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The children were screaming. Kyne staggered for the door but it seemed to jerk to the side; she hit the doorway hard on the way out and kept running. It was night and pitch black under the trees. Her bare feet slapped down on dirt, grass, moldering leaves and stagnant puddles. She stumbled over the looping roots of the forest giants. She burst into the clearing and froze at what she saw.

Her father held the infant by its neck; he reached up to slam it upon the ground. Kyne did not pause. With a scream she leapt upon him biting and tearing. Her nails caught in his hair and broke on his face, digging deep into his flesh. The men shouted and tried to grab her flailing limbs. She fought wildly; taking grim satisfaction in the damage she did them. A nose crunched and a man grunted as her foot found a soft target. Finally they wrestled her to the ground.

She cursed them by their mother's womb and called the wrath of dark places upon their children and their wives. Three of them held her whilst her own father and older brother, Orden, slaughtered the yelping children. In the silence afterwards she slumped spent upon the ground, tears streaming down her face. Her uncle wrenched her to her knees as her father shook the tiny mangled corpse before her eyes.

"Bukri pups. That's all they are. The dam is dead and gone, curse her. Curse her for what she has done to you."

"It's done now," her uncle said. "The girl is ruined. Bukri-bitten, barren and mad."

She saw a flicker of the guilt in her father's eyes—he had taken her on the hunt and he had wounded the bukri that bit her. The festering wound burned on her arm; the bukri's soul blazed

and writhed inside her. She cursed the Gods that let the creature's will live on inside her. Her heart broke for the helpless pups that waited and waited for their mother, and for their terror as they died.

\* \* \*

It was her brother's pale wife, the girl from the sweetwater lands, who came up with the answer. As folk in those parts saw things, Kyne was still a child who would be taken in if asked. They would foster Kyne to the Red King's court. After all, whilst mad and tainted she would be little use to a family struggling to wring a life from the indefatigable forest. Bukri-bit folk ate like three men, fought like demons—and in a rage they didn't know friend from foe. Added to that, the women never had children but the children the forest gave them, which were rarely of their own kind.

She could be sent to the Red King's house; he wanted an alliance with the forest clans. If she ran mad she would kill them not her own kin—if she mastered it she could return to them later to be tolerated for her strengths, but never trusted. The sweetwater people never saw a bukri, and knew nothing of the curse of the bite.

Father shrugged, "That is their problem. They asked for a fosterling, and they have one."

Her mother filled a bag with a heavy waxed cheese and dense black bread and folded a blue gown and wool shawl at the bottom. Kyne was given a letter from her father and sturdy travel clothes. They put her on the right road and she walked, dazed and blank-eyed for weeks through the forest and the whispering grasslands, though the valley and into the green lands—right up to the doors of the castle.

The guard sent her to the chamberlain who gave her to the governess who put her in to a bath and then a bed where she

slept for three days and four nights. She woke to find a kind-faced old woman with a tray of food.

"You've had a fever girl, and no wonder coming all this way afoot. Now you eat up this and sleep on a bit if you want to. Then you can join us in the music room."

Kyne peered up through the heavy unkempt locks of her hair and took the bowl. It was full of a thick soup with bread soaked in it. As she began to eat, the old woman left her. The food tasted bitter and rotten but she ate it. It didn't begin to fill the emptiness inside her. She slipped from the bed, a thick white dress covered her, and she wrenched it off. On a table she found the blue gown and her travel clothes. The gown seemed foolish and flimsy with a long skirt that would bind her legs. Her travel clothes were clean for all that the leather was stained.

The knee skirt wrapped about her and buckled at the side and a thick padded tunic went over it, held in place by a wide suede belt. Her skirt clung to her skin, which was slick with sweat. She slipped out of the room. At the end of the corridor there was an archway. She could hear the room beyond and women's' voices drifted from it along with a dozen clashing perfumes. There was a tune in the background plucked from the strings of an instrument she had not heard before.

Kyne paused with her head cocked. There was nothing for her in there. She slipped on down the stairs, at the bottom the hallway went in two directions and an iron-bound door stood ajar. Kyne pushed it open and found herself outside. Bright sunlight beamed down and a peculiar selection of plants was arrayed on either side of a gravel path. The air was warm but moved by a refreshing breeze, more welcoming than the towering stones of the building around her.

This must be a garden. Other than meager crops she had never seen cultivated plants, but she had heard about gardens

from Orden's sweetwater wife who talked of the green lands often with a far off look in her eyes.

The small stones crunched as she walked on them but they were not as sharp-edged as they looked. It had been raining and the air smelled of sap and water. Kyne moved tentatively onward. She smelled the earth and wood smoke, she felt dizzy from the smells of a hundred kinds of flower and the musk of small beasts that moved in the shrubbery. Something sweet and sharp called her and it took a moment to realize this was also a scent.

She followed it down the gravel path and onto another made of cobbles. The path faded and she climbed over rocks and a small wall and waded through a field thick with more wildflowers than should ever normally come together. A tall wall had crumbled, leaving a gap. Kyne stepped through into a strange place where almost every plant seemed to be different and their arrangement quite disorderly.

She bent and felt the leaves of a furred plant with tiny green flowers; it was not the one that called her. She moved one, bending and testing. Finally she found a tall bush with three-lobed leaves the size of her hand. It waved gently in the breeze dispersing a scent like burning honey and warm tea.

She smiled with relief and stuffed the leaves into her mouth; the taste upon her tongue was sharp and fresh. She didn't question the instinct that guided her and felt nothing but relief, until a hand grabbed her wrist. Startled she pushed the man away, sending him flying onto the ground.

She took one step back, taking in the fine cloth of the man's robes and the heavy gold chain at his neck. He was old enough that flyaway white strands mixed with his long black hair. His face was marked with deep lines on his forehead and around his mouth.

He put his hands back and sat up, looked up at her, and to her surprise, laughed.

Kyne was poised to run but this man didn't seem a threat, and, well...

"Sorry?" she said.

"That will teach me to go around grabbing young ladies," he said ruefully. "Where were my manners?"

Kyne offered her hand and he seemed surprised at the gesture, but took it. Standing, he was a rather tall man, but gangly, and the dark cloth of his tunic and robe fine but well worn.

"I was going to say that herbs must be taken with care," he said. He reached out and touched the back of his palm to her forehead and looked down his long narrow nose at her appraisingly. "But in this instance I think you have the right of it. Pursewort for a fever, although it is more usual to take it as a tisane rather than...a salad. Well, never mind, with healing conducted as it is in court you are wise to take matters into your own hands." He stepped back and got a good look at her. "Those rather interesting clothes must help keep you cool. I should do something about that before meeting polite company; some men consider the sight of a young lady's naked knees rather provocative."

He turned away from her and seemed inclined to take his leave.

"Wait, who are you?" Kyne called.

He looked back. "I am Jasper, the king's personal advisor and, if you believe what is said in the parlors and pulpit of this keep, a minion of the Dark Lord. If you are wise, my girl, you will not even admit that we have met." With that, he walked away.

Intrigued by the man, Kyne began to retrace her steps back

to the castle. She had just stepped through the crumbling wall when the kind-faced old woman reappeared.

"What are you doing out here? What are you wearing?" ...and a long string of other questions to which she apparently required no answers.

Kyne dipped her head apologetically. She felt oddly detached from things as the lady bustled her upstairs.

"...Perfectly acceptable gown, this. Now come and meet the other young ladies and then I will speak to you about your meeting tomorrow with the king."

Kyne allowed herself to be ushered into the music room. There were a dozen females there, ranging from young formless girls to others like her, approaching twenty. They looked at her blankly, like goats watching a passing dog. Only one, a sweet-faced woman with a mop of curly red hair, smiled at her openly.

The governess sat her down. "Now girls, this is young Lady Kyne from the Black Forest. Kyne why don't you tell us a little about yourself. What do you like to do with your time?"

They all watched her silently as though she were some kind of performing animal. Kyne felt her face flush and she looked down at the floor where the tasseled edge of an ornate carpet lay near her foot.

"I hunt," she said.

The girls tittered. "Hunt, how unusual," the governess said, flustered. "So you like to ride?"

"Ride?"

"Yes, horses dear."

"I've never seen a horse."

The soft laughter rippled around the room and Kyne ducked her head further, letting her long fringe cover her eyes.

"Well, young Lady Simmy. Perhaps you would like to show Lady Kyne the horses. That *will* be a treat."

It sounded more like an order than a prediction. Kyne stood obediently, and was relieved to see the smiling girl join her.

"Of course, Madam Manser," the girl said demurely, and led the way from the room. "Thank the Sun God's mercy," she whispered as they went back down the stairs. "Finally a chance to get out of that mausoleum."

Kyne followed, but going down the stairs she stood on her hem and tripped, falling against Simmy's back. "Sorry."

"Oh don't worry. It would take more than that to do me any damage."

Closer up Kyne had to admit Simmy was well built with broad shoulders and hips and large capable hands. She'd do well in the forest but she didn't seem to have the confidence a big woman should, knowing that she'd hold up to any job given and birth her babies easily.

"The stable's this way," Simmy said. "All the girls pretend they love horses because the king does, but most of them are actually scared. I like them, I'd ride the hunt if girls were allowed to—Gilly always laughs when I say that because she says I'd break a horse in two. But that can hardly be true because they carry great big men..."

Simmy started to relax and talk freely as she led the way down the left passage, which opened out into a courtyard with a large glistening fountain at the center. Kyne felt a strange snapping sensation. A cool wave washed over her body and all her senses returned abruptly to normal. She took a deep breath and picked up her skirts in both hands.

There was a deep, moldering smell coming from the far side where an arch opened to a beaten dirt area, and beyond that a stone building with row upon row of doors, each cut in half with the top halves open. Beasts' heads stuck through, great big heads, as big as elk but with swollen up noses and tiny pricked

ears. All at once the beasts turned to face her. Their eyes rolled and some of them made shrill calls.

A man walked out holding a big horse with a head leash. The animal pointed its little ears at her and reared up on its hind legs.

Simmy stopped and took a step back. "Oh dear, I wonder..."

The big white horse reared and bucked, pulling free of its handler. Then it spun and began to gallop straight towards Kyne and Simmy.

The other woman stood frozen, eyes wide, mouth agape.

Kyne looked wildly around for a weapon. All she could see were some white-painted stones that marked a line between the dirt and a small garden against the wall. She bent and grabbed the biggest one she could hold in one hand.

The horse dug its front hooves into the ground and stopped hard just in front of Simmy, then it reared again, flailing its hooves in the air.

Kyne stepped forward, making it shriek and snort, shaking its head.

"Get back!" She shouted, and threw the stone as hard as she could. She'd always had good aim with a rock or a sling, and the stone hit hard just between the animal's nostrils. The horse spun and ran full-tilt away from them with thudding hooves, tail raised high. Men scrambled from all parts of the building to catch it.

"I've never seen a horse act like that," Simmy said tremulously.

"I don't think I like horses," Kyne replied, putting her hands on her hips with a scowl.

The men captured the horse and one of them shouted, "You girls get out of here, dammit."

And one of the other muttered, "Witch."

Simmy grabbed Kyne's sleeve and led her back the way they had come. "We don't need to tell Manser about that. Now we'll have to go and listen to Missy recite the Sun Lord's proverbs, or her damned sister play the harp."

\* \* \*

Kyne was instructed on how to curtsy, how to walk with small silly steps, and different ways to address the same people depending on the time of day. Then she was deposited back in her sickroom and instructed to wear the thick white dress to sleep in.

Alone again, she looked out at the sky where the moon was slowly reclaiming its skin. It hung heavy and almost full, in waiting for the ebb moon when the river would shrink out to the deepest part of its channel.

The night was warm, and Kyne tugged uncomfortably at the starched neck of the nightgown. She pulled back the shutters and felt the warm moist breeze brush against her skin.

In the darkness, a thin plaintive cry struck like a needle to her heart. Kyne's whole body drew up straight and alert. Without another thought, she put one bare foot on the sill and vaulted out. Part of her mind was dimly alarmed as she fell more than three times the height of man, then hit the ground, stumbled and stood.

She waited still, feeling as though phantom ears were pricked atop her head. The call came again, not so lonely now, more like a summons. She trotted through the garden and around the building toward the stable, whose split doors were all closed up. At the far corner stood shrubs and bracken, and an enclosure made of thick wooden pales and tough drawn iron strands.

A human figure stood in the darkness—a figure she sensed,

rather than saw. She felt him watching her and after a moment she felt the faint, clean male scent of him. Jasper.

The keening sounded again, much closer now.

"It is the call of a bukri," she whispered as she neared.

"A bukri," Jasper confirmed. "A forest wolf. The king had it brought here so he can hunt it. For a good man he has a callous side."

The bukri appeared then, panting to the other side of the fence. It was a very young adult male with a ragged black-brown coat. It looked at Kyne with wide, dark eyes that glistened in the darkness. It paced the fences, whining. Kyne could smell it, a thick eager musk. It made strange urges swell up inside her, feelings that scared her and made her wonder what she was doing standing here in the middle of the night.

Jasper came to her side. He reached out one pale hand and drew up her chin so he could look in her eyes. His gaze was darker than the bukri's—with a single mote of light. He looked into her for several long moments, searching, and then he spoke.

"So tell me this. Are you a girl with the soul of a beast, or a beast with the body of a girl?"

"I am just a girl."

"Whatever you are, I suspect it is anything but just."

He turned and walked away from her. Kyne looked back at the bukri, who watched her fixedly, but followed after the man.

\* \* \*

Jasper went to a small cottage that couched beneath an enormous needled tree. He paused at the door, backlit by a low fire that smoldered in the grate within. When he saw she had followed, he looked at her and frowned, but then stepped within, leaving the door open. Kyne went inside and closed it behind her. The building had just one room with a fire and chair to the right, a bed to the left, and a long table along the back wall that

was stacked with books, jars, and strange objects of all types. Branches and flowers hung from the ceiling beam along with the still forms of small animals and stripped pelts.

"So what is it you want from me?" Jasper asked wearily.

Kyne took a step towards him, paused, then took another, and another, until she stood directly before him—so close that her breasts lightly brushed his chest. Her eyes were on a level with the base of his neck, and she gazed unseeing at the thick links of the neckchain he wore.

"I want..." What did she want?

A presence within stirred. The scent of him was of weak, damp wool, a male past his first vigor, quiescent. The dull musk of his blood. He smelled, he smelled.... Kyne leaned into him, ignoring the frown that creased down between his temples. He started to move his arms to push her away.

*He smelled like food.*

The impulse was like lightning—it threw her forward. She sank her teeth into the flesh of his shoulder, cloth and rank metal blocking a proper strike. She growled with frustration as he stumbled backward, falling on the floor and rebounding off the wall. She pinned him down easily, rearing up to find naked flesh. She took the neck of his robe with both hands and ripped it, feasting her eyes on his lean, pale torso.

It didn't look quite...right. Her vision shifted, becoming brighter, less sharp. He flailed against her but she braced her feet and knees, straddling him stiffly. His trembling right hand rested on her breast. The cloth of her nightgown was damp; her panting breath pushed her breast against his hand, her nipple rubbing against the coarse cloth.

The sensation was curious, calming. She looked down into his widened eyes.

"Well, I did ask," he muttered.

Her eyes flicked, following his left hand as it fumbled into the pocket of his coat. He pulled out a silver medallion in the shape of a solar disk. He raised it very slowly and pressed it against her chest.

The world exploded in fire. Kyne reared back, fleeing the unearthly fire. He had hurt her!

A rage that was not her own coursed through her body. The man was standing, running for the door. Kyne caught him easily. Rending his foolish clothing to the waist, she slammed him against the wall. She aimed for his throat but he flinched aside, so her teeth dug into his shoulder. Blood filled her throat and bubbled about her lips. She used her body to press him against the wall. Her teeth were too dull, they did not tear his flesh—but the blood was sweet and stank of fear.

Another scent met her nostrils—human male—and confused her senses.

His hand settled gently on her ribcage, wormed up to her breast. His thumb stroked against her hardened nipple, teasing gently.

Kyne felt her jaw relax, releasing her hold on his shoulder. Bright red blood ran in rivulets down his chest. She watched it with fascination, then dipped to lick it from his lightly furred skin.

His hands stroked her breasts, sending feelings quivering down her spine to her sex, and she leaned away from him. The foolish cloth of her nightgown dulled the feeling, so she tore it from her and cast it aside. Her body was damp, her thighs quivered as she stepped backward

His eyes dropped over her body and he felt his breath quicken. "Why is it always the profane rather the sacred that saves me?" he asked, facetiously.

Blood ran down his right arm and a drop fell with an audible splat to the dusty floor. He stepped towards her.

"Very well," he said. "I'd rather give you this than the rest of my blood. I think you'd find it rather thin anyway."

He leaned down and ran his tongue between Kyne's breasts and round the crease beneath one. He took her nipple between his teeth gently and circled his hands around her waist. He guided her very slowly over to the bed and sat her upon it. She followed his directions cautiously, like a tightly jointed marionette.

She had never coupled with a man, but in the small thick-walled houses of the forest, she had seen it done. She expected him to strip off his torn robes and take her, so when his palm gently divided her legs, then pressed her back across the bed, she let him do it, cool-eyed and waiting for him to earn her lasting mercy.

But instead, he bent his head and touched his mouth to her sex, first licking over the outer lips, then gently parting them. The tip of his tongue touched the small whorl about her sex and pressed down hard. His hands gripped her thighs hard with fingers splayed wide. His tongue continued to rasp against her insistently, striking sparks that stung her body and burst like brilliant flowers before her eyes.

She hooked her legs over his shoulders and pulled him in towards her, her body writhing beneath his ministrations.

Suddenly his tongue hesitated at her entrance, and he pulled back.

With an impatient moan Kyne reached down and grabbed his arm.

He winced as she wrenched his wound and burst the fresh clots forming.

She pulled him up to cover her, clasping her thighs around

his hips. Through binding clothes she felt his hard cock, and she arched her back to push against it.

"My dear, I really don't wish to do that whilst you are—not yourself."

Kyne growled, reaching up to grasp the back of his head, winding her fingers in his tangled hair. He reached down his right hand, running his rough thumb over her center, rubbing hard and rhythmic against her. He pushed two fingers into her sex.

Kyne moaned, it was not enough. Wetness surged from her and she clutched at his back with nails digging in deep. She pushed hard against his hand, raising her thighs and wrapping her legs around his hips. She threw her head back and felt a shudder welling up from inside. "More," she demanded.

He pushed his four fingers together further inside her. She thrust against him, pushing him deeper, jerking as wet pleasure radiated through her body. She cried out, feeling the rage, the need, the desire roar to a crescendo and then fade, slowly, into emptiness and silence. She lay back, loose-limbed and sated. With a faint buzzing sound the *human* Kyne took possession of her body once more and looked, dazed, at her naked torso drenched with sweat and smudges of blood. Alarmed, she looked at the man whose blood she wore, whose shoulder bore the ugly wounds from her teeth.

"Jasper?"

He watched her closely, as though gauging her human awareness. Then he collapsed beside her with a sigh of relief, gathering her up against him on the bed and pulling the covers over her nakedness.

"Yes, Kyne," he whispered. "You have a little explaining to do."

Kyne sighed deeply. How did one explain being sent away

by one's own kin because of a taint that is none of one's own doing? She curled into Jasper's arms, struggling to part with more than a few words about the bite of the bukri. Her heart shuddered with horror and... entirely different emotions. His hands upon her were warm and so natural. If somehow the rest of the world could be wiped away it would have been the happiest moment of her life. But nothing could expunge all of the horrors of the last few weeks.

"Those that are bit are savage; often they are killed or die," she said. "Those that master it enough to go on are not asked what they do, and do not speak of it. They normally live apart in the forest and even their own kin deal with them with caution."

Jasper seemed curious despite himself. His hands still shook slightly and he winced to move, but his dark eyes sparked with interest. Then he looked down at her and sighed. He had wrapped the blanket about her as if suddenly unwilling to touch her bare skin now.

Kyne struggled to regain her senses and to grapple with her state. She had somehow avoided thinking of it until now. The change had crawled over her bones and into the most remote part of her soul, a soul she now shared with a being whose needs were so much simpler and deeper than her own.

"It is almost dawn," she said.

"The servants will notice you are missing." After a palpable pause, Jasper pulled away from her and stood. He picked up her torn nightgown and, after she had climbed off the bed, wrapped it around her as best he could and held it in place. "I will give you a cloak. Cover yourself and avoid looking directly at anyone you see. You need be careful only near your own rooms, wait until the hall is empty. Otherwise they will simply assume you are somebody's mistress, and they will not look too closely."

Kyne's body felt strangely light and numb as she moved

toward the door. She was not sure what she expected. Perhaps some tender word? A strange hope for a man she had so wounded. She could see the blood on his fingers and covering his neck as he rummaged in an old trunk. He did not look directly at her as he proffered a dense gray cloak.

"I am sorry," she said.

"It was not you."

"We are both me," Kyne said, struggling towards understanding. "The bukri and I are both 'me' now. If there is any way forward, I cannot be blind to that. Perhaps there is no way...."

She wrapped the cloak about her and drew the hood up over her head. The garment was obviously for a man, overlong. She looked at Jasper, pale and cautious, with his own blood upon him and splashed about the room.

How foolish indeed to think he had done any more than what he had to, to stop her. Kyne felt the pressure of tears but held them back. This was her first time being with a man, but it could hardly have been worse. How could any man know tender feelings in such a way—for a woman who was half a beast?

"I will not...bother you further," she said as she opened the door. "If you feel you must inform the king, I will understand."

\* \* \*

The governess looked upon Kyne with an expression of cool mistrust. Kyne simply concentrated on wide-eyed silence and made no reply to questions about her bruises and torn nightgown. Simmy loaned her something to wear for the morning's audience. It fitted her only loosely, cinched into the wide leather belt from her traveling clothes.

At the designated hour, she was lead into a small chamber where the king was taking breakfast.

"...is pale and then there is pale, old friend," he said warmly

as she entered.

Jasper stood at the window, turned away from the king whose hand stretched out in a tender gesture or concern. As Kyne approached them, Jasper bowed and retreated into the shadows.

Kyne noted the Red King did not suit his name. His hair and skin were only a faintly tawny brown, and his eyes were pale. He stood both tall and broad in ivory-toned riding clothes with only a simple iron band serving as a coronet. Of the four kings of the peninsula, he was counted the most powerful and his self-confidence shone from his handsome face.

"My Lord," Kyne said with an awkward curtsy, flushing as she remembered that for a first greeting 'Your Highness' was the proper address.

"Young Lady Kyne," the king replied in a voice that was warm, yet instantly commanding. This was a voice she had no doubt could lead troops in battle as effectively as it could charm a lady. "I am pleased to see you are well. Tell me, why is it you were sent to use on foot. That seems extraordinary treatment for a lady of breeding."

Kyne noticed how Jasper took himself to the edges of the room, all but invisible against the thick drape of the curtains. The king followed her eyes.

"Aye, he does that, my advisor Jasper of Laurent. Always hiding away as if the presence of a single heathen in my court will bring the wrath of the righteous down on my head."

"One day it may, Lord Aureus. Especially if you speak so freely before near strangers visiting your court." Jasper's voice emerged from the shadows, though he himself did not.

The king just laughed. "My spiritual advisor, who doesn't believe in the Sun God, and a visiting lady who arrived on foot in rags. My court becomes stranger by the day. Perhaps I

should make the wolf our new priest; he would bore me less than Pecrutious does. But then perhaps my young lady here, like you, has cunning arguments to explain her peculiar ways."

"Should I travel better than my father does?" Kyne snapped—tired of his condescending amusement.

"That depends... Who is your father?"

"A man worth no more or less than any, for all that he is acknowledged as the Black King of all the land beneath the forest's dark."

Aureus turned to Jasper. "A barefoot *princess* then," he said. "I go to hunt and then to meet the farmers who want to cut the land and make more pasture to feed our people. Perhaps, my old friend, you will have at least one more person in court who agrees with you on that issue. What say you, young lady? Why should they not burn the land to farm and feed their families?"

He started to leave the room, obviously not expecting an answer, but paused when Kyne spoke.

"The forest is not to be trifled with."

His smile wavered but reasserted itself. "You may consider that you have been introduced, young lady. If there is anything you need to know, I am sure Jasper can help you. I am off to the hunt; I have rare prey today."

Kyne watched him go, snatching his fur-lined cloak from a squire that waited beyond the door but not even looking the boy in the eye. She wished the young bukri swift passage and true luck—that he might see the forest again rather than become some moldering garment for a swaggering king.

"You do not believe in the Sun God?" she asked when the king was gone.

"I believe in him. I just do not worship him." Jasper stepped forward. "The king is a good man and a competent ruler, but he is too honest to see how he is beginning to overstep

himself. It is well past time I left this place."

"You have his ear. It seems a comfortable position to desert without need."

"I would have rather more than his ear if...well; you have your own concerns. Nor had I realized how directly what you learn might get to the Forest King. You best take care. Forest folk are not thought of much, but it would not take long for the priest to make connections that would not go well for you or your kin. They are quick to burn torches here if it serves their ends."

Kyne reached out, as the king had done, but Jasper did not turn away from her. His cheek was rough with stubble and his eyes met hers only reluctantly. There were shadows beneath them and lines of strain.

"Perhaps in my case they would be right. I am not safe to be around. Perhaps it is I who should be leaving this place."

"No." His hand fell heavy on her shoulder. "There must be some answer. Some way to separate you from..."

Alarm rose up that was not entirely her own. She backed away from him and drew in her hand. He would never understand that the bukri and she were one now—she would not sooner lose that spirit than sever her own hand. Besides... "There is no time. It is the ebb moon tonight when the bukri-bit run mad in the forest. I will not be able to hide what I am or stop myself from doing what the moon calls me to do."

"And what is that, Kyne? To hunt?"

"I don't know. I must leave."

"No, he knows you are the Black King's daughter. To snub him now will push the farmer to say that meadow and forest folk are not at peace—to press their case for conquest. You must stay and we can surely find some way... a sleeping draft, a remote place perhaps."

But she saw in his face that he was afraid.

"It is not your difficulty or your cause," Kyne said. "I have hurt you already and cannot ask more."

She turned and fled from him, feeling the bukri inside. *Yes child, he is not our kind. We need him not.* The other half of her heart ached but made no answer.

\* \* \*

Jasper had tried to follow her. The last words she heard from him as he dropped behind were a curse upon her youth and vigor. Kyne sought the trees. They were but stunted dwarves compared to the trees of the real forest. The light still struck through the canopy and grasses grew thickly. Kyne walked one until the smooth paths grew ragged and faded away. She skirted the field sown with swaths of grains and crawling vines.

Finally she came to a halt. Bowing her head, she had to admit that she did not know what to do. Part of her wanted to turn back into Jasper's arms—but she was both too proud to and too protective. She might hurt him again, even kill him. The bukri soul had been seduced for one night but it still did not truly count him as male, and never as a mate.

A sharp scent came to her. Kyne threw up her head and looked about. The black furred bukri staggered from the meadow. His head drooped, his coat matted and damp. He came to her feet and dropped to the ground, eyes closing as pants shook his exhausted body. In the distance she saw the silent hounds start to break through the crops.

Kyne bent and grabbed a fallen branch. It was thick but softened by rot. She stood over the exhausted bukri, partly covering him with her skirts. The first dog ran straight for her and she swung at it desperately, throwing it back. The dog yelped in surprised and circled back. The others hesitated.

"Get back! Back!" she yelled, waving the disintegrating

branch.

The first of the riders thundered behind them, and shortly after them, the king. He pulled up his great mount and it seemed he would be too slow. Kyne did not even have time to flinch away. But then the stallion caught a glimpse of Kyne and stotted aside, his eyes flashing with a memory of the stone she had pitched at his soft nose.

"Hold off!" the king shouted. "Control those hounds!"

Gradually the small party gathered behind him, all regarding Kyne.

"I thought I was hunting a wolf," the king said. And then his eyes dropped.

Kyne looked down to see the long nose of the bukri protruding from beneath the hem of her oversized skirt. The creature seemed quite calm under her protection, but Kyne wasn't sure what she could do against such numbers. She let the branched drop so that she held it loosely in only one hand.

"Your Highness," she said as demurely as possible, with only a slight curtsy.

"The forest wolf," the king said—and he sounded somewhat amused. "It seems he knows his own kind. Will you release him, young lady?"

"Will you give him to me, my Lord, as a remembrance of home?"

"He was brought to me at great expense," the king mused. "Why should I give him up?"

Kyne jumped to hear another voice behind her. "It is the essence of many a tale of chivalry, to make heroic efforts to satisfy a maiden's whim."

Jasper came to her side. A heavy look passed from him to the king.

Jasper pressed, "And is not the king our highest model of

chivalry?"

"Is he not," Aureus said in a voice that was both light and bitter. "As you ask for it, my most loyal of advisors. As *you* ask for it she may have the beast, but bid her take care what she does with it. What I have a mind to hunt, I am not easily turned aside from."

He jerked the reign and spurred away, and after a moment's pause the others followed. Kyne bent to the young bukri, hardy even full-grown. He looked up to her and wagged his tail. She knew that it saw a human girl with its eyes, but with its nose it recognized her as an alpha female—and every good bukri trusts his nose more. Her bukri soul regarded the young male with amusement. Callow but spirited—she would take a male such as this one into her pack. A few more years might make him a worthy mate.

Kyne shuddered at the thought and turned to Jasper. He looked a little worn from his own chase.

"You best send him back to the forest," Jasper said. "He will not do well at court."

The bukri growled at him, wrinkling its lips to reveal jagged yellow fangs.

"Hush," Kyne said to them both. And to herself, "What am I to do?"

Jasper watched her a moment, and then his eyes flicked to the bukri. Some deep, dark idea kindled within his hooded eyes and he stalked away.

\* \* \*

Which was a less than helpful response.

Kyne fretted the day through, waiting for sounds from the keep, yearning for the cover of the forest. When it fell dark she went out onto the main path south. Down a dip in the road she saw the clustered houses of the gate village—the windows

already shuttered and showing only glimmers of the fires within and the smoke blending into the dusk like two streams meeting at the sea.

"Go back to the forest," she said.

The bukri took a few steps and paused as if confused that she did not follow. In some way he still hoped to be hers, for all the difference in their bodies. A powerful tug pulled her that way, to be a bukri in a malformed body somewhere deep in the forest's heart. But that would not be right. It seemed a poor choice: to be a wrongly-made bukri living as a savage; or a wrongly-made girl likely to be put to death as soon as the urges got too strong. The moon was so fat and full that it didn't seem that that would take long.

"Go," she said, and turned away.

He turned and sniffed their air, and trotted away without a backwards glance. Kyne walked back towards the keep. She must go someplace where she would not harm anyone if she lost control, and she did not know the castle grounds well enough to guess where that might be. She was half lost when she found herself at the door of Jasper's cottage. Its door stood open and its insides dark.

Kyne went inside and roamed the interior, considering. The one window was small and the shutters could be barred from the outside. She went and set the bar in place, then addressed the door. An iron key rested in the inside of the lock. She pulled the door closed, locked it, and then pushed the key out the slats of the shutters. It fell in the wet grass well beyond her reach.

Satisfied with this solution, Kyne wandered the small room.

She sat on the edge of the narrow bed, but was too jumpy to stay still for long. She could feel the bukri soul unfurling within her like the bud of a night-flowering blossom welcoming the moon. It rose in her heart and her loins; it ran through her veins

like honey. An ambiguous hunger started to gnaw upon her, as though someone dear were calling her name but she couldn't tell from where. Her jaw ached and her stomach cramped. The girl that was Kyne was just a shadow of this dense cluster of desires when she heard the door handle rattle.

"Go away, Jasper," she shouted. "By all the Gods, stay away from me 'til morning!" Her voice trailed off into a snarl and then shifted into a hoarser register. "Come in human, enter if you dare."

"Unlock the door, madam, and let me in."

Kyne snarled, with the bukri ruling her senses she could not encompass an idea like a key. She came to the other side of the door, sniffing the air. The man smelled... different, very different.

Kyne struggled to the surface one last time. "Get out, Jasper. I cannot control...I trapped myself in here for a reason."

She felt him standing on the other side of the plank door as she ran her fingertips over the coarse grain of the wood.

"Trapped?" he asked, bewildered. And then she heard his boots crunching through the grass and heard his satisfied exclamation as he found the key.

Kyne, the beast, stood straight and took a step back from the door. He would have to do better, far better to placate her this time, she thought smugly. She was hungry, so hungry.

The key turned smoothly in the lock and Jasper stepped inside. A strange, dark energy moved with him, entering the room like an errant breeze. His musk filled the small space and Kyne stepped back, regarding him. His cautious manner was gone as he slammed the door and coolly turned his back on her to lock it.

To her surprise, she waited. Jasper let his coat slip from his shoulders to the floor. The collar of his tunic revealed a scar that

looked weeks old, not a fresh wound. He pulled his tunic over his head and stood before her in just his hose.

"Well, my dear," he said. "Experience suggests you need to hunt or couple. I am over being squeamish about it. And although you are a most beautiful girl, fate had chosen to limit you options dramatically. I do hope that doesn't distress you overly."

Kyne felt the two parts of her soul slip into accord, for the first time in her new life she felt like one being again. Jasper might not be a burly hunter but he was well enough made, and upon strong bones. Her eyes traced his slender thigh and torso with lean flesh over a broad ribcage and well-proportioned shoulders.

He was all male, his spirit darker and his scent earthier—but above all Kyne saw the kindness in him. Here was a man who found the monster beneath her skin and yet still came back to her. She let the belt loose from around her waist. Then she grabbed the material of her overdress and chemise and pulled them both over her head to stand before him naked.

"I think the two of us might do together quite well," she whispered as she stepped towards him.

Jasper laughed as she untied the laces supporting his hose, and in moments his last clothing fell to the ground. Kyne regarded his cock curiously. It seemed much the same as the members she has seen on the men of the village when they bathed in the river. She touched it curiously, stroking and curling her fingers around it.

He put his arms around her, resting upon her buttocks and guiding her back towards the bed. Kyne felt calm, heat welled up inside her body but this time there was no confusion. She felt him becoming hard in her hand; the silky head of his cock slid against the crease of her palm. His whole body was coiled tense

even as she felt so relaxed.

She backed up against the wall beside the bed, pulling him against her. Kyne raised one knee high against his hip, curling her thigh against his buttocks. She guided his hard cock, feeling her insides wet and eager for him. The last vestige of his uncertainty bled away and she felt his hand clutch her ass as he bent his knees, then pushed up into her.

She was tight but slick as he pierced her. She raised her arms over his shoulders and stayed balanced awkwardly on one leg, but then trusted his strength and let him hold her up, pressed to the wall. He pushed into her so far that it ached. Kyne clung to him as he pulled out just enough to thrust into her even harder.

"Yes," she whisper as her strong thighs flexed and her inner sinews held him tight as he drew out of her.

He drove into her harder and faster. The stone slabs scratched her back and sweat ran down between her breasts. Her body opened to him and she felt a hunger for him growing that she was sure would never be fully sated.

Suddenly he lifted her away from the wall with a hiss and threw her down onto the bed.

His lips found hers and Kyne answered with her tongue, questing into his warm, wet mouth. Her fingers dragged against his shoulders as she urged him on. He reached down and she felt his rough thumb touching where they met and moving through her slit. She cried out as he touched a part of her that made her start to shake, and an incredible sensation surged through her. Kyne shuddered uncontrollably, bucking under him and he held her up against him effortlessly. Amidst the last fireburst, the whole world seemed to grow gray and cold with nothing between her and the outer darkness but the lithe form of her lover.

\* \* \*

Dawn broke suddenly, augured by a looming figure silhouetted against the open door. The king's face was too dark to see but his stance was rigid. Kyne shook Jasper, who awoke with a start.

"Jasper, you take into your bed a child given into our care," the King roared.

"My mother was two years short of my age when she married," Kyne rebutted, clutching the covers to her chest.

"I was no speaking to *you*."

Kyne, feeling strangely uncowed, laughed. "Will you lose an old friend out of simple jealousy, my Lord?"

"Am I meant to be jealous of *him*?"

"No, my Lord, of *me*. But we, each of us, can only act according to our natures—or not at all. Would you rather Jasper bide alone, rather than go to one he wants."

"...Loves," Jasper corrected. "But perhaps you should let me speak for myself on that matter."

The tide of the king's rage had already turned; he sighed and sat on the edge of the unkempt bed.

"The young lady's parents may not mind, but tongues here will wag. She is not deemed marriageable. But if I gave it my blessing and you married quick as can be..."

"It would be better, I think, if we went away..." Jasper said, putting his arm over Kyne's body to rest his hand on Aureus' knee.

Kyne saw the look of panic on the king's face. "And leave me alone with these prudes and puritans?" he exclaimed. "Better I learn to get along with your young vixen."

He gave Kyne a tight smile and she returned it easily. She was not threatened by the king's attentions to Jasper—even had that been Jasper's nature, he was hers now—irrevocably. Now that their passion was spent, she understood it. He had the bukri

soul also and there was only one way he could have got it. It gave her a chill to think of it.

"A compromise," Jasper said. "The priests will be in an uproar and I think a quiet elopement might be in order—some time away to let things settle down and get the family's blessing."

"Oh no, you don't get away so easily." The king's mercurial nature turned fully around. "You will be having a wedding—and a royal wedding at that, for the young princess who, rumors will say, was looking for a husband from the moment she got here." He leaned in to them both, "A husband with the ear of the king."

He stood and looked down at them with an altogether different expression. "Tidy yourselves up, my dears. There will be a feast tonight and I shall post the bans."

He left them alone, tangled in the bedclothes.

\* \* \*

"You had the bukri bite you..." Kyne mused.

"I regretted the necessity, but I don't think I would have been enough otherwise," Jasper said as he lay back.

Kyne knew they must get up and get ready to meet what was likely to be an unpleasant public response to their engagement, but not for a few moments yet. She rested her cheek against his shoulder.

"In the end it was all right," he continued. "We both got what we wanted and he understood—I swear he understood what I was doing. The bukri knew he was no match for you as he was but between us we might make a passable mate for an extraordinary woman."

"Do you mind?"

"Mind?"

"Marrying me."

Jasper pulled her close. "Well there is one small matter that

gives me some concern. When they read the bans and anoint us in the solar service of handfasting—we may well burst into flames and be consumed by righteous fire."

"Oh, is that all." Kyne slipped her feet out of the bed and looked back at him saucily. "I am sure you will think of something."

She felt him watching her as she collected their scattered clothing.

"It *is* a formidable problem," he insisted.

Kyne went back and tossed his tunic to him, holding her own garments against her chest. "Together we are going to be rather more than formidable, my dear Jasper."

She smiled. Her father had sent her away to either destroy herself or find a way to be whole. He was going to be rather surprised by the outcome. The future stretched before her replete with a thousand possible paths—and none that she would have to walk alone.

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*About the Author*

Emily Veinglory is an expatriate New Zealander currently living in Indiana and learning more about pigs and corn than she ever really wanted to know (and also enjoying the friendly, small town life). She has a long-standing fascination with the supernatural and a love of fantasy and romance fiction. Better known for her gay romance stories she finally decided to write what she knows, heterosexual romance that is, not werewolfry (honest).

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