low moan. “I’ll have the upper hand for once, Tirsah.”

Careful as he could be -- and oh, it was a struggle to contain himself -- he moved to lie on his back among the leaves. She whimpered as her hand came free from him. He laughed and pulled her mouth down to his for a long, hungry kiss.

“You’ll have all of me that you want soon,” he promised, lifting her easily as a feather to rest atop him. He had meant to wait, but as soon as he felt the wet heat of her pussy against his skin, he almost lost his mind. “Help me get these thrice-bedamned trousers off!”

She laughed, rich and delighted, small hands helping him to tug the offending clothing out of his way before she settled down again. Her pussy came to rest against his cock, a temptation too great to resist. Memories of just how to lift and angle Tirsah’s slight body guided him straight and swift as an arrow’s flight.

Unable to be gentle and knowing that she didn’t want to be treated like something fragile, he thrust deep inside with one stroke. The feel of her after so long made his head swim. “Tirsah,” he gasped. “Ah, ah, love, so good -- hold me. Now, now --”

He thrust up, groaning at how she gripped him from within, so heated and tight. Their hips picked up a rhythm, dancing together. His hands roved over her shoulders, clutching her with ravenous desperation.

“So long,” she breathed. “I’ve waited so long.”

“Tirsah,” was all he could say in return. The bliss of being inside her stole his words. He felt the wave building inside him. He would have made it last forever, but it had been so long since --

He managed to slide a hand between them and caress her mound. His fingers found the little button that gave her so much pleasure. He manipulated it with all the care he could, wanting her to feel the same bliss.

“Ah -- Benec!” She arched and moaned above him. The muscles deep inside her squeezed and fluttered. It was too much. With a groan that came from his very center, Benec

felt himself erupt deep inside his lady love, his seed spurting against the mouth of her womb in heated pulses.

She collapsed atop him, breaths coming hard and fast. Her hands clutched at him in tremors of ecstasy. With a massive effort and a pang of loss, he managed to shift her limp, satiated form off, and she fell, spent, by his side.

For a long moment, neither had the strength to do anything but catch their breaths and caress the other with pale, trembling hands. He noticed vaguely that his palm still bore a scar; he suspected that it always would.

Perhaps they slept for a time; he was never quite sure afterward. They spoke of small things and teased each other as lovers did, surprised and amused at how easily it came to them. *Making up for lost time*, he told her quite seriously, which earned him a playful slap -- which led to a squealing, tumbling wrestling match, which led to something else entirely ...

Dawn had nearly broken before she told him what had happened on the terrace earlier that night, and what she planned for the next morning. Worn in body but wide-awake in mind, Benec rolled over onto his back while she spoke, and stared thoughtfully at the cave's rough ceiling.

When she had finished, she sat up and crossed her legs neatly, tailor-fashion, propped her chin on her hand, and waited for him to speak.

"What does Rose say?" he asked at last.

"I don't know yet." She shook her head. "I only knew what I had to say, so I said it. The words weren't my own. More than that I don't know. I just don't know."

"And so, and so." He shook his head. "It's daft, Tirsah."

"You think I don't know that? I'm not asking for your approval." She sat up straight and angry. "I'll do what I'm called to do, with or without your say-so, Benec!"

"Stop that, brat." He caught her by the wrist. "Come what will, Tirsah, I won't leave you again. Whether I agree with you or not, I'll stand by your side."

She stared at him. "You mean it," she said after a moment, shaking her head. "You actually mean it."

"Well spotted, green-mage." He pushed himself up off the dais and held out a hand.

She took it and stood with him, still caught in wonder. "Do you have any idea what you're doing, Benec?"

"Not really," he admitted.

"At least you're honest." She reached up as far as she could and twined her fingers around the end of his life-lock. "Perhaps you'll do."

"I had better." He stroked the velvet curve of her cheek. "When I'm ignorant, I'll steer by you as sailors do by stars."

She tilted her head to look up at him. "That's as it may be, but when we stand together, I can't even reach high enough to kiss you."

"Something the mage can't do?" Benec bent to kiss her, lips lingering on her own. He slid his hands beneath her and lifted her like a doll. She clung to him, slender legs sliding around his waist as she gave a surprised peal of laughter into his mouth.

"The city man sees a way." She locked her ankles behind his back and glanced saucily up from underneath her lashes.

"You don't weigh anything at all." He bounced her gently, marveling. "Like an armful of feathers."

"I am a small woman, but I am a woman," she reminded him. "And you are a man."

"As I am very much aware."

"Are you now?" Heavy-lidded, she shook back her hair and kissed him until she stole his breath.

Benec slid one arm behind her back and, hardly daring to breathe, trailed his fingers up to the rosy peaks of her breasts. The sight of his hand, so large against her slender form, arrested him. He closed his eyes and burrowed his face into the curve of her neck. "Pest, I'm twice your size and half again your height," he murmured against her skin. "I should have thought before --"

"Several times before," she murmured saucily, "And I appear to be just fine."

He groaned and pulled her closer. "I don't want to hurt you."

She covered his fingers with her own and kissed him just beneath his eye. "Some pains are welcome pains," she whispered. "Some pains heal, and some joys kill, and who's to say which is which? Let me die in your arms and be buried in your eyes."

He drew in a shuddering breath. "You know I'm not wise in the ways of men and women."

Warm arms slid around his neck; warm lips touched his. "You're quite well on your way, and as for the rest, well, it's about time you learned, beloved. Don't you think?"

And so he did.

Chapter Ten

Three of the clock, and perhaps a little past ...

Cloud had no timepiece but the moon as it glided silently through blackest velvet sky. He lay on the cold, unforgiving ground near the tomb and gazed at that sky, while less than a body's length away his beloved Rose lay cold and still inside.

His head rang faintly, empty. Things seemed strange and distant to him with the knowledge that she'd be gone forever, not just put aside in pique. Had he ever truly realized what he'd done?

The faraway gleam of stars looked like a handful of silver dust flung against night's curtain. Folk wisdom had it that stars were the moon's tears. He wondered, as he sat and drew his knees up to his chin -- were they right?

He'd long since passed being cold. Fingers and toes, the tip of his nose, and his ears -- all were numb.

Restlessness and the burning chill drove him to get up and walk, circling around and around the tomb. Yet if he dared to draw close enough to touch the stone wall, the haunts set up a wail of protest, there came a blowing and crackling of dried leaves, and the wind over the ocean rose to a scream.

He passed by a group of mourners gathered outside the fence, who uttered dark things and spat curses at him that he barely heard. They'd been coming in groups since before he and the prince had arrived. Most stayed only an hour or so in grim guard before the cold finally drove them back down to their own hearths and a bed already warmed by their sleeping mates.

One or two had been most careful to mention that, and when they did, Cloud's heart squeezed painfully in his chest -- as, he knew, they had meant for it to. The simple fishermen

and their hard-working wives had loved and honored Rose higher than a queen, for she had loved them in return and never showed herself ashamed of it.

Ohe, they meant to make sure he understood very well all that he'd lost by being so hasty. They knew they couldn't have punished him better if they'd taken up gaff and cudgel and beaten him to his own grave barrow.

When he returned from his circling of the tomb and sat by the prince, he saw that Paedro had closed his eyes and lain down on the hard soil. He was fingering the angry red puncture wound in his ear. "It's just," he said at last. "It's fair. Think you?"

"It's not enough," Cloud murmured. He turned again to gaze at the tomb. "If I could only see her one more time," he murmured. "If she could see me, I wonder, what would she think now?"

* * * * *

Edge curled onto her side and hugged her newly healed leg to her chest, just as she hugged her misery equally close. Anno sat back on his heels and watched her with eyes that lingered and caressed.

Ah, Edge!

Magery had done its work on the wounded leg, yet not on the grieving spirit, and he knew why.

Just as he knew that, at last, the time had come to give Edge what she craved most of all.

He moved, soft and gentle, as graceful as the Catkin herself, stripping the heavy cloak from his shoulders and casting it aside. Without a word, he lay down beside his beloved, enfolding her with his whole body.

He felt her flinch in utter surprise and not a little curiosity. A flicker of life sparked awake in her eyes as she twisted to stare at him. She asked no foolish questions, no "what are you doing?" She knew very well, as she studied his face, what he wanted -- what he chose to give her at last.

One question she did ask: "Why now?"

Anno nestled his chin into the curve of her throat and kissed her. "Sweet ... so sweet," he murmured. "You taste like no other woman, Edge, wild as the wind. Why now? Because I feared I had lost you."

He took her slender hand in his own. "Because I desire you as I've desired no other woman," he breathed into her ear. "You've always known that to be true. Just as you want me, Edge, sweet Edge."

She shook herself. "You say always that I would leave you one day. Why upset if you think I am gone?"

“Because.” He seized the back of her neck lightly in his teeth and gave her a gentle lover’s shake before he spoke again. “I thought you had left before I had the chance to say goodbye.” His hand slid onto her belly. “This is the goodbye I have been saving for you since we met, little wildling.”

She thought about that for a moment, then turned over to face him. “Goodbye, Anno,” she said gravely and wound her arms around his neck.

“Goodbye, little Catkin,” he whispered back, before he lost himself utterly in the wonder of her.

* * * * *

The fire in Rose’s new bed chamber had died down at last. Tirsah had built it well, with piece after piece of prized, sweet-smelling cedar wood layered on, sprinkled with herbs, and ringed with a circle of coals to keep it alight near until dawn. As it burned, Rose had sometimes been wakeful and sometimes dozing, always on her side, face turned toward the warm light and the gentle crackling.

Sela had come up a few hours since and found Rose with her eyes open in semi-wakefulness. She had told her everything that had passed and watched anxiously for any sign of reaction.

“He was sorry,” Sela had told her. “So sorry. I’m told he wept right there, as if he were a child.” She dropped her eyes and twisted her fingers together. “I’m not advising you one way or the other,” she said, choosing her words slowly and carefully. “’Tisn’t my place. Just thought you should know.”

Weary, Rose had let her eyelids drift closed and allowed the sound of the serving woman’s voice to lull her into sleep. When she woke, Sela was gone.

That had been hours ago, she thought. At the moment, she drifted somewhere between awake and asleep, her mind filled with a white mist that drowned out unwelcome thoughts and brought on a soothing, if false, comfort.

She twined her fingers in the ends of her hair, gazed at the fire. *When the last coal winks out, then I will choose. And then I will truly sleep, and let the morning bring what it may ...*

With her eyes half closed and her back to the door, she could hear everything so much more keenly than she might during the day. Had she ever been awake so late before? She heard the wind coming in over the ocean; she heard the soft chittering of a mouse Edge had somehow missed, snug in his cranny between the wall stones. She heard the soft sound of footsteps as they pattered down the stairs that led to her chamber.

The door opened with a near-silent snick, just wide enough to let someone small and slender gain entrance. They brought with them the wild, salty smell of the ocean and a strange, musky tang.

The footsteps pattered close to her bed, close enough that Rose could hear the soft, light sound of the person's breath. Cold hands slipped out to snug the quilt up around her shoulders and to plump the pillow beneath her head without disturbing her rest.

The person hesitated just a bit, then circled the bed soundlessly to take a closer look at the fire. Tirsah, Rose noted absently. Who else could it have been? Her hair was wildly disheveled, her nightgown was buttoned one-off from throat to ankle, and her feet were bare. She did not look at Rose's face, but made to reach for the poker and stir the fire back up.

"Don't!" The word slipped out before Rose could stop herself.

Her cousin calmly put the poker back in its place and folded her hands together. "I knew you were awake," Tirsah said quietly. "We'd best speak our pieces here and now, while there's still time."

Rose fingered the edge of her pillow slip and said nothing. Tirsah let out a soft breath. "I know you know what's come about. Are you angry? I'd be furious if the shoe were forced onto the other foot. But I swear to you, before the words left my lips I didn't know what they would be."

"It doesn't matter."

"Liar. It does matter." Tirsah sank down on the bed and shook Rose's shoulder. "I mean this. Law or no law, magery or none, I can have us a dozen leagues away by daybreak if you want me to."

Rose half smiled. "No."

Tirsah pounded the bed with one small fist. "But why? You shouldn't be bound to pay the price for what people have done without thinking, myself included. Cousin, it's your own life. I've told you a hundred times or more that's so."

"Then I'll make my own choices." Rose let her eyes drift nearly shut. "Leave it, Tirsah."

She could just, between her eyelashes, still see the flicker of the dying fire. *I have been through the fire these past mornings and evenings.* She remembered, suddenly, that when girls entered their growing years -- when breasts began to bud and hips began to curve -- they threw their corn dollies and cloth poppets into birthday bonfires to cast away their youth. Their toys burned to ashes to symbolize their growing up.

Boys, too, cast their tin horses and lead soldiers into the flames, but they could collect the melted metal and use it to make part of their first man-sized fishing knives. Sharp metal knives.

But not content with that, the very, very richest of men saved their coins for prized knives of silver. She'd heard once that where there were silver mines, men would put ore into a mighty furnace and smelt away all the impurities.

Just as happens with people.

For one person or another, and for as many reasons as there were people, there would be a fire burning forever.

It's what comes out of the flames that matters. And me? I am not what I was. That's all I know. Am I ash? Am I a thing to mold? Or have I been tried and come out the other side a different thing altogether?

So far as the world knew, Rose was dead. Once she'd even so much as said "yes" to a man, a woman could never look at another. Not if he beat her or decided he was weary of her; not if he abandoned her like a used handkerchief; not if he died in a war, or in a tavern brawl, or in a fall down the stairs. She'd given her hand to Cloud and bound herself to him forever, for good or for ill. And he had used that power to strike her down.

She could leave with Tirsah, and within a week be so far from Kirree-on-Sea that no one knew her name or had even heard of Lorn's unlucky daughter. They might be able to make their way alone. She might someday find another man, a kind man, who'd have her as his wife, but -- no, there again, she'd be caught. Any mage would be able to read her and know she wasn't free.

What then? Remove themselves to another town and start all over again?

I will not live out my life running and running.

Tirsah waited patiently enough for her answer, but Rose could feel the almost unnoticeable quiver of her cousin's hand as it shook on her shoulder. She slanted her glance backward and saw that Tirsah had gone pale beneath her sun-browned skin, and her eyes were so wide open that a ring of white showed all around the green. Yet she could see, too, from the set of her cousin's lips that she'd meant her promise. If Rose gave the word, Tirsah would leave everything dear to her there and spirit them both away like will-o-the-wisps in the middle of the night.

Rose turned away with a shudder. She knew what it would cost her cousin if she chose to leave. But if she chose to stay ...

* * * * *

"Hsst!"

Paedro startled and sat bolt upright, staring out into the night. The mourners had left at last, he'd thought. Had one come back? Surely they hadn't spoken to him.

"Hsst!" the voice repeated. "Over here. Behind the wall." A pale hand beckoned.

Paedro shuddered. So small, so white -- corpselike --

A head poked out from around the corner, surmounted by a wild tangle of red hair. Mims. It was only young Mims. "Come here," she insisted. "Now!"

He glanced down at Cloud. If his friend had heard a thing, he gave no indication of it. "Bide here," he whispered. "I'll be back in a moment."

Mims waited, impatient as a coiled spring, for him to join her. He drew up short at her appearance of wild grief -- face ravaged with tears, hair filled with ashes.

She half laughed and half sobbed at him. "I know what you're thinking," she said. "You thought I was Rose when you saw me first. Didn't you? But it's only Mims, once and always."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Sorry gets no one nowhere. You've heard my sorry story. I've heard that he -- Brach -- was to get the full punishment. That the truth?"

"Tonight. Unless you object."

"Object? I wish they'd let me do it!" She dashed her hand against her eyes. "Everyone knows about me now. But what other fate is there for the bastard brat of the village madwoman? 'Well, her mother was a whore, so she must be a whore, too. That soldier paid her for her goods. Why can't I have a bit of that myself?'" Her voice rose higher and higher, sharp and mocking. "I may as well set up shop for myself down on the beach. Only a farthing! Come and have a turn at plowing the sweetest field you ever saw!"

"Mims, stop." Paedro gripped her arm. "You know that's not so."

"It might as well be. You know that as well as I do."

"Then tell me what I can do about it," the prince begged. "Tell me how to help, and I'll do what you ask."

She dashed away another tear. "You won't."

"I will."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I can't prove myself." He spread his hands. "But I've made the offer. It's for you to decide if you'll take it."

He waited. Mims bit deeply into her lip, red as the rest of her face was white. "Fine, then," she said at last. "When you go back to Amahpre, take me with you."

Paedro blinked. "With me?"

"There's nothing for me here. There never has been." On her face, both fear and grief mingled with a deep stubbornness. "Take me to the King's City with you."

"Mims." He softened his grip on her arm. His heart beat fast. "Mims, not as my wife. I'll have no wife from the sea or the islands, if I ever do take a mate."

She flashed him a look of disdain and knocked his hand sharply away. "You stupid cockerel! Do you think that's what I wanted? I want no man."

"I don't understand, then. What would I take you for?"

"Do you think I care? But I swear that if you don't take me, I'll run by myself. I won't stay here anymore. I can't! Take me to the city and let me scrub out some burgher's chamber pots, or send me to the Sisters of Mercy, but help me get away from here and let me fall or rise on my own luck where I go next. But either way, Paedro, I'll leave this place before tomorrow night."

Paedro pressed his hands to his forehead.

“Well?” she jeered. “Do you keep your word or not, prince?”

“Of course I do.” He rubbed his eyes. “You’re kin to a chieftain, Mims. I won’t send you to be a maid. If the Sisters of Mercy will have you, I’ll take you to them. I’ll give you the silver angelus to pay your entrance.”

She gave a startling, bitter laugh and reached into the pocket of her bodice to draw out a glittering silver piece. “I have my own already.”

Paedro’s brows drew together. Where had she gotten such a coin? No -- he wouldn’t ask. None of his concern. He nodded only, signifying that it would be enough.

Mims dropped the coin in her pocket. “Tomorrow night,” she insisted as she wrapped her arms around her chest. “Come with me or don’t.”

“If I’m alive to do it, I will.”

“I’ll wait until then to believe you,” she said darkly. “Until then.” She swept her cloak around herself and padded away, silent as she’d come, until she was lost to sight in the deepening fog.

“A hard promise,” Cloud observed quietly from behind him.

“How long have you been watching?”

“Long enough.”

“A hard promise, and a very small payment on a very great sum.” Paedro sat down heavily. “More’s to be asked of both of us before the sun rises. Watch and see, Cloud. Watch and see.”

* * * * *

Rose gave a small sigh and nestled her cheek deeper into her pillow. The fire flickered gently. Dancing within the flames, she half fancied she could see the things she dreamed of, tiny players acting the future out before her eyes. If she allowed Tirsah to stay ...

She could see the arbor on a sunny day, the snow just melted, Benec and Tirsah walking hand in hand. Tirsah wore a loose smock of her usual wheaten homespun, while he’d dressed himself in the fine tunic and trews of a rich man and had the badge of the chieftain’s family sewn to his collar. Tirsah pointed to a drooping tree, her forehead furrowed with concern. Benec peered up, listened to something Tirsah said, then nodded his head and gave her a boost up into the branches. He watched and waited, spoke a word to her, and put up his arms to lift her carefully down. His hand smoothed over her waist, rounded just a bit where it had not been so before.

Rose’s lips parted as she dreamed on, fascinated. Images and scenes flashed before her eyes, each one rolling into the next. Blossoms burst up rich and full on the trees, and Tirsah slipped past Benec to hide behind them, grinning at him through the branches with one hand on her belly, round as a ball. Benec ran forward and caught her easily, swinging her around in his arms and lifting her high for a kiss.

The sky darkened. Rose smelled fresh honey and the richness of harvest just ended, fragrant as a cedar box filled with perfumes. Tirsah and Benec lay idly underneath an apple tree, arms wound casually about one another. She'd grown up to her chin with child, and they laughed at how she looked like an oak tree with a gall on it. *Time to shed your acorns*, Benec whispered into her ear and got both a jab to the ribs and a kiss in reply.

Then there was a grassy dell, and Tirsah beneath it with Benec supporting her shoulders. She heard the cry of a newborn ...

The joyous pictures faded into a gray fog as Rose closed her eyes. *But what if I ask Tirsah to leave?*

She imagined that she heard noise -- the hectic, harsh clatter of a thousand men and women as they barged through streets roughly paved with cobblestones. Amahpre, just as the stories spoke of it.

Loud voices hawked vegetables, salted pork, and tomatoes half rotted from the sun. Rose had her hand on a loaf of bread, stale and dry. She counted a scraping of coppers to see if they had enough. Tirsah waited for her back at the stall they leased, selling ribbon-weaving and simple charms; all they could afford the makings for.

Tirsah's son had been born sickly because they hadn't money for the herbs she needed to give him strength and had died not long since. Burying him had taken all their remaining hoard, and now they had just barely enough coin to buy stale bread.

In time there would be more money, and better things to eat, and even a small storefront to live over. But they never wore better than secondhand garments and never went to bed with their stomachs full; they grew old without kith or kin. And when Tirsah died of drinking foul water, Rose was left all alone ... And one day, she knew, she would look out of their unpainted window and see an old man. Once tall as a yew tree, now bent double with age, he would stumble through the crowd with a walking stick in either hand, rheumy eyes looking from right to left, still seeking the woman and child who'd left him thirty years before....

No. Rose shook her head hard, back and forth. *No! I will not. I will not pay Tirsah with such cold coin, all for loving me.*

Then what must I do, to survive, if I stay here?

Rose pondered quietly for a few long moments and exhaled a long, deep breath when she had finished. It was enough. It would have to be enough.

Tirsah shook her cousin's shoulder hard and called to her in a voice sharp with concern. "Rose? Rose!"

Rose sat up and let the quilt slide away from her. She looked at her cousin as though through the muzziness of a dream, put her hand over Tirsah's stomach, and shook her head. "We'll stay," she said with quiet ferocity. "Your life is with Benec. I'll make my own."

Tirsah gasped. "How --"

Rose threw her head back and laughed. "It doesn't matter! I know, that's all. I've done with explaining. Let the future come. I know what it holds for me now."

She kicked her blankets aside and slid out of bed. Ohe, the icy touch of the floor was welcome on her hot feet! She made for her workbasket, tucked beneath the foot of the bed, and hauled it atop the bed. She threw the lid open and fumbled through it until her fingers closed on what she wanted -- the long, sharp pair of shears she used to cut the threads when a piece of weaving was finished.

"Rose, no!" Her cousin's hand closed about her wrist.

Rose looked at Tirsah in mild surprise and pushed her back. "Do you think I'd do that?" Serene as a swan, she lifted the scissors to her hair, just below the curve of her neck, and cut. Streams of red-gold hair cascaded to her feet.

"Rose!"

"It's my hair." She lifted a heavy tress on the other side and set it free. "I'll do what I want with it."

Tirsah sat back on the bed with a thud. After a moment, she crossed her legs beneath her. She watched Rose through narrowed eyes, and then the faintest of smiles touched her mouth. "Make a proper job of it, then," she said. "Do the thing as it should be done."

Rose flashed her a look over her shoulder. "I will," she said simply. "I know myself now."

Tirsah folded her hands beneath her chin. "And who are you?"

Rose fell silent for a moment, snipping at her hair. "I am Briar," she said at last. "You didn't lie, Tirsah. Did you know? Rose is dead. Briar lives instead. I've broken her chains and set her free." She fingered her life-lock. "Enough of this, too." One snip of the scissors and she cut it free. Her bare foot kicked it into the fire. "Help me braid another one, cousin."

Tirsah stood and put a small hand on her cousin's shoulder. She tilted the small, lovely face down so that she could examine it. "You're wrong, you know. You've not destroyed yourself wholly, only just come into your own ... Briar-Rose."

She fingered her scissors. "Think you?"

"I do."

"Myself and thorns," she said, tasting the thought. "It's right."

"Ohe! You'll do." Tirsah kissed her cousin's cheek. "You've gone through the fire and come out true, dear one. Give me a bit of ribbon, Briar-Rose."

Briar-Rose plunged her hand into her workbasket. She rejected a strand of silver and a hank of white thread, narrowed her eyes at a slip of purple ribbon, and finally handed it to Tirsah.

Tirsah's gentle hands combed through the newly short red hair and separated out a lock. The light touch soothed Briar-Rose and helped to salve away her hurts.

"I never wanted to marry, you know," Briar-Rose said softly. "But what choice did I have? None. No choice is given to the daughter of a king, who's neither mage nor anything else special. But Briar-Rose -- she can choose as she likes, and --" She took in a deep breath. "-- I choose to have Cloud."

She felt Tirsah's reaction, disapproving, understanding, wishing that it could be otherwise, knowing why Briar-Rose had made her choice. "You're sure?"

"Very." Briar-Rose grinned like a mischievous sprite. "And whether he regrets it or not, I'll never be sorry. He'll know, in time, fully, what he's to discover only a little when the dawn comes."

She turned to Tirsah and touched her cousin's face unafraid, searching the blue eyes with her own. "But you -- be happy, love," she whispered. "Tirsah, you always thought you looked like a small mistake beside me, a slip of thyme next to my rose, but you were all the light I ever wanted. I know about you and Benec. I've always known. You've waited so long. Be happy with him."

Tirsah squeezed Briar-Rose's shoulder. "And so I will be," she said simply. "Now, let's finish with your hair. The daylight is almost here."

"And I will be ready," Briar-Rose responded, soft as a breath. "Oh, yes. I will be very ready for Master Cloud, when he sees me next ..."

Chapter Eleven

The sun hovered just on the cusp of rising and the day was almost born when Edge came down to Anno's cellar. She smiled as she came, but her expression boded no good for the prisoners now housed there.

Chirre watched her creep down the steps, one leg before another and another. No other lady would dare come so close to desperate criminals -- but *she* didn't fear them. Why would she?

"I knew you'd come sooner or later," he murmured. "Why did you take so long?"

"I choose my own time," the Catkin replied, regarding him with the unblinking stare of her kind. She jostled a loose-woven string bag around her neck. "Ware -- I come further in!"

As if he could stop her. He watched, lethargic, as the Catkin picked her way toward him on all fours, dainty as a courtier. Her lean hips swayed, and her tail made sinuous loops and arcs in the air above her long spine. Naked as usual, with only her sleek golden pelt for covering, he supposed that she could be considered enticing as a woman, yet he could only regard her with dispassion.

Just as well, for he'd been barred from action, from fight or flight by means of strong bonds, his wrists and ankles shackled with chains light as hemp but sturdier than iron. He didn't remember them being clapped on and wondered vaguely how they'd managed it.

Brach, bound equally well, slept near Chirre's side. His mouth hung slack. Half the time he snored; the other half, he moaned in pain remembered and real.

Chirre felt no sympathy for the man. His own cat scratches throbbed, though he'd been salved and bandaged from chest to chin.

Edge paused at their feet to lower her string bag into the straw scattered about to soften the stone floor. She pawed and sniffed at the loose strands. "Fresh," she commented in clear

disapproval. She arranged her tail neatly about her feet and put her head to a side to stare at him.

Chirre gave his chains a half-hearted jangle. "Do you think I'll hurt you?"

She sneered. "Maybe I hurt you."

Chirre lifted one shoulder in a shrug, though it pained him, and turned his head to look at Brach. He remembered ... he *thought* he remembered ... he'd gazed at one of the wall stones while a tall man in a dark cloak worked over Brach. White the stone had been, with more paint left on it than the rest, and a strange interlocking pattern of circles etched on.

Brach had taken one look at the cloaked man's canvas-wrapped pouch of stone tools and commenced such a cursing and fighting as could have blistered the air. But by the time Chirre's eyes traced the stone's pattern three times, the bravo had shrieked and blubbered like a wench.

Someone had taken as much care for him -- after -- as they would for a nobleman. They'd wrapped his legs in strips of soft leather, peasant-style, near to the tops of his thighs, and firmly bandaged his wound with clean white linen. The spicy scent of a healing poultice and an expensive opium tincture hung in the air. He noticed, idly, that not a drop of blood stained the linen, for all of Brach's thrashing about.

As his mind wandered, Edge picked her way closer to Chirre and sniffed him delicately with her lips drawn back. She nudged at his own bandages and made a noise of displeasure. "My choice, you would have bled to death."

He said nothing. Her eyes narrowed, and her tail switched impatiently through the straw. "Anno bid Sela send bread," she snapped, jerking her head at the string bag. "And water. This lasts you all today. Hear?"

Chirre glanced at the bag, not a small one, crammed full. "Back in the city," he said, soft and low, "they'll give a doomed man a good, heavy last meal. When will they hang us? When the sun comes up?"

Edge sneezed in distaste. "You wait." She gave him a fey smile, sharp teeth a-gleam. "Kirree has own ways of punishment. Best punishment. You see soon."

"But they will hang us. Won't they?"

"Maybe." She tossed her mane. "Maybe not. Depends."

The warm, earthy smell of the bread grew stronger, and his stomach twisted. "On what?" he asked, wary.

"This, that." She laid a hand on his grumbling guts and flexed her dangerous claws just a little, barely enough to snag his jerkin. "Tell me now. Where is Ione?"

Chirre's breath stopped. "Can't tell," he rasped. "Can't tell, can't tell, can't tell ..."

The claws pricked his skin. "Never?"

"Not ever!" His voice broke. "Never, never, never --"

Edge began to purr. "I tell you a story," she said abruptly. "Once and once, a poor man loved a queen. She scorn him, say he is 'barely good for washing feet. No good for loving.' But she sees he is loyal, thinks he is useful, and bides her time. One day she says, 'do this task for me, and I reward you with a kiss.' So he does what she ask, and he kisses her. She say, 'you are a good servant, now do this. And then kiss me again.' So he gives himself to her, a pretty toy to play with, and he thinks, now I am happy. She say, 'lover, lover,' then she bite him with the poison dirk-teeth she hide under her pretty lips."

A shiver rippled through Chirre's body from top to toe. Edge nestled her claws deeper into his gut. "I ask again: where is Ione?"

He shook his head.

The Catkin sighed. "I see you on the terrace, how you look only out to sea," she said quietly. "No one else sees. I do. You know where lady has fled. You know how. Tell me, and I bring you wine. I bring gelded tomcat more sleepy-powder to stop him mewing so."

"She's safe," a stranger's voice whispered -- surely not his own. "Safe and away."

He barely felt a prickle as the Catkin gripped his raw throat. "Lisssten to me!" she hissed. "Time is ssshort. Tell me where she iss!"

Chirre shook his head and closed his eyes. A wave of dizziness swamped him. The Catkin's voice faded to a whisper in his ears, no more than a brush of wind without meaning as he followed the lights that danced behind his eyes. In, out, up, down, around, sideways, through; in, up, around, down, out, through ...

"Bah!" Edge flung herself to her feet, stalked to Brach, and kicked him fiercely in the ribs.

The man convulsed himself awake with a squeal like a stuck pig, thrashing about and churning up the straw. His face was clammy, and great beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He retched and brought up bile.

Edge's ears flattened in disgust at the sour stink as Brach collapsed backward into what remained of his straw bed. As he breathed in great, noisy gasps, she leaned forward on her haunches and favored him with one of her most alarming grins. "Awake?"

Stark terror etched itself on the man's features as he looked up and saw the toothy, sweetly malicious Catkin face that hovered above him. With an animal noise of fear, he tried to scrabble backwards and hide in the straw.

"This one, he will not say where Ione has gone," she purred with a tilt of her head at Chirre. "Maybe you know."

Brach gave a wild shudder. "I'd have said," he managed to choke out around his terror. "Swear, I'd have told you if I knew. Swear. Don't --!"

The Catkin laid one paw on top of his bandages. "You lie, pig man." She squeezed, ignoring his screech of pain.

When he could speak again, he wheezed through white lips: "You're not supposed to be down here, I bet. They'll hear you; they'll come stop you."

"No one hears you. Everyone has gone to terrace but for me." She squeezed again, harder this time. "Never insult Catkin! Anno is soft punisher. I take revenge. Best revenge." Her lips curled back from her teeth. "I bite you next!"

Brach shook his head, desperate. "Don't, don't! I'll tell you anything, swear I will."

"Last warning! Tell me where Ione is. Maybe I don't bite then."

She lowered her lips to his ear. "Shrimp man, he looks out to sea while we are outside," she purred. "He sees something I not quick enough to see. Tell me: where Ione goes, out on the sea?"

Brach took a terrified peek at Chirre. The smaller man's eyes burned hotter than coal brands. He shook his head and let his gaze drift pointedly to Brach's bandages. They'd tethered both men up good and sound, but if he got free somehow ... Chirre was a small man, but he had great strength in his hands.

"If I say, he'll kill me once he's got a chance," Brach quavered.

Edge's smile flickered. "I sweeten the deal, pig man." She undid the tie on the string bag full of bread and poked delicately inside for a moment.

When she drew back her hand, she held a small, stoppered vial. "Pure opium syrup." She raised it to the torch light. "I steal from Anno. Enough to send you sleep for days. Pain maybe gone by time you next wake."

Brach's eyes dilated. He licked his lips. "What do you want for it?"

"Truth." She tossed the vial from one palm to another, taunting him. "I promise I make sure Chirre not escape chains. I give you opium. All you do is say truth: where is Ione?"

Brach's eyes darted between Chirre and the bottle of painkiller. Finally, he nodded. "Gone," he rasped. "She'd not stay here if she saw us caught. She'll have headed for Amahpre. That's all I know, I swear!"

Edge laughed in triumph. "See? Not so hard."

"Give me the opium, then," he begged. "It hurts!"

"First I tie him, then I give you bottle," she scolded. Picking with careful paw-fingers, she unlaced one leg's worth of leather bindings and piled straw over his bare skin to keep it warm.

Chirre sat loose-limbed and stared at the wall. He barely seemed to notice when Edge undid his chains and looped the leather straps around his wrists, passing them through a hook on a stone high above his head. "See? Tight." She gave the bindings a pat. "No fear."

She hunkered down on her haunches and gave Chirre a curious look. "Too tight?"

"Give me the vial!" Brach wailed, threshing miserably. "You promised! Give it here!"

Edge stood with an easy grace. She stretched nonchalantly and lifted her arms above her head. Every sleek, supple, feminine line of her stood boldly outlined against the torchlight, on display for both men. Brach's whimper turned into a shriek as his wound site reacted, furrowing bolts of white-hot pain through his body from top to toe.

She laughed. "You want opium? Catch, then."

The vial arced through the air and landed in the middle of his chest. She turned and slithered gracefully up the steps, but paused at the top to glance over her shoulder and favor them with a purr and a smile. "Game over. You lose."

Brach didn't hear her for his struggles with the vial. He managed to fumble the cork loose and put the bottle to his mouth, sucking at the contents.

He tasted them as they passed over his tongue.

Water. Nothing but clear spring water.

At the same moment, Chirre realized that while Edge had tied his straps tight to the loop in the wall ... the straps were easily twenty feet long, and the cellar was only ten feet square.

A quiet man can only be pushed so far before he breaks.

Chapter Twelve

Brach's screams followed Edge all the way up the cellar stairs and out into the pantry. She smiled to herself, a quiet Catkin smile.

I say so, she thought, contented at last. *Catkin know revenge. Best revenge.*

Edge ignored the last of the muffled sounds from the cellar and slithered toward the pantry's exit. Her ears pricked forward in curiosity. Women's voices chattered close-by-hand in the kitchen, quick and low. Ohe -- almost ready, then!

She sniffed the air in satisfaction. Her nose filled with a dozen smells, each better than the last. Musty-sweet woman's skin, the wild-hay scent of new cloth passed from hand to hand, fresh-baked bread, cider warmed on the hob, and *fish* frying! Tunny! She shot forward to claim her share.

Sela turned the fish and released another juicy cloud of steam. "Edge!" Tirsah coaxed. "Coo-ee! Edge, where are you? Sela, have you seen --"

"I haven't, and don't ask me about her again. Aren't I already cooking sun-fin tunny to try and lure the beast?"

Edge hooted with laughter. They knew her well at last!

On a second thought, she slid the pantry door shut. It wouldn't do for them to know just yet what she'd done. Time enough later for them to see what the cat caught in *her* mousetrap!

"Edge!" Tirsah called again.

Edge grinned to herself and darted into the warmth and light of the kitchen. The pan of sizzling fish drew her like a magnet. She took the most direct path, over a heaped pile of rough white cloth and against Sela's ankles. She ignored the serving woman's indignant screech as she clawed a chunk of meat from the iron pan and popped it into her mouth.

Chewing daintily, she turned and blinked at a small figure hunched into the warm nook between stove and wall. Mims. Her feet were bare and dirty, her hair tangled, and her face marred with the track of tears. She held her lips closed tight, as if she were afraid of what words might escape against her will.

Edge swallowed her mouthful. On an impulse, she padded over to the girl and snuffed at her. She scented both anger and fear rising from her bruised flesh like steam from a pot.

Finding herself oddly sympathetic, she smoothed down the red hair tangled around Mims's face. Damp eyes met her own curious slanted ones, but not for long, darting down and to the side. Mims raised her hand to hide her face as her shoulders shook.

Soon you know, thought Edge. *For you, Mims. I make revenge for me and Rose, but also for you. Soon, you be comforted.*

She butted her head hard against Mims's calf, ignoring the girl's flinch. After a moment, a thin hand came down to tangle itself in her curls. It hurt, but Edge forced her muscles to relax and even brought out a purr as she caressed her cheek against Mims's shin. *Peace, little girl,* she thought at her, hard as she could. *Peace.*

"Edge," Tirsah said quietly.

Edge gave Mims a last gentle nudge, freed her hair, and turned to gaze at the small lady mage. She'd dressed herself, Sela, and Rose already, and from the looks of it wanted Edge to come next.

The Catkin narrowed her eyes as she considered their garb. Not what she would have chosen to make a proper show, but they'd neither fur nor feathers, so it would have to do. "Time is now?" she inquired.

"As soon as you're dressed, we'll be ready." Tirsah held out a length of undyed whole-cloth. "Are you still willing?"

"Still so." Edge leaned over and stretched out her arm, far as it would go, to hook another bite of the tunny. She nibbled at it, enjoying the salty burst of oil in her mouth, then popped the rest of the chunk between her lips. She held her arms up as she'd seen children do. "Fix me."

Tirsah knelt and gathered the bundle of cloth into her arms. "Hold your arms out, not up," she scolded. "Sit still."

Edge shivered as the cold material fell around her shoulders. Tirsah's hands worked carefully and quickly as she draped the cloth, looping here and pinning there. She laid a double thickness over the Catkin's face and bent in close, as if to tuck back a stray golden curl, but whispered in her ear: "I saw you coming up from the cellar, little one."

"Saw you come up from beach last night."

Tirsah's lips firmed together, but Edge knew that hid a grudging smile. "You're too smart for your own good, kitten."

Edge preened in her shroud.

"You'd have to prove that by me," Sela sniffed as she removed the iron tunny pan from the hob. "Tirsah, have they left the tomb yet? Oh!" Her hand flew to her mouth. "Rose, I'm that sorry --"

The last of the women, swaddled entirely in white cloth, shook her head. "No apologies, old mother," it said. A ghostly hand floated up through yards of wound fabric to brush Sela's arm. "Tirsah?"

Tirsah's eyelashes drifted shut. "They're on their way," she said after a moment. "Coming around the front now. They'll be here as soon as we can make our way out."

Sela tucked in a bit of her shroud. "Rose -- you're sure?" she faltered. "Very sure?"

"I am Briar-Rose, and I've made up my mind," the girl said, her sweet voice as harsh and final as the tide. "You'll see."

Edge struggled to her feet and kicked at her shroud in irritation. "You hear her," she said. "You coming, come. Or stay. But I go with sharp one."

Sela sighed and dropped her forehead into her hands. "Then I come too," she said at last. "I hope you won't be sorry."

"I won't be," Briar-Rose was grim and sure. "You can be sure of that. I won't be. My story is only just begun."

* * * * *

The walk around the stronghold never seemed so long or so hard as it did in that early morning sunrise. The air seemed made of liquid ice. Cloud stumbled as he put one foot in front of the other, step-step-step-step, neither able to watch where he stepped nor see where he went. How long had he walked? Surely for hours. The sun rose so slowly; perhaps it had frozen, too ...

The first snowflake fell gently as a kiss on his cheek and melted in a breath on his skin. He opened in eyes in surprise to blink at the sky. The sun had risen behind a thick wall of gray clouds and released only a thin, watery light upon them. Frost crushed the ground beneath their feet.

"Did you hear me, boy?"

Cloud's forehead creased as a gentle murmur of voices washed over his ears. Tiny flecks of white fell from the sky and swallowed the whole of his attention. They landed on his face, little pinpoints of cold that melted like tears.

A gloved hand shook his shoulder. He shrugged it off.

"Is he well?" someone asked.

"I don't know," another voice replied, worried. "He nearly froze last night."

"And no more than he deserves," a third voice snorted. "Cloud, boy!" A hand seized him by the jaw and dragged his head around. He stared at the dark hair and dark eyes,

confused. The sky didn't have eyes, did it? Nor did it have a mouth to speak. Was it a sprite, come down on the snow?

"Dazed," the sky said abruptly. "Cloud, do you hear me?" The hand shook him again. "Lorn, give him some of the mulled wine in that skin."

Cold metal thrust itself between his teeth, followed by a choking rush of liquid so hot that it scalded his tongue and sent him into a coughing fit. The world shrank in and belled out around him. His feet slipped from beneath him and the ground rose up.

Hands caught him before he hit the flagstones. "Cloud, drink," the voice coaxed. "Here, I'll do it, and slowly this time." The metal tip of the wineskin slid between his lips. Careful hands tilted his head and the skin back together. A sip of the blazing wine glided into his mouth. He managed to swallow, gasping in a deep breath of the frozen air as the liquid burned a trail to his stomach. He blinked as his vision swam with tears and finally cleared.

"Cloud?" He recognized Anno now, with the small skin of wine in hand, and Paedro, hunkered down in front of him. Lazy snowflakes frosted his friend's hair and made him look old before his time. "Can you stand?"

Cloud winced, realizing for the first time that his knees rested on the rough shell path that led to the terrace. He'd gotten soaked with melting snow and frost. His legs ached with cold. "How did I get down here?"

"It doesn't matter." Paedro gave him his hand and hauled the boy to his feet.

Cloud rubbed his frozen arms and looked about. They stood at the heavy iron gate to the terrace -- himself, Paedro, Anno, and Lorn, without another soul in sight. The sun trembled on the lip of the horizon. "I don't remember leaving the tomb," he said slowly. "Have we been gone long?"

"Not so long as that." Anno bent over to peer into Cloud's eyes. "Best we get this done with quickly as possible, brother," he murmured.

"He even know what he's here for anymore? Not too addled?"

"He's naturally daft; we both know that." Anno dusted off Cloud's shoulders. "Give him another sip from my flask," he directed Paedro. "Not too much. It's powerful stuff. Lorn half drowned him."

"Better if I'd finished what I started," Lorn muttered. "Go on, then, guzzle down some more. Wake yourself up."

The prince pressed his lips together until they turned white, but said nothing. He guided the flask to Cloud's mouth and tilted it back so that he could drink. Cloud took a tentative sip, wincing as the sharp bite of it hurt his throat.

He shuddered as he drank, as he remembered it all. Everything.

"Better now?" Anno inquired very politely.

Cloud's cheeks warmed with shame and liquor. "I'm not that much of a child." He thrust the flask back at Anno.

Anno accepted it and tucked it into his belt. "So, you think yourself a man?" Not allowing Cloud a chance to reply, he turned to his brother and held a hand up to catch the drifting snowflakes. "Do you think we'll have a blizzard?"

"Signs are there. Can't tell yet. Maybe so."

"Quickly, then!" Anno clapped his hands together once, twice, three times. He wheeled on Cloud. "Are you ready? Ready, ready, young Cloud? Ready to make your choice?"

"He's promised," Paedro protested.

Anno's eyes flashed. "Let him speak for himself for once then, prince! What sort of man will Cloud be if he fills his head with others' thoughts and his mouth speaks their words? Let him make his own choices and rise or fall as he is able to!"

"But --"

"Enough of this!" Anno pressed his palm over Paedro's mouth. "Be silent until you know better."

Paedro's eyes widened in alarm. Breath huffed from his nostrils in clouds of steam on the frozen air, but his mouth remained sealed. He picked at his lips, pressing his fingers to their seam. A dull moaning poured from his throat.

"Perhaps next time, you might heed me when I suggest you should be quiet." Anno rounded on Cloud. "Boy! Speak up now, and speak quickly. Are you ready to do what you've promised?"

"I promised," Cloud said without any pause for thought. "I gave my word. I'll go where you lead."

"You're sure?" Anno pressed. "No going back. Say your word, and say it now."

"No!" Cloud threw back his shoulders and, for a moment, stood tall as the man he would become after the morning's end. "Let's get it done."

"Very well. Open the doors!"

Lorn pulled back the heavy iron gate. It squealed along the hard flagstone, where the day before it had opened without a sound. A gust of sharp ocean air blasted out from the sea and engulfed their senses.

Anno pointed at the empty flagstones. "Go in, Cloud. Go in and play your part."

Cloud hesitated. "You'll tell me what to do?"

Anno shook his head. "No, not me." At the end of the terrace, a torch flared into life and a man appeared where none had been before. He moved toward them in the early morning mist, a face appearing in the gloom. "That's for him to do."

The man smiled at them. "Welcome," he said, his voice mocking them.

Benec.

* * * * *

Tirsah laid her hand on Briar-Rose's shoulder. "Now," she said at last. "Go."
 Briar-Rose smiled beneath her shroud.

* * * * *

Benec hung the torch on a wall bracket and beckoned with a wide, lazy arc of his long arm. "Come on in, boys," he urged, "Nothing to bite you here. Yet. I've looked forward to this for, oh, seems like a long time now."

Anno pushed at the small of Cloud's back. "Go," he ordered.

Cloud dared not look back at Paedro. The prince's muffled moaning had subsided, and he could hear the sound of his friend's footsteps behind him. He lived, at least.

He swallowed roughly as he crossed to the center of the flagstones. Benec laughed and gestured him further in. Nausea twisted his empty stomach.

He looked at the man he'd once called friend and felt weary as the world. "Is it a duel between us, then?"

"Not yet," Benec said cryptically. "Could be, later."

"I don't understand you."

"You will." Benec turned on his heel and stalked away, kicking loose sand into a blizzard. "Come, stand beside me."

Cloud picked his way more slowly. His head swam, and he put a hand to it to steady himself.

"Dizzy?" Benec asked. "Pity. Here, take this." He stuffed a sprig of something green into Cloud's hand.

Startled, he near dropped it, but his fingers remembered themselves in time. He stared down at the strange, curling plant that lay on his palm light as a feather. "What is this?"

"Angelica." Benec poked at the herb. "Do you know how to recognize any plants?"

"Poisonous mushrooms. Lemongrass and wild sorrel."

"In other words, nothing but what I taught you." Benec snorted. He reached to his belt, pulled out another sprig of green, and held it out. "Don't know what this is either?"

"You know I don't. I was never taught to look."

"Never thought to look," Benec corrected. "There's life and death in everything. Both of these look like a tasty mouthful, don't they?" He crushed the second sprig between his fingers, and released a small puff of a foul, rotting-meat stench. "Smells good, doesn't it?"

Cloud's guts twisted. "Am I to eat them?"

"Hardly! Take a bite of this one --" Benec held up his stinking snip of green. "-- and you'd be dead before you'd tasted it properly. They make belladonna from this. Mandrake

plant. I've got death in my hands, lad." He pointed at what Cloud held. "And that's angelica, as I said. A healing herb. See? Life and death, life and death."

Cloud closed his hand around his sweet-smelling green herb. "I don't understand. What am I to do?"

Benec looked past him, to Lorn and Anno. The two men leaned against the wall of the Great Hall, arms crossed over their chests. "Should I show him?"

Anno glanced out the open door. "The snow's picking up. More time won't help," he said. "Call the players, Benec."

"Players?"

Benec flashed him a wicked grin. "Watch this, boy." He held his hands above his head and clapped them hard together. "Sleepers, arise!" His voice boomed and echoed against the high stone walls. "Come and meet your bridegroom."

A blast of wind that cut to the bone roared in from the ocean, scouring curtains of sand against them with the harshness of ground glass. Cloud yelled and covered his eyes. He thought he heard Benec laughing.

When the wind ceased and he dared look again, Cloud dropped his arm and stared in equal dismay and horror. What new magery was this?

Four mounds of whole-cloth surrounded him as points of the compass. They shifted in a slow dance, changing from shapeless bundles into long, narrow figures and back into nameless things even as they moved. Cloud's heart pounded in his throat. Ghosts!

But no, surely not -- for Benec laughed at his obvious startlement. Living creatures lurked beneath those shrouds.

With an almost soundless sigh, the figures arranged themselves on the sand and turned to him.

"We do things a little differently so far out to the sea," Benec said softly. "What d'you think, Cloud?"

"Is one of these the mad child?" he asked, bewildered. "Is she here?"

"What, you can't tell?"

Paedro stamped his boot hard against the floor and startled them into turning and looking at him. A muffled, angry buzz poured from his throat.

Benec grinned at him. "Cat got your tongue?" he asked, amused. "That Anno's work? Just hold on to it for a moment, Prince. You'll get your chance. This is Cloud's turn."

Cloud's jaw tightened. "Not much of a moment if I don't know what to do. You're mocking me."

"A little," Benec agreed. "Did you think it was going to be easy? No? Come on, then, should I take pity on you and tell you what's afoot?"

He waved his arm at the shrouded figures. "This is blind man's choice -- a game that the Catkin play, and a useful one, I think. One of these is the girl you've promised to make a wife. This is your final test. Choose among them. If you make the right choice, then the challenges are over, and we -- I -- let you go in peace with your wife. Choose wrong, and I and my knife meet you on the beach fast as we can toss you over the cliff's edge." He grinned ferally. "Agreed?"

The shrouded figures bent and nodded. Each moved in such unison with her sisters that they seemed but mirror images of one another. "How do I know who she is?" Cloud protested. "They're all the same."

"Are they? Look a little closer."

Paedro stamped his foot again. He buzzed loud and furious.

"Be quiet!" Benec bellowed. "You're blind as he was. He never looked close enough to know Rose for who she was. Now, he's got to learn how to know his future wife. Keep quiet and let him get on with it."

"But --"

"Use your brains, boy!" Benec shoved him forward. "Give the angelica to the one you choose. Do it now, and do it fast!"

So. Cloud understood at last, and it was a bitter dose to swallow. But he deserved it ... oh, yes, he deserved every drop.

He clutched his sprig of herbs tight enough to crush it and gazed at the women, a row of shrouded statues waiting for him.

Look a little closer, Benec had said.

He slid forward through the sand to the first of them, the closest. She lay on her side, nestled on the ground. Her arms and legs were flung about with lazy grace, slender lines just barely visible beneath the fabric. Small legs, small arms. Too small for a grown woman. "You're not her," he dared to accuse. "Who are you?"

The figure rose fluid as a swimmer through water, diving upward through the whole-cloth. At her fullest height, she barely came up to Cloud's waist. Soft hands poked through the cloth and stroked him. He choked and struck at her. "Stop!" he commanded, sickened. "Who are you?"

The creature chuckled. She twined around his legs and rubbed her cheek against his thigh. "I am wild as winds," she said -- no, purred. "You want a taste of me, yes? Sweet as honey, young as spring, tender body to love you hard. You want me for your wife? Yes?" She reached up to touch him, and he shivered as her finger-pads trailed along his flesh. "No?"

"No." He pushed her away. "I don't want you."

Something flew out of the shroud and struck him in the face. A burst of stench overwhelmed him, and his stomach gave up at last. He retched. Mandrake. She'd pelted him with a clump of decaying mandrake!

The creature laughed out loud. "Keep looking!" she advised, and vanished -- utterly vanished! The cloth that had swaddled her fell loose and empty to the sands, with nothing left to hold it up. Behind him, Paedro made a strangled sound.

"Do you understand now?" Benec asked.

He did, and could have wept for the hopelessness of it all, for what he'd lost with an hour of playing the fool. He nodded roughly. "I do."

"Perhaps there's hope for you yet."

"Perhaps there isn't."

"That we'll see." Benec clapped his hands together, softer this time. "You heard what she said. Keep looking."

An absolute silence fell. Cloud turned, half afraid of what he might see, but the three shrouded women remained where he'd seen them last. They waited for him patient as the ages.

With his back to fallen Youth, he faced one of the women directly. As if she felt the weight of his eyes, the woman shifted, lifted her head and tilted it at him.

He moved forward slowly, staring. She'd seated herself on a block of stone, and from the way the fabric draped he thought she'd plaited her hands in her lap and crossed her ankles neat as a poppet. No one sat so except by design. A pose, that was it, a deliberate arrangement that suggested modesty and chastity, just as Youth invited wanton lust with her sprawled limbs.

Not many young girls would arrange themselves like that, Cloud realized. Just so would an ... older woman ... sit. An older woman raised with older manners.

"You're not her either," he said softly. "Who are you?"

The figure stood, stiff and awkward, as if her joints had served her for many years, and ached with the bitter cold. One weathered hand slid out from the shroud to touch his cheek, gentle as a mother.

"I'm Old Age," the woman said in a voice rough and soft with years. "There's experience come with a long life. I know joy and I know heartbreak. I could guide you through life. You'd never have to make a choice on your own again. I could show you the right way." Her wrinkled fingers trailed away. "But is that enough of living, Cloud? Will you have me for your wife?"

"No." He swallowed. "Not you. You're not the right one."

"Good." She tucked something into his belt. He didn't have to look, for he smelled it, and knew it to be another clump of mandrake. "Keep looking," the old woman said and vanished just as Youth had done, gone in an instant.

Two left now, only two ... one to his left, and one to his right. They made identical shapeless lumps on the sandy stones, with nothing even to suggest humanity. He could almost imagine that they crouched, weight balanced on the balls of their feet, hands at rest

atop their thighs, but -- they might not be. Or one might and the other mightn't. His head turned, back and forth, from one to the other.

Benec barked out a laugh. "Problems, Cloud?"

"They're just the same." Cloud stared at one, then the other of the immobile mirror images. "No difference at all between them."

"Hah!" Benec leaned against the wall and propped up one of his long legs. "There's plenty of difference. You're not looking close enough."

Cloud frowned. "You mean --"

"Go a little closer, for a start. They won't bite you."

The two women threw their heads up as one and clacked their teeth together with a sound like knucklebones. "Or they might," Benec allowed. "But what do you have to lose? Truly?"

Cloud bit at the inside of his cheek and tasted warm, salty blood. "Will you let me come closer?" he asked quietly, extending one hand to either lady.

They flinched! The first break in their utter concentration. And one moved just a little before the other, who let out a small gasp. Cloud's eyes sharpened in interest. Just a little hint. Was it enough?

The lady to his right ... he turned to her and examined her from head to toe. Not bound in so many layers as her sister, though at first glimpse they seemed equally swaddled. Beneath her shroud, she wore something whiter and thicker than the whole-cloth. It made her look bulkier and bigger, but in truth she was much the smaller of the two.

Fascinated, he stepped closer. As he did, the woman raised her head. A small head. He thought she might wear a white hood, but he could see thick, curling shadows that might be her hair, hair the color of ripe wheat.

Not enough. He couldn't see her face. Could he touch her?

When he stretched his hand out, the woman drew back with a hiss. Yet as she moved, a fragrant cloud of spicy scent wafted from her robes, strong enough even to overpower the mandrake. Cloud closed his eyes and inhaled. Comfrey, he recognized that, and cloves. Mint and cherry bark. Poppies.

He opened his eyes and shook his head at the figure. "You're not her either."

The figure rose. Small, though not quite as small as Youth, she kept her hands to herself. "Who am I?" she asked him.

The answer came to him in a bitter flash of clarity. "You're Woman," he said, understanding at last the simple truth. "Neither young nor old. You know what you want, and you're all that you need."

"But I can give of myself if I choose." She drew a clump of mandrake from some inner pocket and pressed it into his palm.

He inhaled the foul stink of the plant and waited for her to disappear as the others had, to let her whole-cloth billow empty to the stones.

Instead, she tucked her hands back into her shroud. "I have no plans to leave," she said. "I've found what I want."

Benec slipped off the wall. "As have I. My love?"

The woman turned to him and nodded. Though he had to bend nearly double, Benec's hands moved with a gentleness and surety that parted Cloud's lips in astonishment. He unwound the whole-cloth from the woman's face and arranged it on her shoulders.

While he worked, his broad back hid her face from Cloud's view. The long hair spilled free, and Benec bent to touch the woman's lips with his own. Small hands came up briefly to touch the back of his neck.

Cloud's heart gave an unhappy twist. "This is what I've lost," he said abruptly. "I know that. At least show me, Benec, what have you gained?"

"What I waited far too long to claim," Benec pronounced with a triumphant smile in his voice. "Tirsah, show yourself."

Paedro, almost forgotten, made a startled, strangled sound.

Tirsah's head peeped from underneath Benec's arm, hand protectively at rest on it. "Why so surprised?" she asked. "How daft do you think we are, anyway?"

"You seemed to hate each other so."

"People can change." Benec stroked Tirsah's cheek. The warmth and care he held for her glowed in his eyes like the beacon of a lighthouse, welcoming his lover home from too long a voyage at sea. She moved her face, dropped a kiss into his palm -- then looked up in sharp challenge to Cloud. "Tell me, boy," she ordered. "Who is your wife?"

Cloud's jaw clenched. He looked back over his shoulder at the single woman left, still as ever. Not even her chest moved to show that she lived. "Her," he said. "The only one left."

"Is that all she is?" Tirsah slid her arm around Benec's waist. "Are you sure?"

"Of course that's not all she is," Cloud snapped.

"Then what is she?"

"I don't know her!" he cried. "How can I know what she is?"

"Not Youth, not Old Age, not Womanhood either." Tirsah ticked them off on her small fingers. "Who is she, then?" Deep, fathomless eyes caught his own and held them fast. "You know the answer, Cloud. Who do you want for your wife?"

Cloud threw his head back and raised a plaint to the heavens. As if in answer, the snow began to fall thick and fast and cover the ground with a thin white blanket. The winter had won. There was no more time left. He saw what they wanted, saw the wisdom behind it, and the words burst from him. "I want all three of you! Youth and womanhood and old age. Everything in between. I want to learn what I don't know. I want my wife!"

There was a moment of awful silence.

Tirsah nodded, and the pent-up air exploded from Cloud's chest. "Well done," she said.

She raised her finger to indicate the woman behind him. "The lady that remains is your wife. If you want her, ask her to give herself to you."

Cloud turned to the woman, his heart beating a rapid tattoo inside his chest. "Lady?" he asked. "Is it true? You're the one?"

The head beneath the veiling bent slowly. Her hand -- a slim, feminine hand -- rose to beckon him closer.

He went, his own limbs quivering with fear. The angelica in his hands, utterly crushed by now, bled out its rich, sweet scent. The lady had been swathed so thickly that he couldn't see anything beneath her whole-cloth, not hair nor eyes. He could barely hear the sound of her breath as it rasped in and out. A damp spot marred the front of her face veil.

"Don't cry," he begged in alarm as he kneeled in front of her and reached to touch her face. She pulled away from his hand. "Please, lady, don't weep."

She shook her head and spread her hands. *I can't help it.*

"I know that I'm a stranger to you." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Are you as frightened as I am? More?"

He fumbled for her hand and clasped it. "I'll take care of you," he promised, so low that only the two of them could hear. He didn't know how much she would understand. Yet he had to say it; the words burst out, poured from his throat in his need to be understood. "What you need, I'll provide for you. What you want, I'll bring to you. I'll listen to you before anyone else. I'll try to learn to know you. If you can learn to love me, I'll learn to love you. More than that, I can't offer. Will it be enough for you? Please. Please, answer me." He stared into what he thought was her face and begged with all his heart that she would understand.

She gave no indication that she had heard a word he'd said.

Cloud let his breath out slowly and pressed the slip of angelica into her hand. "If you want me, lady, I'm your husband." He bent his head to rest it on her knee. She smelled sweet as honey and fresh as spring. "The choice is yours."

The lady swayed. He heard the intake of breath as she tried to form words and finally spoke, soft as a rush of wind past his ears: "You are already my husband, Cloud."

It was a familiar voice.

Cloud jerked his head up and stared in disbelief. A howling wind roared inside his ears. His heart began to thunder, beating fast -- too fast -- it could not be; it couldn't be her ...

"And I am already your wife." The lady dropped the angelica and lifted unsteady hands to the tucks that held her shroud in place. One pull and it came loose to reveal a veil made of finest white net, draped like a frost of ice over the deep, sun-colored curls that belonged to Rose -- Rose!

"It can't be!" he exclaimed through numb lips. He stared until his eyes ached. Over and over, searching -- but it was her; it was her ...

They heard a great sound of gasping as Paedro's lips unsealed themselves. "Not dead!" he heard the prince cry out if from a great distance. "Not dead after all ..."

"Why?" he begged her.

"Why did you do what you did to me?" Rose replied. Her smile had a new edge to it now, her voice a coolness, and her face a woman's richness. "You know the answer. You abandoned me for a lie. I made you choose me again for the sake of the truth. If we're to live with each other as husband and wife, then I want you to know, to be sure, of who I am. Are you?"

Cloud felt both like a boy and a man old as time. "I am." He dropped his face to her shoulder and sobbed. "Rose!"

Her arms rose to hold him close. She murmured quiet words as he wept against her shoulder. From a great distance, he heard the sound of other voices, others as they surged in close, and felt their hands touch his back. They didn't matter, not for him. All that mattered was Rose. For now, and for forever and ever again.

And as he held his wife, beyond all sense of season, the sun began to shine through the falling snow.

Epilogue

Winter blew cold and fierce that year, the snows falling without cease, near burying the chieftain's island in mounds of white. With no way to retreat, Paedro, Ione's men, and Cloud had been forced to winter over, increasing their debt day by day -- but what help for it?

Yet finally, the day arrived when the skies had ceased raining down their stinging flakes, and enough had melted away that travel was once again possible.

Time to leave.

"Paedro, are you ready?" Cloud leaned out of the stronghold, struggling to balance a pannier around his neck. He flinched a little, as if unable to help himself, at the sight of Tirsah and Benec standing by the prince, overseeing his departure.

"Almost," Tirsah said, her voice neutral. Benec kept quiet, letting his wife do the talking for him. He had yet to speak a willing word to Paedro or Cloud. It grieved Paedro sorely, but he accepted it as punishment he had earned. "Come and join us."

Paedro watched as Cloud shifted the load to his hands and approached with a tentative nod of the head for the newly handfasted couple. The winter had treated the lad both hard and well. Few had seen much of him or Briar-Rose; they'd chosen to spend most of their time in quiet rooms and solars. What they spoke about, no one else knew, for they never told.

But as the days passed them by, and Cloud began to join the chieftain and his kin in the common rooms once again, they all saw that silver strands feathered through his hair and small lines marred the corners of his eyes. Still a young man, he looked thirty. But he had begun to smile again, and last week they'd heard Briar-Rose laugh. Healing might be slow to come, but it looked to be on the way.

He would be parting ways with Paedro that day. Released from the prince's service, he and Briar-Rose would be making their way out to the island that had belonged to Cloud's father, to repair and live in the small manor he had been born in. To right old wrongs, exorcising the unhappy past by a future filled with hope.

"Briar-Rose's been down seeing to our boat," he said as he lowered the heavy pannier to the ground. "She and Lorn have gone over every joist three times or more. At least Sela can't press just one more bag of apples or bolt of cloth on us, or we'll sink."

"I heard that," the old woman said indignantly from the doorway. She put her hands on her hips and glowered at them. "I should let you starve, and serve you right."

"You'd never starve me." Briar-Rose slipped out from behind Sela. She dropped a hasty kiss on the old woman's forehead as she hurried down the steps. She regarded the prince with narrow eyes. The groundwork for peace had been laid with her husband, but Paedro knew years would pass before he was forgiven his part in her betrayal -- if ever.

"You're ready to go?"

Paedro inclined his head gravely. He rarely trusted himself to speak to Briar-Rose, shame and regret keeping him silent around the woman he had wronged so terribly.

"Father and Uncle are on their way," she informed them as she slipped on a pair of leather sailor's gloves. "We'll see you off first, and then we'll make for the boats."

Behind them, one of the sturdy donkeys Paedro had purchased for his journey back gave an ear-splitting bray and butted its head into Tirsah's neck. She made a noise of outrage and jumped away from the cold, wet nose. Benec laughed as she wiped her skin.

"Wretched imp!" she scolded as she yanked the animal's floppy ear. "I don't think he likes our scurrying about or the weight of those two bags. Patience, you," she warned it. "Get used to your burdens. You'll have a long walk back to Amahpre, and with more weight than this on your back."

"Not that much weight," Paedro said.

Tirsah glanced to a silent figure waiting alone, hunched in on herself within a thick swaddling of cloaks and shawls. She had pulled them close around her face, yet one limp red lock of hair escaped and fluttered ignored in the breeze.

"Mims's lost ground over the winter," Tirsah warned the prince in a whisper. "There's barely anything to her now, mind or body."

Paedro scratched the donkey's neck and burrowed his fingers deep in its bristly pelt. "I know that, lady mage," he said at last. "I'll be as careful with her as I can be."

"And when you reach the city?"

"I've no idea yet. When she knows what she wants, she'll tell me."

"She's a good person, but she's lost her way. Help her to find it, Paedro."

He nodded, accepting her charge and making his silent oath to keep it.

Anno and Lorn appeared at the door of the stronghold. "Ready at last?" The chieftain snorted. "All's prepared. Why lag?"

"Chirre?" Paedro questioned.

"Bound and waiting in Briar-Rose's boat," Anno replied. For reasons known only to herself, Briar-Rose had taken pity on the miserable creature, simple-minded as a child now. He would be going with them, still a prisoner, but by her mercy not sent to the cold cruelty of an Amahpre jail. "He shouldn't cause trouble."

Paedro hoped not, for their sakes. At least they had only Chirre to worry about. How it had happened, they never knew, but not a day after the prisoners had been stowed in the wine cellar they had found Brach dead, strangled with his own bandages. Chirre lay curled in a corner, knees drawn up to his chest. His fingers, never stopping, traced a pattern on the bricks that only he could see. He had been humming to himself, a little tune that had no end.

Perhaps that was what stirred Briar-Rose to her mercy. Chirre's own mind had already given him the punishment of unceasing madness.

The chieftain and his kin stood about, gazing levelly at him. Time to leave.

Yet he'd risk their further displeasure and linger to take care of one more task. One last thing before he helped Mims onto her donkey and set out on the long journey -- and that would be to speak his farewells to Edge. Though she seemed to have no use for him, he'd watched her move about the keep and grown fond of her sly, fey humor and her strange ways. Though she never said as much, he sensed that he owed her more than he'd ever know or be able to repay, and to his surprise he disliked the thought of leaving her behind, even more than saying farewell to Benec or Cloud.

He had learned that she often scorned words as trivial, yet he felt the need to pay his respects. Waking hours earlier than he'd needed to, he'd gone ice fishing that morning and caught one of the first fine, fat tunny of the season.

His prize lay wrapped in dried leaves at his feet, but Edge had not come to claim it. He'd thought she would be lurking about to playfully torment the donkeys, but he'd not seen a flicker of her whiskers since the night before.

"Where's the Catkin?" he made bold to ask. "Inside by the fire?"

Tirsah shook her head. "She hasn't been inside today."

"Down at the tombs, probably," Lorn said, face tired. "Most often there these days."

Berry had died during the last of the snows, curled against the kitchen door. No one had heard her begging entrance or even sensed her presence there. Whether she'd grown sick or only frozen they couldn't guess, but she had died with a smile on her face. Perhaps Hanri had come to join her at last.

Paedro knew that Lorn blamed himself, though even he knew it foolish to do so. Edge took it hardest, and they'd seen less of her after that. She came to cadge food when she

hungered, or to lurk about as the mood took her, but in truth, she spent most of her hours inside the house of the dead.

He understood he was pushing his luck, but ... “Can you call her?” Paedro asked. “Surely she won’t let Briar-Rose leave without a goodbye.”

Anno gave Paedro an odd little smile. “There’s no way to call a cat. They come if they want to, and never if they don’t. But ...” And he dropped his gaze. “Sometimes they know when they’re wanted. Hello, Edge.”

The Catkin poked her small, flower-like face out from beneath the hem of Anno’s long robes. She blinked at them with a terrible sorrow in her eyes and stretched up to butt Anno’s hip with her head.

He stroked Edge’s tangled mass of curls with a lover-like caress. “It’s all right,” he murmured, as if they were alone together. “We’ve said our own goodbyes, little one, and I knew from the moment you came that you would have to leave someday. Go where your heart leads you.”

Edge turned an unhappy gaze up to the master-mage. “Not miss me?”

“I will miss you very much. Still and all, I’d grieve the more if you stayed when you were meant to travel on.” He bent and kissed the Catkin’s pointed cheek, then her lips, with a lingering tenderness that startled, yet somehow did not truly surprise any who watched them. “Go your way with every blessing I can give you, friend of my heart.”

Edge sighed. She dropped to her paws again, rubbed her cheek briefly against Anno’s leg, then turned to Paedro. Her eyes measured him up thoughtfully, then flicked to the wrapped tunny at his feet. “For me?”

“As my own goodbye.” He crouched to offer the gift. “Will you take it?”

Edge poked at the fish. She used her nose to nudge aside the leaf wrapping. After she’d weighed it up carefully, she took a bite, chewed it with obvious pleasure, swallowed, and sighed. “Mine,” she decided. “Wrap again. Tunny travels well. We go many miles before night.”

Paedro blinked, deeply surprised, and not a little confused. “You plan to go with me, back to the city?”

She nodded. “This is my path. You need much help to be good ruler. I lived ten years in city; I know it well, parts you do and parts you don’t. I can help better than any human. Watch me and see!”

“You’re certain?”

Edge sat back on her haunches and regarded him narrowly. “You not want me?”

“No! I mean, yes, of course, I do. But why?” He shook his head. “You never said.”

“You never asked. I choose this. Besides,” she said and took a playful nip at the donkey’s leg, “this is fun. What is life, if not fun?”

Paedro glanced at Anno. The mage raised his hands. "She's not mine to command, prince. If she wants to go, blessings on you both, though we will miss her."

Edge nudged Paedro's leg. "On your donkey. We waste daylight. Time to move!"

"Almost." He moved slowly, so as not to frighten her, and carefully helped the waiting Mims onto her mount. She slumped in her saddle, listless and dull, the heart utterly gone out of her.

"I help with her," Edge murmured for Paedro alone, so low that no one else heard. "Trust me."

A sudden silence fell, in which each person looked at the other, no one quite sure of what to say until Lorn coughed. "As she's said, daylight's wasting." He tucked his hands into his jerkin pockets. "Best go if you want to make any distance over land before dark."

"Or over sea. We can make it to our island before nightfall if we row hard." Briar-Rose tossed a fold of her cloak over her shoulder. "Follow me, Cloud."

Cloud walked toward his bride and held out a hand for her to take.

Sela kissed Briar-Rose's cheek as she passed. "Safe journey," she wished with a sad smile. "I'll think of you often and oft."

Paedro mounted his sturdy little donkey. He looked down at the fisher-folk, longing for something to say but knew there was nothing. A wiser man, who had paid a dear price for his knowledge, he turned his mount and rode away in silence.

"Paedro!"

Tirsah's call surprised him into turning. Her eyes fixed onto his. A tiny grin quirked her lips as she took Benec's hand in her own. She spoke again, words that he would never forget:

"Edge -- Mims -- Paedro! This story is ended. Now, go -- go, and make another one!"

 THE END 

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 or visit her website to check out her work at <http://www.willsheornillshe.com>.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Wolf Island

by Cher Gorman

Available Now from Loose Id

Wolf Island

"I have a proposition for you."

He stopped and turned his head. His sensual gaze journeyed in a lazy appraisal from her eyes to her mouth, making her limbs feel warm and weak. "A proposition?" An underlying sensuality suffused his husky voice.

Her cheeks heated. What would it be like to slip beneath the sheets with a man like him, to lie warm and protected within his embrace? But would she gain protection, or would getting closer to him physically be a danger instead? Had the same thing happened to Miranda?

Why did she find him so attractive? Abby gave herself a mental shake. "Wrong choice of words. I didn't mean that kind of proposition."

A corner of Devlin's handsome mouth kicked up.

Abby cleared her throat. "I design a lot of graphics for my students to help them with their studies. I've built quite a few websites, and the owners were very pleased with the results." She paused to let her words sink in and gauge his reaction. He raised his brows and motioned for her to continue.

"I could do the same for you and the island." She gestured with her hand. "A well-designed website could bring in a lot of much needed business. In fact, I'm surprised you don't already have one. There would, of course, be plenty of information about the Chiming Lady, the history of the island, and so forth." Tomorrow she would go into the village and get a firsthand look around, snap a few pictures, and talk to the locals. That would make it easy to bring Miranda into the conversation.

"Once I get the site up and running, I'm sure it will encourage more tourists to visit the island, therefore boosting the economy. What do you think?"

His mouth eased into a sudden, arresting smile. "I think you're just trying to come up with an excuse to stay, but you're wasting your breath."

Not just an excuse. She had to stay. "Won't you at least consider the idea?"

The lamps along the hallway flickered out. A chill brushed Abby's skin.

"Help me," a quiet voice sighed.

Her heartbeat picked up rhythm, and she stopped in her tracks. "Did you hear that?" she whispered and lightly touched his arm.

"What?" A frown creased Devlin's brow.

"That weird voice." She turned her head to look up and down the darkened hallway, seeing nothing.

"Must have been the wind." He shrugged in an unconcerned manner and lightly grasped her elbow to lead her toward her room.

"It didn't sound like the wind. And what about the lights?"

"Power outages aren't unusual in the castle. Much of the wiring is old. Relax. You're letting your imagination run away with you."

She didn't appreciate his patronizing tone, but she let it pass for now. Maybe he was right. When they entered her room, he lifted the screen from the fireplace, knelt down, and struck a match against the hearth. In a moment, flames licked at the kindling and stacked wood. He rose, replaced the screen, and watched her with a sensual glimmer in his eyes.

Through the open door, the lights blinked on in the hallway. "See?" Devlin gestured toward the hallway. "Otis must have checked the fuse box."

She swallowed and inhaled a calming breath. "So, how about a few more nights' stay in the castle?" After all, Abby knew she could design a very sophisticated website for the island. "You never told me what you thought of my idea." She rubbed her hands together and glanced at him, waiting for him to answer. But only the gentle flutter of the flames in the hearth filled the silence in the room. He was watching her the way a man watches a woman he finds attractive.

She had little experience there, although she was no virgin. He walked toward her, slowly. Her pulse quickened. The closer he came, the harder her pulse beat.

As he moved toward her, his gaze never left her face. Unable to meet his eyes a moment longer, she stared directly at the center of his chest. Muscles shifted beneath his blue shirt. A hint of dark chest hair curled through the opening at his throat, inviting her to touch.

Within seconds, he stood barely an inch away. His scent grew more powerful, nearly overwhelming her, the warmth from him a gentle caress of her body. He raised his hand and laid his fingers over the pulse in her neck. Her heart accelerated to a jackhammer beat.

The heat from his hand infused her skin. Hunger and yearning flowed from him into her bones. Inexorably, he lifted her chin until she looked deeply into his eyes.

The moment her eyes met his, she experienced a sensation of spinning down a deep emerald chasm of which there was no end. Clear green eyes with the iris circled in black mesmerized her. His breath, with the faint tinge of coffee, warmed her lips. Her blood heated and raced while her bones slowly melted.

"Staying here more than one night is a lousy idea." His husky voice did strange things to her insides. Concern flickered in his eyes.

What did a man like Devlin have to be worried about? Did his anxiety have something to do with Miranda's disappearance?

She wanted -- oh, how she wanted -- more from Devlin. But how could she? He could be connected to Alice Howard's death somehow.

He rubbed his thumb in a lazy circle against the jumping pulse in her neck. Her breasts ached to be touched in just such a way. How would his mouth feel on hers?

She took a step away to put some much needed distance between them, but he moved closer. Instinctively, Abby laid a hand on his chest. His heart beat steadily beneath her palm, warming her, making her skin tingle. Firm muscles flexed while strength emanated from him, surrounding her in a drugging haze.

Lord help her, she wanted to lean into him, rest her head in the middle of his chest, and let the sensual drumbeat flow into her.

What was she thinking? Her attitude toward him was beginning to soften, and she couldn't allow that to happen. "What worries you so much, Devlin? Why don't you want me here?"

A spark of some indefinable emotion burned briefly in his eyes. "Something that would curdle your blood if you ever came face to face with it."

His chilling words made uneasiness curl through her stomach. "What do you mean?"

He dropped his hand from her neck, breaking the tenuous connection between them. Her palm tingled with the warmth from his body, and cool air brushed over her neck where he'd laid his hand.

"Never mind. You're leaving tomorrow." His offhand manner belied the note of regret in his words.

"But you can't just make a statement like that and then leave me hanging." Exasperation rang in her voice. The man was being deliberately obtuse.

He gazed at her for a moment, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a slight smile. "You're a curious cat, aren't you?"

"I'm a teacher. It's my nature to be curious. Why won't you answer my question?"

A clock on the mantel in her room chimed the hour in light, musical notes. "I've answered all the questions I intend to for one day."

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Wolf Island

Wolf Island is full of fascinating characters who entice you to turn the page to see what happens next.

-- Sue Viders, co-author of *The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes and Heroines*

Cher Gorman

From the first pages of *Wolf Island*, author Cher Gorman grabs hold of the reader with a spooky tale filled with plot twists and surprises that will keep you up all night.

-- Becky Martinez, author of *Love On Deck* (Wings Press)

Rich in detail, Cher Gorman's *Wolf Island* brings gothic mystery back in style with a story that will keep you reading long past your bedtime.

-- Lucynda Storey, author of *Simply Irresistible* (Loose Id)