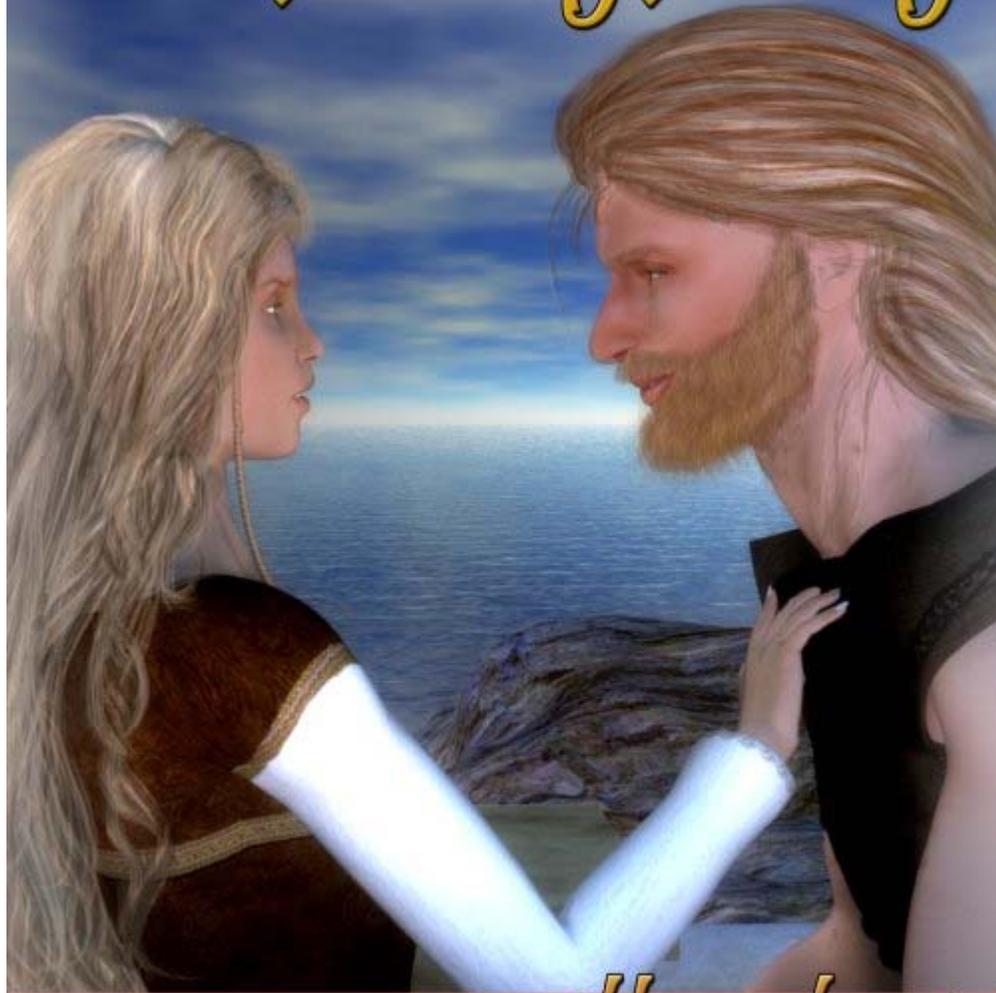


The Finest Line I:

The Sighting



Loose Id

Willa Okati

Praise for the writing of Willa Okati

The Finest Line 1: The Sighting

Magically entrancing; erotically titillating. *The Sighting* gives the reader all of the old world feel of kings, castles, and wizards combined with the enjoyment of sex and love we've come to anticipate in an erotic romance. A very enjoyable reading experience.

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THE FINEST LINE 1: THE SIGHTING

Willa Okati

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

The Finest Line 1: The Sighting

Willa Okati

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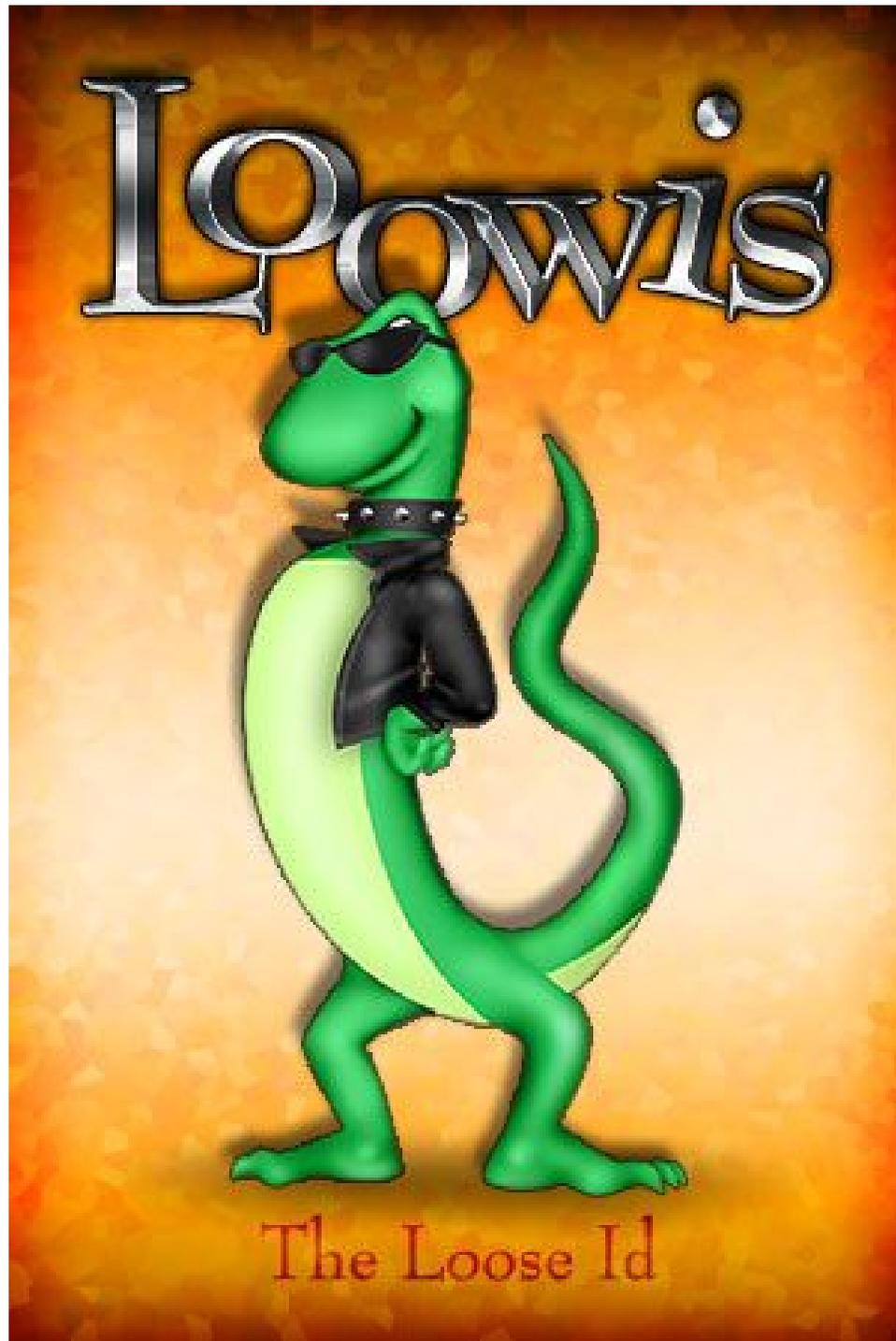
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Chapter One

The green-mage Tirsah clung to the uppermost branches of an ancient apple tree and stared out at the harbor surrounding her chieftain's island.

Danger, whispered salty gales blowing in from the ocean.

Beware! replied earthy breezes returning from the mainland. Strangers traveled toward her home of Kirree-on-Sea, hastening forward on old, forgotten trails -- men who smelled of foreign lands, dirty streets, sweat, and money hurrying to the very edge of the world at that moment, toward Tirsah and those in her care.

But there were no sails on the horizon. No disturbances on the shore. No foundering boats in the narrow harbor that separated them from the mainland. Kirree-on-Sea bustled on placidly as ever.

Tirsah parted her lips and tasted the air, searching it in vain for any further hints. Something so familiar ... yet so long gone as to be nearly forgotten.

"Tirsah?" The chieftain's serving woman Sela shook one of the tree's lowest branches. "What's gotten you up there?"

“Bide a moment,” Tirsah said absently. She frowned at the sea that surrounded them. If the holy creatures of the deep had a mind to, they might allow her a small sign. Even the tiniest hint would be welcome.

Will you speak to me, secret-keepers of the deep, she requested politely, and tell me what I need to know?

A wave bubbled against the shore with the sound of a man’s deep chuckling. Against the horizon, a pod of silvery dolphins broke the fathomless green surface of the water and arced against the sky. Messengers of the ocean gods, they came close to shore to honor a new power that was drawing close. One that could command them as well as the other sea beasts. They hooted loudly in bursts of eerie laughter, then turned their tails on her and plunged back into the deep.

Tirsah’s flesh turned cold as winter ice. “Oh, no.” She gripped a branch for support. “Not *him*.”

“I don’t know what’s to be done with you, man.”

High Prince Paedro glanced up from counting his change. “How’s that?”

“Our friend the hostler was overcharging you,” Benec, the prince’s chief advisor and closest friend, informed him with a wicked grin. “Shamelessly. Honest.”

“Really? Well, that took nerve.” Paedro stirred his small collection of coins with a forefinger. “Odd, though. I see from my coins that he barely asked for a -- what did you say they call it here? A bronze maiden?”

“Not exactly. Fine folks call them maidens. Around these parts that’s named a brass cunny.” Benec jabbed at the coin in question. “And other things, maybe even ruder than that. Don’t laugh, now; you asked.”

“I find it hard to believe that’s enough for feed and stabling, even so far away from the main cities. Could he have named the cost for just one horse?”

“Not likely! We’d have heard some fine cursing before now if old Nash thought he’d been swindled. I remember the old dodger and his leather lungs well enough. He knew it was for the lot of them. Believe me, a brass cunny covers the horses just fine for the winter.”

Paedro felt a solid thump on his shoulder as Benec leaned on it, grinning. “You’ll get used to it, Prince. You’re too accustomed to the city and not holding your own purse strings. Things go for less so far north.”

“Are you saying I can’t take care of myself in a fishing village the size of our castle keep’s laundry, Master Advisor?”

“Not at all, Your Highness!” Benec backed away a few steps and mimed a mock bow. “I’m still paid to outthink you, though, so just you stand back and let me do my job, eh?”

“And what else did I bring you for?”

“Ohe! And here I thought you loved me because I could emulate a pack mule.” He tugged at the loose straps of a once-heavy satchel slung over his shoulder. “At any rate, Highness, given that I’m the only one who knew the way out here to the end of the world--”

“Hsst! Benec, please.” Paedro jerked his chin at the village folk surrounding them. It was clear that every ear stood wide open to better catch any interesting gossip. “Perhaps the less of the ‘Highness’ we hear, the better -- at least until we reach the chieftain’s island, think you?”

“Ah!” Benec tapped his temple. “Now you’re learning. The less said about our mission here at all, the better, so listen to your nearly erstwhile advisor and hush, would you?”

Paedro made a wry bow. “As you command. You do know other princes would have you racked for such insolence.”

“Lucky me that I serve you, then.”

“As I’m well aware.”

“Ohe!” Benec yawned. “You’d best be, old friend. No one, least of all yourself, ever expected the king’s third son, bound for a soldier’s lonely life, to be summoned up for a task like this. Especially as the heir and spare --”

“Thom is on pilgrimage, and Father and Richere live yet, despite their illnesses.”

Benec shook his head. “They won’t last long, and you well know it,” he corrected. “And that’s why we must hurry ourselves. We’ve bare days to get your aunt settled in here -- well, permanently, if you will -- and with me in a position to guard over her. Then we’ve to find a crew of men willing to travel back to the King’s City in your company. Winter’s soon to strike. You’ll be lucky to make it back to Amahpre before snow falls.”

“Wise advisor,” Paedro said, rubbing his face. “That, or taskmaster, and right about everything you’ve said. What will I do without you?”

“Write me for my advice, and often, eh?” Benec grinned and slapped his royal friend on the back. “And no more talk of racking, if you please. Besides, I doubt there’s a rack built that would fit me.” He stretched his muscles to prove the point -- showing off shamelessly, Paedro thought. At full height he was six inches over six feet tall, so far beyond impressive as to be a little frightening, yet he moved with the grace of a courtly dancer.

A strange man, Benec. He took folk by surprise when they first met him, and delighted in keeping them permanently off step. Made them easier to outguess, he claimed. He kept his mane of wheat-colored hair and his beard luxuriant enough to hide most of his face and wore fisherman’s clothing with a hearty country zest. Only the tattooed spirals beneath his eyes gave the lie to his countrified exterior and hinted at deeper things -- and those he never spoke about.

His stretch finished at last, Benec yawned and idly scratched at his shoulder. “Where’s Cloud got himself to?” he asked. “Haven’t seen him since I headed for the stables.”

“He heard word of a fellow who’ll rent us coracles for crossing the inlet. Down near the quay, I think.”

“Mmph.” Benec pulled a face. “And ... your aunt? She’s been stashed away safe enough?”

“Chirre and Brach have her in hand.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“Benec ...” Paedro pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Why, whatever did *I* say?”

“Benec --”

“Ohe, there’s the boy coming back, just yonder.” Benec pointed down the cobbled street to the black-haired, lean-hipped boy heading excitedly for them. Cloud. Nineteen years old, nearly twenty. Just edging into manhood, and a new-made defender of the realm with the scars to prove it, he still ran like an eager puppy.

Paedro shook his head in admiration. “It’d take much to crush such a spirit.”

“Don’t go tempting fate.”

“Is that a seafaring superstition?”

“It’s something all folk of decent common sense keep in mind,” Benec said dryly. “Ohe, Cloud! Any luck?”

“Enough of it,” the boy reported with a pleased nod of his head. “One of these little brass coins to have the boats for a night. If we can’t get anyone in the chieftain’s household to send them back, the owner says he’ll come around to collect them.”

“Then we’ll start now. Cloud, go seek out the rest of our party.”

The boy saluted and dashed off without a pause to catch his breath. Benec muttered something beneath his breath about the impetuosity of youth. Paedro ignored him. “Have we purchased all we’ll need?”

“Not at all, Your Highness,” Benec retorted. “This isn’t a merchant town. Hasn’t changed a bit since I left it, oh, ten years since. How you talked me into returning, I’ll never know.”

He rammed his hands into his pockets and glanced around the street. “Huh! One thing’s different, now that I come to look for it. No dogs. Used to be packs of the curs wherever you looked.”

“Is that important?”

“Probably not, but it might be. Here, old salt!” Benec reached out one long arm and caught a passing ancient by the shoulder. “Hold hard and give us a word, will you?”

The wizened old character looked his captor up and down in deepest suspicion. “Can’t say I recognize the face nor yet the hair,” he said at last. “Who be you?”

Benec rolled his eyes to the heavens and tapped at one of his mage-made tattoos. “So much for fame. Does this tell you much?”

Toothless jaws dropped. “It never be Benec!” the ancient exclaimed. “What’s drug you back home after so long, Master Whale-Singer?”

“A little of this and too much of that. Here, what’s happened to the dogs? Been peaceful enough that you don’t need barking guards anymore?”

“Hah! Used to be dogs in plenty, till *her* came and drove them all away. Wanted village and island for herself, she did.”

“Who?”

The old salt made an ugly sound in his throat and nodded to something behind Benec. “*Her*, that’s who. Have an eyeful, if you like.”

“I’ll be a shipwrecked sailor! Paedro, have a look at that!”

The prince turned, then jerked back. “By the Lady!”

“Her” -- apparently pleased to be noticed at last -- gave them a smile full of extremely sharp teeth. “Welcome, strange men,” she purred. “What do you here?”

As the winds subsided, Tirsah took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. Perhaps she had been mistaken. It happened. From time to time. She hoped.

But if strangers were indeed coming, and if *he* was with those on their way to Kirree ...

Don't think about it yet. Wait and see what happens. Perhaps no one will come at all. Perhaps.

"Child?" Sela peered up into Tirsah's tree, a worried look on her face. "Something's wrong, isn't there?"

"Not at all!" Tirsah lied. "I'm just on my way down."

"You can't be after fibbing to me, girl. I've known you since you were birthed."

"Ah, Sela! Be quiet, there's a love."

The old woman squared her hands on her hips. "Shan't," she sassed with the confidence that came of serving a family for thirty years.

"Shall so!" Tirsah laughed. "Watch this!" She made an elegant leg in the air, pushed herself out of the tree, somersaulted once in the air, and landed on her feet.

Amused at the scandalized exclamations of her kinfolk, who, after twenty-six years of knowing her, still hadn't quite got used to her antics, Tirsah straightened to her full height and beamed at them.

Although not an imposing sight at half a foot shy of five, hard work had pared every extra ounce of fat from her frame and left her with a firm, lithe musculature. Her face was plain, but rich with life, her mouth warm and wide, her smile generous. She kept her wild tangle of thick bronze curls scraped back in a rough knot to keep it out of her eyes.

Years ago, when she had first begun to learn her craft as green-mage and proved her talent for it, her face had been tattooed with delicate green whorls that began at the outside corners of her eyes and spread over her cheeks. With each new accomplishment, another loop or knot had been added, signifying her growing power.

Being a green-mage was no easy task. One had to have their soul sunk deep in the earth, and -- in her case -- the sea, as well, and know how to coax things into growing, and growing tall and strong. More, because her magic focused on life itself, she had had to learn midwifery and herbalism. Many came to her for help in childbearing or with a cough or cold from too many hours out fishing. Tirsah helped them with a glad heart, working her "plain" magic with power and skill. She was good, and she knew it. Under her care, no babies died, nor their mothers; rheums were cured at a touch; the crops grew strong and healthy; and the fish were fat when caught in nets.

She knew she had the power to go further, to become a master-mage as her father had been. But for reasons she kept hidden inside her heart, she had not yet taken that step ...

Straightening, she swept an elaborate curtsy to her kinswomen and whirled about to face an old man seated on an overturned lobster trap -- her uncle Lorn. "Do tell Sela to leave well enough alone, if you please."

He grunted at her and squinted at a small rounded scrap of whalebone pinched between his thumb and forefinger. "Get on with your sauce, girl," he grumbled. "Hard enough, this. No need for playing about."

"There's always time for play." Tirsah bent lithely, scooped up a sweet, autumn-red windfall apple, and tossed it at him. He nearly dropped his bit of scrimshaw trying to catch the thing before it splattered on his knee.

"Leave off!" he roared, firing the fruit back at her.

She caught it neatly and took a luscious bite, dabbing syrup-sweet juice from her chin. "Have a bit of spirit, Uncle Lorn."

"Help the women, you!"

"Old grouch." Tirsah tugged at Lorn's grizzled life-lock, the long braid that all men and women wore from cradleboard to tomb. "What if I said that little trinket you're carving is the best I've ever seen?"

“Rubbish. Leave off and get away on, would you?”

Tirsah chuckled and dropped a quick kiss on her uncle’s temple. Lorn had a fierce bark and was grand at making folk think he’d bite, but she’d never yet seen him do it. “Get on yourself. It *is* fine.” She tugged his braid once more, just to make him mad, and moved on.

Scrimshaw -- frivolous, but why not? Their chieftain had done his hard work for the year, guiding Kirree’s fishing fleets throughout the summer. Just so, she’d kept a mage-watch on the whaling ships and worked among the rye and pease fields until her skin had burned dark as a nut. Hard work filled Kirree’s cellars with enough good, sturdy viands to keep them well-fed during the long winter soon to come.

The women of the household, her lady kinfolk, had all but finished with setting the chieftain’s lighthouse stronghold ready for the snowy season. Rather than miss the last fine day for a long time to come, they’d come outside to work at small things, spreading an old blanket beneath a tree to sit on, careful to tuck their legs and skirts modestly beneath them. Tirsah knew they were grateful to be nothing at all like her, in her short kirtle and a cut-down pair of men’s trews, clambering about in the trees!

Tirsah loved her kin fiercely as a vixen would her cubs. Sela, called serving woman but treated like a favored aunt; Rose, Lorn’s prized and only daughter, lovely as the first flower of summer; and Mims, another cousin, small and sour. Tirsah noticed that Mims had managed to twist or tear her neatly sewn kirtle so that it fell off one shoulder in a way she must have imagined tantalizing. Who she was trying to entice would be anyone’s guess.

And, of course, there was her uncle Lorn, chieftain of Kirree-on-Sea, solid as the fishermen he served -- yes, served -- on the deck of a ship and in the judging chair that was his by right. Taciturn, kindly beneath his carefully cultivated hide of leather, beloved by all who knew him.

And her father, though not among them ...

Tirsah would never trade her strange royal family for a proper king's ransom. More, she'd guard them to the very cost of her life, just as each of them would do for her.

So if *he* had plans to come back to Kirree-on-Sea, then he had best be careful, for she'd not stand for any nonsense. Oh, no. She'd meet and match whatever he challenged her with. Just so! See if she wouldn't!

At the front of his coracle, Benec twisted about to look behind him and shivered.

"Something amiss?" Paedro, in the rear, glanced up at his friend. "I can read you, advisor. What's wrong?"

"Bah! Nothing, save for getting splattered with icy water. A little less enthusiasm on the oars, eh? We're rowing, not digging for gold. Slower, smoother -- there, well done." He pointed directly ahead. "Just past this side of the cliff and we'll see the chieftain's lighthouse island. There's clear sailing here; down the coast it turns swampy. If you'd believe it, trees grow through the shallows five fathoms out -- Here, watch yourself! What do you call yourself doing, twisting about like that?" Benec balanced the wobbling coracle and dealt Paedro an indignant glare.

"Will they have the beacon lit, do you think?" the prince asked, unashamedly curious.

"Not dark enough yet, and it's past the season for proper fishing besides." Benec scowled. "Ohe, for pity's sake, don't make that face, will you? I feel as if I've kicked a puppy."

The prince chuckled. He pulled slowly at his oar and gazed at the cliff. "I feel as if I know Kirree already. You pepper almost every speech with a sour reference to this sleepy little place. I know you'd have rather gone anywhere but here. If you hadn't sworn your fealty, I doubt you'd be here now."

"And neither would I be, except for a likely vain hope that some things might have changed."

"And if they haven't?"

Benec glared at the rippling waters of the inlet. He didn't suppose that Paedro saw what he did. Tiny silver footprints skipped across the water, glimmering with a fey, mocking light all their own. *Magery. Her brand of magery.*

"I don't guess they have," he said. "We'll see what we see, Paedro."

"Mmm." Paedro drummed his fingers on his oar. "Do you think that creature will have carried the message as we worded it?"

"Not a chance. But you can be fairly sure they'll suspect I'm on my way." Or at least one of them would.

He'd handled armies. Madmen with swords. Courtiers! Surely he could deal with one small woman.

"There you have it," Benec nodded toward the island. "The first ending of our road. What do you think?"

Paedro shook his head, lost for words. The tall, roughly built stone structure rose impossibly high and proud on a massive crag of an island jutting from the sea, invisible until you swept past the mainland's cliffs, then suddenly there. A sight fit to steal the breath from a man's chest.

Benec let his oar go slack and stared at the castle glumly. He'd gladly give his sword arm and his most useful talents to be anywhere else. After spending his growing years on that rock and leaving it in a temper ten years past, he hadn't ever thought to return. Yet here he was.

"Now I know why the fisher folk call their headsman a chieftain. Anyone who could conquer that rock ..."

"Aye." Benec heaved a sigh and picked up his oar. "Go slow from here, and follow my lead!" he called out, loud enough for the other boats to hear and heed him. "There're coral reefs hereabouts. Go where I go, and we'll make it through safe enough."

At least to the other side, he thought. Huzzah.

Tirsah ran her hands longingly over the rich-smelling windfall apple she held. Juicy, it had dripped sweetness on her fingers. She licked it off and moaned softly in sheer pleasure. The fruit tasted of sweetness and life, and she savored it.

Winter was coming on all too fast for her taste. She despised it, and always had, for locking her away from her beloved gardens and trees.

But the signs were clear -- the season of snows would start within a month. One night the outside air would grow cold beyond a man's ability to bear, and a day or so after that, the blizzards would begin. They'd fall without ceasing for weeks at a time and bury Kirree beneath a thick, choking blanket of white for three turns of the moon at the least, perhaps more. Tirsah often thought she'd go mad before the spring thaws.

If only her father ...

Ohe! Best not to think on that. She took another bite of the windfall fruit, noting idly that more than a few lay scattered about among the tree's roots. Definitely past being ripe, well bruised and sticky with leaking juice, but they might do for cider. She held hers up for inspection. "What do you think, Sela?"

"Let the bees have them," the old woman judged without pause. "We've already got more cider stored than we've got jugs."

Tirsah hated waste. "Seems an awful shame."

"So are a lot of things, child." Sela clicked her tongue. "What use thinking about it when there's work to do?"

Tirsah felt a sudden thump on the back of her head. Startled, she wheeled about to see Mims pitch a second hard, pale brown nut at her.

"I'd have said save them," she pouted. "You might have asked me."

"I might have. You might have spoken up."

"Hush it. Nearly got this tricky bit," Lorn snapped.

“Hush yourself!” Mims retorted.

“Mind your manners, girl.” Lorn stretched and held his carving to the sunlight. One of a pair of earrings, Tirsah could see now. “Needs must check the fit on this,” he grumbled. “Where’s Edge got to?”

“I haven’t seen her,” Tirsah realized. Odd that she hadn’t noticed. “Was she inside earlier?”

“She’s not been home today,” Rose murmured. She rarely spoke, though her voice matched the rest of her in beauty -- soft, low, and sweet.

Tirsah frowned. She had a special interest in their long-term guest. According to some, Edge should not exist at all, and according to all common sense, one of her kind would never have come to bide on an island.

Edge was one of the Catkin, an odd folk that fell somewhere between small-cats and men -- the last of their ancient race, and very rarely seen by any but their own kind. Covered in a soft, downy fur, with a mane of curls on her head, she went as easily on two legs as four, and had a foreshortened muzzle flexible enough for human speech, though she spoke it poorly.

One year ago, she had appeared from nowhere that anyone could figure -- simply trotted up to the lighthouse just as if she belonged there, staked out a spot by the fire, and raided Sela’s pantry. She refused to answer any questions about her past, and laughed when they spoke about the future. Her reasons for being there were her own, and Tirsah had given up on finding them out. She’d know in due time, or not. Edge had made it clear that that was her own choice.

They had no idea how young or old she might be, and, despite the fact that nothing in the world could convince her to wear clothes, they had been hard put to discover that she was a she. Tirsah sometimes suspected Edge was capable of altering from more to less feline as it pleased her, but knew she’d never perform at anyone’s whim but her own.

Tirsah shaded her eyes to scan the trees. “Did Edge say where she was off to?”

“Chasing a mouse or a squirrel, most like,” Mims butted in sulkily. “It’s all right for some to run off and leave the work when they feel like it.”

Tirsah had learned from watching Edge that Catkin could hear a whisper on the other side of the world, but rarely stirred themselves to give chase. Perhaps she’d noticed the peculiar omens. She certainly had all the famed curiosity of her kind. If she had gone into danger ... “Uncle, perhaps we should go after her.”

“I am here,” a voice piped into her ear, and laughed to see how she flinched.

Tirsah pressed her hand to her heart and glared at the mischievous beast. Edge purred deep inside her slender throat, not at all repentant. She gave Tirsah a wide, mocking smile that displayed all of her sharp teeth. “I see something today,” she sing-songed.

“Did you now?” Tirsah pretended a lack of interest to pay the Catkin back for her joke. Her kind could hold out for days if they knew they had something you wanted, but nothing drove them wilder than being ignored.

“I see much. Look here.”

“Perhaps later.”

Rose hid a smile behind her hand. Mims, not so polite, hooted.

Edge hackled. “Very important!” she protested. She opened her forepaw and held something up in triumph. A small golden trinket.

“Mercy!” Sela gasped.

Tirsah wheeled around. “By the sea and shore!” she murmured. This, she had not expected.

Edge grinned as she dangled her prize in front of the green-mage. A chunk of gilt sealing wax, heavy and ornate, strung on a thong. A royal crest. “Told you.”

“Where did you get it?” Tirsah demanded. “Honestly or by theft?”

Edge blinked at her. The Catkin stole, but only out of a sense that the world and everything in it belonged to them by right. “Got it from a man. Dirty, sweaty man. He ask, where you from? I say here, this place, so he say here, take this seal, take my message, go back, fast!”

“Hmph.” Lorn laid his scrimshaw aside and crooked a finger at the Catkin. “Bring it here.”

“No.” Edge gripped the chain tight. “Man say catch messenger a fish for payment.”

“Done.” Tirsah held out her hand. “Let me see it first.”

Edge sneered at her. She swung the thong around in a circle, then tossed it carelessly at Lorn. He caught it neatly and held the seal up to the light, turning it this way and that. Then, forehead furrowed, he passed it to Tirsah.

The weight of it startled her as she took it in her palm. “Pure beeswax,” she said, brushing the design -- a dizzying maze of lines interwoven with each other in elaborate flourishes and twists -- with the tip of one finger. Buried deep in the middle, she thought she could make out an elegant “P.”

“What was the message that went with it?”

Edge yawned. “Two fish for telling.”

“Two, then!”

The Catkin shrugged and licked a paw. “Man is called Prince Paedro,” she said idly. “He comes here today with some others.”

The shocked silence lasted for three heartbeats. “Not the son of the king,” Tirsah said slowly. “Coming here?”

“*Now.*” Edge dealt her a look of one exercising great patience with the stupid. “Today. I already say so.”

“Mercy,” Sela squeaked, throwing her hands in the air. She snatched up her skirts and fled back into the lighthouse -- heading, Tirsah knew, for her pantry, in despair at the

fisherman's stew and workaday bread that would have served for the family's dinner. Mims followed hard on her heels, but Rose remained, her face bloodless with shock.

"How far away?" Tirsah demanded.

"Not far. Sailing across now in coracles."

"Then they'll be here at any moment." Tirsah bit fiercely at her lip and glanced at the sky. Omens, omens! A true prince, come to Kirree-on-Sea? Why? Did he come in *his* company?

"Who's with him, Edge?" she demanded, sinking to one knee before the Catkin. "Did you see?"

"Not named. Ugly, smell bad, chatter like birds." Edge sniffed. "Big, small, tall, short. Six in all. One is big, *big*, bushy as a bear."

"Was he tattooed?" Tirsah gripped the Catkin by her forearms. "The bearded one! Try to remember."

Edge hissed at her. Tirsah remembered too late that she did not like to be touched. "Tattoos under eyes," the Catkin snarled. "Move back away!"

"First tell me -- were they gray spiral tattoos?"

"Yes. No touch, no touch!" Edge lashed out at Tirsah, the mage jumping back just quickly enough to escape being hurt. The Catkin retreated, brushing her ruffled fur back down. She glared at Tirsah. "No more questions. I not answer."

"I knew it!" Tirsah swore beneath her breath. "Him!"

"Hold!" Lorn ordered both females. "Enough! Back to what I asked you, girl. Royalty's coming. Well?"

Tirsah ran her hands through her hair, seeking composure. "I don't like it," she said. "There's no reason I can think of for a visit so close to winter, and royals don't do things without a reason."

“Can’t turn them away, can we?” Lorn cracked his knuckles loudly, resigned and yet not a little excited at the thought of visitors. “Have to let them come, we will. Greet them best as we can. Ohe, could be they’ll want nothing much at all, eh?”

“Or they could ask far more than we can pay.”

Lorn scowled. Not over fond of mages and their ways was he. “No good, girl. Made up my mind, I have. We’ll show them hospitality, an’ that means you, too. Understand me?”

“But, Uncle --”

“But me no buts,” he ordered, with a certain stubborn look on his face that Tirsah knew from long experience could not be argued with. “Hospitality, d’you hear?”

Tirsah shut her eyes. “Yes, Uncle,” she said, very, very softly indeed.

Behind her back, she made a sign to protect herself against punishment for telling lies.

“Ashore, ashore,” Benec grumbled as he reluctantly hoisted himself out of his coracle onto dry land. Cloud, who had beaten him by three lengths, had already clambered out, dropped to his knees, and begun examining something on the stone quay with the fascination of a child.

“Get up,” Benec ordered crossly. “We’ve still got a long way to climb.”

Cloud ignored him, caught up in brushing sand from the rock. “Have you seen these?”

“Often.”

“Paedro, come and see!” Cloud urged the curious prince closer. “See? Footprints, etched deep into the rock. Benec, tell him the story. Guess what these are, Paedro?”

“Footprints,” Benec said, dry as wine.

“Benec!”

“Ah, it’s called Ancestor Step.” He begrudged them the knowledge. “Legend has it that the first mage on this island set them there as a blessing of some sort.”

“They’re a family of great power, then,” Paedro mused.

“And then some.” Benec shaded his eyes against the setting sun and glared up at the lighthouse. “Not to be tangled with. No, Prince, I wouldn’t have come back on my own for all the gold I could carry. Especially not to deceive them as we plan.”

Tirsah closed her eyes and opened her senses to listen as closely as she could. “The visitors have already set foot on the island,” she reported. “They’ll be on their way up the path. Best prepare yourself, Uncle, since you’ve bound us to it.”

She stood up, pushing her sleeves back over her elbows. “Come to me at moonset for those fish,” she offered in apology to the Catkin. “You’ve earned them today.”

Edge studied her warily, tail switching back and forth across the grass. “I stay friends with you,” she said at last.

“Wise choice.” Tirsah held up her hand for quiet. “Shh, shh, they’re closer than I’d thought, Uncle!” Yes ... yes, that was the sound of boots on the sandy, rocky path below. She could just hear conversation in voices pitched too low to understand, broadly accented in the strange, foreign-sounding dialect of the King’s City.

“Daughter, to me!” Lorn beckoned.

Rose hadn’t moved since Edge displayed her prize. She shook herself like one dazed as she stood, reaching for her father and comfort. Then her lovely brown eyes went wide and dark as a seal’s in the middle of her white face, as she apparently realized it would be her task as the highest-ranking lady of the household to greet their guests.

Tirsah gave her cousin’s arm a quick squeeze. “Rest easy,” she whispered. “I’ll speak for you.” She glanced at her uncle. “Do you object?”

Lorn knew his daughter. He nodded. “Best you do it.”

“This part, at least, with pleasure, Uncle.” Tirsah cupped her hands around her mouth and called out, loud and clear as a cathedral bell, “Stop where you are!”

The sound of scuffling boots came to a quick halt on the path. With her uncle at her back, Tirsah spoke on, but with her own twist, “You’re welcome in the chieftain’s name if you are friends. If you are foe, pass on! You’ll not enjoy tangling with the folk of Kirree if you mean us harm.”

She couldn’t make out any details of the faces or figures of the men at that distance, able only to catch glimpses of tunics and breeks and pale faces. The tallest bent down to murmur in the ear of another, then lifted his head and called out, “Ohe, we’re friends! Is this still home to Lorn, chieftain of Kirree-on-Sea?”

“Tis, and I am he,” Lorn boomed. “Who’s asking, then?”

The tall man raised his arm and waved in a long-forgotten, yet all-too-familiar way.

A cold wave washed over Tirsah. *So.*

“You can guess three times, Chief of Rascals!” the man called.

Lorn’s weathered old face lit up. “Benec!” he roared. “That you, boy?”

“None other. May we enter your lands, Chieftain?”

“Uncle, wait --”

“Enter?” Lorn whacked his leg with one tough old hand. “You’d better! Come up and welcome! Ten years since I’ve seen you, lad, and too long at that! Come up and be welcome in my home!”

Chapter Two

The small party of men poured up a path through the arbor. “You should’ve told me Benec’s come home,” Lorn scolded Tirsah under his breath as he beckoned the strangers on. “What’s to worry on if he’s with the crowd? Could’ve saved me a bad moment, girl.”

“I -- Uncle, you don’t know --”

Lorn ignored her to hurry forward and greet his guests. “Rest yourselves, put down your packs. Must have been a long journey, eh?” he exclaimed. “Ohe, Benec! Get you up here, lad. Thought I’d never see you alive again!”

The tallest of the group separated himself from the others and approached the chieftain with both hands out in greeting. “Rascal!”

“Rapscallion!”

Tirsah narrowed her eyes as the lean-hipped man approached them, beaming a great smile. *Oh, yes, that’s Benec.*

His face was one she’d never forget -- she’d seen it in her dreams and nightmares nearly every night since he’d left her ten years before. Left her a woman with only broken promises and memories of what once had been to keep her warm at night, never thinking, she believed, of what he’d cast aside so carelessly. Hatred for him came naturally.

His disdain had followed her own, with her refusal to answer his letters, and malicious mage-pranks that he must have recognized as her work. As time had passed, they'd left each other very much alone. Alone and distanced enough that, as Benec now glanced briefly over Tirsah on his way past, he might never have known her.

"Who's this, Chieftain?" he asked as he made a rough bow to Rose, who'd all but hidden behind her father. "Have you taken a new wife?"

"Wrong, wrong." Lorn cackled. "'Tis my daughter, you young idiot -- don't remember Rose?"

"This can't be your daughter. No one ugly as you could produce a flower like this." Benec tugged his forelock and winked at the girl. "Ten years made more of a difference in you than I'd have thought possible, lass. Ohe, now --" he protested as Rose gasped and fled entirely behind Lorn.

"Leave be; she's a shy thing. But here's yourself, gilded as a cheater's coin." Lorn flicked one of the many medals pinned any which way to Benec's jerkin. "Waylaid by gypsy merchants, were you?"

"Ohe, some daft fools thought I'd earned the trinkets. I'll melt them down when no one's looking." Benec gripped the chieftain's arms and shook him with the gentle ferocity of a mastiff. "Who'd have thought you were still alive, old man?"

Lorn wrestled away, obviously well pleased. "Leave off!"

"Not while the sun shines."

"Bah! Good to have you back, boy."

"Bound to happen someday."

"Glad 'twas sooner than later." Lorn jerked his head at the other men. "Your friends ... from the King's City, eh?"

"And here I thought I'd managed to give them the slip. Well, as they've managed to keep up, I'd best have a word or two with you about the bad company I keep these days ..."

He drew Lorn aside and lowered his voice, murmuring for the chieftain's ears alone.

Tirsah planted her fists on her hips and clicked her tongue in disgust. How could her uncle favor the wretch?

Chin high, she made for the small cluster of travelers. She tugged at her life-lock, braided through with mage colors to signify her place in the chieftain's household, then tucked her hands into her sleeves and nodded to them. "You're welcome here, even if you do come in that oaf's company."

The youngest, barely more than a boy, looked startled. "I thought -- Benec said he was a friend of the family. We didn't mean to come where we're not wanted --"

"No, you're fine," Tirsah reassured. "We'll keep you in a stable for the winter and use you in the fields come spring."

His eyes flew open wide. "What?"

Tirsah managed to look sober for just a moment before she burst into laughter.

The boy's face warmed with good humor as he realized he'd been had. "I remember you now," he said, tossing his hair back out of his eyes.

"Do you?" Tirsah raised an eyebrow. "Who am I, then?"

"You're the master-mage Anno's daughter."

Tirsah's smile faded. "So I am. How did you know that?"

"Don't you remember me?" The boy dropped to a squat and looked up at her from below. "I was just so tall the last time I saw you, I think. I tried to raid your honey pots, and you smacked my hand for it."

Tirsah frowned. He did look slightly familiar. Gray eyes. There was something about his eyes, especially when they looked up at her like that ... "Not Cloud!" she exclaimed. "Old Storm's son Cloud, from the far islands?"

“You do remember!” Cloud rose with a grace unusual for a boy his age, the mark of a well-trained warrior. “Ten years and more it’s been. I fostered for a few weeks with the chieftain while my mother’s family traveled out to fetch me home to Amahpre.”

“You were seven years old. I did slap your hand for trying to steal honey.” Tirsah caught that hand, much longer and leaner now. “And for pulling the small-cats’ tails, and for emptying lobster pots to watch them swim away, and --”

“I remember thinking you had eyes in the front, back, sides, top, and bottom of your head.” Cloud squeezed her fingers briefly. “I’m that sorry about your father, Tirsah.”

She hesitated. “My father?”

“Aye.” He looked as shy as Rose when she tried to explain things. “Rumor reached us of how he’d gone out wandering, and only his body came home to you for burial. I remembered Anno, and I liked him. I wanted you to know that people still remember the master-mage. They say we won’t ever see one like him again.”

Cloud leaned closer to her and whispered, “That’s partly why the prince came out here, you know. To pay his last respects to Anno through you.”

“Has he really?” Tirsah knew she smiled a little too brightly. “He needn’t have bothered. The time for mourning is over and done.”

She whirled around. “And what do you think of the lighthouse? You’ve changed more than a little. Has this island altered much to your mind?”

“It’s the same as ever, Tirsah -- wonderful.” Cloud turned around in a slow circle, admiring the lighthouse stronghold and her mage-grown arbor. “The only changes are for the better.”

“Flatterer.” Tirsah breathed a little easier at leaving the subject of her father behind, and laughed at Cloud. “Honey tongue.”

“No, truly. Is that really Lorn? I remembered him as being so much taller. And who’s that, beyond him --”

Cloud fell suddenly and thoroughly silent, and stared. At Rose.

Tirsah chuckled. "What, Cloud, has your memory failed you? Surely you remember that girl."

He shook his head dumbly, staring yet. The light of the setting sun surrounded Rose with a warm glow that turned her hair into soft, living flame. "I'd remember her," he swore. "Who is she?"

Men! Tirsah took pity on him. "It's only my cousin Rose. As I remember, the last time you met, you tied her braids together. Stop staring! She'll take fright."

Rose had noticed them, for under the weight of the boy's eyes she took a quick look at Cloud -- handsome as a picture himself, Tirsah realized -- and flushed the deep pink of a summer sunset.

Hmph. Tirsah didn't like that. Rose was far too much the innocent for dallying with soldiers, no matter how handsome.

Dogged, she distracted Cloud yet again. "And shall you introduce me to the prince today?" she asked, scanning the group. It pleased her that she couldn't spot the prince immediately. Every man looked as bedraggled and travel-stained as the next.

It pleased her more that neither had the prince pushed himself forward, demanding to be recognized or pampered. Though she wouldn't let herself decide yet, Tirsah thought she might like him better for the rarity of possessing common sense.

Blushing at his bad manners, Cloud tore his gaze from Rose at last, put a hand to the small of Tirsah's back, and ushered her forward.

"Prince Paedro," he addressed the most battered-looking fellow of the lot. "I've someone to meet you."

The man in question turned reluctantly away from the lighthouse. "So marvelous. How did they do it?" he wondered aloud. "It's just as Benec described it."

“As for how they did it, it was with hard work,” Tirsah retorted without waiting for Cloud to finish the niceties. “I am Tirsah, mage to the chieftain of Kirree-on-Sea. I’m told that you’re Paedro, a prince of the King’s City, Amahpre?”

“That I am.” He studied her in surprise. “I myself am told a few things about your boldness that I begin to suspect are true.”

“And so?” Tirsah returned him gaze for gaze, without fear or maidenly blushes. Very plain-faced, this royal -- all sharp bones tempered with deep weariness. He might have seen twenty-seven summers in all. She sensed that he missed very little.

“You’re not a bit like Benec described you,” he said abruptly.

“And how am I different?”

“Beautiful.” As her mouth flew open, he laughed. “And you haven’t snapped off my head in one bite yet, either.”

Tirsah recovered herself with an effort, but managed a cheeky smile. “Give me time, Your Highness!”

“I am Paedro only, and badinage aside, I would call you gracious as well as beautiful.” He shook an errant lock of hair from his eyes. “You’ve given a queen’s welcome to a handful of rag-pickers that most rich men wouldn’t show to a servant’s back door. Will your generosity extend a little further still?”

Beginnings like that rarely boded well. Tirsah disliked them as both woman and mage. “That depends,” she hedged.

“On?”

“On what you ask.” She spread her hands. “What is it that you want?”

“Well ...” The prince rubbed at the back of his neck. “Brach, Chirre, if you would?”

Two men in the group, one tall, one small, seemed to glance doubtfully at each other, shrugged, and walked a little apart to reveal a woman behind them. A woman very like a

crow, swathed in black veils, black like clotted molasses, black as a moonless night. Her aura hung thickly about her, sour and clogged with mist the color of dried blood.

Tirsah drew in a sharp breath. The woman was a stranger to her, but no one like that could bear good tidings. The prince put a finger to his lips. "Don't be afraid. She means no harm, I promise. I'll explain soon. Patience."

"Paedro," she began -- then stopped as she felt a burning gaze like two sunspots fixed between her shoulder blades. Unable to resist, she turned her head just a little and saw Benec staring at her with a malicious grin decorating his face. Lapping up her discomfort like a small-cat with his nose in cream.

Tirsah's shoulders drew back, poker-straight. "As you will, my lord," she said flatly, "but pardon me."

She almost, but not quite, took to her heels, elbowed her way rudely past Benec, and snatched Rose by the hand. "Come with me quickly, sweeting," she ordered under her breath, with a gentle push for emphasis.

"Quickly, now! We'll help Sela prepare the evening meal. With your permission, Uncle?" she called back over her shoulder, caring little whether he gave it or not.

"Ah! Good!" Lorn approved. "How soon?"

"When you hear the bells," Tirsah flung back at them. "Before full dark." She prayed that Sela would be ready by then.

While she was at it, she prayed that Benec would fall victim to a horrible accident as soon as the Lady might find it convenient.

Omens, she thought sourly as they hurried into the lighthouse. *If I never see another omen again, it will be far too soon!*

"Tirsah?" Rose whispered.

Tirsah looked up and saw how pale her cousin had gone. “Poor little chickadee, you’re not used to so much excitement, are you?” She patted the white cheek. “Run on ahead to Sela, then. I’ll be along soon.”

Rose kissed her and fled gratefully. Tirsah sighed, sensing that the beautiful young girl ran from her fast approaching destiny.

Royalty never visited without wanting something. The dark woman -- who would bring a weak female on such a rough journey for a mere visit? If it wasn’t the royal’s intention to find a permanent place for that lady raven in Kirree, Tirsah would bite through her rune stick. And more, it didn’t take a mage to see that Paedro wore no wedding jewels. Rose was nobly born, lovely, and just of an age to be married.

Tirsah gave an angry, unhappy twitch of her shoulders. It was not to be borne -- yet what choice did they have? Long ago she’d learned that Fate cared very little about individual men and women, who were mere pawns in the larger games that gods played. They were free to move within their spheres, but set on courses that would be played out whether they willed it or not. Her father, the chieftain, herself, and Benec ...

But she’d have that horse-face’s head in a basket if he’d jostled Fate’s fine hand on the matter -- and, oh, she suspected he had!

Grimly decided, she made for the kitchens and the rich smell of cooking food. She inhaled in appreciation, then noticed that the small sound was far louder than it should have been. All else was silent.

No sounds of spoon and dish? No women talking together?

“Sela?” Tirsah quickened her pace. “Do you need help? I’ve come to lend a hand if it’s wanted.”

Sela appeared in the low stone doorway of the pantry, her lips pressed together so tightly they were but a thin line in her face. Rose and Mims stood behind her, looking terrified. “Miss, if you’d come have a look at this?”

“What’s happened?” Tirsah stepped into Sela’s domain, warily scanning the spacious, stone rooms. A warm, welcoming light shone from the hearth. A dozen or more savory cooking smells filled the air from fish steaks sizzling on the spit, and warm food already dished up in bowls on the work table.

“How did you do all that so fast?”

Sela’s brows lowered. “Miss, I did *not*. None of this! Those redfin tunny fillets were bleeding raw when I left them not an hour ago, and now they’re nearly done. Look! There’s shrimp, bits of leftover crab cakes, and lobsters still in their shells on the spit as well, and do you see the work table? There’s our best cloth half on and half off it, and old camping plates laid out! Ohe! Common garden greens, thrown whole into my washing bowl! Well?”

“By the Lady.” Tirsah pressed her fingers to her lips to hide a grin. “You found it like this?”

Rose touched the tablecloth timidly. “Not -- not Uncle Anno’s work?”

Tirsah’s smile broke free. Tickled, she laughed aloud. “Lady, no! Poor cubs! You didn’t truly think -- no, have you been that scared? It surely wasn’t my father. Look there.” She pointed at the hearthstones. “I know our culprit. Do you see the ashes?”

Sela peered at the stones, swore, and dashed her hands against her apron. “Paw prints on my hearth. That filthy Catkin! I might have known. Who else would put together such a daft mishmash of food?”

Tirsah wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. “Imp! She must have come and tossed this lot together, then snuck around front to surprise us. Not exactly what I’d have chosen, but I suppose she meant well.”

“And just what’s for it, now, miss?”

Tirsah raked a hand through her curls. “Well, we certainly can’t serve a prince in the kitchen.”

“That we cannot. Mayhap we could find a table and chairs for the great hall?”

“There’s not near enough time for that.” Tirsah tapped a finger against her lips. “Sela, I’ve an idea.”

Sela froze. Mims crossed her arms over her chest and let out a puff of disgust. Even Rose paused, uneasy.

Tirsah flashed them a mischievous grin. “No, no, it’s a sound plan. We’ve plenty of fisherman’s stew, fresh bread -- oh, lots of things! Rose, quickly, change the bowls around. Mims, find more tidbits and sauces. Small things are fine so long as there’s plenty of them. Sela, see what we can salvage from the spit. I’ll see to the rest. Haste, now!”

She sprang forward, dipping into a small cooling well for a firkin of her best honey. “We’ll take the food out on the star-watching terrace,” she instructed, “and eat outside as the sun goes down.”

“But Tirsah --”

“Rose, I know what I’m doing.” Tirsah dropped a hasty kiss on her pretty cousin’s forehead. “These strangers are travel-weary and probably half-starved. What would they want of a fancy meal on white cloths? We’ll serve them best with good food and simplicity.”

She picked up a round of bread and frowned at it. “Simplicity out of necessity, but they needn’t know that. It’s a pity that we’ve only got workaday bread, but it’s warm. And since they’ve come to us without a warning, they shouldn’t expect a feast. Let them eat our bread. It’s good enough for us, isn’t it?”

“Tirsah, it’s the kin of kings waiting out there,” Sela protested, round-eyed with horror.

“A king,” Tirsah retorted blandly. “We’re a chieftain’s kinswomen, aren’t we? That’s much the same as a king so far north. And isn’t that bread made from your prized recipe? There can’t be any finer in Amahpre’s palaces. Butter and honey will cover the scorched bits.”

Sela shut her mouth tightly. She snatched up platter and fork and eased the edible bits of tunny from the roasting spit. Then, “You’d best know what you’re doing,” she muttered.

“When don’t I?”

Mims made a rude noise and slammed two cruets of vinegar onto the table.

“Use the small basket to carry them in, Mims,” Tirsah called, ignoring the girl’s display of temper. “Or a cart. No, not that one!”

She hastened over to the iron cart Mims had flung her gear onto. “You can carry them in a basket. It won’t spoil your hands. I’ll need this for moving the stew. No time to find a tureen or a deep enough dish -- besides, it’d lose half the heat.”

“You’re not -- ohe, I do hate it when you do this,” Sela fretted.

“Stop worrying, love.” Tirsah blew on her hands, murmured a charm, and reached deep into the fire to pull out the bubbling stewpot. The stewpot easily weighed three times what she did, yet she lifted it easily as a feather onto the cart. “There, you see?”

Sela shook her head. “You’ll do yourself an injury one day, but will you listen to me? And is there enough, do you think? Benec looks big enough to eat it all and twice as much over again.” She fanned herself. “Benec, ohe! And hasn’t he turned into a fine figure of a man?”

“There’s plenty of stew. That man-mountain will simply have to go hungry if he can’t eat his fill. And as for fine figures, I’m surprised you could tell a thing about Benec beneath that furze bush he cultivates on his face.”

“Tirsah! Time you put old squabbles aside. Not that I know what parted the pair of you, mind.”

“Is it really?”

“Yes,” Sela insisted. “He’s come about to be a handsome fellow and no mistake. Lovely long limbs, big strong hands, witty as a --”

“Should I arrange a chance meeting between the two of you?”

“Miss!” Sela gasped, scandalized. “You will twist everything I say. I only meant you’re getting no younger and he’s not yet married. You were once such friends, so --”

“Sew with needles, and seal your lips on the subject of marriage -- at least when speaking to me,” Tirsah said with flat finality. She clanged a heavy iron lid onto the pot of stew. “Is that clear?”

She brushed her hands off on her skirt and turned to survey the kitchen. Her kinswomen had worked quickly and well, even sulky Mims. “Anything else? No? Then we’ll start with what we’ve got. Come on, follow me!”

“The bell!” Rose piped.

“Oh!” Tirsah faced Rose in a silent plea. She was too short to reach the chimes, she’d offended Sela, and no doubt pouting Mims wouldn’t consider ringing the summons. “Would you?”

“It’s all right. I can do this.” Rose smiled. Such a beautiful smile as she had! She reached up above the kitchen door for one of the gilded chains hanging there, and pulled the one on the farthest right. Close by, a set of three small bronze bells sounded, calling the chieftain’s family to dinner on the terrace. Rose smiled at the sound. When happy, her face was a sight men would give their lives to see.

Tirsah set her jaw. If Benec was behind a plan to change her dear Rose’s life forever -- and if it were not for the better -- he’d best begin running straightaway. She wouldn’t just have his heart on a plate. She’d have it for fish bait!

At the sound of the bells signaling the evening meal, Lorn led his guests around the side of the lighthouse, toward the terrace. When they reached a set of tall iron gates, he rattled them peremptorily. “Mage!”

In a twinkling, Tirsah was there to unbar the way, and stood aside to let them in.

“We eat outside this night,” the miniature mage twinkled, genuflecting to the open sky as they moved past her. “We’ll take our meal under the stars tonight and let the sea be our salt. Why come so far to the ocean if you don’t take the time to enjoy it?”

The chieftain's terrace faced the ocean in all its wild glory -- a crashing, white-capped beast that roared forever and ever at their feet and spread from side to side of the horizon.

Torches blazed in mounted iron sconces on the guard wall running the length of the terrace. Their light cast an inviting glow across the flagstones, the rough rock benches, and the rune-carved tables scattered about like dice. Steaming platters and bowls of food stood at the ready, the smell that came from them instantly drawing the water to their mouths.

"This is the oldest known place on the island," Tirsah murmured softly as she passed by Paedro. "Before there was a stronghold, before there was a lighthouse, there was the star-gazing terrace."

She lifted her arm and pointed. "Look behind you. What do you think of our prize?"

The prince glanced over his shoulder. His eyes rounded, and he licked his suddenly dry lips. He recognized the thing immediately -- the skeleton of a whale, twenty times the length of a man, mounted in some mysterious way on the outer wall of the lighthouse tower. They'd done it so cunningly, the dry bones seemed nearly alive, the whale raising its massive head up to sing.

"Amazing," he managed to say at last.

"Never saw aught like that, have you?" Lorn nearly glowed with gruff pride as he approached the pair. "Caught it myself, twenty summers past. Now!" He pushed them forward. "We'll eat, eh?"

Young Mims and old Sela moved to stand behind tables heaped with platters of food, their serving spoons at the ready. Rose wrapped trembling hands carefully around a tall, ornate goblet in the center of the table, stepped forward shyly, and offered the cup to Paedro.

"Be welcome here," she whispered. "In the name of the chieftain."

He took the cup gratefully. "For such a greeting, a man would travel a thousand miles, lovely lady," he said as he would to a courtly woman of Amahpre, apparently not noticing how Rose blushed.

“Good!” Lorn roared, pleased with his daughter’s success. “Now, have at it! Men and women all, eat, enjoy!”

Tirsah coughed. “You may clean your hands if you want, first,” she murmured, indicating a large clay bowl filled with steaming water. It smelled of salt.

Paedro peered into the murky depths. The bottom of the bowl had been lined with sand. Benec elbowed in front of him, paused to give Tirsah a filthy look, and plunged his hands in, using the sand to scrub the dirt from his fingers.

Amazed that a chieftain with so much else had no soap to offer, but pleased at how well it worked off the battlefield as well as on, and with salt water rather than fresh, Paedro followed suit. He hesitated, then stood aside to offer a chance to the small woman in black following close behind him.

When she saw what it was, she drew her hands back into her sleeves and shook her head firmly.

“Aunt,” he whispered, hoping that no one heard him -- not yet. “Please -- to please me.”

“No!” She backed away behind her taller guard.

“They don’t mean you any harm,” he insisted, knowing she would not listen, but he had to try. “It’s a feast, Aunt. At least eat something. For me. Please?”

She shook her head.

It *was* a feast that the women had conjured up, and no mistake. Benec pitched into the tables as if he’d never seen food before, hardly piling one thing on his plate before he was scooping out another, eating all the while. After investigating among the platters, Cloud dug in with equal fervor.

He saw that Paedro would have taken a modest portion as manners demanded, but Benec knew well that each tidbit looked better than the last, and he chuckled as the prince ended up heaping his plate high with fish, stew, salad, preserves, bread, and cheese.

“Try the honey,” Benec ordered around a mouthful of warm, fresh bread.

“Honey?” Paedro asked incredulously. “There’s honey?”

He stared at the small firkin Benec pointed out to him. No wonder, too. Only a handful of mages in the entire world were skilled enough to harvest honey. The sting of a single bee would sicken a man, and more than three stings meant death. To go among the creatures in their homes and steal their honey was a hero’s feat. It said much for the generosity of the chieftain that he’d allowed a whole firkin to be set out for their feast. Honey was more valuable than melted gold.

Carefully, carefully, Paedro dripped a tiny spoonful onto the corner of his bread. “I can’t believe it.”

“Neither can I, come to that.” Benec licked his thumb. “Must be left over from Anno’s time.” He remembered the master-mage had had beehives, even, at one point.

“Of course. Anno would have been able to do it. Tirsah is a green-mage, though, isn’t she? Would she have --”

Benec snorted.

“Ah. Well.” Paedro lowered his bread. “The word of Anno’s death was a great blow to the world. No doubt Kirree felt the loss of their master-mage that much more sharply.”

“No doubt.” Benec found himself unaccountably depressed. Knowing that Anno was dead did not stop him from wishing that the master mage still lived. If there was a single person in the world who could advise him on what to do with Paedro’s aunt besides immure her at the edge of the world, it would have been Anno.

A paw dabbed at the top of his foot, startling him. He looked down to see that the Catkin Edge had slipped in and curled herself up under the stone table.

She watched Benec with bright eyes, clearly amused by something.

“You’re a little devil, aren’t you?” Paedro asked as she favored him with a feline grin. He tore a chunk of meat from his helping of tunny and held it out to her.

They hardly saw her move, so quick was she. Benec just had time to flinch as her teeth nearly clicked shut on Paedro’s flesh.

Sela, presiding over the stew pot, jerked upright in alarm. “Ohe! Did she bite you?”

Paedro examined his hand, looking astonished to find it whole. “Not quite.”

“Catkin!” Sela shook her fist at the unrepentant Edge, who slunk back under her table with a self-satisfied look.

“Calm yourself, Sela.” Tirsah turned to Paedro. “Edge wouldn’t hurt you, not on purpose. Sela’s not a friend to the purring folk. She can’t even bear to hear of a common kitchen moggy, though it would keep mice out of the stores. Not this one -- she’s far too lazy. Why run after mice when you can eat fish all day?”

Edge hissed at the mage. “The day you see mouse in pantry, you see my feet turned toe pads up.”

“A mighty hunter, eh?” Benec rumbled as he topped off his plate and turned about to scan for a seat.

“Better than you.” Edge preened.

Paedro extended his hand carefully to the Catkin. “May I touch you?”

She sneered at him and turned her back.

Tirsah patted the prince’s shoulder. “Don’t take it personally. She won’t allow anyone to touch her.”

“I’ll try my best, Lady Mage.”

“It’s Tirsah,” she said. “Perhaps we’ll find time to speak more about the Catkin-kind later, Paedro.”

Benec made a rude noise. "Would you like to kiss the prince's feet next or wash them, Tirsah?"

Paedro frowned. "Uncalled for. Apologize, Benec."

"Not on your say-so, nor anyone else's."

The prince shook his head. "Forgive him for his rudeness, Tirsah, I beg you. And it would please me much to hear more."

"Good." She smiled and lifted her plate. "But first things first."

Tirsah turned and scanned the benches for a place to sit -- and her face fell. *Oh, no.* Whether by fate or chance, the only place that remained was a roughly hewn bench just wide enough for two. Benec was heading for it even as she watched. He reached it first. Tirsah knew very well the oaf would have spread out far enough to deny her the seat if she hadn't arrived before he could try it. She raised her eyebrows at him to show him she knew his intentions full well. He dealt her a foul look but shifted aside, so far aside, in fact, that he balanced on the edge of the bench.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Benec toying with a small white clove of pickled garlic, taking care not to drop the slippery thing. It looked as if he'd found a few in the bottom of the bowl of greens -- too powerful for eating whole, probably added by accident.

He glanced at Tirsah, neat and demure at his side. She knew she smelled of trees, autumn air, and the honey-sweetness of ripe fruit. Her thick, wheat-colored braid hung smoothly down her back, and her mage-braided life-lock fell forward against one small, dusky cheek. As he watched, she took a bite of honey on a morsel of bread, enjoying herself.

He popped the garlic clove into his mouth and chewed it with his lips open.

Tirsah's nostrils twitched. She glanced sharply at him. He grinned back, openly enjoying the look of outrage on her face before she whirled, bristling, back to her own plate.

Benec whooped to himself in delight. *Success!*

“Ohe, Benec!” Two leathery old fingers snapped next to his ear.

“What?” he barked, flinching, before he realized that Lorn had been trying to get his attention. “Chieftain?”

“Haven’t minded a word I’ve said, have you?” Lorn demanded. “And why’re you sitting like a one-legged duck on a nest, boy? Tirsah, shift over.”

“No!” Benec snapped. “I’m comfortable like this. Go on, Chieftain. I’ll listen.”

“Whale-singing, boy!” the chieftain said. “Back in Kirree for good, eh? Plan to take up your Gift again, or no?”

Benec’s heart sank as if coated with lead. *Ah*. He’d half-hoped the notion wouldn’t come up, yet had almost yearned to mention it himself.

Whale-singing. A rare and precious magical Gift to have in a town that depended on the sea for its livelihood. A whale-singer could speak to the beasts of the ocean and coax them into the hunter’s nets. He’d discovered his gift and been tattooed with the proper markings when he was but a child, and had practiced for three years before he left Kirree.

After that, things were ... different. He hadn’t stirred that particular Gift deep inside his bones in ages. And yet, when he first knew he’d be coming back, he could feel it waking.

Lorn put his plate aside and rested leathery hands on his tough old knees. “You might not know we’ve had no whale-singer since old Hezek died six years past. We could use you, and that’s a fact.”

Conversation around them died down. Benec felt certain that Paedro had heard every word from the chieftain. No putting off the inevitable, then. He swallowed.

“Aye,” he said reluctantly. “I’m here to stay. “I’ll take the job up again, if it’s available.”

“Good lad!” Lorn roared, slapping him across the shoulders. “Didn’t know what I’d do if you said no!”

“But as to where I’ll stay --” Benec said hurriedly. He would *not* bide on the chieftain’s island, no matter what Paedro said! Ordered to keep an eye on the exile or not, he wouldn’t do it from the same household as that ... that ... Tirsah!

“Winter in the village. We’ll build you a home on one of the smaller islands for after next whaling season.” Lorn offered. “That satisfy you?”

Benec relaxed. Thank the Lady! If he had to bide in Kirree, then it’d be just as well to ride the seas when he could. “It’d be good to hunt again,” he allowed.

“Hunh! Be good to have a decent catch again.”

“You’re not going to tell me you’ve suffered by my absence.”

“And if I did?”

“Try again, old man.”

Lorn grunted into his mug. “I reckon you’ll do.”

Benec laughed aloud, unaccountably relieved. And -- happy? He turned back to his diminishing plate with a lighter heart, and took a bite.

Faugh -- bitter! He nearly spat it out, but managed to swallow. He took a small, tentative nibble, frowning, before he felt the gaze boring into his side. *Ah.*

“Take your ill-wishing off my food, witch,” he ordered, jabbing Tirsah with his elbow. “And don’t play the innocent. I know what you’re doing.”

“You should have stayed away, Benec,” she warned without looking at him. The food on his plate browned at the edges and suddenly stank of rot.

He pushed it away from him with a grunt of disgust and glared at her. “Stop that!”

“I won’t,” she said, narrowing her eyes back at him. “You’ve cozened Lorn well enough, but I say you’re not wanted here. Go back where you came from.”

Benec narrowed his eyes. Wench! “I have no choice in the matter.”

“That’s a fool’s excuse. There’s always a choice between yes and no.”

“You think it’s that easy, lady witch?”

“You think it’s not?” She lifted her gaze to him. He had the feeling that she measured him in the balance and found him wanting -- still. “You left easily enough ten years ago.”

“I doubt you cried to see me go.”

“*I* didn’t. But did you think, even once, about the rest of Kirree? For years, we’ve had no one to call the whales. You were wanted here.”

“And here I thought you hadn’t missed me at all. But if I’d known you needed me ...” He leered.

Tirsah slammed her fists against her knees. “Far from it, you vain cockerel! Thanks to my talents, and work hard enough to break all of our backs, we’ve done well enough. But it remains that Kirree needed your gift, and you walked away without a by-your-leave, Benec. Among many other things, that I cannot forgive.”

“Lucky me, I didn’t ask for your pardon! And now that I’m back, I won’t leave again. You watch and see what I can do.”

“What! Do you think you can still call the whales?” Tirsah put a hand over her heart. “Ten years without use and a Gift shrivels away, Benec, as will many other things.”

“I’ve kept my Gift -- and, as you say, other things -- in good practice.” He hooded his eyes. “Care to test me?”

Test her, aye. Once upon a time, he had loved to challenge her in a different way -- with love, not hate. He adored his games, did Benec, and had played with Tirsah many a time ... sneaking up behind her and snatching her about the waist with strong arms, whirling her around for a hungry kiss.

Oft and oft, that kiss had led to more -- behind a pillar, in a hidden nook or cranny, or a room temporarily empty. He’d gloried in taking her during the middle of her working day - - undoing the lacings on her hardwearing bodices to suckle the tips of small breasts into his

mouth, sliding his hand underneath canvas skirts and up her petite legs to a center that grew moist at the feel of his fingers, toying with her cunny until its wetness pleased him.

Sometimes he would toss those skirts up over her chest and bury his head between her legs, daring her to cry out as his lips and tongue worked a whole new brand of magic. If she felt lazy or whimsical, or he dared her to it, Tirsah would slide down and take him into her own mouth, running her tongue along the veins and taking greedy breaths of his male, magic-tinged scent until he nearly came upon her tongue.

Then, he might caress her until every nerve tingled. It always ended with him carefully pulling her up onto his lap or rolling them until he was on his back, maneuvering her into place, and moving his cock into position. He would spear her, or she impale herself on him, and they'd rock with the rhythm of the ocean, trying to swallow down their panting breaths and eager cries until they came with the force of a tidal wave, soaring into the deeps of greatest pleasure.

Benec counted it a victory if he could cause her to make a peep. Tirsah called it her own score if she could make him cry out her name. It was a game they both had enjoyed. Aye, both had savored those challenges of old.

Now, he could see their challenges would have a nasty tang, laden with malice.

"You'd never manage it," she said disdainfully.

"Watch me, Mage." He turned about. "Lorn! Your niece has just challenged me to call the whales. Would anyone like to put money on it?"

"Oh, dear." Sela hid her face in her hands.

Paedro looked interested. "You can do that still?"

"Of course, I can," Benec boasted over the lump in his throat. Blast Tirsah! Forever pushing him --

"A bronze maiden says he can't." Tirsah stood and slipped a coin from her belt. She held it out to her uncle. "Well? Anyone else?"

The chieftain took Tirsah's coin eagerly. "I've more faith in him. I'll back that bet. Show us what you can do, boy!"

"Gladly."

Benec stood, straightened his shoulders, and flung his hair back out of his eyes. He pointed at the far horizon, where the water met the fading sunset sky. "Watch carefully. It's near to dark."

He closed his eyes and breathed in and out, slowing the pace to match his heartbeat. The knack for this particular magic came back more easily than he'd thought it might. The lump of worry melted in his throat. He could do it.

Deep within his mind, he sought for the calm gray spiral of enchantment that matched the tattoos beneath his eyes and the wild, noble song of the whales ... then tugged at it. Gods, but he was rusty. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he struggled to hold on to the magic, pure stubbornness enabling him to keep a grip on it. That, and pride. Bedamned if he'd show himself weak in front of Paedro, the chieftain, or *her*. Benec opened his eyes,

Finally answering his call with the air of one doing a very great favor, a water-spout broke the far surface of the sea. A whale's head, bigger even than the one mounted on the lighthouse wall, surfaced for half a moment.

Spellbound, the watchers around Benec probably fancied that they saw the vast black eye regarding them curiously before it slowly, slowly slipped beneath the waters again.

Benec grinned from ear to ear. He held out a palm. "I'll take that maiden, if you please."

Tirsah snatched the coin from her uncle and slapped it into Benec's hand. "You are insufferable!" she hissed.

"Maybe." He leered. "I'm still good, though."

"Oh!" She turned on her heel and stalked away.

Paedro watched, fascinated. What a little tigress that mage was! He'd never seen a woman to equal her. Her anger burned with a flame magnificent to see. Yet it blew over quickly as a summer storm in the wake of her cousin's concern when Rose put up a hand to comfort her. The anger melted from her as ice in summer, and soon she smiled again.

Then again, who wouldn't smile at young Rose? The chieftain's family might have vast stores of food, a solid home of stone, Lorn's sea mastery, and Tirsah's magery, but in his opinion their true wealth was Rose's beauty, lovely and perfect as a painting.

Perhaps ... perhaps.

Lorn pretended to snatch the coin back from Benec, jesting with him about the local currency in words Paedro didn't understand. Something about selkies.

"I've heard old stories," the prince interrupted, curiosity running strongly through him. "Is it true that there are still some of the seal folk left this far north?"

"Not since my grandda's grandda's time," Lorn said with obvious real regret. "Not common, anyhow. Ain't seen one m'self in, oh, forty years or more." He pointed toward the cliffs below the terrace. "Legend says once on a time, they'd house and keep their bearing women and new pups in that cave down there. Folk call it the Queen's Cave."

"And the lands beyond this?"

"Are none but a few tiny islands. None we've found."

"How far out have the boats gone?"

"Far as the biggest boat ever built would provision. Two weeks out and two back, good weather all the way. Didn't find a thing. 'Course, I wasn't but a young'un then, but I mind it well. Hasn't anyone tried since. Like as not we could get further with a bigger ship. Maybe not. Someday we'll have another go."

The prince smiled a little wistfully. "Perhaps, someday, when we've finished our business, I'll go with you."

"Aye, there's that." Lorn cocked his head. "Going further before winter?"

“Perhaps further out to sea. We’ve not yet decided,” Paedro lied.

“Not much!” Lorn rolled his eyes. “You’d never make it.”

Tirsah stalked back over to the tables. She shook her head at Paedro. “He’s right. It’s nearly winter. We’ve less than a week before the snows. The bay might look easy, but you’d think you were riding the night mare if you tried to sail through it in bad weather. It’s filled with rocks and reefs. You’d surely sink if you tried to pass in a storm.”

Paedro shook his head stubbornly. “Still, perhaps we’ll try,” he insisted. “Before it snows, then. At least to the island where Cloud was raised.”

“Hunh. You could *try*,” Lorn said disdainfully. “Stay here until you get better sense. At least bide the night -- better still, stay the winter. Don’t go sailing in the dark like ninnies. Eh? We’ve got room.”

“That we do,” Sela agreed. Paedro could almost see the thoughts flying through her mind -- so much of bed linen, so much of warm water, so much more food to prepare -- and yet he knew she would do it gladly enough. “Enough for all of you.”

“We won’t take your rooms, not even tonight,” Paedro demurred. “Perhaps the pantry or the cellar?”

“No!” Sela and Tirsah yelled together.

Tirsah recovered first. “Those are well filled, my lord.”

“Paedro,” he reminded them.

“It’s no fit place for your lordsh-- Paedro,” Sela caught her breath and rushed on. “Tirsah -- Lady --”

Tirsah tossed her life-lock back over her shoulder. “Leave it to me. There’s certainly something better than a storage room to house you in! Though *one* of you might sleep in the stables.”

“Stable or castle, it’s all the same to us, I would think ... save for ...”

Paedro saw Benec gave his head a tiny shake, warning *Not yet!* in vain. It was plain to see that his former advisor thought it was too early to broach the notion of his aunt staying on.

Benec leaned over and whispered in Paedro's ear, "You're a fool, forever jumping in without a second thought. But it's too late now, isn't it?"

The prince stood and placed one hand on the fragile shoulder of the silent woman dressed and veiled in black. "I must introduce you, dear aunt. Forgive me."

The woman remained motionless as a statue, save for her hands. She jerked a strip of embroidered gray leather, the sigils on it worn dull and unreadable with frequent handling, from her sleeve and twisted it tight, as if seeking to reassure herself. Paedro didn't know what it meant, save that it gave her comfort -- women often carried such charms.

"My aunt, the dowager Ione," Paedro said quietly, seeking some kind of acceptance from the chieftain and his kin. "We've brought her with us ... her health ... better that she should be near the ocean and perhaps get well again."

Blast it, he had no skill at lying. Would they believe him?

Tirsah's lips thinned. So. She'd been right. Hospitality would not allow for a denial, and the sour raven woman would stay among them. Though it choked her, she spoke at Lorn's nudge. "We'll find a nest for you, Lady Ione."

"That we will." Rose's soft voice was a surprise until one saw the pity warming her lovely eyes. She dipped her head to the woman in black and gave Tirsah's hand a squeeze. "Be welcome among us."

The veiled figure seemed to have to hunt for words. After a long pause, she spoke in a low, firm voice. "Thank you. I ... am not much for genteel speech. But I thank you."

She fidgeted. "Daughter of the Chieftain, may I rest now? I am no longer the girl I once was, and I am not accustomed to riding so hard in one day."

Paedro carefully lifted the frail creature to her feet. "Tirsah?"

"Of course. Mims!" She beckoned the girl closer with a look and infused as much a threat of dark things as possible if Mims chose not to obey. Mercifully, she came.

"Show the dowager and her servants to the little rooms just off the great hall, if you please," Tirsah whispered into her youngest cousin's ear. "Hurry!"

Mims switched her skirts. "And if it does not please me? I've heard a thing or two about --"

Tirsah pinched Mims's wrist hard. "Show the dowager to her room," she said in a voice like honey, "and escort her guards to the smaller adjoining room, as well."

Mims appraised the two men behind Ione. Young, both of them, and while the short one had a face like a ferret, the other was tall and handsome. "If I must," she pouted.

"Good." Tirsah signaled to Paedro with her eyes. He bent to murmur to his aunt.

Mims clicked her fingers at the two guards. "Follow me."

"Gladly," the handsome one said, bold as brass. He followed Mims with a little more interest than strictly necessary. Tirsah rolled her eyes. Sure as sunrise and sunset she'd have to have a word with Mims before the night was out.

Benec watched them go, a weight lifting from his shoulders. Hadn't that turned out better than he'd expected? If Ione could winter on the island, then perhaps they'd not say no to her staying next spring, and on and on. He could live on an island and hunt with the whaling ships. Not one to expect the best, he'd prepared for the worst, and found himself both surprised and utterly relieved.

Eager to get away and both think and triumph, he stood and stretched. "The dark comes on more quickly, this close to the west," he began, ready to excuse himself.

Paedro cocked his head. "Yet it's still early, if I gauge it right. Not eight of the clock, or I miss my guess."

“Time that old folk sleep,” Lorn started.

“And forget the masker’s dance?” Tirsah exclaimed indignantly. “I think not!”

All of Benec’s self-satisfaction deflated. “Oh, no,” he groaned.

Benec remembered masks, masters, and misses, dancing among the trees until dawn. Few ever missed the chieftain’s end-of-harvest masker’s celebration, and even more folk would come out of curiosity to see the visitors, he knew.

Tirsah threw him a sly grin of satisfaction. “You came just in time,” she informed Benec smugly. “We chose this night months and months ago.”

Sela pressed her hands to her cheeks. “I’d forgotten! Surely our guests won’t want ...” But her voice drifted off, clearly hoping that they wouldn’t object.

“Don’t change your own plans. We’ll bide and rest ourselves inside,” Benec said firmly.

“Not likely!” To Benec’s dismay, the prince looked thrilled at the prospect. “I’d not expected anything like this. Do you think I’d miss it?”

“But the chill off the sea!” Benec protested.

“A bonfire!” Tirsah countered. “A great bonfire of driftwood, brought from the shores below.”

Rose turned to Benec, lovely eyes pleading. “Won’t you join us?” she made bold to beg.

Benec crumbled. Blast it, to say no to her was like drowning kittens. “If it pleases the prince ...”

“Bravo!” Paedro rose from his seat, thumping Benec on the back. “Allow me to gather the driftwood,” he insisted. He cut off Lorn’s protests. “No, I would like to do it. You’ve given us shelter in your home. Let us provide warmth for it. Benec, Cloud, will you come and show me the path to the shore?”

“There’s kindling enough up here to start the fire.” Lorn hauled himself to his feet. “I’ll see to that.”

“Master, no. First you’ll see to shaving yourself,” Sela scolded. “You cannot face the villagers looking like a scruffy goat.”

“A scruffy goat!”

“Come on, the pair of you,” Paedro urged his friends, looking eager for action.

Benec had an itch to flee. Instead, knowing he’d regret it, he led his city friends toward the rocky slope, and down to the stormy sea.

Driftwood -- forsooth!

Chapter Three

“This is a rough enough path, Benec!” Paedro raised his voice to call over the wind from the sea.

“Then step careful, you great ox!” Benec stopped to allow the prince to catch up. “And for the love of mercy, take the path I showed you! An eagle might make it up the cliff if they strayed, but not men, as I and a good few broken bones can testify.”

By the Lady, what a night, and not half over yet! Benec stared gloomily up at the lighthouse. Seen from below whilst atop the tall white cliff, the structure looked to have grown from the rock itself, putting out towers and windows as the mood took it.

At night, the lighthouse became a thing of terrifying majesty. It seemed as if it rose near high enough to touch the moon. No enemy had ever taken it by force. Perhaps they never would. Lady Ione ...

Paedro caught him up at last. Together, they gazed at the cool luminosity of the stronghold in silence. He spoke first, finding the words that were in both their hearts. “Kirree is the last piece of paradise left in our world, isn’t it?”

Benec plunged his hands inside the pockets of his jerkin. "Not for long," he murmured. "Not now that we've brought *her* here. We'll see how long she keeps the whole barrel from spoiling."

The illusion shattered and, suddenly, the lighthouse was simply that again -- a lighthouse.

"You refuse to believe there's any hope for her." Paedro raised the collar of his thin coat to warm and protect his neck. "Believe me when I say that a place like this might cure the temporary -- yes, temporary -- sickness of my aunt's soul."

"You refuse to see," Benec protested. "Your aunt is determined to have the throne, and that after she's seen you and your brothers and father dead. The last thing Amahpre needs is one like her at the reins. No, hush!" He raised his hand to silence the prince's protests. "Ione's not fit to rule, and you know that. You see that plain as I. We do what we must and keep her here, out of harm's way. No looking back. Agreed?"

Paedro closed his eyes tightly. Yes, his aunt had made mistakes, and must needs be punished ... but surely she could be rescued from herself. He opened his eyes again, looking over the ocean, up at the sky filled with stars brighter than the jewels in his princely crown, and back at the stronghold an emperor would have coveted.

And, oh, how miserable his friend looked to return to such beauty. Paedro understood how much his friend had given up at his request to leave Amahpre forever -- great works and simple pleasures, a sturdy job, excellent pay, marvelous taverns -- a happier life than most men ever dreamed of. He'd left Kirree-on-Sea behind him in his boyhood, and there it should have stayed. Yet Benec had agreed to sacrifice it all for the sake of his friend and his kingdom.

They would not have survived the journey without Benec's guidance -- Paedro knew that for certain. Benec had been the one to suggest they dress as poorly as possible, coat their

poor horses in dust and ravel their manes to make them look not worth stealing, and travel light to avoid the attention of highwaymen. Excellent precautions, and though they wouldn't fool a determined or particularly cunning rogue, no one had bothered or dared to tangle with someone of Benec's stature.

He'd hounded them constantly to be up before dawn and down long after dusk. Riding, riding constantly, never resting when they could be moving. Even Paedro had cursed him more than a few times, but where others had said it would be impossible, they'd made it to the sea before winter, with time to spare.

"I thank you," he said softly. "Not just for this, Benec." He spread his arms, as if he'd embrace Kirree-on-Sea. "For everything."

Benec snorted. "Please yourself."

The prince laughed, surprising both of them. "After all these years of friendship, I still wonder if you're truly that much of a bear, or if at least some of is an act."

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Benec growled.

The ocean chill stripped through his traveling clothes, darkening Benec's already black mood. He picked up a stone and hurled it toward the top of the cliff, scoring a neat hit against the thigh of their third.

"Cloud, hurry yourself before I come back and hurry you down at knifepoint!" he bellowed.

Cloud, who had paused to look up at the lighthouse himself, turned with a guilty look. "On my way, Benec!" He picked his way forward with alarming speed.

Benec shook his head in despair. *Deliver me from women and children!*

The terrace framed the very edge of the manor, level to the sheer drop. Despite the waist-high barrier wall, not a few had fallen, jumped, or been pushed to their deaths from that great height. The only fool in memory to try and climb the cliff had been Benec himself,

who'd thought it possible to scale with ropes and climbing hooks when he was just eleven summers old.

Ah, the rashness of youth! As he recalled, both legs, one arm, and his collarbone had broken, and he'd nearly drowned besides. The old wounds still pained him when the weather turned.

The scolding he'd gotten from Lorn made his ears burn yet in memory. Why, the chieftain had demanded, was he daft enough to risk his life when he could have simply climbed the stairs?

For there *were* stairs. Generations past -- so long ago that no one could remember who, or when, or how -- by some great effort, a set of crude steps and ledges had been hacked into the rock, forming a winding path down to the sea. They'd grown so worn and slick with time that one could only find them now by dint of careful looking.

"He'll be all right, Benec." Paedro scuffed at the rock with the toe of his boot. "Can you imagine the work that went into this? It must have been the dedication of a lifetime. Several lifetimes."

"Would you be up to breaking your back on such a thing, do you think?"

Paedro laughed. "Not by half! Learning to stop being a soldier and start being all things noble is quite enough for me, thank you."

"There's not that much difference between slave labor and being at the mercy of the nobles, if you ask me." Benec chafed his arms to warm them. "Now where has Cloud gone?" The boy had vanished. "You didn't see him fall, did you?"

"Someone called him back up while you were lost in thought. Bide until he returns. We've had little enough time to rest. Enjoy it with me, while we can."

"You can enjoy it. I'll slowly turn into an icicle, at your pleasure."

“Rest easy. Soon you’ll be snug in the village, and I must return to Amahpre, where I’ll be wanted immediately to pick over the current crop of noble daughters thought fit to be a prince’s bride. Powdered, painted, soft as lambs, and bred like hounds for the kennel.”

“Part of being royal, isn’t it?” Benec made a face. “Or would you rather one of your cousins fell to squabbling over your lands and rights after your death if you don’t produce a litter of heirs fast as you can leap into a bed fit for a king?”

“Crude, Benec.”

“Truth.” The tall man shrugged. “Why pretty it up? Find a pure-breed bitch, tup her till she’s with child, and put it on display. That’s love when you’re noble.”

He glanced at his friend. At the pain he saw there, his tone softened. “It could be worse, Paedro.”

“As you describe it, I doubt it could be any more repugnant.” Paedro slapped his palms together. “There, he’s back at last. Cloud! Hurry it up!”

Benec scanned the higher steps. “Oh, he’s on his way, all right -- just slowly enough, and stopping every few bits to look back on the track.”

“Paedro,” he said, lowering his voice, “there is a way out of your dilemma. One you haven’t considered.”

Paedro snorted.

“No, I’m serious,” Benec insisted. “The chieftain’s line isn’t a fancy one by Amahpre standards, but it goes back a thousand years. There are three young women in Lorn’s household. One of them even I would consider beautiful enough to win any cold blue-blood’s heart.”

Paedro went still. “Rose, I know.” He gave Benec a quizzical look. “You’re advising me to take her?”

Benec whooped mirthlessly. "I'd never advise any man to get married if he could escape it! But seeing as you're doomed to the thing, and since you're a friend, I'll advise the least bitter pill. Rose."

Paedro hesitated, then shook his head. "I'll think on it. No more will I promise."

Benec sighed. It would have to be enough. "Here, Cloud!" he called as the boy drew closer. "Did you lose something?"

"Found it, more like." Cloud hurried toward them, shaking an armful of something dark. He'd served as page and squire, been knighted in Amahpre, had fought with the best -- and still he gamboled like a puppy when the mood was on him.

"Nets and tarps! Lorn bade me come back and bring them along. We can carry more wood this way. I don't much fancy trying this path more than once tonight."

Cloud took another, strangely jubilant look back up at the stronghold and nearly slipped.

Benec caught him by the arm. "Careful, brat! Whatever you're looking for should be there when you get back."

"I hope so." He grinned like a buffoon and leaned close to Benec, speaking for his ears alone. "Did you see her? Lorn's daughter, I mean?"

Benec rolled his eyes. "I saw her, but I paid no attention. Does she talk at all?"

"Of course, she does," Cloud protested. "She's quiet and modest. A true lady if I ever saw one. Don't you agree?"

The prince chuckled. Benec glared at them both. This puppy love would never do, not if the prince meant to think seriously about Rose.

"That depends, Head-in-the-Clouds," he evaded. "Are you asking me for an honest answer, or am I supposed to growl and grumble like the ogre women think I am? The kind that gobbles up dainty morsels like Rose without grace or gravy?"

Cloud spread his hands eagerly. "Be truthful. Tell me what you think of her."

Benec rubbed the back of his neck. He didn't care for the turn of the conversation, not a clipped copper's worth! He meant Rose for Paedro, not Cloud.

"What do I think of Lorn's meek little mouse?" he lied. "Not much. She fades into the background like an aged mosaic on a wall. The only good thing I might be able to say is that I suppose she'd be considered beautiful. And since she's beautiful, I don't like her. What does my opinion matter?" He paused. "Careful, the last step down to the beach is steep -- best jump for it!"

Cloud tossed the armful of nets onto the sand before they took the step one after another. More than two feet down, they thudded into the powdery grit and sank up to their ankles.

Benec straightened, dusting himself off. He scanned the coastline, stretching in a smooth, rocky arc around the curve of the island until it disappeared from sight. Too late, he wished he'd brought a torch after all. The moon had hidden herself behind deep purple fog, and the waters had already grown rough as Lorn had predicted.

"Over there." He pointed to a likely spot. "No one'll have been down here in a while, and I think I see a good collection washed up just yonder."

The prince picked up the heap of nets, winding them neatly in his arms. "Even this lonely spot is a rare sight. I could drink nothing but this beauty for years. It'd be a miracle cure for the hundreds of sour souls I've met over the years."

"How lucky you've brought your poor old aunt out here for her 'health,' then." Benec deliberately made his face blank. "Perhaps in a thousand years dear Ione would make a start at becoming a human, unless the water demons crowned her their queen first."

Before the prince could respond, Benec turned and was incensed to see young Cloud moongazing back up the cliffs again. He gave him a rough push. "Here, pay attention! Stop gawking after Lorn's short daughter."

"Oh!" Cloud flinched. "Was I staring at her, above? Do you think I frightened her?"

“What does it matter?” Benec demanded, well and truly exasperated. “And why would you even ask after Rose that way in the first place? What could you possibly want of her? It’s not as if she’s a horse or a sword you’re looking to buy!”

“No one’s fortune is that great.”

“Oh, yes, it is. I haven’t met a woman in ten years without a price attached and a bill collector close on her round heels.”

“Camp followers and city whores are nearly another race,” Cloud said in horror. “How can you compare them to Rose? She’s an honest woman!”

“So were they. They could be painfully blunt about their pricing scales.”

“Bah!” Cloud threw his hands in the air. “I give up on you, Benec.”

“Took you long enough, too. I won’t be drawn into talking about women as if they were pleasant creatures. You should know that by now, boy.”

Cloud’s face darkened. “I’m no boy, Benec. I’ve killed as many enemies as you have.”

“Killing doesn’t make you a man, *boy*.” Benec drew himself up, looming over the shorter Cloud. “Or do you want to challenge me on that, too?”

“And what if I did?” Cloud flung his head back. Though he had some six inches to look up to meet Benec’s glare, his courage shone through unscathed.

Benec narrowed his eyes. “I should beat you into a jelly just to teach you some manners.”

Cloud grinned hugely. “Aye, but you won’t, will you?” He tagged Benec hard on the shoulder and broke into a run down the beach.

“He’s after feeling his oats like a young colt,” Benec explained to the prince. “It’s the sea air gotten into his bones. Takes a lot of folks that way.”

“Truly?”

“Sure and certain. Haven’t you ever wondered how those rickety old sailors can jig like that?” Only the faintest of twinkles in Benec’s eye gave him away.

“Get on with you!” Paedro groaned. “If you can spare a moment from your foolery, I’ve seen something to interest me, and I wonder if you know what it is.”

Cloud galloped back up to meet them. “What have you seen?” he asked, gulping for breath after his run.

“A cave, I think.” Paedro jerked his head toward the side of the cliff. “You’d never know it was there but for the wind blowing the ivy a little to the side as I passed it. I saw a small hole that looked like a cave mouth. Is it so?”

“The Queen’s Cave!” Cloud exclaimed. “I’d forgotten about it until now.”

Benec grimaced. “Unfortunately, I had not. It’s a favorite sparking place,” he explained to the prince. “Village folk sail over here with their sweetheart of the moment and collect cowrie shells washed up on the beach. The popular fancy is to etch your names or your marks into a shell and leave it in the cave, maybe dawdle for a little slap-and-tickle if there’s no one about.”

“Under Lorn’s very nose?”

“Are you mad? He’s supposed to have spent hours here when he was young.” Benec shook his hair away from his face. “The old legend has it that if a selkie should ever happen to come back and read your shell, they’d bless your love. Of course, it’s been going on so long that by now you’d not be able to stir inside for all the old shells. Folk are easygoing about it, though -- if there’s no more room, they toss out an armful of the old ones. Smash! Crash! And so much for everlasting love.”

He scowled. For a moment, a sense-memory flashed across his mind of doing that very thing. Gathering armload after armload of shells, clearing off a dais with Tirsah watching him and smiling that secret smile women got sometimes, when they were thinking things men were never meant to know.

Oh, yes. He'd cleared off a space for them to lie on, and when he'd returned from dumping the last load, she had been waiting for him -- naked, golden from the sun, golden *as* the sun, her lips curved up in that peculiar grin as she reached for him.

That had been one of their best nights ever. Tirsah was a lusty lover when she had a mind to be, and she'd almost worn him out, riding him like a stallion balanced atop, then in his lap. He could still feel the tightness of her cunny clenching around him, milking him dry, and taking him into dizzy climax time after time after time.

So much sexual power from such a tiny creature had astonished him, as ever, but he'd been more than a willing participant. His cock had filled again and again at her bidding, hard and ready for more. They'd fucked the night away, only stealing back to the keep when dawn threatened, and that with regret.

Now he looked at the cave with distaste in the main. If Tirsah had changed so, forgetting all that had passed between them, damned if he would let himself linger on past memories.

No. He wouldn't.

"Ah, Benec. You're too harsh by half." Paedro tilted his head back to watch clouds drift over the moon. "True-love shells and selkie-blessed romance ... I'll go and have a look at this cave, I think. Will you come?"

Benec shuddered. "Not likely!"

"Cloud, then?"

Cloud hesitated. "In a moment."

"Just as you like." Paedro wandered idly toward the base of the cliffs, deep in his own thoughts, and left them together.

Cloud might as well have been a thousand miles away, however. His gaze had strayed back up to the lighthouse yet again. Lost in dreams of Rose, Benec would have wagered. He eyed his younger friend with displeasure.

“Here, do you plan to dawdle around moony-eyed all the night or help me with this driftwood? Look, there’s a fine big branch, nearly dried out.” Benec pointed up the beach a short ways.

“For sweet pity’s sake, lad,” he chided impatiently as they unrolled the nets, “I’ve seen you face down the enemy with never a shiver. Why do you let this snip of a Rose bother you so?”

“Enemy? Bother?” Cloud shook his head, confused. “Rose? She’s not bothering me. I’ve never seen such beauty.”

“Ha! You’ve got salt in your eyes.” Testy, Benec grabbed for a piece of planking, speared his hand through with a hefty splinter, and dropped the thing, cursing. “If that isn’t the cap to the night! Here, tear off a strip of your shirt and let me use it for a bandage.”

Cloud’s hands flew protectively to the garment, still mostly white and more or less whole. “Use a bit of your own!”

“Afraid of looking ragged before your lady-love?” Benec jeered. “Want to make a fine-looking picture when you go down on one knee before her tonight?”

“Benec --”

“Here now, you don’t intend to do that, do you?” Benec puffed up like an angry bull. “Do you?”

“Here, Benec, have the shirt --” Cloud fumbled to rip off a strip of the cotton. “Have it!”

“Answer me!”

“Then, yes, I do!”

Benec’s jaw dropped. “You daft brat,” he breathed. “You -- you --”

Cloud glared. “Shut your teeth before I knock them in!”

“You --!”

“Hush, I said!” He grabbed for Benec’s hand, roughly tying the bandage around it. “Brother-in-arms, any other friend would call this an occasion for celebrating,” he grumbled as he worked. “Why do you want to spoil my happiness by being such a numbskull about women?”

Benec sputtered. “Me -- numbskull -- women! You! Rose!” He stumbled back. “It’s come to this! Why, I remember back in my youth, how I admired those comfortable old bachelors that used to sit around the docks. Good men who kept for themselves --”

“Men who ate cold beans and corn bread three meals a day --”

“Men of fifty or more who’d never shared a house with a woman since their mothers!” Benec raged on. “If you want a yoke that badly, why, let me sling one around your neck and you can work in the fields!”

“Is there a problem, gentlemen?” Both Benec and Cloud jumped and flinched as if arrow-shot.

Paedro had come unnoticed up behind them, loosely holding a perfect conch shell. “I leave you for a moment to enjoy some peace and come back to a new battle. What’s come about that you stand here squabbling like a pair of cats?”

Benec and Cloud glared at each other in silence.

Paedro sighed. “Brothers-in-arms, what if I made it an order?”

Benec broke first. “Oh, I know how to keep a secret, Cloud. But it’s an order -- you heard it, an order --”

“Tell if you want. It’s nothing to me,” Cloud said sulkily.

“Just as if he couldn’t wait -- couldn’t have the sense to -- to -- this little boy claims to be in love!” Benec frothed. “And with whom? Lorn’s baby daughter! He -- in love with Rose!”

The prince blinked. Aside from that simple movement, his face remained unreadable as ever. Benec glared at him. *Don't play the noble here, Paedro! Mind what I said and claim Rose for your own. Bah! If only men could read minds!*

Paedro raised a hand to his chin and rubbed at it. "Is this the truth?"

"Yes." Cloud answered without apology. "From the moment I first saw her. My lord."

"So." Paedro looked down at the shell he held, turning it over in his hands. He stroked it once, then held it out to Cloud. "Here, have this."

Don't do it! Benec ordered silently.

Cloud took the shell, stunned. "My lord?"

Paedro smiled. "Permission granted, young Cloud. You're in love. Go and seek the lady's good will, and marry her if she'll have you. Is that all?"

Cloud held the shell as if it were the rarest of blue diamonds. "You're serious," he said slowly. "You're truly giving your blessing."

Benec gripped his head in his hands and roared aloud. "You're both mad!"

Paedro raised one eyebrow. "Somehow I suspect our mutual friend does not approve."

"Not approve? Folly -- idiocy -- to think yourself in love after an hour's dreaming?" A political alliance was one thing, but this heart-soft madness ...!

"No." Cloud ran his tongue over his lips. A sure and certain knowledge glowed in his eyes, a look that Benec had seen before. He knew too well what it meant. Nothing short of disaster or betrayal would move Cloud from his chosen course. It had brought him success where others predicted certain death; it had been with him when he promised to join the group bound for Kirree. "I know my heart. I love her."

Benec's one-word response was succinct and to the point.

Paedro shook his head in amusement. Benec could tell that he had given himself over to the idea of Cloud claiming Rose -- gone wholly to the other side and forgotten his own

practical needs. “Ah, you’re the sourest of old bachelors, Benec,” the prince said. “There’s no use trying to explain the charms of women to you.”

Benec shot his prince an incredulous look. “Charms? Women?” That, from him who’d talked about the pampered ladies of Amahpre not moments earlier? Ah, but Paedro was a romantic for all that, and the prince was surely glorying in his matchmaking.

“I’ve begun to wonder if you’re not cracked in the head on the subject,” he continued, further infuriating his friend. “Take Tirsah, for example -- a charming hostess, a skilled green-mage. Capable, kind, and lovely in her way. You nearly hackled when you saw her! What could she have ever done to provoke that kind of rudeness?”

Benec growled. “There are reasons to hate her that you know nothing about, you puppy. You’ll change as time goes by -- it changes us all.”

Paedro stretched and yawned. “You keep to your opinion, and I’ll keep to mine.”

“Have things ever been different between us?” Benec made to point at Paedro, then winced.

Paedro’s face grew concerned. “Here, is your hand hurt? Then we two will finish fetching and carrying the wood ourselves. You go back up and have Sela see to that wound. Give my respects to Lorn. Tell them we’ll be back soon, but I believe we’ll stay out here a while first ...” He cracked an evil smile. “Planning your hand-fasting. Let’s see, do you prefer roses or apple blossoms?”

“I’ve heard just about all I want to.” Benec felt his ears pinken. “I’d think it best to say -
_”

“-- that we’ll be wanted at a very special ceremony --” Cloud piped in.

“-- the first day of summer. Yours most earnestly, Benec,” Paedro finished.

“You’d be wiser not to poke fun at me,” Benec growled. He jabbed one finger at Cloud, then at Paedro. “If either of you have a brain left, use it to think about what you’re doing. For pity’s sake, think for once. Just once!”

He sketched a half-bow to the prince and stalked towards the cliff steps, his back stiff with anger.

Anxious, Cloud glanced at the prince, who put a hand on his shoulder. "Let him go for now," he said. "He'll calm down soon. Trust me, lad. Come, if we hurry we'll be done quickly and you can return to your lady that much sooner. Here, you take that branch, and I'll take this one."

It took only a little while for them to fill the old nets with as much driftwood as they could carry together.

Benec had chosen their harvest spot well; branches and planks were left in plenty when they'd taken all that they could.

Paedro dropped to his haunches and felt for the edges of the net to tie it closed. "If I know Benec, he'll manage to find Sela in the kitchen," he said, with a wink. "I've eaten enough to last two men for three days, but there is nothing like her way with cooking. I could eat again when we return."

"So could I," Cloud admitted. "Sela told me that Rose helped with the food. She's near as skilled as the old woman. So she said."

"Rose is a good woman. You've chosen well." Paedro calmly finished tying the knots.

"Lorn ... he doesn't have any sons, you know."

"No. As I heard it, Rose is his only child. Her mother died in childbirth, and Lorn never did marry again." Paedro cocked an eyebrow at Cloud. "Do you think you'd be seen as digging for gold? For that matter, are you?"

Cloud had money enough to support a wife and then some to spare, inherited from his father, but it wasn't everyone who knew that. A woman could inherit, but only if she had never married and had borne no sons by the time her father died. If he married Rose, when

Lorn died the rights to Kirree would go to her, and from her to him by marriage-law. He could be the next chieftain if he married her.

“I know my heart,” he said slowly. “I would want Rose just the same if she pushed a broom up and down a dirty city street all day. But again, not everyone would think that.”

“Such a serious face. I know you too well to suspect such a thing. As for any naysayers, they’d protest the same to anyone who dared to steal their princess for himself,” Paedro said reassuringly.

“The trick, I think, would be to win their hearts as well as hers.”

“Just so, and I’ve no doubt you’ll succeed. I’ve seen how you are when you ‘know’ things. Will you ask her to be your wife tonight, then?”

“I had hoped to. But do you think that’s going too fast? And what if she doesn’t feel the same love for me?”

“Ah, Cloud! You’re running before you’ve learned to crawl!” Paedro stood and stretched out the kinks in his back.

I’m growing old, he thought ruefully. Ah, well, there’s life left in me yet. Despite Benec’s protests, I know what I’m doing.

While he might need a wife, it served him better to match Cloud with Rose. Their pairing would make sense. They came from the same place. More, Cloud might stay in Kirree, and there would be another set of eyes to watch over Ione. And to see how his blessing pleased the boy would warm any heart. Paedro felt munificent, almost fatherly, happy in his ability to dispense pleasure with a lavish hand.

And come to that, as Cloud had no older male relatives to handle marriage negotiations for him ... What if ...? Should he? *Why not?*

“I’ve had an idea,” he said, turning to Cloud. “It’s the custom to come masked and disguised at these seashore dances, isn’t it?”

Cloud nodded, puzzled. "Tirsah has a storeroom full of costumes for people who want them. She loves parties."

"Well! Who's to tell, underneath the costumes, who is who? I'll take your part and find out what fair Rose really thinks of you. If she loves you, then off with the disguise, and I'll go talk to her father about it. Do we have a deal?"

He knew from the lad's brilliant, dawning smile that Cloud understood him. No one would say no to the prince. And if Rose didn't love him yet -- she might not, though he'd thought, from the look in her eyes ... then once they were married, he'd love her so well that she'd learn to cherish him in return.

"We do!" Cloud seized Paedro's forearms and gripped them hard, gratefully. "Thank you. Thank you!"

"Good!" Paedro's heart felt light as a bit of seafoam, rising to the sun. "Come, take up your end of the net, and we'll make our way back to the stronghold. Then we dance into our futures. Ready? Yes? Then one, two, three, lift!"

Chapter Four

Lorn stormed down a torch-lit passageway in the lighthouse, searching for a quiet place -- any place at all -- to have his decreed shave.

“A scruffy goat. Hah!” he grumbled, juggling a wooden bowl, a lump of shaving soap, an old, worn brush, and an ill-sharpened blade. Too hurried to even heat some water for him, Sela had tossed a leather strop and a bit of towel around his neck and pushed him out of her way.

“And don’t be coming out to the terrace until your cheeks are smooth as a baby’s!” she’d scolded, scurrying back to her kitchens to prepare vast bowls of punch.

He’d gone at her bidding, grumbling to himself, but content at least with the idea that it was a sure bet she’d be after appreciating his smooth cheeks later with a bit of a cuddle and a kiss. No one knew about them but themselves, but there! Wasn’t anyone’s business but their own. If Sela slipped into his bed every once in a while, or he into hers, it was their right. Perhaps not by law, but wasn’t *he* the law thereabouts?

He liked Sela in a way he’d not liked his wife, a young, fragrant thing, and him an old salt, afraid of hurting her. But Sela was tough as him and eager to make love as any sailor. The feel of her legs, still smooth and firm, wrapped around his waist ...

And then the grins they exchanged when no one was watching. The way she'd wink and he'd know to prepare for a visit later.

That was the best part of all.

Lorn felt fairly sure he'd wind up that night in Sela's arms. Just had that thrice-blasted party to get through first.

In their afternoon's excitement, the lighthouse dwellers might have forgotten about the masker's dance marking the end of harvest season, but for certain no one else in Kirree-on-Sea had. They'd barely finished with their evening meal before the place began to overflow with eager villagers. More came fast on their heels, clustered knots of torches winding up the hill like flickering fireflies, one group hard after another.

Such a racket as they made! Lorn's ears rang already. Shrieks of laughter and shouting voices shook the walls as fishermen and their womenfolk stormed the usually quiet halls and their young ones dashed around like wild dogs, bent on seeing and breaking as much as possible. Girls of an age to marry minced about, fluttering their lashes at the latest crop of available young men. He saw and approved that they were decently dressed for the most part. A few had wriggled their necklines down and hemlines up; most didn't bother. Few of the fishermen were daft enough to pick a wife for her looks, for beauty faded fast in the harsh sea air. A good heart and a strong back mattered far more than beauty.

A cluster of young boys bolted past Lorn to get away from the simpering girls, and nearly knocked the shaving gear from his hands. When they saw who they'd bumped, they squeaked in terror and made a run for it.

They escaped around a hunched-up granny and a fat young fishwife huddling together, gawking at one of the mosaics that decorated the corridor. The younger one's plump finger moved over the inscribed motto, puzzling it out word by word. Their faces pinched with concentration over the task.

Only a few of the fishermen could read and even fewer of their women. What need? A fisherman didn't need words to tell him when the small, oily tunny were schooling or the tide running high. Slashes on a counting stick served for records of the season's catch. Stories and poems were recited from memory, told over a bowl of warmed ale by a winter's fire. Reading they left for the rich, the idle, and the mages.

As Lorn remembered, Sela hadn't learned the art till she was past thirty, and only then because she'd determined to interpret an ancient book of recipes unearthed from an attic chamber. On the other hand, Tirsah had once fallen asleep in her truckle cradle clutching a scroll as if it were a beloved rag doll. They should have known then that the family strain of magery ran deep in her blood.

Lorn caught sight of that same niece and snorted. No one would ever guess her to be the best green-mage on all the coast from the way she joked and played with the children as they ran screaming past her, snatching up the trinkets she tossed to them. She'd light the bonfire when the wood had all been gathered, but until then she cheerfully stood guard over the costumes and dispensed them with a free hand. How she laughed at their antics, her eyes alight, drinking in all the life and excitement!

Lorn sighed. Too much of a free spirit, his niece. But, ah, well, if her chosen life gave her such pleasure ...

He headed further back and deeper into the lighthouse. If his own bedchamber hadn't been invaded as a changing room, it would be the best place for him to get a little peace.

A wide arc around the great hall led him to a cleverly concealed corridor, the parallel mate to a long, blank passage approaching the kitchen. A door had been set into the middle of the long passage, small and kept well sealed -- or it should have been.

What's this? The door's chains had slid free from their moorings; the padlock hung ajar. He kicked at the oak with the toe of his boot. "Anno?"

No reply. He kicked again. "Brother? Are you safe?"

A latch clicked open. The door slid back an inch or two. Footsteps padded softly away, receding into the distance.

Lorn balanced his shaving gear and gave the door a mighty shove with his shoulder. It slid open reluctantly, surprisingly heavy and sticky on its hinges, for it rarely ever moved. He nipped inside soon as it gapped wide enough to admit him and pushed it immediately shut again.

He glanced around himself, shivering. No one stood within the confines of the small room. No one to explain the footsteps or the opened door.

“Anno?” He stomped on the floor with the heel of his boot. “Want me for something, brother?”

He heard a sudden grating noise and jumped back hastily as a trapdoor, cunningly set into the floor so that it was perfectly level with the stones, lowered a little and slid back away into its recess to reveal a gaping hole.

His brother felt in the mood for company, did he?

Lorn shut his eyes, summoned up a bit of courage, and stepped down into the darkness. He wished he'd brought a candle, then on second thought reckoned it better that he hadn't. The wooden steps down to the wine cellar were sturdy enough for good footing. Light only gave a better look at peeling whitewash scribbled over with runes and mage-signs that made his skin crawl.

As he stepped off the last of the rungs, his sharp ears caught the small sound of a sigh from one corner of the cold, dank cellar. “Anno?” he called warily. “Brother? That you?”

“Yes,” a voice replied from the corner. His brother had a voice all his own, raspy as a small-cat's tongue and rich as good brandy on a cold winter night. No one could mock it and come close to the real thing.

Three years it had been since a messenger summoned Anno to Amahpre, with a challenge against a dark-mage in hand. His opponent was wreaking havoc, causing battles to

be lost, and needed to be stopped. The messenger had borne tales of how the dark-mage laughed at Anno's reputed power and dared him to come for a challenge if he liked. They'd see who came out on top.

Anno had gone, head high, garbed in his master-mage's robes of deepest black. After a six-month, word came that the dark-mage had been bested, but nothing more. They hadn't heard from Anno himself for another six-month. Then --

Ah, then, one cold morning, they found the wreck of Anno's body, clothed in rags, floating in the shallows near the island. Tirsah suspected one of the dark-mage's cronies had taken her father by surprise and kept him prisoner, though he wouldn't speak of it, or if it were true, how he'd managed to escape.

As it was, on his return Anno had been near broken in mind and spirit and his body barely alive. Half-healed marks of torture still showed in deep-black bruises on his limbs, broken fingers starting to knit in the wrong shapes, and a near-bald, blistered scalp where his hair had been burned off.

Tirsah's skill at healing had kept him from death. Soon as he was well enough to move on his own, though, even the touch of his daughter's gentle hands maddened him, sent him screaming into the corner of a box-room, where nothing had coaxed him out for weeks.

Tirsah had gotten her own tears shed and out of the way. Then, every inch her father's daughter and a capable mage in her own right, set about doing what needed to be done. Under her direction, they stripped the wine-cellar of every bottle and blocked out the light. She coaxed Anno into letting her lead him there under cover of darkness.

There he had stayed, alone in a world he knew to be safe. He would speak with them through the slightly opened trapdoor if they came to him, or through cunning speaking tubes that Tirsah had rigged up, but hid if approached directly. Not even Tirsah knew why it had to be so, for Anno refused to explain. They knew how to treat him and had to let it go at that. What else could they do?

At least Tirsah had, with considerable effort, worked him around to taking a few comforts. She had moved a cot in to some faraway corner, brought in a leather camp-chair and table, and hung a small, warped mirror on one wall. Lorn never remembered where anything was and hated to move lest he knock something over.

“Put your armful down before you drop it,” his brother said, sounding amused. “Do you remember which wall the mirror hangs on? I’ve moved the table beneath it, and you should find water and candles there, as well.”

Lorn picked his way through the dark to where he thought the mirror might be. He found the table in the usual way -- by stubbing his toes against its leg.

Anno chuckled quietly at his brother’s yelp. “I’ve grown used to the dark.”

Lorn thumped his shaving gear down and fumbled on the table’s surface. “No flint.”

“Then, for your sake, let me strike a light.”

Two candles burst into life. Lorn’s own reflection flared brightly before him.

He flinched back with a startled yell and stared -- but it was only the mirror, as promised. Warped and old, it reflected back to him his own face, the small, narrow stone room, and behind him, his brother.

Anno lounged in the camp chair, his leg tossed over one of its arms. He had draped his cloak around the back, its length falling into black pools on the floor. He was thin as a lath, with a crop of dark curls streaked through with white, and a pair of eyes that seemed to see things a thousand leagues away yet could pierce one’s very soul. In one hand he held a deep goblet of tarnished brass filled with blood-red wine.

His reflection glanced up to meet Lorn’s eyes in the mirror. “Brother,” he greeted him briefly. “It’s been long and long since I asked you in here.”

“Nearly a seven-month now.” Lorn looked down at his shaving gear, uncomfortable with meeting Anno’s gaze for long. He tested the shaving water with his forefinger. Ice cold. “Guess you don’t mind?”

“Why not?” Anno swirled the wine in his goblet and took a small sip. “Business and pleasure, pleasure and business.”

“Hah,” Lorn grunted as he mixed up the shaving soap. “Suppose you’ve heard the ruckus out there? Don’t know how I let m’self get talked into such rubbish year after year.”

“That’s easy enough. You’re completely foolish over your daughter, and my own girl can twist you around her finger faster than a curl of her pretty hair. If it’s a celebration they want ...”

“That’s as may be, but I could hold out on Rose -- if need be,” he amended when Anno laughed. “But just you let your daughter get *her* hand in, and no man has a chance.”

Anno turned his gaze to his cup, gently swirling the wine. “I’ve been watching tonight, you know.”

With a great effort, Lorn stopped himself from jerking around to face his brother. Instead, he took a careful grip on the edge of the table and watched his knuckles turn white. “I thought -- you --”

“I know.” Anno stared at his wine. Lorn thought he saw the barest glimpses of images moving on the deep-red surface of the liquid, reflections that had nothing to do with their movements in the narrow room. “It called to me tonight, the magic, and there was no denying it. I didn’t need to speak the words. The images came to life of their own. I could not help but watch.”

“How long?”

“Since the strangers entered our lands.” Anno’s reflection lifted a thin hand to touch one of the wide white streaks in his mane of tumbled curls. “I’ve gotten barely more than glimpses. And wine-sight at that ... bah! It’s no more than a mirror pointed outward. Heskit is the true Seeing. And that’s been denied to me for -- how long? Perhaps forever.”

He gestured to the small, battered table at his side. Fools and children played Heskit as a game, ignorant of its origins as a powerful scrying tool. Anno’s first set had belonged to

mage after mage before him and gained power as it passed from hand to hand, generation to generation. He'd taken that Heskit set to Amahpre with him and lost it there.

Tirsah had managed to acquire a new set of pieces, but Anno didn't trust them. Claimed they were "contrary" and refused to move at his bidding.

He gave one piece a disdainful flick and knocked it over. "Useless," he muttered.

Distinctly uneasy, Lorn dipped two fingers into his shaving soap and lathered his cheeks and chin. Magery was all well and good, but he'd just as soon leave it to his brother and Tirsah. Whale-singers were about all he felt truly comfortable with, and that because they were useful.

"At least the wine's something," he blurted out for lack of anything better to say.

"Hah! Yes, and a crutch is something to a crippled man, too." Anno tilted the goblet to a side, frowning. "Yet it comes back so easily ... I see the prince and Cloud have returned. They're dragging one of your old nets between them, completely filled with driftwood. Ah, that's pleased Tirsah. She's out there, as well -- she'd been waiting for them. It's only her touch that's needed to set the wood alight. She's a grand mage, Tirsah."

"What of Benec?"

"He came back earlier, alone, furious, and anxious to avoid my daughter."

"Ohe, those two!" Lorn rolled his eyes. "Squabbled like children at the dinner table, they did. Has he run into Tirsah again?"

"Not yet again tonight. He had words with Cloud down at the shore, and he's angry at the prince, as well." Anno lifted his cup and drained it dry. "Enough of that. Enough!"

"Too hard ... is it? To watch the Amahpre men?" Lorn humphed. "To have them here at all?"

Anno shook his head irritably. "No, no, their presence is bearable. But I've seen much else tonight that I would rather not have known. I invited you in to tell you of these things, though I'm not too sure how you'll take them."

Lorn scowled. "Chieftain or no, I'm a plain man, brother. What have you seen?"

"Many things." Anno rolled the goblet between his fingers. "For one, I have seen the way that Paedro looked upon your daughter."

"My Rose?"

"Pah!" Anno exclaimed. "There are none so blind as they who will not see. He couldn't take his eyes from her beauty from the moment that he looked on her, and he was not the only one. Young Cloud drank nothing but the sight of your daughter, and ate dreams alone."

"But -- Paedro?" Lorn pulled the razor down his cheek with a hand that shook a little. "She's no match for him!"

"Such beauty as hers has won kingdoms, and it is all the better for having an innocent heart to match it. I've been thinking about Rose. She is a problem." Anno picked at an invisible scratch on his goblet's side.

Lorn's shoulders tensed. He didn't care for mysterious references to his prized daughter, particularly from mages. "How do you mean?"

"I mean that even without wine, I can See what's come to her tonight. A choice." Anno laughed bitterly. "A choice between a king of men and a prince of the sea. She'll be asked to wed tonight, and she'll make her decision."

"So soon!"

Anno inclined his head. "Winter hurries on wings of ice," he said cryptically. "There's no time for dallying. Even Rose senses that. Don't you?"

"But to marry!" Lorn couldn't take it in. "She's too young. Barely sixteen. In two more years, maybe three --"

"The choice isn't yours to make. This, I think, has been meant to be all along." Anno tapped the side of his goblet. "You must let her choose, Lorn. Do not hinder her."

"But if she chooses wrong?"

“Do not hinder her, I said!” Anno sat up straight, eyes blazing. “This is her time of testing, to see whether she bends or breaks. It is hard, but it is life. *Her* life! Would you hold her back, sheltered forever? Or did you have a better path for Rose to travel besides marriage?”

“What am I s’posed to do?” Lorn demanded, slamming down his razor. “She’s got no magery. Law won’t let her inherit. Think she could command a fishing fleet? D’you think they’d listen to her? What am I to do, leave her not provided for?”

“Then why not one of these two?” Anno demanded. “They’re both young, strong, healthy, and neither one’s bad-looking.”

“My girl’s not a filly to be bought at the best price.”

“What other choice does she have? Pleasant or not, you must hear me out.” Anno held his hands palm up. “You could see how the prince might want to marry Rose, the daughter of a man with fine fleets of ships and enough gold for tribute. As a younger son, he’d be wise to marry into a family with strong magery in their blood, and have a priest-king as his heir.”

“Think you?”

“Oh, aye, unless he yields to Cloud. Paedro has the look in his eyes of one who would go to the world’s end for those he trusts as friends.”

“What else have you seen, Mage?”

“Ione, for one. Don’t you know what her presence here means?” Anno made a low, angry sound. “I know her of old. You can’t think he’s brought such a foul old baggage out here to enjoy the view.”

“Aye, I’m not fooled. No doubt they’ll be asking me for ‘permission’ to leave her here soon.” Lorn ran a hand over his face. Wouldn’t be the first time, nor likely the last, that kings had got rid of folk in that manner.

“Likely with the young buck as her guard and the fop as valet,” Anno deduced aloud. “Odd she’s brought no maidservants, but from what I know of Ione, it’s likely no one would follow her willingly.”

“Cloud, Paedro, Rose, Ione ...” Lorn wiped his face dry. “It’s too far beyond me, brother. What should I do?”

“It is not our choice. All we can do is wonder until we know.”

Lorn cursed again. “Anno! T’girl’s not only my daughter; she’s my heir-passer. Still a child herself. Shy as a deer. Never even thought of marriage yet!”

“No,” Anno agreed, closing his eyes. “She has not.”

Lorn rubbed the bridge of his nose and swore a third time, helplessly. “Should I speak to her?”

“No,” Anno replied quickly. “Don’t you dare. You’d terrify her into losing her wits, and that would mean terrible danger. If she chooses wrong ...”

“Oh, aye, but if she chooses wrong anyway?”

“We’ll never know.”

“Anno --”

His brother turned the chair abruptly, presenting Lorn with his back. “Go away, brother. You make me tired. Go to your guests, and pray, if you will, that your daughter makes the right choice. More depends on it than you know.”

Angry, Lorn threw his shaving things together. “Mages!” he spat as he turned his back on his brother and stormed up the stairs. “To the Hag with the lot of you!”

Anno heard his heavy boots stomp up the stairs and out the trapdoor, which he flung shut with a thud.

“Rose’s choice may mean more than I know, even,” the master-mage whispered. “Go quickly, brother! Fly!”

Alone again -- at last -- too soon -- Anno leaned back in his chair and allowed his tension-tightened shoulders to relax into the worn leather. He rolled the back of his skull against the familiar roughness, frowning as the snags caught at his hair. He remembered the chair as a handsome thing once upon a time, but now? Old, cast-aside, useless. Not even good to look upon anymore. Like himself. Lorn had tried to get him to take another seat into the cellar, but he’d refused. This made a fit throne for a fallen mage.

A warm, hidden lump at his feet stirred slightly when his foot nudged it by chance. It chirruped sleepily, clearly not pleased at being disturbed. “My apologies, little one,” he murmured, reaching down to caress a bump that he guessed to be a shoulder.

Edge poked her small, flower-like face out of the loose folds of his robe. She’d squirreled away beneath them when they’d first heard Lorn’s footfalls. She blinked at him, the size of her pupils shifting in the soft candlelight. “Angry mage,” she mumbled, dropping her chin on his toes. “Why?”

“I doubt you’d understand, wildling.” Anno put his head to the side, regarding the small Catkin with a look as enigmatic as her own. Tirsah had told him that she permitted no man or woman to touch her, yet she came to his cellar every chance she could steal, lingering with a fascination he had never been able to fathom, welcoming -- nay, inviting -- his casual pets and caresses eagerly as any small-cat.

Neither could he understand just why he had never been able to tell Tirsah, or anyone else, about her visits.

“Someone out there in the hall,” she mumbled. “Heard all your talk-talk.”

“I know. But I could hardly warn Lorn. He’d make a scene to best all scenes.”

“Lorn called you ‘brother,’” Edge pointed out.

“That’s no matter. Who knows but those in this family how many kin Lorn has? He might have been speaking to someone else altogether.”

Edge rolled her eyes. “If, if, if,” she said. “You take chances. Foolish chances. I say, let me hunt listener down, use claws, warn them not to repeat what they hear.”

“If I take chances, you are too quick to act on your impulses, so we’re both flawed.” Anno caressed Edge’s curls. “Stay with me for a while, Catkin,” he asked impulsively. “Keep me warm.”

“Hmph.” Edge shuffled bonelessly until she covered his feet. “Cold toes,” she said in distaste.

“They’ll lose their chill soon.” He bent, and ran his long fingers through her tousled mane of curls. “Don’t play games with me. I think you heard everything that we said and never slept at all.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

“No maybe about it.” He tugged at the tip of one pointed ear. “I may not be what I once was, but I can still smell a lie from truth.”

“Too smart for own good,” she grumbled. “Yes, I heard.”

“And?” He rubbed a favorite spot beneath her jaw. “What do you think of it?”

She lay quiet for a long moment, thinking. “Don’t know yet. Could be this, could be that. Can’t tell.”

“Nor can I,” he said, sinking gloomily back in his chair.

Edge made a deep huffing noise in the back of her throat. “Stupid man. Think too hard. Me, too.”

He laughed. “And what do you suggest to remedy that?”

“Sleep,” she said firmly. Without further ado, she crawled up his legs and settled herself in his lap as coolly as an ordinary lap cat and not a full-grown Catkin.

He had expected her to be far heavier. To his surprise she was feather-light, as if she had the bones of a bird underneath her lithe musculature and coating of downy fur. She pushed the palms of her hands drowsily against his thighs, kneading in sleepy content.

“Rest,” she ordered.

Anno shifted uncomfortably. The wild, outdoor scent of the ocean wind in her warm down was ... tantalizing, disturbing to his senses, long since used to only damp, musty smells.

“I will, for a while,” he agreed, very deliberately not stroking her back as she wordlessly invited. “But as for you ... go and play your fiddle at their dance, little wildcat. Will you?”

“Why?” Edge butted her head against his chest. “Rather stay here.”

“As a favor to me.” Anno gave in and stroked beneath her inviting, pointed little chin. “To be a set of eyes and ears for me that no one would suspect. We must know more, little wildcat. And you ... I can depend on you.”

Chapter Five

“Aunt, no. I cannot presume any further on Lorn’s hospitality. You mustn’t ask it of me! Please.” Paedro ran a hand through his short, no-color hair and pulled it away from his forehead.

The gesture displeased Ione. It showed where Paedro’s hairline had begun to creep back a little along the front. Most ignoble, as were so many other things about the abominable man.

Ione did not like her nephew. Indeed, she despised him -- Paedro, who could yet inherit the throne of Amahpre due to the luck of his birth, not the turn of his wit. Yet he doted on her as would a mindless hound. Far too loyal to family and friends, that one, with no sense as to when the worm turned and the dog was about to bite. A weakness of his and one she despised. It smacked of mindlessness.

Mindless ... no, she did not like him, but neither was she herself stupid. She’d learned to turn his foolishness to her advantage more than once before.

She had thought to do it again. The rooms they had put her in were not to be borne for a woman of her status. “You do not care that I am uncomfortable,” she accused, wringing her gloved hands together in a manner calculated to bruise her nephew’s soft heart.

Paedro had a fine sense of honor concerning the delicacy of women. He'd had difficulty enough condemning her to a journey without a proper litter and maids in the first place. Oh, but she had made him squirm on their journey by playing the martyr, pretending the horse's rough gait hurt her, that the inn beds were too hard, and that her delicate stomach could not bear the rough travel food.

Now that she had been settled into the lighthouse, Ione found to her delight that she had, perhaps unwittingly, been given marvelous fodder for further tormenting her nephew. Yet to her dismay, Paedro had not taken her complaints with his usual respect. Far from it!

"I cannot bear the humiliation of being placed here," she said, voice trembling on the edge of tears. "They do it to shame me, Paedro. An old woman without a husband to protect her. Is it not your duty to --"

But instead of listening, Paedro brushed her complaint aside easily as a puff of down. "Try to make the best of it, Aunt."

Ione sat up straight, stunned. He dared!

"They do things differently so far out to sea," Paedro rattled on carelessly. "I'm sure they mean no insult."

"Nephew!" Ione gaped at him beneath her veils, shocked. "You do not understand. They play at being noble, but these are peasants." She reached up one sleeve for her strip of gilded leather and began to pull it through her gloved hands, willing him to look at the thing.

He did not. He turned away! "They're hardly peasants, Aunt." Paedro struggled for words. "They live a different life out here. Courtly rituals are meaningless in Kirree. As they should be in Amahpre, I sometimes think."

"You would cast aside the very soul of world?" Ione twisted the leather strip between two of her fingers. "Nephew, surely you must see how foolish that is. They shame us all by offering less than their best, and that a-purpose."

A great whooping and a burst of sudden firelight rose together outside, briefly illuminating the room. Paedro glanced eagerly out the window.

“Aunt, I must go. That’s the bonfire started already. They’ll be ready to begin their celebrating. I won’t miss it.”

Ione pulled her leather strip tight with a snap. “Paedro, you will listen to me; do you understand?”

“I must go.” He bent and dropped a hasty kiss where he guessed her cheek might be beneath the veils and missed. His lips brushed the tip of her nose, which wrinkled in disgust.

On his way out the door, he pointed happily to a small table and a plate beside it. “Look, Aunt, there’s courtesy if you like. Since you didn’t eat much, they’ve sent a cold collation up and what looks like some wine to warm you.”

“Wine! Cold food!” The leather fell from Ione’s hands. “Paedro, you --”

“Rest well tonight, Aunt,” he called back over his shoulder. “Chirre, see to her needs.”

“Peasants!” she wailed after him, forgetting her dignity. “Paedro! They don’t even keep wolf-hounds!”

He paid her no heed -- he was gone.

Her manservant, Chirre, stirred uncomfortably in his position beside the door. “My lady?” he ventured. “Are you well?”

Ione sank back in her chair.

“My lady Ione?” Chirre crept forward, his eyes fixed on her feet. “Do you need a taste of the wine? It is crude -- homemade, I think -- but they’ve marked the bottles with what sorts they are. There’s dandelion, blackberry, tomato --” He stopped, taken aback. “Tomato?”

Ione’s stomach roiled at the listing of the crude wines. Her energy had deserted her.

Clearly worried, Chirre crept closer still. “Lady, let me bring you some food. Your worship’s health ...”

“Perhaps they hope to make me drunk,” she said at last, her voice dryer than the finest sherry she was accustomed to. “Homemade wines. Made of tomato.”

“Perhaps the honey?” Chirre asked timidly. “It might taste something like mead.”

“I’ll have none of it!” Ione snatched her strip of leather and made it vanish up her sleeve. “You may drink it, if you’re so fond of spirituous liquor. Perhaps you might develop something resembling wit if you fell deeply enough into a cup.”

“I will do nothing that displeases you, lady.”

“Chieftain, indeed,” Ione murmured to herself, ignoring her manservant. “Peasants with a crown. No bloodline worth calling blood at all ...”

She glanced wearily about herself, around at the room she so despised. Small, built on clean lines, the stone plain but finely cut.

“What they have goes to utter waste,” she said bitterly. “This vast place is let to spoil for the pleasure of commoners when it could sparkle with a thousand lights. The finest of the land should connive at a chance to get inside. Never should they open the doors wide to let a horde of dirty fishermen trample the rushes with their fouled boots. I can’t think why that ninny Paedro is so charmed by it.”

She shivered. “My feet ache, Chirre,” she whimpered. “Remove my shoes.”

Chirre knelt before his lady, reverently laying hands on her feet. The tiny kid-leather shoes had once been works of art, but the damp boat ride and harsh walk up a rocky cliff had destroyed them. Cracked, dirtied with mud and worse than mud. Heat rose from her bruised flesh and stung his palms.

Poor feet! Such feet were not made to trudge up a cliffside by themselves, without horse or even mule to carry her. Chirre would have carried her himself, but he was a small man and her servant besides. He knew his lady’s pride. Even to spare her pain, he had not dared.

Ione sighed, leaning her veiled head against the back of her hard wooden chair. “Was I born for this?” she asked wistfully. “Myself, the daughter of a duke?”

“You were born to be a great one. A shining star,” Chirre soothed. “Shall I bathe your feet?”

“What?” Ione jeered. “Surely there’s no such thing as hot water on this fish-stinking lump of rock?”

Chirre pulled forward a basin of water that the sour little redheaded wench had drawn for their use. She’d dropped it onto the floor, spilling most out in a wide puddle, but a little remained. “Some, my lady. It’s warm, at least. Somewhat warm.”

“My feet are dirty, cockerel brains. Of course you are to bathe them. And quickly! Or must I do it myself?”

“No, my lady. I am your servant.” Chirre gently caught his lady’s small feet in his hand and undid the many buttons that held the shoes closed, careful not to jostle her sore toes. When at last the battered shoes came off, Ione sighed again.

Chirre dipped a handy cloth in the lukewarm water and began to rub it lightly over his lady’s sore, reddened feet. Thank fortune he’d thought to check a cupboard earlier and had found some towels, old but clean, and laid them near the basin.

Lady Ione wiggled her toes -- such dainty toes, a queen’s perfect toes! -- in momentary pleasure, bringing a smile to Chirre’s face.

“Perhaps it’s better that the water’s gone cool. It’s more soothing so,” he ventured as he sponged her ankles.

Ione toyed with the edge of her veil. She shrugged.

“Is the room too warm for you, my lady? That serving girl built the fire very badly. I think she pushed every stick of kindling that she could find in there and tossed in a lighted spill. No doubt she hoped it would last the night, and she wouldn’t be bothered again.”

“Why would she want to return?” Ione asked sulkily. “What’s in here for her to care about serving?”

“My lady --”

Chirre felt her sudden anger sizzle between them. “To death and darkness with your unbearable forever my-ladying!” Ione kicked him in the chest, knocking him back on his rump.

As he gasped for breath, her mood changed again, lightning quick. She slumped back in her chair and slapped her wet soles against the floor like a child. “It *is* too hot in here. Are there no more windows at all?”

Chirre scrambled back to his feet. “None, my lady, but if you’re too warm, then let me remove your veils, as well.”

Again the shrug that could mean either yes, no, or not caring either way. Chirre hesitated, then made bold to take the hem of the first veil between his fingers. He raised it back, away from her face, waiting for a protest.

None came. He swallowed, prayed she would not punish him, and carefully peeled away the rest of the veils. There were three altogether -- the first made of lace delicate as a spider’s web, the second of thick, rumpled gauze, and the third of thin netting. He held his breath as the last one came away.

Ahh ... yes, yes.

Once, Chirre had been told that in her youth Ione had been the kind of beauty that men killed over, just for a kiss from her cold, perfect lips. By his count she would be past forty now, but oh, oh, still so marvelous to look at! Corn-colored hair and eyes blue as violets. Far too thin, but white and perfect as a statue. A goddess among women. Not even the Lady rivaled her.

When Paedro had told her she must go into exile, Ione had called for veils and put them on to hide her shame. Since that day, only Chirre had seen her face. Chirre, whom he thought she trusted, if only a little ...

As the light hit her eyes, Ione covered them. "Too many candles! Put them out, put them out! They're everywhere!"

Chirre darted about, hastily pinching wicks between forefinger and thumb. "Is that any better, my lady?"

"No." She fixed him with a baleful glare. "What matters a little light more or less? You fail to see the sun eclipsing these tiny stars."

Chirre felt the familiar, sinking disappointment in his gut. He had failed again. "My lady, I am sorry," he whispered, crushed. "I am your servant."

"Servant, servant," she mimicked. "One of only two servants left to me in all the world. I do hope you enjoy your exile. A grand and glorious life you'll have with your lady, won't you!"

"I will work my fingers to the bare white bone to see you comfortable again, my lady," Chirre vowed desperately. He dropped to the floor. "I swear it on my knees!"

"I cannot hide what I am," Ione said wearily. "Paedro should have had me killed, for this exile will be the death of me."

Chirre gaped and made the sign against evil. "My lady, no! I beg you, please, never speak of such things!"

"You understand nothing!" she blazed. "Least of all what it means to be noble. Leave me to my own ways. Never, never try to change me!"

Chirre sat back helplessly. He did not understand the moods that came over his lady, how she could be warm one minute and cold the next -- now loving, then fierce. Beyond any doubt a strange, fey creature, however he might love her.

“Chirre!” Ione shot upright with a sudden, violent flinch at a noise he could not hear. She scabbled for her veils. “Someone’s coming -- quick, quick! Go see --”

A door to the adjoining chamber burst open. Brach, Ione’s bodyguard, spilled in, brimming over with homemade wine and a badly timed grin. He carelessly dropped two bundles by the door and gave a loud, satisfied belch.

Chirre’s lips firmed into near-bloodless slits of distaste. Ione had wisely chosen the biggest and strongest of the Amahpre bravos to be her bodyguard, but Brach had also turned out to be the thickest-skulled, smallest-minded, most beetle-browed oaf either had ever had the misfortune to meet.

Ione snatched up a ruined shoe and threw it at Brach. He dodged it with ease.

“Have you seen?” he demanded, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at his chamber. “There’s all leather handgrips and ropes in there, attached to the headboards! What d’you think the snobs get up to, with all that tackle on their beds?” He elbowed past Chirre to peer at Ione’s room.

The lady covered her eyes with one slender hand.

“Idiot,” Chirre hissed, trying to drag Brach aside and quiet him. “I don’t doubt you’ve left more than one bulging belly behind you in your wanderings and never yet saw one of these, but allow me to enlighten you. These are birthing rooms.”

Brach’s face paled in alarm. “What kind of rooms?”

“Hush!” Chirre waved his hands frantically. “In a small place like this, that mage is likely the only healer they have. Women set to give birth come and stay in these rooms around their times. Do you see now? It’s not even servant’s sleeping holes that they’ve given us.”

Brach frowned. “So what are the ropes for?”

“They dishonor us in all things,” Ione said, too quietly. “That little snip of a servant -- a cousin -- whoever she is -- she placed us here as a deliberate snub, I am certain. I would give much to see her put in her own place.”

“Perhaps I could see to arranging something to her misfortune that might please your ladyship?” Chirre faltered.

“Perhaps. I would rather sharpen my claws on that sniveling ‘chieftain’s’ daughter.” Ione bared her sharp white teeth. “Did you not see how she greeted me? Did you not hear? She pitied me. *Me!* Not two months ago, I would have sliced her open alive for such impudence.”

“Reckon I can push her off t’edge of that balcony thing, at the dancing tonight,” Brach offered with a lazy grin.

Ione pursed her lips. “Dancing -- faugh! I’ve no doubt you’ll be there for every minute of it. Dancing and then some, if I know your sort. It’s never worth hoping you’d have the brains to keep your eyes and ears open for anything that might be of use to me in my plight.

“Assistance!” she cried out suddenly, kicking the forgotten basin of water across the floor. “I warn you, the useless pair of you, if you value your lives, you would do well to find something, no matter how small, that will assist me against my enemies. Some scandal -- some mischief -- the smallest of things, something to occupy my mind, or I shall go mad!”

Brach grinned. “Come to that, I just hoped you’d say so.”

“Say *my lady* when you speak!” Chirre chided him primly.

“How odd you should say that, my lady Chirre.” Brach winked at them, then kicked at the bundles he’d dropped by the door. “I’ve had me a fine idea to liven things up a bit. Go on, take that first one and try it for size.”

When Chirre hesitated, eyeing the thing in suspicion, Brach picked it up for him and tossed it at his head. Black cloth spilled out, raining down on his shoulders. He spat out a bit of lace and huffed indignantly. “Skirts?”

“This is for you, m’lady.” Brach handed the second bundle to Ione with a bow and an impudent wink.

Ione picked at the lumpy bundle with her finger, her lips back curling in disgust. “What nonsense is this? Purple velvet, orange silk. Trousers!”

“For the party, ain’t they?” Brach propped himself against the wall, enjoying their confusion. “Last of the get-ups to be found, but I think I picked good just the same.”

Ione glared at her pile of rags, so brightly colored that they hurt the eyes. “For one, I do not intend to attend this idiotic party to be stared at and pitied,” she informed him coldly. “For another, I am not a clown!”

“Nope, you’re not,” Brach agreed. “Given a choice, if you went, you’d wear black silk with a raven’s mask, yeah?”

Ione paused, catching the thread of Brach’s idea. “Therefore, I should wear these rags ...”

“Clever, eh?” Brach preened. “I got the black lot for Chirre. He’s just a shrimp, around your size, begging your pardon, and with that on, why, folks’ll think as he’s you.”

Chirre shook his head, baffled. “But to what purpose?”

“Straw brains! What would folk say before a common jester that they’d never say before an exiled noble?” Ione exclaimed impatiently. “While they stare at you, they will be free with their talk in front of me. And what I could overhear!”

Ione stroked her rags with a smile ... then hesitated. Chirre knew she believed it did not do to praise subordinates, lest they get ideas about their stations, but it *had* been a clever idea.

“I am pleased, Brach,” she said stiffly, at last. “I shall note this in your favor. Now, we begin at once!”

Chirre clapped his hands. “You, oaf, turn your back. Lady Ione, will you require assistance?”

“I will dress myself, Chirre. You may turn your back, as well.”

Ione withdrew behind a small privacy screen in the corner of the room, but kept her ears open as she slipped out of her kirtle and into the hideous jerkin and trousers.

“Is that’s all you’ve done tonight?” Chirre scolded Brach under his breath as he slipped into the skirts. “Rummaged through old storerooms? You should have stayed to see to our lady’s comfort!”

“Nope! Been wandering and using my ears, too. And how those ears do burn now!”

Oh, really?

Ione adjusted her tasteless velvet shirt, grimacing. “You’ve heard something?” she asked coolly, enjoying their flinch of surprise as they realized she had heard their talk. “Something of interest? Pray tell me, Brach.”

“I’m certain it’s only gossip --” Chirre started.

“Did I ever!” Brach hooted, oblivious to Ione’s displeasure with his boorishness. “Someone’s heading to get himself a prime piece of filly. Looks to be a handfast coming up soon.”

Ione sniffed. Gossip, indeed! “What could possibly interest me about that, do you think?”

“Lady, you don’t know who’s thinking on getting handfasted, do you?”

Ione bristled. “And who,” she said, clear and cold, “might this man be?”

“Cloud,” Brach smirked. “How’s that for interesting?”

Ione emerged from behind the screen, fully dressed, her mask and hood in hand. “Not Cloud!” she said in disdain. “That milk-blooded little sop?”

“One and the same.”

“Who could he possibly have found to marry him?”

“Rose. Lorn’s daughter, and his heir, come to that.” Brach crossed his arms smugly.

“Who told you that?”

“Me, I figured that there would be a few chances to get some woman tonight, so I was checking out the nooks and crannies for later,” Brach explained with a cocky leer. “Happens that I overheard Lorn chattering to some other old man. Sounded just like two milkmaids. They thought it could be Cloud *or* Paedro might offer for Rose, but I found out what’s what.”

“Then that’s not all you’ve heard?”

“Nay. I hung about a while there hoping for some more, but after they’d gone quiet that ugly Cat went skulking by and I made tracks outward. Wish I’d had my bow with me! Snap! Twang! Some more roast on the fire tonight, boys!”

“Fool, get to your point. How do you know it’s Cloud offering for the chieftain’s daughter?”

“Well ...” Brach shrugged. “I happened to be behind a corner and I heard the prince and Cloud chattering a bit. Yon boy’s too yellow to do the deed himself, plus he don’t have any family left, so Paedro plans to stand in and ask Rose for him. Once she’s said yes, then he gives her to Cloud as a gift.”

“And you left that bit of knowledge until last!” Ione whirled about, biting at the inside of her cheek. “This, this we can use!” she murmured excitedly to herself. “I’ll think of a way. Oh, yes, I’ll think of something. Chirre!”

Chirre turned around. Ione stifled a laugh at how ridiculous he looked, all spindly legs and bony arms. Yet who would look close enough to see more than black and veils before making a sign against evil and scurrying off?

“I stand ready to help you,” he swore, near panting in his eagerness to serve.

“Good. Then go. Go! Do as Brach bid you earlier!” Ione dusted off a dirty velvet sleeve. She slid the mask and hood over her head, and saw that Chirre stared at her, eyes wide with hurt and disappointment.

“Well?” She glared at him through the blank clown’s mask. “What are you waiting for? Did you think I would go with you, fool? Move!”

“We’ll get on ahead.” Brach shoved Chirre ahead of him. “Come on, you, our night’s just starting.”

It certainly is. Ione found herself well pleased with the amusement that her two little pets had devised. It was certainly not the ultimate path to her freedom, but it would be a fine start on her revenge against the chieftain and his kin to meddle with the marriage that was planned.

And who knew? She allowed herself a small smile. In the end, where might her night’s entertainment lead? Great things ever came of small, and without a doubt she would be there. She would take advantage of them all.

Chapter Six

Lorn scowled out a small kitchen window through to the courtyard. “Ungodly racket! What’s come about?”

“The mercurial Edge has declared she’ll play lead fiddle tonight.” Tirsah laughed at the face her uncle made. “Come now, it’s not so bad. Catkin songs aren’t what everyone likes, to be sure, but they’re interesting in a way.”

“Sound like dead men screeching.”

“She told me a gypsy taught her to play the fiddle.”

“Hunh! Wouldn’t doubt it.” Lorn drummed his fingers on the wall. “What’s the o’clock? Near to ninth hour? Past time to stir our bones. Rose, Mims, Sela! Haste, women!”

“Coming, coming!”

Light footsteps clattered down a long set of stone steps that led from family chambers to the kitchen. Mims beat the other two in, hair and skirts flying wildly. Sela came just behind her, face flushed with laughter, tucking wisps of fine silver hair back into place.

“Are we ready?”

“Nearly so.” Tirsah eyed Mims in disapproval. She yanked her cousin’s bodice flounce higher and tugged her hitched-up skirt to its proper place. “Now, we’re ready,” she said, satisfied. “And don’t try to undo that.”

“Wait -- Rose, where’s Rose?” Sela turned around, perplexed. “She was just behind me.”

“Here I am,” a small voice replied.

Tirsah put her fingers to her lips as Rose pattered softly down the steps, tying on her mask as she came. She’d laid Rose’s favorite rose-and-heart mummery especially aside for her. How she had come to choose the mask she wore now was a mystery. Blank, wholly blank, made of pure white leather with only almond-shaped holes for eyes and mouth.

Lorn’s heavy eyebrows drew together. “’Tis plain, daughter,” he ventured at last.

Rose wove her fingers together, looking down, the beauty of her face hidden. “It displeases you?”

Understanding dawned. Tirsah put her arm around her cousin’s shoulders and held her close, defensively. “Hush, Uncle. Plain suits her best tonight.”

Lorn hesitated. “You think it best?”

“I do,” she said firmly.

“Well, then.” He reached out awkwardly to pat his daughter’s lovely shoulder. “You’re all right, lass?”

She nodded, the mask revealing nothing.

Lorn cleared his throat. “Best get on, then. Tirsah?”

“Not me. Let that one go first,” she said mischievously, pointing at Mims. “Look at her! She’s like a starling beating at the bars of her cage.”

Mims put her tongue out at Tirsah. Then, like the child she was, as given to glee as to sulks, she grinned and danced eagerly ahead of them, darting back and forth to urge them on faster, until Tirsah sensed that even Rose smiled beneath her mask.

It didn't take a master of mathematics to add this and that together and find the source and sum of Rose's suffering. Poor thing, called so young to choose with almost no time to prepare herself! Yet what other choice did she have? She had no magery, and lacking that, it was a woman's lot in life to marry. At least both men seemed kind ...

Tirsah frowned. Marriage -- a foolish custom! Given her way, she would have wished for a bit more in life for her sweet, shy, beloved little Rose.

They reached the end of the corridor, and a heavy oaken door that led out onto the terrace. Just beyond, they could hear the boisterous sounds of reveling like rain in a desert.

Rose shivered a little.

Impulsively, Tirsah kissed the white leather mask. "Listen carefully, cousin," she whispered. "You don't have to do this. If you don't know enough to choose now, or if you'd rather not choose at all, then don't."

"Tirsah," Lorn rumbled. "Leave off."

"I've said what I wanted to." She squeezed Rose's cold fingers, attempting comfort. "If you need me, come to me," she whispered. "I'll stay close by the fire."

Rose shook her head mutely.

Tirsah sighed in exasperation. "I suppose you've frightened her out of her wits," she accused her uncle.

"Hush! 'Tis none of your concern," Lorn growled. "Who're you to talk, any road? *You'll* never marry. Leave your Da without an heir or heir-passer, you will."

Tirsah smiled coldly. "Da's got nothing to do with this, Uncle. It's what I alone think. Mel!"

Lorn glared at his stubborn niece for a long moment. "Your tongue'll be the death of you one day."

"Perhaps." She tilted her chin up. "I'll die happy."

"Too shrewd for your own good, you are."

“No, Uncle. Unlike you, I can see past the end of my own nose.” She darted past him quick as a hummingbird and flung the heavy oaken door wide open in a gesture of strength and defiance.

At the first sight of their chieftain and his kin, the crowd on the terrace went mad, shrieking in glee, dance partners swinging each other around in wide circles.

Lorn shot Tirsah one last angry glare. Then, as she had planned, he had no choice but to turn from her to the crowd and bellow out, “Welcome, all!”

At that signal, the dance officially began. Torches flared up, Edge plied her fiddle’s bow, and hundreds of nimble feet plunged into the patterns of a lusty sailor’s reel. Nearly each and every member of the chieftain’s household found themselves snatched by a different partner and swung away into the quick measures of the first dance.

Tirsah laughed out loud for delight as a man in an antlered mask seized her hand. She twirled and spun in circles, the salt air cool on her skin and the music hot in her veins. She forgot everything else in the glory of that moment. What a night for it -- what a night to dance!

At first Rose held back from the crowd, shaking her head at the swarm that pressed in on her, begging for the first dance. All the young bucks had recognized her straight away with her smooth waterfall of hair like red silk. Every man jack of them yearned for a dance with the chieftain’s beautiful daughter.

Somehow she knew, when the man in the eagle mask approached, that he would be the right one to begin with.

He neither joked nor laughed, but only held his hand out solemnly for her to take.

“Lady, will you honor me?” he asked under the indignant roar from her would-be partners.

For answer, she slipped her hand into his, and they were away. He held her close enough to guard her from the other whirling dancers, but not so close that she feared him. A big man, but thin -- strong, but gentle.

After a few turns in silence, she dared to look up at him. He gazed off somewhere above her head, not paying attention to her. Somehow, she summoned up the courage not to look away. He had damped his hair down and bound it into a tight queue so it would lie smoothly under the edges of his mask -- impossible to tell what color it might be.

He had gray eyes.

"Am I so terrible, that you shiver so?" When she flinched, he shook his head gently at her. "Little one, don't be frightened."

"I'm not frightened," Rose lied, turning her face away. If only she could tell who he was ... Not a village boy or a fisherman. He spoke differently, held her lightly, and danced gracefully. Cloud ... or the prince?

"Your heart's going like a rabbit's," her partner chided her, reaching down with one gloved hand to touch her mask. With an effort of will, she managed not to flinch timidly away from his caress. He must have seen it in her eyes, for his own reflected sudden pity.

"You're just a child, aren't you?" he asked, sounding sorry. "Don't faint! I'll speak quickly and have done with it."

She stared up at him, taut with anticipation and fear. "My lady," he said quietly, "this is what I ask of you ..."

Tirsah stirred up the bonfire with a long, narrow iron poker, settling the driftwood this way and that. The better built, the better burnt, and she wanted a good fire that would last half the night for watching by.

Satisfied at last, she put the iron aside and stretched out her hands, warming her cold fingertips by the flames. It'd take some brisk dancing to break the evening's chill. She hoped

Edge would be especially clever with her fiddling and play the complicated old tunes with notes tumbling one over the other in a rush to be heard.

Behind her, the crowd sent up a roar of approval as Lorn ordered out a barrel of good barley-beer for the dancers to slake their thirst upon. Tirsah rolled her eyes indulgently. Ah, well, that was another way for old salts to warm themselves. Whatever else his faults, Uncle Lorn had a generous, open hand with his guests.

Their squabble had upset her more deeply than she would ever allow him to see. How, she asked herself, could Lorn simply accept the dispensation of his daughter with such a cool hand? The treasure of his household and the jewel of his old age? It made no sense.

She hugged her arms tightly to her chest, gazing idly into the heart of the fire and wishing for impossible things. If she could only see what would come of Rose's choice! But while her father might have the gift of Sight, she certainly didn't. The only time she'd tried to bring a vision, she'd nearly died of the shock. No, Fortune deemed it Tirsah's work to bring the harvest, and the babies, and send dying souls on their way into the shadowlands.

But if it amused her -- and it did, just then -- she liked to pretend that she could See things in the fire, just as children did with clouds in the sky. There -- that looked like a ladder, tongues of flame climbing it nimbly as feet. *That* looked just like an unfolding rose, even if she knew it was just a tough knot burning through. And that ...

Her smile faded. Just for a half-second, not clearly enough to truly see at all, there had been ... something ...

There, there it came again! Clear as the reflection from a mirror, she saw it in the heart of the flames -- herself, stretched beneath one of her beloved trees in the circling arbor. Limbs tangling together, bare and slick with salty sweat, thrusting upward, accepting deep within ...

She and Benec making love.

Truly making love -- none of the playful rutting or the hurried fucking they'd indulged in when they were young. No, now they were taking their time. His hands moved slowly and lazily, trailing up and down her limbs, opening her bodice wide to bury his face, clean-shaven, between her breasts, then lifting up to kiss and lave the nipple of one with his tongue while he caressed the other in one huge hand.

He had already thrust inside her, but there was no rush to his movements. He rocked as slow and steady as sluggish winds across a field of wheat, moving as if he had all day to savor her. Her legs came up to lock around his waist, urging him on, but he only laughed and kissed her sweetly.

Patience, he said.

Tirsah's channel ached, hungry for more. Benec drove her mad with his unhurried thrusts. She wriggled beneath him, begging him to go faster, harder, *now* -- to no avail. No, Benec meant to drive her mad before they were both finished.

She lifted her lips, eager for more kisses, at least ... for, after all, as the bands on their fingers declaimed, they were wed, and the touch of his mouth was hers by right ...

No! She snatched up the heavy iron poker and thrust it into the heart of the vision. The picture exploded into a thousand sparks shooting up into the sky. They hung like stars for a long moment before finally fading.

Tirsah lowered the poker, her arms shaking. *It won't be. It won't. I won't let it be!*

Edge flickered her ears naughtily and began a daring love song in the Catkin dialect. Almost no one understood her words, but few could mistake her meaning. Fishwives fanned themselves in pretended shock, but the younger folk burst into laughter and danced anew.

Mims knew what a few of the words meant. Not the *good* ones, though.

"Come to me, love, once again," she sang under her breath. "Come to me and let me hold you, my wild ocean heart, before the morning dawn ..."

A clear, cold wind, redolent with the promise of snow to come, blew in from the north off the sea. Mims leaned her warm face greedily into the breeze, drinking it in. Oh, she'd hate being pinned up inside and all when the real winter hit, but just then, that breeze felt *good* --

Abruptly, the wind died away. Disappointed, Mims opened her eyes and glanced down, down to the sea, and froze.

Far below her, something long and lean, dressed in a wild assortment of rags, danced and spun about on the sand and the rocks, flinging its arms to the sky in abandon. She could just hear the long, ululating wails it made as it twirled.

Miss Berry. The madwoman of Kirree-on-Sea. Thirty years before, her husband had gone out fishing and not come back -- but every day she walked the shoreline, waiting for his boat. Horrible, awful, ugly old thing!

Mims drew back sharply, making the sign against evil. What if she'd been seen? She never, never wanted that crazy old thing to come near her!

Not even if ... or because ... *I just don't*, she told herself firmly. *'Tis better this way. Everyone says!*

Mother ...

A sly hand slipped around her waist and pulled her off balance, right into a set of hard male legs. "Gotcha!" the trickster boasted in a broad city accent.

Mims burst into laughter and slapped, aiming to miss. "Naughty fellow!"

"Sure am." Heated lips pressed against the side of her neck. "Mad at me?"

Mims twisted around, giggling. "That depends," she said pertly, relieved to see that it was the handsome city guard who'd caught her, not the short, weasel-faced one.

And, oh, he *was* handsome! She wrinkled her nose at him in the way five fishermen had said made her look delicious. At least she'd never end up like old Berry. Or Tirsah.

“You’re a brave one, aren’t you?” she asked saucily. “Here, and I hardly know you at all! Maybe I will be mad at you. They say I’m a bad little thing.”

“All I see is good things,” the guard -- Brach? -- said with a knowing wink and a hungry look at the bodice she’d adjusted down the second Tirsah’s back was turned. “Bad thing, good thing -- s’long as you’re a bad girl, sugar girl. Come on, now, give a poor boy a good kiss, won’t you?”

Mims grinned and tilted her face up. *Mmmmm*, he kissed like a prince in a fairytale. She gave her shoulders a wiggle, sending her bodice even lower. Extra work or no, having Brach around might not be so bad at all.

Still there?

Tirsah had been aware of the presence behind her for some moments, and just that night she lacked the patience to be approached. She wrapped her fingers a little more firmly around the cold iron of her fire-poker and heaved a tired sigh.

“I know you’re back there, madam or master whoever you might be. Do stop burning holes in my back with your stares and come around before I come about to face you.”

When she thought about the person’s voice later, she decided she would have called it gray. “No, my lady,” it intoned. “You must face me. Your time has nearly come.”

“I beg your pardon?” She turned and spoiled the creature’s evening -- she hoped -- and his entire planned effect by bursting into helpless laughter. “Lady have mercy!” she gasped. “What are you supposed to be?”

The overly tall, cowed, cloaked figure in the badly painted sailcloth death’s-head mask shifted uneasily. “I am a representation of the fate that awaits you,” it growled. “A fate due to all women with sharp tongues.”

He held out an irregularly shaped contraption of twisted, rusted iron, and gave it a menacing shake. “Do you recognize this, Lady Scold?”

Tirsah raised one eyebrow. "I should. I gather plover eggs in it every morning."

"You what?" the tall figure blurted, snatching the scold's bridle up for another look.

"You did a marvelous job getting all the straw out," she said kindly. "Does this game have a point?"

"It does!" he snarled, angry now. "Insult one more man and I will personally fit this scold's bridle over your foul little face myself, witch!"

"No, you won't," she replied calmly. "And I'll insult as many men as deserve it, or just as many as suits me. Do run along now, there's a good specter."

"I will not!" The tall figure nearly twitched with fury. "You're to keep your mouth shut, woman, or, by the Lady, I will not be held responsible for my actions --"

"Yes, you will. We all of us are." Tirsah twitched the scold's bridle from the cloaked man's fingers and flattened it, seemingly without effort, between her two palms. "Pity," she mused. "It made an excellent basket." She handed it back to the figure. He took it dumbly.

"Better luck next time, Benec." She gave him a long, cool smile. "Did you honestly think I wouldn't recognize you?" She thumped the flat of the poker against his chest hard enough to take his breath and glided away, struggling not to laugh. Oh, that had been splendid!

Just you watch, Benec, she promised, grinning like a Catkin beneath her mask. Before three days are ended, you'll wish you'd never come back to Kirree!

Finally! Ione smiled thinly. She'd had ill luck following Cloud early on, all for the sheer crush of people choking the terrace and arbor. Her skills were certainly not to blame. It disgusted her to note that there could never yet have been such a poor yet determined tracker as Cloud, dogging Paedro's every step with Rose. Had her fool nephew learned nothing in Amahpre?

She gave her head a minute shake. It would never do to give him even a small portion of power. If his father and brothers died or were lost in battle, as seemed likely, Paedro would be king. And under Paedro's control, Cloud would end up with much presented to him on a golden plate. No. For the sake of the country, it would be her duty to prevent Paedro's taking the throne, by whatever means she saw fit. But that would be for later ...

Brach sidled over to join her, nodding slightly at Cloud. He saw him, too, then -- good. She beckoned the guard closer. As he drew near, her lips drew back over her teeth in disgust. He fairly stank of an encounter with a whore.

As punishment, she gave him a sharp pinch with her fingernails. "Do you remember your lines?" she demanded. When he nodded, she gave the bit of flesh she had caught a pleasing twist. "Go, then."

Then, after a second's worth of thought, Ione broke her own rules. She knew men and knew the path to Brach's obedience. If it were not of the greatest importance ...! "Please me and I will reward you. Go!"

Cloud balanced on the tips of his feet and leaned forward in vain. The dancers were too noisy -- he couldn't hear a thing. Paedro bent and whispered something in Rose's ears as she stood like a statue, the only lifelike thing about her the rippling of her hair where the ocean breezes teased at it.

The prince finished speaking and drew back a little, meeting Rose's gaze. She did not move. *Is she afraid?* Cloud wondered, frantic. *Does she not like me for some reason? Am I too young for her? Am I too poor?*

"Ohe, Cloud!" a voice startled him, together with a blow hard enough to jar his teeth.

He rounded on the oaf, ready with some harsh words, and swore to see who it was, laughing at Cloud's surprise with his usual insouciance. Cloud would swear that the man could lounge against thin air! "Scared you, didn't I?" Brach jeered.

Cloud turned his back on the man, but found to his surprise that there were some folk in the world that simply wouldn't be insulted or ignored. Brach hunkered companionably next to him. He stank of sweat and other things, and his breath smelled horribly sour. "You see them?" he honked. "That's the prince and Rose, that is."

"I know that!" Cloud tamped down the urge to push him away, staring at the couple in question. The prince stood patiently, gazing at Rose. She moved at last, pressing her fingertips to the mouth of her mask. Even at that great distance, he could tell that she trembled.

Don't be afraid. Can you not give me a chance?

"Hunh." Brach chewed at his lip. "Big things brewing there, they be. Look here, you." He jabbed Cloud in the ribs. "Hadn't had a chance to get to know the prince, this here journey. Just a guard, me. But I know what I know, and I surely wish I could get in close enough to have a word of warning with him. He ought not to be asking Miss Rose to marry up with him."

The bottom of Cloud's gut dropped out. He stared at Brach, horrified. "The prince -- Rose -- what? What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, and that's all." Brach sneered. "They call her father chieftain, but it's not like he's a real lord, is it? Ought to marry a princess, Paedro ought. Besides, that Rose is barely out of nappies. Too young to be a queen! But there it is; he's asking her to marry him. Look!"

Rose nodded, once, just barely. The prince bent, kissed her forehead, and stepped back to reach up and untie the strings of his mask. He tugged it away, shook his queue so that his light hair fell around his face, and gave Rose a broad smile. He said something; Cloud knew not what.

The change in Rose was amazing to one who knew her. Her fear melted into what looked like gladness and relief. Though still demure as a doe, she laughed. The prince ruffled her hair fondly.

Cloud licked at suddenly dry lips. "Who told you this?"

"Paedro 'imself! Heard him saying to Lorn how much he loved her. Swore if he could just get permission, he'd make her queen -- that'll be before the sun next came up.

"But, eh, who am I to gab about it, though?" Brach stood and stretched. Reckon I'll head back to the kitchens, see if I can grab me a tart. You want anything?"

Cloud couldn't have moved if his life depended on it.

"Nah? Well, whatever makes you happy. See you around the dancing, boy!" Brach loped off, unconcerned. Uncaring, perhaps, that he had just shattered Cloud's world as carelessly as a spoiled child would bring his fist down on a clay toy ...

Chapter Seven

“Get away from me!” Cloud followed word with blow, hammering his fist into Benec’s ribs with the force of a battering ram before turning heel and stalking off, too fast for even a man with half a breath left to catch.

Benec collapsed onto a stone bench, sucking in air and clutching his ribs. Gut-struck! Not once, but twice in one night, by man *and* by woman!

It was the woman’s blow that bothered him more, though the pain from Cloud’s strike was freshest. He gripped his aching chest and cursed all womankind. No ribs broken -- he’d learned how to recognize the way those creaked when a man breathed -- but come the morning he’d have a bruise over his breast like an ugly flower.

No doubt Tirsah would have plenty of liniments squirreled away in a pantry somewhere he’d never think to look, but he’d sooner kiss a rutting pig than ask her for a single drop of salve.

Tirsah! She won’t be satisfied until she sees me skinned and hung up to dry! Well, not if I have anything to say about it. Oh, no. We’ll just see what we see when I come across her next. Ha!

“Benec!” He looked up to see the prince waving at him from the oaken door leading to the stronghold. “Over here, man!”

Benec made a face, saluted, and loped over stiffly. “You owe me,” he gritted. “Do you know what I’ve been through?”

“I thought I’d lost you.” Paedro passed him a cup of cool water. “I moved out of the way of the general stampede. Did you find Cloud? Where is he?”

“Not with me,” Benec grouched as he wiped sweat off his forehead. “This -- and I speak with all due respect -- is the daftest idea you’ve ever had. I found Cloud, yes, and gave him the message that you’d spoken to Rose and her father and gotten it all arranged. I’ll add, by the by, that I call it a vicious, vile, and cruel jest to make *me* go and do that.”

Paedro coughed to cover an impish grin. “Call it the right of nobility. Wasn’t Cloud glad to hear the news? Something in your face tells me different.”

“Glad as a man who’s just stepped barefoot onto a dead mackerel. The little wretch punched me hard enough to break my ribs and headed off to I don’t know where. There’s the result of your matchmaking, if you please.”

“Are you sure you gave him the exact message?”

“Of course not. I told him Rose has absconded on mule-back with a goatkeeper. What do you think I told him, Paedro? I read off my assigned lines word for word, or close enough.” Benec poked gingerly at his ribs. “Maybe he’s just come to his senses.”

“Forever cynical, Benec.” Paedro stretched high on his tiptoes to scan the crowd. “Did he leave entirely?”

“No hope for that. He’ll be sulking somewhere about.” Benec took a sip of the cool water and eyed Paedro, carefully choosing his words. “Speaking of the missing, have you seen the lady Ione tonight?”

“She stayed in her quarters, I think,” Paedro said, distracted. “No, wait, I think I did see her a bit ago, wandering on the edge of the crowd.”

“Did you now? I saw a skinny-shanked creature swaddled up in black, true, but it stumbled over its skirts and adjusted its veils every half-minute with knobby hands. If that was Ione, then I, my prince, am a monkey’s own uncle.”

Paedro frowned. “I don’t take your meaning.”

“Listen to me,” Benec said with exaggerated patience. “The ‘lady’ in black wasn’t Ione. It was Chirre dressed up as your aunt. A dumb sheep dressed in wolf’s clothing. If you care to look, you’ll see a gloomy little puss dressed in motley sticking close to Brach. There’s your aunt.”

Paedro shook his head. “A prank?”

“A prank? Have you lost your wits? Ione’s not a joker. What Ione is, is dangerous. There’s a reason why they’ve done this, and if we don’t wind up blown to bits and pieces because of it, I’ll have my best hat for dinner.”

“Nonsense. You’re overreacting.”

“Give me patience,” Benec muttered, gripping his forehead. “I served you well in Amahpre as your chief strategist -- admit it, I did. You wagered your life against my ability to outguess the enemy. How many times must I warn you? Ione is close in line to the throne. You have not and will not pay attention to my warnings. Does the word ‘denial’ mean anything to you? Think carefully about that for a moment.”

“She hasn’t betrayed my trust yet.”

“Again.”

“I choose to believe that she won’t.”

“Ohe! I begin to think you half believe the story we concocted about taking her away to the sea for the sake of her nerves. Give it up, Paedro!” Benec gripped his prince by the forearms. “Ione might be your aunt, but she’s no less a monster for all that. You know what sort of games she likes to play. Don’t, do not, and never, never trust her!”

Paedro shook off Benec's hands. "I know you don't agree with me, but I have hopes for my aunt. Perhaps I won't be proven wrong."

"You will be. You know what she's capable of, and yet you brought her out here, Paedro. I told you what this place was like, and you pollute it with her presence. Do you have any idea what kind of damage she could cause? I should have fought you more fiercely over this. I'll regret that for the rest of my days."

"She'll settle in soon enough, and as for trust, I put my faith in you to see that she does. This is the only place for her. And there's much good come of our traveling out here. Don't you see? There's Rose. And Cloud."

"That sort of good is no good at all. Cloud's too young to know his mind about something like marriage. Think, man! What about that enemy dagger he simply had to have? Didn't he go sticking his hand nearly into their stewpots to get it? Sometimes the danger isn't worth the price."

"But he has that dagger still," Paedro said. "Strategist, sometimes the battle doesn't require seven levels of plotting to be won. So Cloud's quick with what he feels. He knows himself. He holds true to what he chooses."

"Oh ... I give up! Good luck to you, then." Benec threw back a deep swallow of water. "Family! As bad as women. Not a pin to choose between them."

"Twenty-nine years old and you know everything." Paedro rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Hush, now! Lorn and Rose are coming."

Father and daughter drifted over to them, masks abandoned, looking tired and hot, but somehow at peace with each other. Paedro nodded at the pair, smiling. "Not so long now," he reassured Rose, earning a pleased blush in return.

He waved a casual hand at Benec. "Don't worry that you didn't bring Cloud back. I sent more than one messenger out to look through the crowd."

Lorn nodded, pulling at his chin. "Ohe, even so. Benec, I'd have a word with you."

“What’s on your mind, Chieftain?” Benec tilted back his cup.

“Spoke to Tirsah just now. Girl has a bone to pick with you. Says you wronged her.”

Benec choked. For a moment he spluttered, his face going deep red. Then, with a sudden burst of fury, he hurled his costly glass against the wall, shattering it into a hundred shards.

Rose hid her face against Lorn’s arm. “Benec, don’t!” she pleaded, muffled.

Benec ignored her. He wheeled on Paedro, breathing hard. “Pardon me, Prince. I’m off to find an evil little vixen, turn her over my knee, and thrash the life from her!”

“Benec!” Rose begged.

No good -- he didn’t hear her. His long legs carried him away far too fast for his own good -- or Tirsah’s.

Lorn had gone red to the roots of his grizzled eyebrows. He struggled to pat Rose’s head with one hand and to offer the other to Paedro in apology. “Sorry, I am,” he rumbled. “That sorry I am. Can’t say how ashamed.”

“No.” Paedro composed himself. “I knew he harbored a dislike for her. I only -- I did not know how intense --”

“Ah, but I expect he does now,” an impish voice piped up. Tirsah popped up at Paedro’s very elbow, cunning as a cat. “Yes, I saw all of that,” she said calmly. “Don’t fret. I’ve heard far worse out of him. I expect he’ll be hunting for me, but look how cleverly I’ve fooled him!”

She laughed at Paedro’s astonishment. “Poor fellow. You’ll grow used to my ways if you’re here long enough. Cheer up! I’ve found what you sent me to seek.”

With a grand curtsy, she swept back to reveal a sopping wet Cloud standing some feet back, dark and forbidding as a thunderhead, arms crossed over his chest. He favored them with a furious look and refused to approach.

“He was a little unwilling to join us,” Tirsah murmured, “particularly after I saw fit to fix the damage he’d wrought from dipping a little deeply into the ale.”

“Merciful Lady,” Paedro murmured. “Did you dunk him in the ocean?”

“Heavens, no.” Tirsah’s eyes sparkled. “I dropped him into the well and winched him back up again.”

Not a person there believed she hadn’t done that very thing.

“Come, then, you young fool,” she directed, ducking back to tug Cloud forward by one unwilling arm. “After all the trouble we’ve had to get you here, you might as well have a word with the prince. There! You begin, Cloud.”

Cloud flashed her a look that would have had trained mercenaries quailing in their boots, and which affected her not a whit, before turning it on Paedro. “I am here at your command. My lord.”

“What’s upset you so?” Paedro asked, puzzled.

Cloud’s jaw hardened. “My lord. I’m not upset.”

“Sick, then? Too much celebrating --”

“My lord. No!”

Tirsah rolled her eyes. “I’ll regret this, I will, but oft I’d swear I’m the only one in the world with a drop of common sense to her name. Rose -- you’re sure?”

Rose looked up beneath her eyelashes. She nodded once.

“Very well.” Tirsah shook her head, clicked her tongue, and seemed to give something intangible up as lost forever. “Cloud isn’t sick, or sad, or happy. Don’t you see?” She reached up on tiptoes, high as she could, pulled the prince down to her height, and whispered a brief word in his ear.

Paedro blinked in amazement. Would Cloud think that of him? And yet ... what else could it be? Clever little green-mage, did she miss nothing?

He straightened, meeting his friend's glare without shame. "I have done nothing to wrong you," he said simply. "I did just as you asked me to, and nothing more."

He caught Cloud by the hand and tugged him toward Rose. "She's considered it and given her honest, willing word on the bargain. Do you hear me? Her word, to be your wife."

Cloud's eyes dilated. "But -- but *you* --"

Paedro lifted Rose's hand from his own arm and laid it over Cloud's. "I've spoken with Lorn on your behalf and gotten his permission. You and she have only to agree on the date you'll be married, and may you both be blessed."

The soft, light butterfly touch of Rose's hand on his arm apparently unnerved Cloud. He trembled, as did she, each not daring to meet each other's eyes.

Lorn coughed. "Both young you are, but still," he said gruffly. "Shan't argue her choice. Trust you'll do right by her. My blessing on it. So!"

Cloud seemed barely to hear. He lifted his love's hands to his lips and kissed them gently. "I wish I could tell you what this means to me, sweet," he said softly. "We are strangers still, but I'm as much yours as you are mine now. It's a bargain I'll never regret."

A brief, intense -- something -- flashed through Rose's eyes, and she blushed. She squeezed his hands and raised her lips to Cloud's ... cheek.

Tirsah dealt Cloud a playful cuff to the ear and smoothed down Rose's hair, bringing them back to their senses as kindly as possible. "Ah, Cloud, you young clown, you live on a knife's edge, don't you? But Rose's more than a match for you, believe it or not. Lady bless her. And you."

"Good!" Lorn clapped his hands together. "Come on, then," he ordered. "Best announce it now, before gossip starts. Paedro, Tirsah, you'll excuse us?"

"Of course, Uncle." Tirsah leaned back against the door, looking somehow smaller, pale, and tired. "Go, and blessings go with you."

She watched until they were gone, then exhaled a long, soft breath. "I suppose that turned out well enough."

"You're not pleased with her choice?" Paedro asked.

Tirsah turned her palms up and flipped them from side to side. "Pleased enough," she evaded. "If she's to be Cloud's wife, at least she'll not go far from home. I don't know how they can be so sure so fast, but there! It's not mine to wonder about, is it? It's not as if *I'll* ever marry."

She sat on the wall, light as thistledown, and plucked up a few loose pebbles that had broken off, stacking them one atop the other in her palm. Paedro tilted his head to a side. He ought to go and find Benec ... to see how his aunt fared ... but he found himself strangely loath to do so.

"What are you doing, lady?" he asked idly.

"Sculpting myself a husband. He's a bit lacking in the arms and legs department, but I'll work on that."

"You can't bear to be still for a moment, can you?"

"Never!" She flung the pebbles into the sea. "Can you?"

Paedro laughed. "Hardly ever, lady."

"There! You see?"

"I do, my lady." Paedro raised his cup to her and drank in the sight of Tirsah's unusual handsomeness, the wild tumble of bronze curls, the wide, warm mouth forever smiling at others -- save for Benec, of course. She spoke to him as would a sister, not afraid of his position or power, and with more wisdom than many a priest he'd met in his time. He'd looked to Rose first for her rare beauty, true, but now he wondered which cousin would be the pearl of greater price.

“You won’t have to sculpt a husband,” he told her frankly, taking the seat beside her on the wall. The stone felt cool and rough, strong as the ages it had been there for. “I think you could have anyone you snapped your fingers for, except Benec.”

“The trouble being that I don’t want anyone. Tell me, Prince, what if Benec were the only one that would do?” Tirsah put her chin on her hand and twinkled her eyes at him. “What do you think it would take to win him?”

“A gift of the gods and nothing less,” he replied dryly.

“Huzzah! May I be *never* be so blessed!” She stretched her arms above her head and kicked her legs with the easy abandon of a child. “We used to be friends, once upon a time. Does that surprise you? Folk thought we’d end up married.” She hooted. “To that overgrown stork? Not much! Besides, I do like to do the unexpected. It keeps folk from taking you for granted, don’t you think?”

What a little imp! Paedro marveled. Warm as summer sunshine and sparkling as a diamond. “Ah, but there are other men,” he countered. “You say you don’t want a man, but what if one came to say they wanted you? What would you do, then?”

Tirsah put her head to a side. “I don’t suppose I know. Much would depend on the man.”

Paedro reached for her hand, a strong, lean, limber hand, clever with a dozen things and soft as a kitten’s fur despite the hard work she did, and enfolded it between his own, bringing it to his lips before she could recover herself. “Would you consider taking me, Tirsah?”

His heart beat three times before the miniature mage chuckled softly.

“Heavens, no!” She pulled her hand from his and patted his cheek -- kindly. “Bless you, no, Paedro. You’d be taking me off to Amahpre, and Kirree couldn’t do without their mage.”

She spread her arms. "Look around yourself. A place like this can only last for so long as the magic it needs flows good and strong, like sap through a tree. Our world needs places like Kirree, and it needs me."

She leaned over and dropped a soft, flowerlike kiss on his cheek. "I'm flattered, dear Paedro, but I think you've had too much moonlight. You'll find someone far better than I could ever be for you. Although perhaps you think I'm too bold to say that?"

Lovely, loving Tirsah! The rejection cut surprisingly deep, but Paedro hardened his heart and let her slip from his hands, a butterfly on the wing, a creature made to be wild and free. She was right. He could never cage her in Amahpre.

"Never say that, Tirsah." He stood and grinned at her. "I'd only ever be offended if you were quiet. Bold, never. You're a jewel among women."

When she scoffed, he tilted back his head and laughed. "Woman, you don't know how good it is to meet a soul like yours! It gives me hope for the country's future. Tell me, did you even laugh instead of cry when you were born? That must have been a celebration for your parents."

"No." She stood, her face slipping suddenly into sober lines. "No, Paedro, my mother died. My father wept."

"I'm sorry." He wanted to ask, but did not, *And where is your father, lovely Tirsah? Where is Anno, the master-mage? Did he die, as the rumors had it? Or does he still live?*

Mercurial as ever, she flashed him a grin and danced a quick figure on the stones. "It's a good life, Paedro -- I've no regrets. I'll need to start clearing up soon, so I'd better be off, hadn't I? Lady give you the peace you seek!"

Paedro watched her go, hurt and comforted all at once. "A rare woman," he murmured. Such a lady deserved all the happiness that life could have to offer her. And while she'd sworn she wouldn't marry, he knew as well as she must that spinster women had a hard life of it, growing old alone.

Why *wouldn't* she marry? He knew of no law forbidding a woman to be wife and mother and mage. She'd frighten some men off with her bold ways and her quick wit, but he'd also seen many a fellow eager to dance with Tirsah that night.

He grew still. Many men, yes. But he'd only seen one man touch Tirsah deeply enough to make it through her sparkling surface. One man ...

Paedro sat motionless for a long moment, thinking as hard as he might. After a while, he picked up his glass and moved across the terrace toward the chieftain and his kin.

"M'lord," Lorn greeted him with a nod. "Help an old man out. Already neck-deep in wedding plans, they are!"

"Oof!" Paedro winced. "Spare me from ceremonies! Although the wedding is to be soon, I hope?"

Cloud nodded with the grin of the hopelessly besotted. "Three days. Lorn wouldn't agree to less. I wouldn't hear of more!" He dared to steal a kiss from Rose, who blushed and hid her face behind her hair.

"Good!" Paedro congratulated them, glad of the timing. Perfect for what he had in mind. Distraction would be what he needed most. Distraction, and a bit of payback for Benec, who saw all things clearly, except where they concerned himself. Even more, his plan would be a blessing for the warmhearted mage, who appeared to suffer from Benec's same affliction.

"Tirsah will do the ritual," Sela said cheerfully as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's a blessing on this house to have a mage, so it is. We'd have to send to the next city along the coast if we didn't have her. She's a grand girl."

"I've never known anyone at all like her before," Paedro agreed, heartfelt in his agreement. "She has the warmest soul I have ever known."

He twirled the stem of his glass between his fingers and watched the light dance on the crystal. "She can't stand to hear of being married, can she?"

Lorn snorted. "No chance."

"Mmm. She told me that folk had once considered she and Benec would marry when they grew up. Was that truth?"

"Far as it goes. Never used to be apart. Both magic-workers, aren't they? Don't know what happened." Lorn shook his head gloomily. "Never got an answer from her on it. One day friends, next day enemies."

"That was the way of it," Sela agreed. "Eh, Rose?"

"She never even told me anything about it." Rose whispered. She glanced up, worrying at her lip with small white teeth like seed pearls.

Paedro swallowed a mouthful of cool water and nodded, mind made up. "How would you like to make a bet, Chieftain?"

Lorn cocked an eyebrow. "Depends. What're your odds?"

Paedro grinned deviously. "Simply this -- I say that I can repair the rift between Tirsah and Benec in three days' time and celebrate a double wedding before I leave this place. Three gold pieces, one for each day, will stand as surety that I can do it. What do you say?"

"Mercy!" Sela's hand flew to her lips.

"You're joking, man!"

"I assure you, I'm not." Paedro savored their aghast faces. "Come! What's your answer, Chieftain?"

"Daft. Y're daft!"

"Not at all! In fact, I would bet the last golden coin I owned on success." He turned to Cloud. "May I count on you for your help? And you, Lorn?"

"Aye." Lorn stuck out one callused hand and arm for the prince to grip. "As for me, so for my house." He glared at his kinswomen. "Said and sealed. Understand?"

"I don't understand," Sela fretted.

“You will.” The prince touched Rose’s shoulder gently. “Why so pale, little heart?”

She shook her head helplessly. Her lips worked for a moment, but no sound emerged.

“Trust me,” Paedro encouraged. “I have my reasons for this. You’ll see.”

He straightened. “Now come, all of you. Is there a quieter place for us to talk, Lorn? Good! I’ll fill you in on the details ...”

* * * * *

Tirsah stacked the last of the wooden goblets in a crate to be taken down to the shore for scouring in the morning and wiped her damp hands off on her short kirtle. There -- one more job done. She could have done it easily enough with a charm, but she had told Paedro the truth -- she couldn’t bear to be still for a moment. Besides, busy hands kept her treacherous mind from treading nimbly down paths she’d rather not stray to.

Speaking of which ...

Tirsah felt his presence just before she saw the long, thin shadow that he cast upon the wall before her. No one else smelled quite like Benec did -- a peculiar mixture of wildness, the leather oil he favored, and something unique to himself. “I thought you’d be coming after me,” she said calmly. “Upset, are we?”

“‘Upset’ is not at all the word that I would choose, witch,” Benec growled. He swore at her, a foul soldier’s oath. “Turn around and look at me when I’m talking to you!”

She shrugged carelessly. “And if I’d rather not?”

“I don’t give a harpy’s hairy tit what you’d rather!” His massive hands seized her roughly by the shoulders, twisting her around before she had a chance to reach for the mage’s art that would enable her to resist his greater strength. He lifted her easily as a kitten and pinned her tiny form against the wall with the weight of his larger body. “Now, we’ll talk,” he growled. “You’ve made a fool out of me tonight, witch.”

“Nature did that for me years ago, Benec. I merely helped.”

He shook her, hard. "Blast you back to the demon pits, woman. If you weren't the chieftain's niece, I swear that I'd -- I'd --"

"Do what, Benec? Beat me? My, but that would be well received. You outweigh me by roughly a thousand pounds. An excellent, noble use of strength. Paedro would be most pleased."

"Oh, yes! And yet you can flay the skin from my bones with your tongue and you're applauded for it. I should turn you over my knee, Tirsah, and I've more than half a mind to do it."

"How you frighten me! Do spare me, Benec." She wriggled. "Honestly, how long do you plan to hold me up here?"

"As long as it takes for you to learn some manners."

Tirsah threw her head back and laughed full-throated. "Ah, Benec! Neither of us has that kind of time! Therefore ..."

She tilted her head forward, quick as the striking of a snake, and laid her lips on his. She could feel his cock rising up, hard, hot, and hungry, pressing against the fastenings of his trousers. Yes, that was familiar -- Benec's member had a mind of its own. It had always reacted so to her touch, and more so when it was nestled so snugly against her, even through the fine, thin fabric of her skirts.

Wickedly she undulated against him, teasing that arousal with the moisture that her body produced until she felt a slightly damp spot grow between them. She had always flowed like a river for Benec, and she knew he would be dripping pearls of sooner-seed by now, desperate for completion.

Oh, but she was being cruel. She pressed her breasts against him, listening to his soft moan as her hardened nipples brushed his chest. Even lifted her mouth to nip at his shoulder with her teeth, egging him on.

Her kiss, hot as a brand, searing as the bite of cinnamon and cloves, sent a shockwave through his entire body. Not thinking, only reacting to her lips on his again after ten years apart, he groaned and began to shift her backwards, toward the wall, moving in.

Benec pressed her harder against the wall. Hatred or no, he *needed* her now. Was desperate for her. Would do anything to tear off her clothes and get inside, pushing his cock into her channel. In a moment, he would lose the ability to think like a rational creature.

Somehow he knew that that was what she waited for.

He kissed her back, not on the lips, but all over her face -- hot little kisses that burned where they landed. Eyelids, nose, cheeks, chin. Moving down, he slid his lips over her throat, then down to suckle at the dent between her collarbones. The arms he used to hold her up grew shaky, almost unable to concentrate on keeping her pinned as he grew more and more excited.

Almost ... almost ...

With a groan, he let her down, reaching for the ribbons on her bodice while pressing his lips to her shoulder.

There.

“Ha!” Tirsah threw her arms up and slipped out of Benec’s grip as if greased, darted several steps away, then whirled to face him. She ignored the ache between her own legs for the sake of satisfaction at catching him out. “Fooled you, Whale-Singer!”

Benec seemed to struggle to catch his breath. “You,” he rasped. “That was evil, Tirsah.”

She smiled coldly as she knew how. “I do what I must to survive, Whale-Singer, and nature is not kind. You hate me, Benec, and I hate you.”

“You didn’t always.”

“I do now. And you’ll never truly understand me, will you?”

Benec dragged his hands through his hair. “There’s no hope of peace between us, is there?”

“None,” she said savagely. “And let’s leave it at that, shall we? Never come near me again, Benec, and I will extend you the same courtesy.”

The moonlight shone down on her. She drew herself up, stony and proud. “I have spoken,” she said softly, warning him for once and all. “Ignore me and regret it, Benec.”

And with that, she ... disappeared!

Chapter Eight

The party had ended; every soul that could had sailed away home. Those who stayed had bedded down for the night ... save for a few, and they saw no chance of sleep for the night.

Ione laid her forehead against the cool stone casement of the window in her room. She had discarded her mask -- somewhere, she forgot exactly where -- though Chirre had picked it up for her. Both men had followed her up to their shameful quarters, though she hardly heeded their presence.

How had it gone so wrong? To muddle such a small thing ... had she lost all her skill at the fine art of manipulation? Men and women both were once as putty in her hands. If she could not accomplish so small a thing as setting a marriage awry, what chance had she at conniving for her freedom?

Her small hands tightened into fists. *No, no, I am not beaten yet*, she swore a little desperately. *I will find a way.*

“My lady?” Chirre queried timidly. She became vaguely aware that the little man, still dressed in his flapping black rags and ruined veils, had scuttled up behind her, hands fluttering, trying to soothe.

Ione was not in the mood. When he dared to lay a hand on her shoulder, she wheeled on her servant, dealing him a vicious slap.

Chirre's hand flew to his cheek. He made a noise like a rabbit in a snare. "My lady!"

Ione struck the other side of his face with all the strength she had. Then, bereft, she collapsed to her knees on the floor. The wreck of her costume floated down like a cloud of dying butterflies. She sank her head into her hands, moaning wordlessly through her fingers.

"My lady ..." Chirre crept closer. "Take heart --"

Fool. Trifling fool! "I have no heart left."

"We tried our best."

"Tried your best?" Ione dragged her nails across her forehead, scoring it with faint red lines. "Your best is never good enough. Is it, Chirre?"

"I don't know what went wrong," he protested. "It shouldn't have gone wrong. Brach! You didn't talk, did you? A word in the wrong ear, and --"

Brach spat on the clean floor. "How daft d'you think I am? And how about you, little 'lady'? Maybe you flapped your lips and you want to blame it on me, is that it?"

Chirre glared at Brach as he began jerking the tatters of his veils off. The pins they'd had to use had gotten tangled in deeper than a hedgehog's spikes, so that a good handful of his thinning hair came out with them. "Spare me! I, talk to someone? In my voice? From under these?"

Brach sneered. "Your voice in't that deep. Bet you did talk. Bet you know exactly why it went wrong, don't you?"

"You're the one who chatters like a monkey, you whoremonger --"

"Whoremonger, am I?"

"You stink of having a doxy up against a wall --"

“Enough!” Ione raised her head in hopeless fury. “What further need in discussing it? You both failed! We have accomplished nothing.”

“Maybe,” Chirre’s eyes shifted to the left, then flicked up shyly to his lady. “I have an idea.”

“Look at that -- it thinks!” Brach scoffed.

“Listen to who’s saying that --” Chirre cleared his throat. “It’s just a thought, Lady Ione.”

She gave a dispirited half-shrug. “Speak if you like. It’s all the same to me.”

Chirre dropped to one knee, eager to please her, to blot out the stain of his failure. “The more I think about it, the more I’m sure. There’s a way. A good way.”

“Are you a miracle-worker now?” She stared bleakly at him. “They say I’m ill, Chirre, but they dose me with the wrong medicine. You know what I need. Give it to me!”

“I will. And we can work so cleverly that no one will know we had ever had a hand in what we bring about.” He clasped the hem of her gown. “Will you listen to me?”

Ione examined him wearily. What could a mind such as his have come up with to divert her, save for clamoring nonsense? And yet what choice did she have? To be reduced to this!

It was all Paedro’s fault. She would be revenged on him yet ... as soon as she could see a way ...

She waved a hand at Chirre. Let him take it as he would.

He kissed the hem of her gown in thanks. “My lady, you won’t have cause to regret this. Brach, will you answer a question?”

“Depends,” the bravo grumped, disrespectfully inspecting his nails. “What is it?”

“Who were you with tonight? I thought I saw, but I couldn’t be sure. Wasn’t it that carrot-topped Mims?”

“Sure was. Just about hot as her hair is, that one.”

“And?” Ione hooded her eyes in derision. “Lorn’s second niece is a little slut. Anyone can see that. Make your point, Chirre. I lose patience.”

“Hear me out, my lady,” Chirre said humbly. “Brach, if you called on Mims again, would she come to you?”

Brach snickered. “With bells on, she would.”

“You’d swear to that?”

“Hunh! I know my way around a lady even if you don’t. She’d come, all right.”

Chirre pursed his lips. “I’m sure. But do you think she’d come to you on the night before Cloud’s wedding?”

“I reckon so.”

Chirre giggled.

Brach frowned. “Here, what’s funny?”

“Because it’s perfect, you ninny!”

“It had better be,” Ione warned.

“Oh, it is!” Chirre’s face lit up with the passion of a fanatic in his eagerness to please his lady. “Doesn’t it strike you that Rose would be the type to go and hold vigil in the chapel, or some such foolishness, the night before she was wed?”

Ione put her head thoughtfully to a side. “That would be like her type. And?”

“No witnesses.” Chirre sat back expectantly. “Brach, you call for Mims on the night of the wedding. Tempt her with ideas of being daring. Take her someplace where you could be seen. A room with a large window, perhaps.”

The faintest glow of a pleasant warmth began in the center of Ione’s chest. “Yes ... I begin to see.”

“I don’t,” Brach said.

“Ah, but you will! We call Mims a carrot-top, but the only real difference between her hair and Rose’s is curls. They’re almost the same size, almost the same shape. From behind, in the dark, you could hardly tell them apart.”

The light dawned slowly. “So we’d be up there making a fine sight, and then you come in, yeah?”

“Exactly! On my lady’s behalf, I’ll fetch Cloud and Paedro to warn them of Rose’s betrayal. They come to have a look, and ...” He gestured grandly. “Paedro forgives your offenses out of thanks, the wedding is off, and in short, we’ll have them in our palms!”

“Half a moment there!” Brach paled. “I didn’t know you’d be calling the prince, too. That’s a hanging offense, kissing on another man’s wife-to-be. What if they recognize me?”

Chirre shrugged that off. “Wear a mask, if you’re worried. That’s common enough with lovers, I understand, and with your face hidden you could be absolutely anyone.” He turned anxiously to Ione. “My lady, what do you think? Is it a good plan?”

Ione pressed her fingers to her lips. Her eyes moved over the pair of guards. Weighing. Considering. Assessing. Wondering.

“To fool Paedro ... to embitter Cloud’s youthful heart,” she mused aloud. “To break off the wedding. To ruin Rose ...”

“Which would destroy the chieftain, and break his rule over these lands,” Chirre added.

“Leaving it open for invasion once I am in my rightful place. What more could I want? And with Rose a ruined woman ...” Ione murmured. “How generous it would be of me to look away from her scarlet stain and take her as my own plaything. I should like that ... yes.”

“You would have to play the part of the concerned aunt,” Chirre warned. “Can you bear to do that?”

“You know me little. I could even be forced to pretend concern for Paedro to draw them into my trap.”

Ione rose, throwing back her hair. “The night of the wedding, three nights from now -- that is the best night to do it, yes. Let their happiness be at its peak over thoughts of the coming day. Brach, you must do everything Chirre suggested. Chirre! You shall wait and watch. At your signal I will tear my hair and force tears to my eyes, yes -- I shall come to Paedro, begging him to stop the wedding. And then ... ah, then!”

“I d’know, what with people watching ...” Brach muttered.

Ione ignored him as she would the buzzing of a fly. “Mims’s curls could be a problem. She would not cut them. You must find a reason to get her hair wet, so it lies smooth. Perhaps some game of love. Go swimming. Trip her into the well. I care not what. And, yes, you must be certain to *call* her Rose, so they will not for a moment wonder who that whorish girl is. And it will work, oh, yes, it will work.”

Chirre nearly radiated happiness. “I’ll do my best. And Brach --”

“I *said*, I don’t know!” Brach repeated, much louder.

Ione rounded on him. “But you will know. Come here, bravo ...”

* * * * *

Lorn trod down the long corridor quietly as he could, praying that not a soul would be left awake to hear the slight shuffle of his feet on the stones. Anno’s door was shut, but he tried it anyway. Locked, solidly locked.

He slid down the wall to the floor, landing on his haunches. “Brother?” he whispered, hoping the master-mage had retired for the night. “Brother, you awake?”

Silence.

A listening silence.

Lorn knuckled his forehead. “Suppose you saw all that.”

“Jackanapes!” The heat of Anno’s anger near scalded Lorn through the stone door. He jumped away. “Foolish old man! You like to think you’re a tough old salt, but let there be love in the air, and you turn sappy as an old gossip wife.”

“Spoke without thinking.” Lorn glanced shamefaced at the cobblestones. “Guessed you wouldn’t be happy.”

Anno growled, making Lorn thankful there was a good foot of stone and a solid door between the two of them. “To promise my daughter in marriage? Yes, you spoke too quickly, and no, I am not happy! But what can I do about it? Tell me that!” He struck the door with his fist.

Lorn picked carefully at the edge of his left boot, where the leather was torn. “Reckon you could speak to her. You’re her da, not I. Didn’t give your word on it.”

“Ach ...” Anno sighed. “I could. But I won’t. The pieces are already set out on the Heskit board, and the game’s begun. It was meant to be played differently, but there’s no help for it now. I can’t change what’s going to be, any more than I can change what’s already been.”

Lorn frowned. He didn’t understand mage’s riddles. Nor did he understand Heskit. Neither did he like either. “But you know what’s going to be?” he asked slowly.

“Sometimes.” Anno sounded like a child, lost in the dark. “Not this time. I can’t see what’s to become of Rose with these pieces in play. Is she the ivory queen, or is she a pawn?”

“Chose Cloud over the prince, she did,” Lorn protested. “I gave her her way, just like you said!”

“Yes, and with her word given, she can never draw it back again. If Cloud dies, or his fancy turns elsewhere, she’s bound to that word forever. Can love that was born so quickly live very long? And who’s her white knight?” The frustration swelled in Anno’s voice. “I am the bishop, and Tirsah my rook, but who’s the king here, you or Paedro? Is one black and one white? I can’t see in here. It’s too dark. But outside in the light -- no!”

“Brother!” Lorn laid his palms flat on the stones and tried to peer into the murk. “Open your door. Let me in.”

“No! You’ve made this bed. Lie in it, and let me lie in mine, in peace.”

“And? I’ve done the wrong thing, have I? Should’ve told Rose to marry Paedro, should I? Should’ve told him to leave Tirsah alone? Come now, why aren’t you chieftain if you know it all?” Lorn demanded. “Well? I’ve done the best I can. Tell me how to fix it, if I’ve done this wrong.”

“Ohe!” Anno growled. “Go to bed, brother! If you want a mage’s advice -- here, have this. In the morning, do whatever the prince asks you to. That is the next move in the game.”

“Here, you!” Lorn banged on the door. “Will it be all right, in the end?”

“I don’t know. I can’t see that! All I can see is silver.”

“Silver? What d’you mean, silver? Anno? Anno!”

* * * * *

The shining coin glinted in Ione’s palm as she held it out to Brach. A silver angelus. She doubted he’d ever been so close to one before, but he knew what it was, right enough. The spending money of kings.

He licked his lips. “Where’d you get that?”

“Does it matter?” Ione rolled the coin between her fingertips. “Carry out your part in this plan, and I will give you one hundred more of these.”

Desperate times, she reminded herself. A pardon. For a pardon, she would bend all of her rules. After all, she need not *keep* any promises she made to mere servants.

Brach swallowed hard. He held out his hand. Ione dropped the coin into it. “If you fail me again, I will swear that you stole it,” she warned him.

Brach clutched the coin tight. “I’ll serve you right,” he said hoarsely. “I swear it.”

“Yes.” Ione’s lips curved. “I know you will. And Chirre, Chirre, I have not forgotten you!” She put her hand over the cheek she had bruised earlier. Little fool, she knew what he wanted. He would not get it, but he need not know that. Yet.

The air left Chirre’s lungs in a low, hissing rush. He stared at her with eyes like a frightened deer’s.

“My dear little pet,” Ione crooned. “You I will pay in a different coin. Do we have a bargain?”

Chirre gave a short nod, not daring to take his eyes away. She knew he’d understood her. Such a face as he made!

“I swear to it, as well, my lady,” he gasped. “With all the heart in my body, I swear.”

“Then we are agreed.” Ione glanced up at them through her eyelashes. She began to feel a little peace at last, uncurling beneath her breastbone. Soon, all would be well. Soon, the world would be her own again ...

Chapter Nine

“... And what then, little Edge?” Anno sipped his wine as he questioned the small Catkin idling at his feet.

She rolled onto her back, forearms dangling against her chest, and yawned. “Why bother? You hear it from Lorn already.”

“Yes, but there are two sides to every coin.” Anno pulled out a small bronze disc strung on a chain around his neck, and showed it to her, flipping it from front to back. “Two sides to every story. I have heard his; I would like to hear yours.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Many sides,” she pointed out. “Benec’s, Tirsah’s, Rose’s, Cloud’s, Paedro’s, Mims’s --”

He laughed. “Are you a philosopher, now?”

“Am *Catkin*,” she said scornfully. “Already tell you all I know. Bored now.”

“Very well, little one.” Anno tucked the coin under his thin shirt. “Go, if you’d like, or stay as you will, if that’s not abhorrent to you.”

“Ab-- What you say?” Edge rolled into a crouch and peered at him. “Big words from big man,” she judged. “Talk too much, Anno. Always want more speak. Not know when to be quiet.”

“Well!” He put aside his cup and spread his hands wide. “Do you want me to hush, then?”

Edge studied him for a moment. “Want to look at your hands,” she said suddenly.

“What?”

“Hands!” She vaulted into his lap without permission or warning, settling onto his knees with the easy grace of a child. “What? Shut mouth before you swallow flies, and give here,” she scolded, prying his fingers open. “Want to see. Pretty colors.”

“My mage-marks,” he said guardedly, allowing her to look at his tattoos. He doubted he could stop her. Edge took what she wanted.

Satisfied, she petted his hands curiously, flipping them back and forth to get a good look at each rune. She even parted his fingers and peeked between them to make sure she hadn’t missed anything.

The rough, cool touch of her hands tingled against his skin, rippling it into goosebumps. Her touch soothed, comforted, eased him into becoming used to her touch, then, alarmingly, into appreciating it.

“You’re acting the fool,” he chided in an attempt to make her behave. “It’s not seemly for a full-grown female to cavort about on an unmarried man’s lap in this manner.”

“Pah,” she scoffed. “Am Catkin. Foolish man-rules not matter to me.”

“Yes, well, they certainly apply to me.”

“No one here but us, stupid.” Edge stroked an intricately tattooed set of golden spirals on the third finger of his left hand. “How you choose this rune?”

A ripple of unfamiliar sensation ran up the middle of Anno’s back. He shivered. “It came to me in a dream, little one.”

Her diamond-shaped pupils enlarged. “You dream this?”

“I dreamed all my sigils. It’s part of becoming a master-mage.”

“You know what they mean?”

“Not all of them.” He lifted his right forefinger. “This is an old Gypsy *patrin* -- a signpost -- meaning ‘the way of strength.’” He crooked his thumb. “This one told me I would have a daughter to equal me in mage-strength.”

She bent his thumb, frowning skeptically. “For true?”

He spread his fingers wide to examine the intricately woven loops and whorls as if they were new. “The others are mysteries to me.”

Edge cackled and tapped his third finger slyly. “All but one less. This is Catkin sign. *Old*, old, old rune. Still used some places.”

“You know what it means?” He leaned forward and caught her by the shoulder, forgetting to be uneasy of her rampant femininity. “Can you tell me?”

“I know it, but you not like.” She tossed her curls back over her shoulders. “Sigil used by consorts of Catkin queens. It says big and bold that bearer claims wed- and bed-right with his lady.” She dissolved into giggles. “You have mating sign on your finger!”

“*What?*”

Edge rolled on his lap, hooting in delight. “Big scary mage,” she sputtered. “Any other Catkin see that, they laugh you to shame!”

“Oh, and you’re not?”

“Nay.” She sprawled across his legs and gazed up at him as carelessly as a child. “I tease you. A Catkin mock you and you know it for certain.” Her cool, callused fingers came up to stroke across the dark lines bisecting his cheeks. “Tattoos,” she said, amused. “Mages are silly men.”

Anno swallowed. “Perhaps we are at that,” he said, his mouth dry.

She wiggled a little, shifting her position. “Lumpy, bumpy,” she complained. “You have stork legs, Anno. Not eat enough. I bring you fresh-kill rabbits from mainland when spring comes.” She wriggled. “Maybe I hunt a deer!”

Quick as a hummingbird, she writhed around and twitched the tails of his long black robe up over his knees and peered at his slender calves.

“Stop that this instant!” he yelped, snatching the cloth from her paws before it climbed too high and she saw what her closeness had done to him.

“Spoil my sport,” she pouted. “Only wanted to see.”

“You have seen,” he said, adjusting his robes, “quite enough, I think. Off with you now!”

He put his hands to her waist to lift her bodily away. Edge objected in her own fashion. She twisted about as only a cat could, slipped a knee on either side of his hip, and wedged the both of them firmly into the chair.

He flinched and drew back -- too late. “Edge,” he warned. “Don’t.”

Her saucy grin, turned up to him, grew softer. Adoring. Her eyes, wide and mischievous, glittered with a light he had not seen in a woman’s eyes since his wife died. “Anno,” she purred, trailing her fingertips down his robe.

Her claws carefully sheathed, she slipped one paw-hand through the gap in his robe and stroked his cock, half-hard, to swollen fullness with but a few strokes that left him gasping. Her other hand skated up across his chest, pinching at his nipples, making them into little peaks.

Ah, by the Lady! How did she know what would please him so well?

“Good, yes, is good,” Edge purred, her eyes growing heavy-lidded with want. She shifted so that she straddled him a little more firmly, his member jutting against the mound of her sex. “Tonight, I be your mate. I keep you warm, Anno.”

He closed his eyes and breathed slowly. Struggling for control. With an effort, he drew back. “No, little one. This is not for us. I’m sorrier than you can know if I led you to think differently.”

Her face crinkled in puzzlement. “Why you think so?”

He resisted the urge to stroke her dear, wild face. "Listen and try to understand me, Edge. I will not change my mind."

"Yes, you will," she assured him.

"I will not. You have told me yourself that your sire was a man. I know that the races can interbreed. A spirit brave as yours deserves a better death than lying in your own blood on a childbed. No, no, listen to me. I won't take that chance. I have one daughter, and she is more than enough for anyone." He laughed dryly. "Surely you can see that!"

She patted his chest. "Be my mate, not always make kittens," she pointed out. "Catkin know how to not --"

"Hush, hush, little one! I have other reasons." Unable to deny himself the small pleasure, he allowed one of her silky curls to twine around his finger. "Cease your protests and accept this as the truth -- we will not come together in this way."

Edge pouted. "But I want. You want, too."

"That is not the point, wildling!" With the last of his strength, he pushed her off his lap onto the floor. "Leave me, Edge."

She stamped her hind foot. "No!"

"You must!" A brief flash of a terrible sadness flickered across his face. "You will leave me one day," he prophesied. "I Saw this when you touched me, only just now, and woke my need for you. If you care for me, care enough not to break my heart, little one."

She shook her head hard. "I not leave you. Not let me be your mate yet, fine, but I stay tonight and keep your feet warm." She bared her teeth. "Try to stop me!"

Anno rubbed his temples. "I would hate to be your enemy, Edge."

She gave him a feline smile and began to purr as she slid down and curled about his feet. "Better to be my friend," she agreed, nuzzling her cheek against his ankle.

Poor Anno, not to see what was so clear to her! If she had to play a part in all these human games, well, then, she would have her chosen reward.

“Much better to be Edge’s friend,” she purred, almost too soft for him to hear.

And one day, Anno, you be more. Watch and see, mage.

You watch and see ...

Chapter Ten

A scrap of red ribbon -- forgotten by a careless lover? discarded when it tore from the hem of a girl's dress? -- caught in the breeze rising from the ocean and blew along the long flagstones of the terrace, swirling in its own private dance before the moonlight. Cloud idly watched it fly, twisting in the breeze like a bit of living flame until it blew over the edge of the terrace and drifted down into the sea, leaving him alone.

Almost all of the dancers and revelers had gone hours before, back across the harbor to their huts and homes, or into the dim, heather-smelling recesses of the stronghold.

All but him. Sleep was an impossibility that night, and Cloud knew it. The night and the sweet sharpness of the approaching winter drew him forcefully as a siren's song, refusing him rest, and it was pleasure itself to obey the call.

He sat on the curve of the low stone wall, his feet dangling over the edge. Nothing between the soles of his boots and the sand below but fifty feet of cold air and free-falling flight. With the wind rising so sharp and wild from the ocean, he could close his eyes and imagine that he was flying. Had he known even a year ago that he'd live to see such peace again, would he have believed it?

Likely not. He drew one knee up to his chin and locked his arm around it, his eyes darkening. Sometimes there had been dancing and music in the camps, but it was always a desperate-sounding thing, the sound of the frantic striving to hold off death one more day. Men banged well-polished stew-bones against drums made of an old shirt stretched tight over a willow branch bent into a hoop, singing loud as they could in voices strained by shouting over the roar of battle.

Dirt-crusting women with their eyes smeared in livid green and their cheeks caked with red paint hauled the men around and around and around in dances that would go on all night. There might be a cask of small ale liberated from a local tavern, or there might only be water, but from the shrieks and howls of laughter heard when the soldiers danced, a man might think everyone had their bellies full of the strongest rich-man's brandy.

The war was a lean time, with never enough food to go around, and some of that raided by their foes. Most of the men had grown thin enough that, from where Cloud watched on the outskirts of the wild musicking, they'd reminded him of skeletons whirling in a dance of death.

Benec had threatened to box his ears onto the opposite sides of his head if he'd dared to set a toe inside the circle, but it wasn't that which had kept him away. He'd had a fanciful idea that if he joined them in their dance of death, the end they all feared would seize him, too.

And somehow he'd lived, lived when he should have died time and again, while the dancers and their dirty ladies died with arrows in their chests and ugly wounds in their throats. Mayhap it was just a foolish fancy of his, but he'd dug many a quick, shallow hole for the fallen, and wondered what might have happened if they hadn't danced -- wondered if he would ever smile to hear music again.

Tonight, the sweetest song ever written had touched his ears. If he closed his eyes, he could hear it yet. Though he understood very little of the Catkin dialect, he could feel the song's meaning in his bones.

“Come to me, love, once again,” he sang under his breath, copying the tune, swinging his leg in time against the stone wall. “Come to me and let me hold you, my wild ocean heart, before the morning dawns ...”

His thoughts drifted to the chieftain’s beautiful daughter. Rose. Was there a woman to match her in the King’s City, in Amahpre, or in all the Wild Lands, either in beauty or in innocence? He’d half thought her a faery when he saw her first, pure and bright as a rose on the vine. Such beauty was better than water to a man with wound-fever, better than sleep after marching a score of miles in a single day. A man could sink himself into the balm of her presence and be healed from all his battle scars.

And beyond all sense or reason, in the space of a single hour, she had become his ...

He let his voice drop into a hum that matched the swell and roar of the tide going out, ebbing into near silence. After a few moment’s practice, he was able to match the sound, breathing lightly in and out between his parted lips. *Better be careful*, he thought, suddenly drowsy. *I’ll fall asleep and tumble down soon ...*

Even as he thought it, something warm and soft fell suddenly around his shoulders, hugging him lightly and closely about the neck.

Startled, he yelled and kicked back, throwing himself away from the thing. He might have fallen over the wall, but for that a small white hand flashed out and seized him by the front of his jerkin, tugging him back. “Don’t!” a voice cried out in alarm. “Be careful!”

With a wrench, he managed to right himself and regain his balance. He shook his head to clear it. The warm thing on his shoulders slid harmlessly off, landing limply at his feet. He stared at it. It was a short cloak, only a cloak, finely woven of Silker wool and dyed a deep gray.

He looked up sharply. “Never come up on a soldier like that!” he shouted, only to have the words strangle in his throat as his eyes met a pair of frightened blue ones. Rose’s hand was still tangled in the lacing of his jerkin, her knuckles white.

“My lady?” he asked, bewildered. “What are you doing out here so late?”

“I thought you would fall!” she blurted. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

She must have realized that she was touching him still and hastily pulled her hand away. Her cheeks flushed a brilliant red. “I’m sorry,” she said, looking down to hide her confusion. “I didn’t know that you’d take fright.”

Though his heart was still pounding against his rib cage, Cloud swallowed and shook his head gamely. “Soldiers are apt to be a little jumpy,” he said, trying out a smile. “Don’t apologize -- you saved my life, didn’t you?” His hand suddenly itched to reach out and take her lightly by the chin, to tip her face up so she could see he wasn’t angry.

He thought he saw the smallest of smiles on her lips. “Only by reason of nearly causing you to lose it,” she whispered.

And I’d gladly tilt over the edge again, if you’d only catch me a second time. He thought the words eagerly, but lacked the courage to speak them. “It’s well enough,” he said awkwardly. “Don’t think of it again.”

She nodded, silent.

Cloud fumbled for words. “It was kind of you to bring me a cloak. What made you think I’d want one?” Oh, that had come out wrong! He stumbled to right himself, but she was already answering him.

“You looked so cold sitting out here by yourself,” she whispered, eyes still fixed on the cobblestones. “I brought you some wine and bread besides. You liked the workingman’s bread at evening meal -- didn’t you?”

She picked up a wooden trencher and cup from where she’d set them down hurriedly, and finally glanced timidly up at him. “I saw you eating a second piece. And men are always hungry. Da is.”

Cloud’s stomach still hurt from the evening meal. He wasn’t accustomed to having as much as he could eat at once and had eaten far more than was comfortable. Despite all that,

looking at her gift, he was determined that he would eat every crumb and smile while doing it.

“That was kind of you,” he ventured, taking plate and cup. “It’ll be welcome.”

There, that was definitely a smile he saw teasing at her lips. “I’ll leave the cloak, too,” she said, dropping a slight curtsy. “You might want it, when it doesn’t sneak up on you.”

He’d taken the first bite of workingman bread, but near choked on it. “You’re leaving?” he managed to say around the mouthful.

A look of confusion touched her face. “It’s not seemly --”

“There’s no one else about to tattle. Please. Sit with me, Rose? Sit and talk a while.”

She hesitated, darting a look back to the stronghold. “I shouldn’t.”

He bit his lip, wondering if he dared hold out his hand for her to take, but settled for a coaxing grin. “It’s poor manners to eat alone, you know.” On an impulse, he broke off half the chunk of bread and held it out to her. “Join me, and it’ll be proper. Please?”

“Truly, it isn’t to be done,” she said, but yes, she was truly smiling now, and she took the piece of bread from his hand.

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” he teased her gently. She glanced up to him and smiled, picking off a crumb of the bread and placing it between her lips.

Heartened, he moved back a little to give her room. “Will you sit?”

She took in a small breath. “If it pleases you, I will,” she said shyly.

“It pleases me much.” Hot blood colored his cheeks, so he looked quickly down at his bread while she let out her breath and perched carefully on the stone wall, graceful as a swan lighting home to rest.

He took another bite, savoring the taste of oats and an odd but good starchy root flour. Rose had slipped a generous pat of salty, sweet butter inside the slice, and it melted on his tongue as he chewed. Nothing had tasted so good in more than three years.

He swallowed with genuine appreciation. "I can't thank you enough, lady," he told her gently. "It was kind of you to do this. But you didn't stay awake for me, surely?"

Rose's slender fingers worried at a bit of husk she'd pulled from her own portion of the bread. "Sometimes ..." she said slowly, "sometimes I have trouble sleeping. Tirsah grows an herb that helps, but it's strong. It gives me strange dreams ..." She blushed faintly. "Oh, it sounds foolish, I know, but I'd rather not take it when it's not necessary."

He shook his head. "There's no shame in that. I've ridden the night mare a few times myself."

She looked startled. "I didn't think men --"

"They do." He looked down, eager to change the subject, and plucked at the cloak. "You weave, don't you?" he asked suddenly.

Her eyes flicked up in surprise. "I do. Since I was a girl. How did you know?"

"You have the hands for it," he said. "I'd bet a silver penny you made this cloak." He held it up, running his fingers over it. It was a simple thing, but woven with great skill, warm and light as a breath.

She ducked her head, embarrassed. "I did," she admitted. "I weave for all the household."

He turned the garment over in his hands, examining the smooth seamlessness of the thing. "Who was this meant for?"

She blushed again. "I took it from my hope chest when I saw you sitting out here. I thought you might like it."

Cloud couldn't help a smile. "Then I'll wear it until it falls into rags."

A small laugh escaped her. "You'll be wearing it for years, then," she said. "My weaving is made to last."

"And so may it," Cloud said softly. He lifted the garment and settled it about his shoulders. It was a little small, perhaps, but he knew quality when he saw it. This was a cloak

a king might wear with pride, and how much more delight could he take in it? He felt suddenly as rich as Paedro, with the whole world changed into coin and at his fingertips.

He finished the bread, still sweet as honey in his mouth, and toyed with the clasp of the cloak. Did he dare -- would she, if he asked her, fasten it for him? Such beautiful hands as she had! Would they feel as soft as they looked?

His pulse thundered inside his chest. In just two days' time, now, he would have the right to ask those hands to touch him. And perhaps she would, with that same shy blush tinting her cheeks, and he would coax words of love to her small, sweet mouth ...

Yes, like the innocent that she was, she might clasp his hands, or might be bold enough to embrace him. He would show her how her presence affected him -- gently, so as not to frighten her in her innocence. He would teach her the ways of loving between man and woman, try not to hurt her, and worship her body until he heard her sing out in pleasure.

Yes, once it was lawful, he would take her small fingers in his own and show her where a man needed to be touched. Even now, he felt himself growing warm and hard at the thought of teaching his lady what it meant to be a wife in the marriage bed ... the thought of hearing her soft voice raised high, crying his name out in passion, her slender body bared beneath him, oh --! It was nearly enough to bring him to a climax where he sat!

Ah, but such pleasure he would take from teaching her what a man wanted, what a man needed. Taking that slim hand in his own and showing it where to touch his member, how to grip and stroke it up and down until he was bubbling pearls of sooner-seed. Instructing her on tasting that salty-sweetness, kneeling between his legs with her rosy-lipped mouth surrounding him, hot and wet. Shy at first, but with experience and skill, both scenarios equally exciting.

More, he would teach her what women liked, so far as he knew what they did. He would bury his own face between her legs and lick her folds until she flowed with juices just for him. Though he had never done it before to a woman, he felt sure he would know how.

He would take her sex-button between his lips and suckle it into his mouth, not stopping until she begged him to, for the sake of mercy.

Then, though he would be gentle, he'd roll her onto her back and show her what it felt like to be filled by a man. Slow until she grew used to the feeling, and easy, but soon adjusting to the point where he could thrust with abandon, losing himself in the wonder of her, body and soul ...

"Oh!" Rose exclaimed.

Cloud shook his head hastily, dragging himself back to the present. His face flamed hot at the thoughts he'd let his mind drift to, and he gave himself a hard mental shake. Rose was a lady. To think of her like that before her time was an insult -- if almost more temptation than a man could bear.

"What is it?" he asked, more to distract himself than out of curiosity.

"Look," she whispered, pointing down at the beach. "Do you see?"

He leaned over and squinted down into the dark abyss. A creature -- a person? -- dressed like a walking poppet, all rags and tags and tatters, danced on the rocks. It sang a strange, wild song that made no sense from what he could hear.

"What is that?" he whispered, fascinated.

"It must be Berry," Rose said, her eyes fixed on the bizarre creature.

"Berry? The madwoman!" he exclaimed. "I remember her well, though I was so young when I left, no one ever told me all the details of her story. We saw her down in the village. She claimed to recognize Paedro, though she was calling him by another name. He had a hard time getting her to let him go."

Rose gave a soft sigh. "Father said she'd been seen lately," she said, curling her fingers against her chest. "Did she call the prince Hanri?"

"That's the name. How did you know that?"

His lady smiled, a sweet, sad smile. “She calls every man Hanri. He was her husband, some thirty years ago. He died during a storm at sea. She never believed, not really, that he was dead. They never found his body. The sea took it for her own. Berry’s been looking for him ever since.”

“A sad story,” Cloud said quietly.

Rose shook her head. “There’s something about the ocean ...” she said, raising her face to gaze out at the rolling waves. “She’s a hard mistress. People make their choices, and they abide by them to please her. Sometimes they can’t ever turn aside, no matter the cause.” She turned her head a little to the side, glancing at him.

“Berry is Mims’s mother. And my aunt. She would have been the masterqueen if she’d kept to her right mind. Did you know that?”

Cloud blinked. “No one told me.”

“I’m not ashamed of Berry,” Rose said softly. “Not even though she’s mad. She’s only following her broken heart. And she is family.”

“Rose, peace!” Cloud caught at her hand, and to his shock, found it. Her slim, cool fingers rested against his own, and his breath caught in his chest. She stared at him, frightened as a deer.

He swallowed hard. He wouldn’t let go unless she asked him to. “Your aunt is your aunt, and you are you.” He tested out a small grin. “And Sela is Sela, heaven protect me from crossing her, and Tirsah is Tirsah, and you are all different as the seasons. Each one as beautiful. But you are the best of all.” Impulsively, he dared to lift his other hand and lightly cup her cheek. Her skin was soft as a rose petal. “You are perfect.”

“Don’t say that!” A fine trembling began in all her limbs. She shook her head in protest. “I’m the least of us all. I’m not as skilled as Sela or half as grand as Tirsah. She’s brave as a lioness. She’d tweak a king’s nose without thinking twice.”

“I think she did tonight,” he said, and startled her into a laugh. Although immediately she covered her mouth with one slender hand and blushed pink, her eyes twinkled with repressed delight.

Heartened, Cloud plunged on. “Your whole family is remarkable. There’re stories told from city to city about how the chieftains rule the sea and all its creatures.”

She gave him a doubtful look. “No, truly,” he insisted. “Every time a rich man lights a whale-oil lamp, doesn’t he think about where it came from? And I can’t think of a society party where they don’t have at least some ocean tidbit.”

“Sela would be proud to hear that.”

“You should sell your weaving,” he said, fingering the smooth weave of his new cloak. “Noble ladies would fight the peddlers for a chance at a bolt of this.”

She flushed and dipped her head. “If you wish me to, I can try it,” she murmured shyly. “Do they tell any other stories?”

“Dozens of them. I’ve heard all sorts of tales told about your uncle Anno -- was he Tirsah’s father? To think I know her!” He shook his head, marveling. “Was he like she is?”

“Anno?” Rose’s eyes flickered to him. “My uncle?”

“Your uncle and the greatest mage in recent history! Paedro has always wanted to meet him. Part of the reason he came so far with us was to pay his respects to Anno’s family.”

Rose bit her lip lightly. “Did he say why?”

“Not as such.” Cloud shrugged. “I think just for the honor of it. There’s many people would have liked to meet Anno, once upon a time. I even had one of his temple coins once, but I lost it.”

Rose did not respond. Aghast, Cloud realized that she had gone white and silent. “Rose, I’m sorry,” he stammered, taking her other hand quickly. “I didn’t mean to cause you pain. I forgot, for a moment, he was your kin.”

Rose inhaled a soft breath and withdrew her hands from his, folding them in her lap. Cloud could have cheerfully slapped himself about the terrace with the flat of his sword. *Charming*, he jeered. *That's the way to win your love's heart -- remind her of when it was broken.*

An awkward silence blanketed them as, down below, Berry danced and sang her wild song to the moon. Cloud struggled for words, finding none that seemed right. The moment was slipping away from him. Soon it would be lost ...

Rose spoke first. "I think she's trying to summon one of the selkies," she said softly, nodding at her mad aunt.

"Selkies?" Cloud asked, weak with relief at this avenue of escape.

She gave him a sideways smile. "Aye. The prince asked about them earlier. They're a marvelous mystery, if you don't know about them to begin with."

"She's not actually going to get one to come, is she?"

Rose propped her chin delicately on her hand, gazing out to sea. "No. They're all gone. We don't eat the meat or wear the skins of ordinary seals anymore, but there was a time that we did, and sometimes we caught the Folk by accident and killed them. They left a long time ago. Father passed the rule, before I was born, that we were forbidden to catch any seals, but they haven't come back."

She tilted her head shyly toward him. "But," she said, voice hushed with glee, "I think I saw one once when I was a little girl."

"No -- truly?" Cloud leaned forward in excitement. "What did it look like?"

"Like nothing else in the world. Strange." She shivered. "I think it was a doe. It had long, long hair made of seaweed, and its skin was as pale a blue as the inside of an oyster shell. Her eyes were all black, every bit of them, and so much bigger than our own." Her face lit up with the wonder of the memory.

“Do you think they’ll ever come back again?” he asked, enjoying the pure light of pleasure she cast off.

“I don’t know. But if you ever see any, it would have to be from way out off the islands, the farthest islands.” She smiled shyly at him. “Your island, maybe. You might be lucky enough to see one someday from your island.”

Our island, Cloud thought with pleasure. Someday I’ll sing them to shore for you, sweet Rose.

Rose shook her hair back from her shoulders, the dreamy smile still playing across her lips. “She was so beautiful.”

“Nothing like as beautiful as you,” Cloud said softly, touching her fingertips to hers.

“Oh.” Rose flushed faintly pink, and dropped her eyes in embarrassment.

“Your cheeks turn rosy as the sunrise at the least little thing,” he joked, jostling her hand a little. “We’re to be married.” Every time he said it, he grew more used to it, and liked the sound of the words even better. “Shouldn’t I be proud that my wife is the loveliest woman in a thousand miles?”

“Forgive me. I’m not used to it,” she whispered, touching her cheek.

“All the men and boys in Kirree must be mad, then.”

“Not so!” She flattened her hands on her skirts and confessed, in a small voice, “I am -- I was -- still too young for courting.”

Cloud stirred. “Rose?”

She glanced up at him between her eyelashes. “Cloud?”

He struggled against a strange new sort of frustration. Her hand was warm in his own, but it was not nearly enough. “Rose ...” He hesitated awkwardly. “Will you look up at me? Let me see your face again. Please?”

She murmured something he couldn’t hear, and he lost his patience. Gently, lest he bruise her flesh, he put his fingers beneath her chin and tipped her face up to the moonlight.

She blinked at him, frightened, and he wished fervently that his fingers weren't so rough and callused from archery. Was he scratching her by accident?

"Stop it, please," he pleaded with her. "I'm not a fool, Rose. I can see how badly I scare you. But I promise you, I'm not so bad as all that. Let me love you."

She repeated the soft words she'd spoken earlier, and this time he caught them. "You don't even know me."

"But I will, and you'll know me," he swore, caressing her cheek with the ball of his thumb. "I'll take care of you, Lady Rose, I promise. I'll never do you a wrong. Just love me, trust me, and go with me. I'll be good to you."

She gazed at him, her blue eyes unreadable in the dim of the night. "You'll swear it?" she asked at last. "Forever and always?"

"And after that!" Thrilled at her response, he pressed her hands to his lips and kissed the tip of each finger. "You won't regret it, Rose. We'll have a fine life together."

Suddenly, she smiled. "You're doing it backwards."

He blinked, startled. "What?"

"You're doing it backwards," she whispered, cheeks bright red. "Don't men usually woo before they decide to wed the girl?"

Cloud threw back his head and laughed exuberantly. "It's this place!" he exclaimed, throwing his hands wide. "It makes men wild as the wind. We go where it blows us."

He stood abruptly, pulling her up with him, and caught her around the waist to keep her from falling. Her mouth formed a startled "O," and he stopped her cry of surprise with a stolen kiss, pressing his lips to hers. She tasted as sweet as he'd imagined, her mouth flavored with honey mead and her skin with roses.

He let go of her, well pleased to see the slight daze in her eyes. "You're wonderful," he breathed, dipping his head for another kiss.

She pushed at him and slipped away, nimble as a Catkin. “My lord -- Cloud -- don’t.” She touched her face, where his lips had been. “Don’t.”

He put out a hand, which she evaded. “Did I offend you?”

She shook her head, looking down. “No. But not this, not yet,” she pleaded in a whisper. “Wait until we’re wed. To please me.”

Cloud swallowed dryly. He hadn’t had a woman in years. Benec had teased him about that time and again, but who was there to have? He couldn’t help but shrink away from the disease-ridden camp followers, and who else would have wanted a landless boy’s kiss before? Every muscle of his body was on edge, quivering with an unbearable, newfound tension. He wanted nothing more than to put her warding hands aside and take her in his arms, to undo the lacings of her kirtle and discover what rested beneath ...

No! He shook his head hard. Cloud, you fool, he berated himself. What, have you waited this long for someone so pure, just to gobble her up in a single bite? And can you not see how frightened she is? She looks just like a doe in the forest, facing down the hunter’s arrow. Of course she’s afraid. Hold yourself in, man. Two more days, and she’ll be yours to teach and learn with. Gently.

He forced his muscles to relax. *Come to the feast with washed hands, Cloud. Be as pure for her as she will be for you.*

“I’m sorry.” He backed away from her, wrapping his arms around his waist. “Forgive me.”

She shook her head, turning away. “I should go.”

“It might be best.” He took in a deep breath of cold night air. “Sleep well, Lady Rose.”

She paused, half-turning her head. “Good night, lord,” she whispered. Wrapping her kirtle tightly around herself, she pattered away quickly, disappearing into the shadows of the keep.

Cloud collapsed on the stone wall, breathing roughly but finding, strangely, that he was relieved. She had reminded him of something he had nearly forgotten in the moonlight, and it was worth it. It had to be worth it. After three years of war, he had finally found purity. And he would preserve that -- he would.

No matter what the cost.

The joke to be played on Benec and Tirsah would fill the time remaining, but he could not, no, he could not, wait for the moment when he would truly make Rose his wife, and become one with her.

One day down, and three to go ...

 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

The Rea Cheveyo Chronicles: Kiana

by Rayne Forrest

Available Now from Loose Id

The Rea Cheveyo Chronicles: Kiana

What she needed was wrong by everything her culture taught. Ian was human. *Human*. It was their very likeness that made them so feared on Adonica.

The humans were everything she'd ever heard they were. Arrogant. Stubborn. Proudful. Self-absorbed. But they were also so much more.

Kind. Generous. Friendly. Witty.

Without consciously thinking about it, Kiana went back to the planetarium. She ordered the computer to call up the stars of her home. As she lay on the reclining chair, looking up, the stars seemed foreign.

She followed the outlines of the more familiar ones -- the fisherman and his fish, the sea swimmers, the mythical *gnovi* beast with his long, forked tail. Kiana closed her eyes, and Orion the Hunter rose before her. Forever in her mind, she would see those stars as Ian.

Enough of this, she told herself. She called up the view of the area where the *Natara* had last been reported.

"If only I knew the distance from Adonica," she mused aloud.

The computer flashed numbers, bright white against the darkness of space. Kiana's mouth dropped open. She ordered the information to be displayed in Adonican. The computer complied. She grew bolder and asked the computer for travel times as well as distance. The information appeared.

She worked with the computer for over an hour. Pieces of a puzzle began to fall into place, only to disappear a few moves later. The picture teased at her mind, but she couldn't bring it into focus. Maybe it was better that she could not.

Her sense of unease grew, and she ordered the computer to cease computations and display Orion as he appeared from Adonica. He vanished, like smoke on the wind.

She sighed deeply and lay back on the chair. Sleep was what she needed. In only a few hours, she needed to be rested and alert. She sniffed the leather of the chair, imagining she could detect Ian's scent. It had been masked under an applied fragrance at dinner.

Applying fragrance was something Adonican males did, too, in their quest for mating. She'd hidden her smile from Ian, not wanting to embarrass either of them by having to explain her amusement. Then he'd been so quiet.

Kiana finally began to doze off, slowly, as her imagination let her sleep in Ian's arms. A gentle touch on her hip woke her. She scrambled to sit up and blink Ian into focus.

He touched her face. "You looked so peaceful. Perhaps I should not have disturbed you."

"I'm glad thee did."

"Why?"

"Don't thee know, Ian Logan?"

His jaw worked. He looked away. When he spoke, his voice was low, and rough.

"What should I know, Kiana? That I've put you in an awkward position? That anything you do is used against your family? That us being alone together is being reported back to your superiors?"

"Thee are a good man, that thee care about these things." She laid her hand over his. "Do thee know more?" Kiana beat back the temptation to open herself up to her gifts and feel his emotions.

He looked at her, his gaze naked with desire. Her heart skipped a few beats, and then started to pound. Her stomach did a strange little flip, and the ache deep inside her flared back to life.

"I know I want you. And I know, for your sake, I can't act on it."

A single tear slid down her cheek.

“I want thee, Ian Logan. I do not care the right or wrong of it. This one time, I want something for myself. Can thee understand?”

“I don't want to hurt you, Kiana.” He swallowed hard.

“I know. It is my choice. I choose thee.” She slipped her arms around his neck and raised her lips to his.

Ian's arms came around her and tightened. He pushed her down beneath him, claiming her mouth. She felt the breathy rumble in his chest as his lips moved on hers. His hand quickly found its way under the softness of the robe and cupped the roundness of her bare bottom. She gasped in surprise, arching to him. His strong fingers caressed lightly down the back of her thigh and brushed across moist, tingling flesh. She tried to open herself more to him, but his body and her gown pinned her. She made a frustrated noise, and he pulled away.

Very slowly, almost reverently, he pulled the fabric from beneath him and slid it up her legs as she watched. It pooled in small ripples, covering her pelvis. The cool air brushed her limbs. Ian bent and kissed the inside of one quivering thigh. The breath clogged in her throat.

He inhaled sharply. She knew he'd caught the scent of her arousal. He slipped his hand under the fabric, resting it in the soft valley where her leg joined her body. Kiana's hips jerked up to him. The robe freed, he slowly stretched out beside her, settling them into a tangle of arms and legs.

Kiana tugged on his shirt, freeing it from his trousers. She slipped her hand beneath it and caressed Ian's warm skin. Small ridges of muscle covered his ribs, and she lightly traced them with one finger. Gooseflesh rose in her wake.

He took her hand and guided it to the bulge of his erection. He opened the snap of his pants with quick fingers, an unspoken request, and permission, for her to touch him as she wished.

Her inner flesh clenched. The tingling gave way to an insistent throbbing, a drumbeat pulse at her core that filled her with a desperate need. She moved her hand across the bulge, learning his shape.

Ian wrapped his hand around hers and drew it back up to his chest. Just the thought of those slim, elegant hands touching him made him wild. In his mind he could see them wrapped around his shaft, slowly stroking him. He needed to calm his ass down or he'd never last for her.

Her skin was soft and smooth under his fingertips, and the color of new ivory. His hand, browned from being outdoors and under a sun at every opportunity, contrasted sharply. His surprise that she wore nothing under the gown passed and he pushed the fabric up her body. She trembled under his hand.

He cupped the soft mounds of her breasts and gently squeezed a peaked nipple. She cried out, a soft sound that shot to Ian's groin. He took the light brown tip into his mouth, teasing and suckling until she was pushing her hips against him. Her hand clasped his head, holding his mouth to her. Her legs moved restlessly. Her thighs parted, leaving her open to him.

Ian trailed kisses up her neck on his way back to her lips. Their tongues danced in a mock battle for supremacy. Ian would gladly surrender to her. She had the victory well in hand. Her busy fingers worked open his zipper and brushed his swollen penis in a light caress, then quickly withdrew.

His hand moved to cup her female flesh. Combing his fingers through the soft, damp curls, he knew without opening his eyes and looking that she was dark there. His mind supplied the image of a black vee against the pale glow of her skin.

He slipped his fingers deeper into her secret folds. She was slick with desire. A part of his mind clinically registered she was the same as a human female. Bolder because of it, he teased at the gate to paradise, and then smoothly slipped his middle finger into her.

* * * * *

What people are saying about the writing of Rayne Forrest

Across Time

Across Time is a fast paced story with strong characters... The new worlds and civilizations that authors create always amaze me, and *Across Time* is one of the best. Ms. Forrest's stellar imagination has given us another science fiction romance to be in awe of. *Across Time* will certainly be worth your time.

-- Tina Burns, *The Road to Romance*

Rayne Forrest delivers an adventure that not only satisfies the romantic heart, but also the desire for the mysterious danger looming in the forest. *Across Time* becomes an addiction from page one. Demanding attention, this story called to me until I had finished the final words and said goodnight.

-- Charity, *Romance Junkies*

The passion is explosive, the storyline is unique and fun, the adventures exciting and the scenes in which they explain their previous behavior heart-rending. This is a book that I would highly recommend to everyone looking for a fabulous romance!!!!

-- Pam L., *A Romance Review*