



Upon Eagle's Light
~ Clover Antrey ~

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Hydeia sat upright, a slow panic turning over in her mind while she tried to remember the markings of the tiercel. A dark muted slate blue that rippled like molten steel in the sunlight.

Shreds, she'd been too caught up in the sensations, allowed too much feeling unleashed to have taken notice of the male's markings. This far from her eyrie's territory, she had just assumed he was a wilder, un-bonded. *Dear Koric, sweet brother sun*, what if the tiercel was true-bonded?

What if...? *Oh shreds*. She formed an image of an Eaglekin male somewhere near in the canyons, experiencing the same sensations she'd felt while Tylan and the tiercel plummeted through the sky...

A faint swirl of reaction warmed her cheeks, filtered down to her toes.

Hydeia pressed a fist to her forehead. How far could the true-bond during mating reach? Through his tiercel, could another Eaglekin have felt her as she lost all control of tightly guarded emotions? He'd think her a fledgling, incapable of maintaining any kind of hold on her *reyn*. Bolting to her feet, Hydeia began pacing, anger rising in slow coils to choke out her ripe humiliation. Then again, she'd felt no other. Because there was no one? Or because she was too inexperienced, too caught up in the new sensations, to have searched for another's *reyn*?

She flinched as she felt Tylan soar toward her, concern emanating at the edges of her awareness, most likely

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unnerved by Hydeia's quickly changing flow of emotions. The golden brown eagle swooped low, arching her elegant wings to land fluidly upon a near boulder. The sun rippled along her tawny feathers.

Hydeia frowned. *Sated and full of yourself, are you?* She sent the image of her displeasure through their connection of luminous *reyn*.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To Pat, Alannah, Kyle, Chase, Sam, and Tate for snapping me back to reality while I was writing in my head, and being patient when I told them "just a while longer".

To Heather and Faith for their great optimism, and letting me drag them to our first writer's conference.

And to grandma, who always believed...

Chapter One

She was going to strangle that bird!

Hydeia stumbled to her knees on the sun-baked ground. Her bond with the female eagle crackled with sharp brutal intensity. The light luminescent glow of their shared *reyn* spilled heat along her flesh. The warmth spun in coils, burning across all her enhanced perceptions. She splayed shaking palms across the brittle shale stone, seeking the solidity of the rock. *Sweet brother sun!*

As though she rode upon the wind with her, Hydeia felt every whisper-soft current of air ribbon across the tawny eagle, dewy cool as her sleek body circled below the darker tiercel in the blue bright sky. Shadows of their long, narrow-tipped wings slid across golden canyon walls, merging and separating while they formed the pattern of their elaborate mating dance.

Pursuing a mate now? Tylan had better simply be toying with that male. *Under Koric's sweet light*, what was the eagle thinking? They were in the middle of their first foray and failing in it was unthinkable. She wouldn't give the Matrons any more reason to name her unworthy of being true-bonded. This was not the time for mating.

Rot it all. She *should* call Tylan back; *now*, ask her to break away from the tiercel. Simple enough for any Eaglekin to do, well, any other who wasn't bonded to the most stubborn, strong-willed bird in all the Fourteen Eyries. She would definitely call her back. As soon as she could concentrate, when this rush of heat left her head and ceased

firing tiny sparks that flashed through her core. *Shred it to pieces!* This was more than play. Tylan's bright sapphire essence oozed with intent seriousness. Hydeia perceived an aching want smoldering from her eagle. Tiny beads of perspiration broke across her forehead.

The eagles soared around each other as though in battle, the smaller smooth male remained slightly higher in the sky. Hydeia focused her awareness more sharply on Tylan and abruptly the eagle's vision overlapped translucently with her own, focused tightly on the slate-blue male soaring above in an elegant glide. With her liquid *reyn* unfettered and connected with Tylan, Hydeia felt the dewy air stream like silk across her body, heard the wind whistle and the hush-quiet strokes of wings. And for the first time since their full-bonding, Hydeia experienced her true-bonded's raw primitive will of conquest, dominance. Possession.

The tiercel was hers.

Hydeia swayed back, and fell hard onto her bottom. Gooseflesh prickled along her flushed skin. A low moan escaped her throat, coming as though from a great distance beneath the shrieks and shrill cries of eagles. Tylan was beyond calling back from this. The eagle's determination to have the tiercel bore into Hydeia with shearing focus. There was nothing for Hydeia to do but wait.

She thought about pulling back, tucking that part of herself, her *reyn*, that fluid of shimmering light that was her connection with Tylan, into the far reaches of her awareness. She didn't want to intrude on a ritual that was as age-old and

rimmed with as much, possibly more, potent power as that of the true-bonding of eagle with Eaglekin.

Yet she was curious. She'd have just a small peek...

She slid her senses out farther, fully embracing the hot slick *reyn* that pulsed through her. Her sight latched onto, then held Tylan's pristine clarity of vision in the sky.

Ohhh! For a fervent instant, raw shattering emotion skidded up her spine, into her chest, and swept her toward some unknown spire. Sucking in a breath, trembling, Hydeia curled over onto her side, letting the hard rocky ground balance her, root her. The Matrons hadn't prepared her for this part of the bonding. She always rejoiced sharing the acute sensation of gliding through the sky with Tylan, the rush of a stoop, the thrill of crashing into prey, knocking the quarry out of the sky ... but this!

Heat, fear and excitement flared through Hydeia, scorching her blood as the tiercel suddenly dove toward Tylan. The male's shriek shrilled in her head. Excitement balled up inside her. Hydeia's shoulder dug into the ground, wanting to escape the unfamiliar emotions, while at the same time wanting to experience them.

Moments before crashing into the tiercel, Tylan rolled in the air, falling upside down, talons thrust upward.

Vicious heat stabbed into Hydeia's chest, painful, glorious, scalding her control.

Talons locked together, the two birds tumbled through the sky, instinctive in their wild abandon.

Hydeia gasped, every nerve shivered, stroked as though by currents of rushing air. Beyond her own sight of chipped

rocks and hard ground, tall canyon walls streaked in rioting reds and drenching golds; spiraled past her in a gauzy, dizzying rush.

She plummeted with the eagles, dangerously hurtling toward the deep black pit of losing herself, her control, to the true-bond of the shared *reyn* that pulsed like a living shimmering strand between her and Tylan.

She realized her mistake at once.

She'd immersed too far. Too deep. She doubted the eagle was even aware of her anymore, caught so fervently in the mating dance. She couldn't know of the danger to Hydeia.

The Matrons had named her too reckless, too headstrong, too quick to follow her emotions, to safely bond with an eagle of such strength, yet Tylan had chosen her, none other.

Hydeia forced air into her lungs. She wouldn't prove the Matrons correct in this. She had her own strength, her own sense of will. She would not become lost in the bird. She would not.

Frantically, Hydeia drew back, focusing her will as her nails dug into her palms. The wind roared in her head. Feather strokes trickled along her flesh. Her sight swirled around and around, blurring while the eagles plunged toward the ground. She was losing.

Hold back, hold back, she willed her *reyn*, yet Hydeia still fell with the eagles, still spiraled and rippled, until she screamed and wrenched her *reyn* back to herself in a thousand vibrant tearing strands when at the last instant the eagles broke free and soared back up into the sky, leaving

Hydeia light-headed and stunned, breathing raggedly on the rocky ground far below.

Hydeia gazed skyward, her sweat-slickened back clammy on the warm rock, every limb loose and liquid. Focusing her breathing to slow, she pushed a moist strand of hair off of her face. Perhaps Tylan taking a mate had not been such an inconvenience.

Eagles mate for life, a taunting voice of caution whispered.

Hydeia sat upright, a slow panic turning over in her mind while she tried to remember the markings of the tiercel. A dark muted slate blue that rippled like molten steel in the sunlight.

Shreds, she'd been too caught up in the sensations, allowed too much feeling unleashed to have taken notice of the male's markings. This far from her eyrie's territory, she had just assumed he was a wilder, un-bonded. *Dear Koric, sweet brother sun*, what if the tiercel was true-bonded?

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her ripe humiliation. Then again, she'd felt no other. Because there was no one? Or because she was too inexperienced, too caught up in the new sensations, to have searched for another's *reyn*?

She flinched as she felt Tylan soar toward her, concern emanating at the edges of her awareness, most likely unnerved by Hydeia's quickly changing flow of emotions. The golden brown eagle swooped low, arching her elegant wings to land fluidly upon a near boulder. The sun rippled along her tawny feathers.

Hydeia frowned. *Sated and full of yourself, are you?* She sent the image of her displeasure through their connection of luminous *reyn*.

Tylan's long neck turned to give Hydeia her full raptor stare.

Shuddering a long sigh, Hydeia stretched out her bracer-covered arm. The sweet warmth of *reyn* flowing between them was strong, vibrant sapphire, glowing bright with health and energy. She could hold no anger toward the bird for doing what was instinctual anymore than she could keep water in a slack hand.

Tylan leaped onto Hydeia's wrist, heavy and sure. *I trust he is worthy of you.*

As though summoned upon the wind, the tiercel called out from above, a swift dart approaching from the east. Hydeia squinted into the sky, searching the sleek body for the strong lightly striped markings that would place him as hatched from one of the Fourteen Eyries, a gifted tiercel worthy and capable of true-bonding to a man.

Her palms were sweaty. Tylan turned on her arm, sensing Hydeia's anxiety. Anxiety that whooshed down to her toes as the male glided low over their heads, ruffling hair and feathers.

No distinctive markings. A wilder then, un-bonded. Hydeia rotated her shoulders, and let the worry fall to the ground. There was no Eaglekin male to take on as her mate. No Eaglekin to be responsible for.

Even among her people who were naturally solitary, Hydeia felt more apart than most. She hadn't given much thought to what would happen when Tylan took a mate, just accepted that whatever tradition demanded, she would take responsibility for. It never occurred to her that Tylan would court a wilder, leaving Hydeia without a mate of her own for the remainder of her life. But she found the prospect of that rather ... freeing. She did not fear being alone. She reveled in it, desired to travel and explore the vast canyonlands with Tylan, unencumbered, far from the scornful eyes of the Matrons. Which they would do, exploring every canyon, every height, every crack and gulch, after she completed her task and proved herself worthy of her beloved true-bonded.

She rubbed her palm down Tylan's silky back and smiled. *You've chosen well. He's a fair beauty.*

Tylan's chest expanded, lifting her soft downy breast feathers.

* * * *

Feeling the footprint gently with the pads of her fingers, Hydeia noted the slight dig of soil where the printmaker's

unique way of walking scuffed the left heel. The track's edges were rounded, pocked from heavy dew and wind deterioration in the hard sediment between patches of stone. The prints were days old. Able to cover a vast amount of ground, the Eaglekin woman she'd been tracking was probably far from the area now. They'd have to move quickly to catch up to her.

No matter. Hydeia would find her, bring her back to the eyrie bound and decorated in pretty twine and dumped in the laps of the Matrons if it came to it.

The Matrons had sent her to discover what kept Lannis, true-bonded to Sheeannar, grand dame of the longwings of High Rock Eyrie from the annual council, and Hydeia would not fail them. She would prove she could bring back Lannis, prove that she was worthy of Tylan and bury all the disdainful glances and comments beneath a fat stinking heap of dung.

She wasn't her mother. She wouldn't lose control of her emotions and beg to be released from her eagle's bond. She would never become a shell of a creature—inconsequential, a nothing, a *tolin sha*, of no vital importance to the eyrie. To any eyrie.

Hydeia uncurled her fingers. Gouges now marred the print, but she'd already learned what she needed, more of the same since she'd first picked up Lannis's trail.

The Eaglekin was on the run. Her trail had been chaotic. Most of the footprints had plumes at the toe, indicating the woman was moving swiftly over the ground. The routes she'd taken were also the hardest to traverse, yet Hydeia could find no trace of pursuers. None. If there had been any pursuit of

the woman, she would have found signs of it. Not even the Matrons questioned Hydeia's skill at tracking.

Lannis was not fleeing anything. The evidence of that was apparent all around, not just in the footprints. If anyone had been chasing her, Hydeia would have seen the reverberations of their passing in the canyon life and their tracks around them. Each animal would have sent ripples of reaction through the area, affecting everything else. Could Lannis be running toward something?

Nothing about this was right. Lannis was one of the most revered of the Eaglekin throughout Gaspar and the territories of all the Fourteen Eyries, true-bonded to the most age-honored and wisest of eagles. She was permitted to roam the farthest edges of Gaspar, even to go outside their territorial borders on the other side of the mountains. She was also the Matrons' most staunch and loyal holder of a true-bond. Lannis would never have missed a summoned council if she could help it.

What manner of foulness was taking place? Several Eaglekins had disappeared from their preying grounds of late, mostly the young and newly bonded, though that was hardly unexpected.

Bonding with an eagle held many dangers and there were those younglings that were always lost upon their first forays. More than a few simply gave up the trial bond, as had her own mother, in their preparatory state before the Matrons performed the true-bonding ritual.

The thought of how many had hoped that Hydeia would have been one of those to give up her bond slipped

unmercifully into her mind where it raked across the still raw and exposed wounds.

She tamped down the hurt with renewed determination not to fail in finding Sheeannar and Lannis, and with a flash of luminous *reyn*, asked Tylan, soaring above, to scout east where a shadowed forest pass stretched between steep granite gorges. Hydeia stared in the distance at the shadowed niche. Stone Forest Pass; the closest route leading out into the territories of mankind. Surely Lannis wouldn't have risked taking her eagle among mankind. Few Eaglekins would brave that and those foolhardy enough to make the attempt had to first petition and seek permission from the Matrons to venture beyond their safe borders. Even then their reasons would have to be of vast importance. The Matrons had said nothing about Lannis seeking approval to cross into the territories of mankind.

Immediately, she felt Tylan's sharp wheel on the silky soft air.

Rubbing her silt-coated palm along her leather-tanned breeches, Hydeia stretched to her feet, and froze.

A man stood before her, his long shadow stretched behind him.

Quick as a sparrow, Hydeia had her knife to hand. Just as suddenly Tylan's shrill *kee-kee-kee* shrieked in her head. She felt the eagle turn in the air and stroke swiftly back to her.

How had the stranger gotten there? He'd come upon her so quietly, that he'd caught her completely unaware,

something no one had been able to do after she had come of age.

The male's stance was calm, direct, giving away nothing. Hydeia appraised him flatly. Long dark golden eyes that marked him Eaglekin as surely as the long, languid lines of his body, flicked toward the blade she held, then back to her face.

Heat flushed through her. Her gaze roamed over him and she felt a tightening low in her belly. Something was echoing in her head, stuttering in her chest, compelling and primitive. Her throat had no moisture as sudden need threatened to loosen her grip on the hilt. She clenched it tighter.

Tighter still as a streak of wanting heated his eyes, then was quickly whisked away, replaced by a slight lift of lips into a condescending grin.

Who was he? Undeniably Eaglekin, yet he wore village-made clothing, supple brown breeches beneath a soft cream-hued tunic that fit lightly over strong shoulders, the dip and swell of forearm, lean roped and sinewy torso, strong graceful hands, the ... *Oh, sweet Koric.*

Her reaction to him was intense and untamed, unnerving her with a frightening unfamiliar ache to cross the short distance between them and touch his cheek, run her hands through those dark shining curls on his head, feel the muscles that were even now coiling in his arms as he turned his well-shaped wrist.

His wrist. He wore a leather bracer on his sleekly muscled arm.

Ruined prey! No wonder simply looking at him was like falling into raw nerves. He must be bonded to Tyalan's tiercel. Her body's reaction to him was purely instinctual, an attraction carried through their *reyn* when their true-bonded eagles were courting.

Courting. Her heart jumped, and then took a long slow fall. If he was indeed true-bonded to Tyalan's tiercel, then, sweet light! *Shred it all to pieces!* This man was her mate.

The implication crashed over her, wild and furious. She didn't want a mate! Especially one who acquired his garments from villages and bonded with—*blessed Koric*—he had bonded with a wilder.

Learned disgust whispered in her head, but she couldn't get a hold on it, not while this yearning put her flesh on fire, and not while she searched his face, found guarded wariness beneath the fine angles and contours, and within his beautifully shaped eyes.

By Tyalan choosing the tiercel, this man, this stranger, became Hydeia's mate. Though it was shredding inconvenient, she was honor bound to care for and protect him. Very well, yes. It was what eyrie tradition demanded of her. He'd have to come with them to find Lannis and Sheeannar of course, but since she was the dominant female, he would have to go where she directed. That couldn't be helped.

Watching him, she returned the blade to the sheath at her hip, his sharp raptor eyes following her movement.

Shrieking above, Tyalan launched herself like an arrow from the sky toward the Eaglekin. A fragment away, she

carved a bend and sped past without touching him. His light tunic rippled in the eagle's wake.

To Hydeia's amazement, the male didn't flinch a muscle. He stood there, assessing her coldly, eyes molten gold, seeming very much a breathing, living part of the stark, turbulent land around him. *Cacking* loudly, the tiercel also swooped low from the blue sky, then landed on the leather encased fist the man stretched out.

Tyalan glided atop a low stone perch, annoyance filtering from her.

This is all your doing, Hydeia sent her own annoyance back.

She glanced back as the Eaglekin rolled his gentle palm along the tiercel's dark winged back then waved him off to flight. Wing beats ruffled his curling dark hair before he turned.

He was leaving?

Without a word spoken to her!

Shred it all, she had to do this right. Scrambling after his long stride, Hydeia quickly opened her pack and withdrew one of the feathers Tyalan had lost previously from the smaller protective pouch. She had several of them, prepared to graft back onto Tyalan when another was lost or broken beyond repair. Every feather was precious.

She ran in front of the Eaglekin male, blocked his way, hissed between her teeth when he simply stepped aside and continued on.

This wasn't supposed to be how it happened. This ritual was important, not it. A most peculiar male.

Not put off so easily, Hydeia overtook him again and this time grabbed onto his forearm. A shocking current of heat fanned up from his skin. A pleasant sensation of wanting did a slow turn in Hydeia's chest. She felt, rather than heard, his impatient intake of breath. But she had stopped him.

The texture of his arm was rock firm and definitely male beneath her palm. She could feel his pulse speed up. This close his scent tantalized, cool and masculine, tinged with the richness of deep forests, solid and earthy.

She dropped her hand away, took a step back, and heart fluttering, composed herself to do what tradition stated must be done.

Perhaps he was from one of the forest eyries far on the west edges of Gaspar. That might explain why he was so strangely unfamiliar with the proper way this had to be done. She would have to lead him in this.

Adopting a dominant pose, though he was a good head taller than she, Hydeia thrust the feather toward his chest.

He cocked a dark brow and folded his arms.

She pushed the feather at him again. This time his eyes darkened, sizzling with temper.

"You're suppose to take it," Hydeia said, not unkindly she thought.

The flat of his palm came up as though in warding, and he pushed the feather back toward her. "No."

"No?" Hydeia felt her own slice of temper. The first word he found fit to say to her was no?

"No," he said again. His voice was rich like amber honey ... and firm in his refusal.

"You can't say no. You must accept the feather." Hydeia's dignity wouldn't take a plunge over this. Not now, not after waiting so long for the Matrons to finally give her an honorable task. "You're true-bonded to the tiercel. My true-bonded has taken him for her mate."

He looked skyward. Frowned.

"Take the shredding feather." She tossed it at him though it flittered slowly to the ground unceremoniously between them.

The muscle in his jaw ticked. His arms came unfolded in loose predatory ease, like the liquid grace of a canyon cat before it pounces.

"Uloki is free to mate with your bonded if he chooses, but his choice will bear no claim upon me."

Hydeia's chin lifted. "Impossible. If your eagle has mated, you can't just—"

"Nevertheless." He turned his back on her and again strode away.

Hydeia slammed a fist on her hip. This could not be happening. Neither of them had the right to turn their backs on Eaglekin tradition. "You'll take this feather if I have to fletch it on an arrow and shoot you with it!"

That made him stop in his tracks. The sinewy line of his broad shoulders squeezed together.

Hydeia tilted her head, pleased he had finally seen reason when she heard his deep laughter. The man was definitely daft. What was the matter with him? Humiliation burned across her cheeks, slunk down along her spine. Shred it all.

And shred him. She didn't want a mate anyway. Let him just go off and fend for himself.

She glared at Tylan, who was watching intently. *Fine mate you chose.*

Retrieving the feather, Hydeia turned to go in the opposite direction. Angry pride had her calling over her shoulder. "You won't be able to resist it, you know."

"We shall see," the annoying Eaglekin called back, then stopped, twisted his torso to look back at her. "You should avoid that forest pass. A hunting party of Rakens has been roaming through there. They'd like nothing better than to—"

"Yes, yes, I know of the Rakens." She waved him off. Now he was attempting to tell her what to do? What sort of an Eaglekin was he? She decided she didn't much like stubborn arrogant males and was well rid of him. He'd probably only slow her down in her task anyway.

He grabbed her elbow. For the second time he'd managed to come upon her unheard. This hot piercing need that made her want to possess him clouded her senses. Getting away from him really would be for the best.

"Raken fear all Eaglekins, see us as demons." He deemed to lecture her as though she were newly fledged. He was insufferable. "They'd like nothing more than to get their claws on a pretty slip of an Eaglekin maid."

Hydeia rolled her elbow out of his grasp. "You've warned me. Now go." She flicked her hand in a shooing motion.

His incredible golden eyes narrowed, appraising her. "You'll stay out of Stone Forest Pass."

"It's not your concern."

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His expression changed instantly. Frustrated anger stiffened his posture. "True." His frown was fierce, considering. Hesitant. "True. None of my concern."

Snapping his mouth closed, he strode away with the blunt force of a blacksmith's hammer.

Chapter Two

He'd rejected her.

Unthinkable. When eyrie-hatched eagles mated, their two true-bondeds were unquestionably mated as well. It simply was. Had been so through all the ages. What was wrong with the man?

What right did he have to go against Eaglekin creeds and time-honored traditions? More perplexing, how could he hope to ignore the overwhelming compulsion that would bring them together? It had been a full day since they'd parted and Hydeia couldn't keep her traitorous thoughts from straying to him, from recalling the way his dark hair curled around the bottom part of his ears, to the strong lean length of him ... and those flashing annoyed eyes. Slow swirling warmth tingled along her flesh.

Maddening.

She tamped down the temptation to send Tylan off to look for him from above, to see him through the eagle's keen view, discover where he was, what he was doing. But she wouldn't. He'd made it clear he wanted nothing from her.

It rankled that she could not dismiss him as easily from her thoughts or from the slick need coursing along her every nerve ending. Then again, why wouldn't he stir such unfamiliar feelings in her? It was the bond. Their *reyn*. That was all. Without that, he really held no such appeal. He was arrogant and rude, without one wit of submissiveness. And much too tall. The top of her head barely came to his

shoulders. She'd get a cramp in her neck if she had to look up at him all the time.

Opening herself to her *reyn*, she sought Tylan and grasped the sweet strong glow of the eagle's pearly sapphire essence as she relayed that she was moving deeper into the forest between the towering canyon walls. Lannis's trail had been easy to pick up in the spongy soil and leaf-litter below the dark twisting trees. Bent and broken foliage marked a frantic passage, which disturbed Hydeia. Any Eaglekin of the Fourteen Eyries was skilled enough not to leave so clumsy a trail. Even a child of the eyries could have hidden her trail better. Unless Lannis wanted her trail to be found.

A red squirrel clamored up the nearest tree and leaned over a branch, chattering annoyance.

Hydeia moved quickly between the tall wide trees, stepping agilely over twisted roots that were partly exposed above the soft ground. While Lannis's trail was so easy to read, Hydeia wanted to make up as much ground as possible.

From above, she felt the imperceptible change of Tylan's direction when the eagle altered the position of her wings. Hydeia paused for a moment, casting her sight outward to ride upon Tylan's lofty vision. *Reyn* filled her, flowing from her navel up inside her chest and down to the tips of her toes, warm and slick and sweet.

Gliding between the highest trees, dark leaves and webbed vines rushed by, stirred by the whoosh of wings. Smaller chatterbrights in the gently swaying tops went silent at the eagle's approach. Tylan's sight moved downward, flickered in a translucent overlap of Hydeia's own surroundings on the

forest floor, and settled on the glossy back and shoulders of the tiercel, flying just below her. Air rippled through his lighter gray wingtips. Hydeia sucked in a breath at his beauty. He was a joy to watch, she'd give Tylan that, strong and sleek, twisting expertly through the high foliage.

Abruptly his scream shrilled through Hydeia's head. Pressing her hands over her ears, shocked, Hydeia watched through Tylan's eyes as Uloki collided with a branch, and fell. Bark and leaves whirled in the air. Only momentarily stunned, Uloki righted himself and glided jerkily sideways, half-folding his wings in a frightening descent toward the forest floor.

Tylan's distress crashed over Hydeia, curdling through their shared *reyn* as it instantly heated to a near unbearable boil. The emotions were far too powerful. *Tylan!* What could—? Suddenly she understood what could only be the cause of the tiercel's alarm and momentary loss of self. His true-bonded was in danger.

Heart hammering, Hydeia left herself blind to her surroundings on the ground, and thrust all her awareness upon Tylan. The overlapping sensations of forest floor and forest heights instantly cleared to a singular sharp vision. Tylan's keen eyes kept easy track of Uloki while he weaved swiftly between the low trunks, skimming just above the moss-covered floor.

They soared several long moments that seemed to hang suspended in time. Hydeia's breathing rattled loudly in her ears. Desperate to know what had happened, she stood stock-still, hands clenched. Had he injured himself? Fallen

from a height out in the canyons? Broken a limb? *Koric*, he'd have been helpless out there alone if she and Tylan hadn't still been near. Yet the eagles were moving deeper into the dark forest. Why had he gone back into the forest? Finally, Tylan and Uloki found the Eaglekin male and began circling among the trees to keep him in sight.

Hydeia's fists tightened harder. Her eyes narrowed at the scene Tylan showed her.

Two monstrous Raken were dragging the tiercel's bonded facedown through the slick leaves. A third secured a length of rope to a tree, his claw-tipped fingers making quick work of the knots.

The unconscious Eaglekin's head hung down. Blood glistened in his dark hair, down the side of his face, shining black in the muted light. Why had he entered the forest after he clearly warned her to stay out? The man definitely needed looking after.

Hydeia pulled back from Tylan's sight and waited for her vision to readjust to the blending of her own surroundings that were slowly overlapping with a gauzy view of what the eagle saw. She held the bond there. Seeing both views, she sent sharply to the eagle, *Guide me! And keep out of sight.*

Hurriedly, out of habit, Hydeia took note of the area, even with the realization that she would be making her own hasty trail that she could easily follow straight back to Lannis's prints. She dropped her pack there, taking only her bow and quiver, and sprinted through the forest, following the path of landmarks that Tylan showed her. A sharp speckled rock,

thick stringy purplish mossbeard that draped across a red oak, a charred lightning-struck trunk.

After sliding on slick leaf-mold and nearly twisting her foot on the exposed roots, Hydeia reluctantly pulled away from seeing through the bird's eyes and relied on the thin stream of luminous *reyn* that stretched between their awareness of each other, a long unseen connection that true-bondeds had of sensing their eagle's presence. Tylan's shimmery sapphire essence brightened with each step closer to her.

Hydeia felt a great urgency to move faster thrum between them. She could only imagine what turmoil the male eagle's emotions must be in and was grateful she couldn't feel him at the moment. Tylan's were powerful enough, concerned as she was about her new mate's anxiety, and were on the bare cusp of being too strong for Hydeia to hold the link and be able to focus on following the liquid line of *reyn*. She slapped through the low branches. *Koric* willing, she wasn't too late.

* * * *

They tied him upside down. Hydeia crept in between hanging strands of mossbeard, closer to the great lumbering Rakens. She had heard of such practices, but hadn't given them much merit. An eagle will suffocate if left upside down too long. Believing they could get to the bird through his true-bonded, the superstitious Rakens bound the man by his ankles to an out-stretched branch. His fingertips grazed the soil, wrists corded together. They'd never get to the tiercel like that. The Rakens were ignorant if they believed they

could. Any true-bonded would close himself off from his *reyn* before that happened.

Tall and thin, the Rakens jumped excitedly around the Eaglekin. Firelight cast eerie capering shadows across the carpet of leaves. Black bear hides worn as cloaks hanging down their pale gray backs were the only garments covering the Rakens' leathery folds of hairless skin.

They'd ripped the tunic from Uloki's bonded and coated his flesh in some type of thick grease, which they were now raking with the tips of their knives and claws into patterns that vaguely resembled the striated breast markings and feathers of the coastal Blue Water Eyrie's fisher eagles.

The stupid brutes were being none too careful about it either. The Eaglekin male sucked in a hiss as a blade scored his flesh. His eyes squeezed in sudden pain. His lips became a hard tight line.

Hot rage coiled inside Hydeia, possessive, ready to snap. How dare they hurt him.

He was hers.

Scout the area, Hydeia flicked to Tylan. If there were more than the three leathery skinned beasts near, she wanted to know. Tylan would find them.

She waited, her fury growing, impatient to do something while the infuriating beasts played with the Eaglekin.

No others. Tylan swept in low, a quiet whoosh of air ghosting between tree limbs, and landed on a low slanting branch beside Hydeia. The tiercel glided to the same branch, dark and silent.

Frowning, Hydeia eyed him critically, nervous about whether he would prove an aid or get in the way. Wilders were unreliable, unpredictable. She wished his bonded was conscious enough to direct the tiercel. He curved his wings in an attempt to look bigger, more intimidating. Hydeia met his steady raptor gaze. It would take more than intimidation to free his Eaglekin.

* * * *

"Beauty, beauty birdman cry. Squeal out for your eagle, beauty, beauty. Bring your eagle to us." One of the brutes pulled a stick from the fire and sliced a clean line across the Eaglekin's lowest rib. The Eaglekin cried out then clenched his teeth so hard his lips turned white.

Forcefully uncurling her fingers from her bow, Hydeia edged closer. How dare they! Her pulse was pounding so violently she wouldn't have been surprised to see the leaves all shaking with the forceful rhythm. She inhaled a calming breath. She would likely get only one arrow off. She needed a cool head and loose fingers. She had to put aside all this burning anger. It was distracting her, making her too edgy for the job at hand. She'd never felt like this before. Then again, she'd never had to challenge three Rakens before. Nor one for that matter. Nor had she ever considered the need to do so would arise. Rakens rarely entered Eaglekin territory, and they were not difficult to avoid on the rare occasions they did. But these Rakens had captured her mate. And they were hurting him for no reason. Hydeia gripped her bow so tight it squeaked beneath her clammy palm.

The largest Raken dragged the Eaglekin's head up by his hair and glared into his face. His bloodless lip curled menacingly back over a chipped tooth. "Call your cursed birdie." The Raken's voice hummed in a vibrant clear tone, shockingly beautiful to come forth from such a nasty-minded creature.

"I think he might not got one." The squattest and brawniest of the three, with arms as thick as mead casks that he couldn't lower flat at his sides, pulled another stick from the fire and examined its glowing end. "I say we keep this beauty, beauty for us our ownselves. See how long we can make 'em glow, then gut 'em quick, neck to tail, 'fore he has the chance to transform into his demon self. I don't care much for the way he looks at us. Don't like it a quiver. He's gettin' ready to do some what evil on us, look at 'em. I can tell. Cut 'em now. Deep. Keep 'em distracted so he can't change."

"They don't change into demons, stupid paggard." The largest, Chip tooth, let go of the Eaglekin's head. The poor male jerked on the dangling rope with a grunt. "I want pynbrew!" the Raken shouted to the silent trees.

The third Raken spit into the fire, orange eyes reflected in the hissing flames. "There'll be no pyn if Looo-reese don't get both eagleman and a birdy." The syllables of Looo-reese grated awkwardly on his tongue. "And I don't see no bird."

Hydeia couldn't believe what she was hearing. These Raken bartered Eaglekins and their true-bondeds for nothing more than rancid ale? Her people's freedom, or worse, was

valued less than village-brewed mead. She told herself to remember the name Looo-reese.

It was worse than the Matrons had thought. Someone was getting these Rakens to bring the Eaglekins to him. This Looo-reese was gathering them for a purpose. It very likely was the reason so many Eaglekins were missing, and very likely the key to finding Sheeannar and Lannis.

Hydeia's lips twisted. She could leave the male in their claws, let them take him and lead her directly to Lannis, or possibly Looo-reese and then Lannis.

Chip tooth bent low and grabbed another fistful of the Eaglekin's dark hair. "He owns a bird. I saw it fly off just before we took this one. You call it here." He lifted the Eaglekin's head higher, pulling the thick dark roots.

More conscious now, eyes fluttering open, the Eaglekin raised his bound wrists and slammed an elbow up into the Raken's jaw, only to get kicked in his already wounded head. The impact sent him spinning on the rope for the second time.

Now, Hydeia called Tylan through her *reyn*. It might be a certain method to find Lannis or it might not, but either way, Hydeia was not leaving Uloki's bonded in their fists a moment longer.

* * * *

A well-shot arrow took the first by surprise, the one closest to the dangling Eaglekin, dropping the Raken to his knees. *Shred it to rot!* At this close range, Hydeia thought her fire-forged tips would do more damage than that.

The other two smaller Rakens dove into the forest from where Hydeia had loosed the shaft, but she was already gone, up into the trees, moving lithely from branch to branch while the beasts tore furiously through the dense bushes below.

Tyalan let out a long shrill call and flew directly into view. Hairless wrinkled gray heads snapped up in unison, seeing a new prize. They scrambled to their packs, shaking out heavy nets before they rushed away through the trees, chasing after the bird.

Hydeia's lips thinned into a flat smile. She was not worried about Tyalan. The eagle would lead them on a grand chase ... away from the Eaglekin.

Now for the third beast that she'd already wounded. Chip tooth. He had lumbered to his feet, pressed a large clump of mud and mossbeard to his bleeding thigh, and stalked over to the dangling man. Apparently more intelligent than the others, this Raken wouldn't be lured so neatly away from a prize already caught.

Hydeia crossed silently over to another branch, working her way lower, closer, and almost overhead. She had to move fast. The other two Rakens wouldn't be gone long.

Pinching an earlobe, Hydeia drew a steadying breath, then pulled four arrows from her hip quiver. Very well. She could take on a lone Raken. How difficult could it be? He was already wounded after all.

And three times her size. With a hide as thick and bristly as a boar's.

She let an arrow fly, missed and leaped to a lower branch as a knife whirled by, slicing through hanging purple mossbeard before embedding in the branch she just left.

Her next shot stayed true, its dark shaft embedded in the beast's shoulder. He pulled it out as easily as a crow plucks a berry from a bush.

"I know where you are, little birdy." The Raken limped to the stack of packs, took up a length of rope. "Fly down." He looped one end into a sliding knot.

Hydeia slid her arrows back down inside the quiver. They were no longer necessary. "Not very well likely," she baited the brute and flinched as the rope slapped the trees. "I'm not over there, old lizard."

Closer this time, the rope whipped above her head. He needed only to catch one of her arms or legs to pull her from her precarious perch.

Again and again the rope lashed the branches, raining cut leaves, and once stinging her knee, tearing a sharp line in her breeches. All the while she laughed as tauntingly as she could make her voice sound.

It was working. Chip tooth glared venomously into the ceiling of trees. In his frustration and anger, the Raken grew sloppy. His claws were looser on the rope, sometimes leaving it altogether as he let it fly.

In one such moment Hydeia took her chance. While it was free she grabbed the rope, quickly hauling it out of reach, and just as quickly dropped the looped end over Chip tooth's head and leaped off the opposite side of the branch.

The Raken's roar choked off in a muffled gasp as the rope jerked them both to a stop, wrenching Hydeia's arms.

Koric be kind. Hydeia dangled; her face a scant hand's breadth from the Raken's furious leathery face.

The rope slanted across loose folds of his gray neck, which was rapidly taking on a mottled tint, and under one arm, pinning it to the side of his thick head. His other hand was occupied prying the ever-tightening loop from his throat. His claws were clicking together furiously to get between and snap the rope. His orange eyes bulged with fury. His breathing was strangled rasps. He kicked out at her, tightening the rope, but he also must have realized that her slight weight was the only thing keeping them both aloft.

Reacting on instinct, Hydeia kicked off of his hanging body, swinging away, trying to shake him higher off the ground. Instead she rose. Higher. Higher.

No, no, no. As she'd felt Tylan do a thousand times mid-flight, Hydeia flipped over in the air, feet up and braced, hitting the underside of the branch with her supple boots before the Raken's weight at the other end of the rope could toss her over the other side. Straightening, upside down, she pulled with all her strength. Her hair hung down, an odd tug on her roots. The rope burned across her palms.

She screamed in effort, not daring to look down and see how close to the ground the Raken had gotten. He was too heavy. Her muscles raged, shook. The rope slid, slick with her blood and sweat. The beast still kicked and jerked. His muffled gasps rasped loudly in the silent forest.

Concentrating her entire effort into bracing her legs against the branch, Hydeia no longer felt Tylan leading the others away. She did not hear Uloki's shriek. Did not know when the Raken below her went still.

Hands slick and torn, she slipped from the rope, turning in the air, and fell to the ground in an exhausted heap.

Laboring for breath, she rolled to her stomach, every muscle and bone protesting, and flicked her knife out to meet the larger Raken.

Sprawled next to her, he lay unmoving. Had she killed him then? The immediate thought brought a tight clutch of nausea to her stomach.

She pushed the uneasy feelings aside to be dealt with later. There was no time. She had to cut the Eaglekin male loose and get him away before—her eyes widened as she saw the Raken's chest rise. Not dead then. Good. She didn't want that.

She stumbled to her feet. Or ... not so good. Apparently these Rakens could withstand quite a bit. She wouldn't count on him remaining unconscious long.

She went to the tiercel's bonded. Anger flared anew at the sight of his wounds, winding hot and furious through her.

They should not have marked him in any way!

He was hers.

She cut the thick cord at his wrists and his arms flopped apart.

"Wake up." She patted his cheeks, leaving prints of blood. His eyes slipped open, startling dark gold and glazed in pain.

Upon Eagle's Light
by Clover Autrey

"I need you to aid me. Have you the strength to support yourself while I cut you down?"

He nodded. Blade in hand, Hydeia stretched up on her toes.

A net whipped out, pulling her feet out from under her.

Chapter Three

Her aching legs tangled in the heavy net, Hydeia gasped, sucking breath back into her lungs. The Raken was conscious, was standing above her, bulbous lip curling back from his chipped tooth in a bloodless snarl.

"Cry out for your bird, beauty, beauty." Long hands lowered to grab a hold of her when a blur of dark wings flapped between them.

The Raken screamed, waving his hands in front of his face to fend off Uloki's fierce talons. He stumbled back into the dangling male Eaglekin who grabbed him about the legs.

Shrill squawks filled the forest.

The Raken crashed forward like a felled tree and rolled to his back, kicking, his chiming tones bellowing against the tiercel's unrelenting attack.

As Hydeia untangled her legs from the net, Tylan's translucent *reyn* filled her, steady and fierce. Swooping low over the ground, ruffling leaves and moss, she soared from among the trees, wings rounded and talons extended to join her mate's harrying attacks.

Feet free, Hydeia threw the offending net over the flailing Raken, further hampering his defense against the eagles. She kicked his injured thigh and hopped on his broad stomach to better reach the dangling rope. Eagle's wings flapped around her legs while she sawed through the rope.

The Eaglekin male fell with a thud and a grunt just as the Raken bucked Hydeia off. She hit the soggy ground on her

side where she was certain she gained bruises she'd feel later, and scrambled back up to her feet.

"Get up! Get up!" Hydeia pulled on the Eaglekin to get him going, but her hands slid across his grease-coated skin.

With her slippery help, he made it to his feet. Shoving her shoulder under his arm, Hydeia half-pulled him through the foliage, leaving the eagles to deal with the Raken.

Where were the other two brutes?

Hydeia glanced at her unexpected mate's features, drawn tight and pale, and streaked with blood. His own and hers. His head must have been pounding savagely from the gash, yet he didn't complain.

Suddenly Tylan sent her an image of the injured Raken on his feet, stumbling into prickly bushes, waving his arms as Uloki herded him with menacing dives and narrow swoops.

Find us shelter! Hydeia sent and felt Tylan dip her wing.

They ran on through the damp forest, padding quietly over spongy tufts of fallen mossbeard, darker purple in color than those strands still growing on the trees.

Tylan's caution rang in Hydeia's head, images relaying thoughts of: *Get down. Find cover. They are near.*

Hydeia embraced the silky flowing warmth of *reyn* and saw the situation through Tylan's view, where the eagle perched above them on a dark leaf-concealed branch.

Two of the Rakens were just to their right, moving behind a screening growth of brush and drooping laces of vines. There was no time to look for adequate cover. Hydeia simply lifted a swath of the dry mossbeard carpeting the ground, and shoved the Eaglekin male down. Half conscious, he fell

without a struggle, face down, barely grunting as Hydeia dropped partway on top of him and pulled the mossbeard over them both. She flung all her sight to the eagle to watch.

Far below the gently swaying branches, the Rakens searched the area.

Hydeia tensed above the Eaglekin, and felt his back stiffen in turn beneath her cheek, breasts, and stomach, as he must have sensed her unease. She pressed a palm against the back of his head, urging him to be still, felt the thick beat of his pulse through his back, so close to her own racing heart.

From Tyalan's lofty vantage, Hydeia could easily make out the signs of her and the male's hasty passage. Yet the Rakens blundered about the area, even trampling over partial boot prints that slanted partway across mossbeard and soil. But even if she and the Eaglekin had been able to manage only stepping on leaf-litter or moss, signs of their flight were evident all around them.

Any tracker with the least degree of skill would see an entire corridor of disturbance above the level of ground. Bruised and twisted leaves, displaced vines, bent branches, rocks kicked out of depressions, cracks and punctures in the damp leaf beds. If nothing else, they should notice which animals had gone silent, intimidated by the presence of eagles in the area.

Were their senses so dulled by pynbrew or did all Rakens have such scant knowledge or skill in woodcraft? The shorter of the brutes shuffled close, kicking through the mossbeard, flinging strands of it still hanging from the trees out of his way.

A heavy clawed foot set down against Hydeia's arm, pulling the sleeve of her tunic tight. She held her breath, tried to slow the pounding of her heart, pressed her palm more firmly upon the Eaglekin's head in warning, though there was no need. He had gone completely still, his own breathing quieted. The grease the Rakens smeared on his skin soaked through Hydeia's tunic.

From above, through her true-bonded, she watched the Raken turn his head side to side, searching.

Next to her arm, she felt his foot shift, begin to lift. She'd braced for discovery when Uloki's loud *cack* shrilled through the forest.

The Raken spun on his weighty heel, kicking dirt and leaves over them as he ran off through the trees, racing with the other Raken.

Hydeia lay very still, her heart pounding. *Koric shine on Uloki*. She would never believe wilders unworthy again.

The Eaglekin shifted beneath her, long back muscles moved against her grease-coated stomach. The soft curling ends of his dark hair grazed her forehead like silken fingers. Ripples of tingly heat unwound deep in her belly. She ran a gentle hand up his back—just to ease his fears she told herself, for he must certainly be afraid—through the wild tangle of his satiny hair, and tried to find and inhale the strong male scent of him she remembered, but couldn't distinguish it beneath the strange odor of the grease the Rakens had spread over his torso.

They shouldn't have done that to him, shouldn't have marked him in any manner.

He was hers.

She had fought for him, had protected him as was her right and obligation.

His fingers fluttered, a fine tremor ran through his hard body, and he momentarily lifted his half-closed lashes. *Sweet brother Koric!* What was she thinking? The poor man was wounded, barely conscious.

"Come. Can you stand?" Pulling the mossbeard off them, she managed to get the male to his feet, draped his arm across her shoulders once more and felt him lean more heavily on her. *Tyalan, find us shelter.*

* * * *

"Tyalan says it's up there. Can you make the climb?" Half-supporting the male's weight, Hydeia stared up at the tumble of boulders that had fallen long ago from the canyon wall, which yawned before them like a giant cupped hand over the forest. An ancient waterway must once have flowed between the heights, leaving the slash of land below rich and fertile for the wild tangle of forest to grow so green and lush.

"Are you able to climb?" she asked again when he didn't answer.

He raised his gaze to the fall of massive boulders and nodded once. Hydeia frowned at his tight brows. His features were pinched and pale. Pressed so close against him, she could feel the slight tremors running through his body. Coming this far had taken too much of a strain on him. She didn't know how he remained on his feet.

Upon Eagle's Light
by Clover Autrey

Hands on his slick waist, she steadied him as best she could as they climbed across the broken jutting rubble, careful to avoid the sharp splinters of stone that would cut through their soft boots. The clouds overhead opened up and spilled rain over them, splattering shiny circles on the rough stone and creating tiny streams that ran across the rock, making the hard surface slick and treacherous.

By the time they reached the large abandoned nest, they were both drenched and chilled to the bone. Sticks, old leaves, and broken strands of dried mossbeard lined the wedge made between two fallen stone slabs beneath a slant of jutting wall that formed a cozy niche around the nest. Below, an array of discarded bones and debris gleamed in the rainfall. At least the long unused nest was partially dry beneath the slanting overhang.

The Eaglekin male stumbled into the nest and rolled to his side.

Climbing in after him, Hydeia knelt over him. That gash on the side of his head worried her. It was deep and still bleeding. She'd have to tend to that first before she could do anything about the ugly burn along his rib. She hoped those Rakens were unable to find shelter and were all shivering out in the weather. She smiled thinly at that thought, hoping it would rain even harder.

She quickly padded some of the old mossbeard that lined the inside of the nest over him. In the condition he was in, he couldn't afford to take on a chill. Next she attended to his head. First she cleaned it with rainwater. Hydeia held the cut together while she padded his head with more of the aged

mossbeard to staunch the bleeding. Head wounds always bled too much, sapping needed strength and energy. At first light she would search the forest floor for nutwort to make a salve and go and retrieve her pack she left by Lannis's trail.

He slept through her ministrations. Even as she pulled back the mossbeard and rubbed away the grease. His skin was smooth beneath sleek muscle, but cold under her touch. Too cold.

An old scar curved across his abdomen from his flat belly then down beneath his breeches. Grimacing, she wondered how long the scar was. Did it continue all the way across his hip and how could someone have survived such an angry wound? It was a nasty horrible looking line that shouted of much suffering.

There were also two more scars, slender marks just below his navel, pink against his sun-darkened skin. Eagle bonding scars. He'd been true-bonded twice. Very few Eaglekin were deemed worthy enough to be true-bonded with an eagle a second time. Especially after their first eagle had been killed. The extraordinary eyrie hatched eagles were protected at all costs by their true-bondeds. Some novices gave up their trial bond after their first year, rather than accept the responsibility and go through the permanent true-bonding ceremony. Hydeia's throat tightened.

She traced the second bonding scar. The male was perhaps three or four years older than herself, much too young to have earned the right to be true-bonded a second time, even if he had achieved something extremely remarkable for the Matrons to consider him worthy of another

eagle. Most likely he would have been deemed as a *tolin sha*, one of the unworthy, incapable of keeping their eagles safe. Yet Uloki was a wilder. The Matrons would never have permitted any Eaglekin to bond with a wilder.

Frowning, Hydeia stared at the puzzling man. He must have performed the bonding ceremony with Uloki by himself. But why would he do that? He had taken a huge risk. What if Uloki had been half as intelligent as he obviously was? Or worse, what if his wild nature had been too untamed, too inhospitable and reckless with defiant emotions too powerful for the Eaglekin to overcome? The Eaglekin's essence could have been overtaken, sucked through their intertwining *reyn* and lost irrevocably in the bird. Such occurrences were whispered about, had been known to happen even with gifted eyrie hatched eagles, but they were rare. Only Eaglekins who had proven themselves resilient enough with strong minds and resolute strength of purpose and will were chosen to be presented to the eagles old enough to true-bond. Even then they had to endure a trial year together.

Lost in the troubling thoughts, Hydeia dabbed rainwater over the male's burn and winced at his sudden flinch and moan. The flash of pain crossing his features unsettled her, clenched the muscles of her abdomen.

"Shhh, shhh, you're well, all's well," she whispered, smoothing his damp hair off his forehead until he quieted again. The strands were feather soft on her skin, his hair a tousle of glistening black curling around a strong face of lean planes and angles.

Upon Eagle's Light
by Clover Autrey

The eagles flew in, silent and graceful. Uloki climbed upon his bonded's hip and rounded his wings over the man's upper body as though he were an eyas that needed protection from the weather.

Thoughts circled Hydeia's head about wilders and their unworthiness and unpredictability to safely bond, yet the Matron's words would no longer land. Hydeia had seen for herself how the wilder had fought for his true-bonded, how he'd drawn off the Rakens, how he watched over him now, exposing himself to the rain.

He was as fine and as worthy a bird as any hatched of the Fourteen Eyries of Gaspar.

* * * *

The summer storm continued throughout the following day, pelting the farthestmost edge of the large nest with weighty drops that splashed back onto them. Hydeia left the slumbering Eaglekin only long enough to backtrack and cover their clumsy trail, hoping the rain would wash away the rest, though it couldn't deter anyone with the least degree of tracking skills. Fortunately it was apparent the Rakens didn't possess such knowledge. Yet she wouldn't let down her guard until she had the male Eaglekin safely away from the area.

After she retrieved her pack, she was also able to find the rigid stemmed brown nutwort growing in a low cluster between tall tangy maddle fronds. The sweet citrus scent of the fronds released in the wet air as she rubbed across the stalks to get to the nutwort, making her mouth water. A little yellow snake flicked his tongue out at her before sliding away

into the denser part of the fronds. Though she didn't want to spare the time away from the male, she dug up two of the fruity bulbs to take back with her.

After she returned to the nest, Uloki flew in with a stubby quail fisted in his talons. He dropped the dead bird near Tyalan and lowered his head while she accepted the courtship offering.

Hydeia looked wryly at the Eaglekin and her stomach took an uncomfortable little lurch. He slept hard, like a man who hadn't rested in a sennight.

He was beautiful. His features were so peaceful while he slumbered.

Why did he refuse her? He should come to her with courtship offerings and a submissive stance. She'd make a worthy companion. She would. She had strength and skill, was comfortable in the harsh and unforgiving canyonlands as well as any woodland. She was true-bonded to a most worthy eagle. What was wrong with the daft man to throw time-honored tradition to the winds?

His disapproval of her gnawed. She frowned at him, her heart sinking. What did it matter? She had a vital task to accomplish. He was safe now and on the mend. His coloring had already improved, no longer so ashen. As the rain wore away their trail from the Rakens, it also would make picking up Lannis's trail more difficult. Not impossible, but it would take longer to follow. Hydeia was losing precious enough time as it was while Lannis and Sheeannar headed closer to danger, but ... she gazed at the Eaglekin's sharp profile. She couldn't just leave him. What if he should start to fever? Or

the wound on his head could be so severe that he might awaken disoriented and confused, unable to care for himself. A sense of dread crept into her mind like a dark shadow at that dire thought.

Feathers ruffled. Wings half-folded, both eagles tilted forward out of the nest, then flattened out and sailed along the slope of boulders before shooting off into the trees together in search of prey to feed their true-bondeds.

Usually when it rained, Hydeia hunted with her bow or gathered nuts, seeds, fruits or other vegetation to provide for their meals while Tyalan remained under a rocky niche or leafy branches, conserving energy. But while they hid from the foul Rakens, Hydeia was grateful the eagles were willing to hunt in the ill weather. She sent a warning to Tyalan to see if the Rakens had picked up their trail or were anywhere near.

Taking dry pieces of the old nest with her, Hydeia shimmed down between the slabs of rock and the canyon face to another relatively dry area and constructed a small fire. In little time she had a nice blaze, screened between thin slants of rocks to keep the ancient nest safe from burning. The warmth seeped slowly into her bones.

Once she had it strong enough to keep until something to cook was provided, she climbed back into the nest to check the Eaglekin's wounds.

When she pulled back the mossbeard, he shot out of sleep, sitting up, eyes wide and frantic.

"Uloki!"

"Safe. Shh. Shh. Everything is well. You're safe. Uloki's safe." Hydeia attempted to press him back down.

He stilled, resisting her efforts to ease him back. His skin was still too cold, but the beat of his heart was strong and steady beneath her palm. His features shone with the subtle glow of an Eaglekin communing with his bonded, a light sky blue luminescence with tiny whorls of green threading through his own unique *reyn*, which faded as relief loosened his jaw. "Safe. As you said, he's safe. He reports that the Rakens have left the forest and have gone out to search in the canyonlands. Forgive me, I didn't mean to be so edgy. I was worried about him is all." He grinned crookedly at her. Hydeia was struck at just how truly handsome he was. "Your hands are warm."

She immediately snatched her palm away. "I was by the fire."

His grin vanished. "How long did I sleep?"

"A night and a day."

He nodded, appraising her peculiarly as he lifted his hand to feel the wound on his head. "You stayed with me?"

What type of question was that? "You would not have done the same?"

His face drained of all his hard won color, then all emotions as he shuttered them away behind a reserved countenance. Obviously, he wasn't going to answer. Unnerved by his steady study of her, Hydeia felt like shifting back. But it was ever her way to not back down, so instead she moved closer. "Let me see your head. I have some nutwort I was about to make into a warm paste."

His eyes narrowed. His jaw had a stubborn thrust to it. Granted, he had no reason to trust her, he didn't know her,

but really. His distrust bordered on insulting. "Your wound. Let me see to it."

After a moment he inclined his head—that was an improvement—and stiffened at her probing.

"I'm not your mate," he said quietly. His darkly golden eyes were bright and sharp as blades.

"So you've made clear." His wound looked better, showed no signs of infection, no smell, though she imagined it must throb terribly. "You must realize that Uloki will want to remain with Tyalan. As for you and me, I'll try to stay out of your presence as much as possible." Her fists clenched in her lap. How it galled her to say such a thing to him. A warm flush of humiliation was creeping up her neck, an all too familiar sensation she'd long ago learned to ignore. Wouldn't the Matrons glower and cluck over this? Already deemed of no consequence, barely worthy, to be true-bonded to the likes of Tyalan, or any eagle for that matter, yet here lay solid proof of her unworthiness, her rightful mate couldn't abide her.

She lifted her chin, managed an uncaring, even bored expression. "I regret that you find me unworthy."

"Unworthy...?" The look on his face was pure masculine confusion. *Rotting prey*, she didn't need this burning humiliation. It was bad enough that his very proximity made the insides of her belly flutter and her thoughts stray to how firm and pleasurable his skin was to touch ... but that he had no want of her, even with the strength of their eagles' bonding straining through both their *reyn*, slick with heat and raw compelling need...

He seemed to see right past her flesh and bone, into her dark embarrassment.

Tyalan and Uloki glided into the nest with a ruffling of wings and a dangling hare and another quail. Uloki dropped the quail and perched near the Eaglekin's shoulder, moving his head beneath the man's graceful palm. His long fingers began to slowly stroke the bird.

It was too much. Grabbing up the hare and quail and her pack, Hydeia eased down to the fire.

* * * *

In little time, Hydeia had the hare skinned and sliced and boiling in her small travel pot. Anger always made her work more efficiently. The fatty broth would provide good nourishment for the Eaglekin, restoring needed strength from all the blood he'd lost. Which would let them part more quickly and she could get back to matters at hand.

When she climbed back up to the ancient nest, his eyes were closed. She quietly thanked *Koric* for that small reprieve from his unnerving gaze. Tyalan and Uloki perched together near the back of the niche. Hating to wake him, more to the point, not wanting to see that knowing way he appraised her, Hydeia sat next to the Eaglekin and checked his warmth. He was chilled again so she scooted closer, covered him with her own bedroll, and studied his lean face. She at least had the right to look at him, didn't she? Just to look at him. Only because she was curious of course. Strong cheekbones, angular jaw. Dark lashes tipped with fine gold dusted his cheeks. He was most pleasing to look upon.

He was hers.

But he refused her.

A little lance of need, of wanting to know him, wanting him to accept her, stabbed her breast. Knowing they'd part soon, she gave in to the undeniable urge to touch him again. Lightly, she trailed the pads of her fingers along his jaw, liking the rough feel of his stubble.

His beautiful eyes slid open, sleep-hazed, and heavy lidded. "Your hands are warm again." The sound of his voice was throaty and rich, which sent delicate little shivers skidding down Hydeia's spine. *Shredded prey*, his voice alone had that effect on her?

She immediately scooted back and grabbed the pot. "I brought you stew. Well, not much of a stew. I only had some maddle bulbs ... and, of course, the, the hare, but it's warm ... ah, warm. And you need the nourishment." *Shred her*, she was rambling on like a half-wit.

Looking at her oddly, he took the pot, shifted to a different sitting position and leaned back against the stiff lining of the ancient nest. His hair was a wild tangle from sleep. He looked adorable. "My thanks."

Flustered, Hydeia nodded. He was jumbling her every nerve. The sooner they parted, the better. But through their eagles they were tied to one another. They'd keep their distance, but would she always know he was somewhere near just out of reach—or would these maddening emotions subside once the newness of Tylan and Uloki's courtship subdued?

Hydeia hunched her shoulders against the cold. Rain splattered the nest, misting her face, sliding down her hair.

The man—her supposed mate—placed the warm pot back into her palms. A streak of warmth tingled across her fingers where his had grazed. "Have you eaten?"

She traced her ear with her thumb and stared down into the stew. "I am true-bonded with Tylan of the Longwings of Crystal Falls Eyrie, Second Creed kae sa Hydeia." She left her mother's formal attachment unsaid. "I thought ... I thought you would at least care for my name. And ... I feel foolish not knowing what to call you."

He was silent for a long moment. She wasn't sure he was going to answer. His tawny eyes held hers. "Ammah."

Ammah. Just Ammah. No formal title representing which eyrie birthed him, or extension of being Uloki's true-bonded, or any tie to another eagle that gave him the first bonding scar that graced the skin above his navel.

"Thank you for that." She inclined her head.

"I ... my name is little enough repayment for your care. Thank you for freeing me from those Rakens, but," his voice shifted, became hard and deeply compelling. "What were you doing in the forest? I clearly told you to keep out."

Hydeia snapped her head up. He had not the right to demand anything of her. He'd belabored that point. "Yet you came in."

"I've a task that takes me through the pass beyond the forest."

"As have I."

Ammah frowned. "You do? The Matrons have permitted one so young to leave the territories? What is this task?"

She didn't have the Matrons' permission exactly. But she was charged with bringing back Sheeannar and Lannis, and if they had crossed out of Gaspar, then the Matrons' must surely expect that she would as well. Hydeia scowled and hoped she did it well. "I'm not your mate. My task is my own."

His dark brows rose, clearly taken aback before he composed his features. "True. However, this is a dangerous time for Eaglekins and their bondeds to be roaming about, especially in these lands. You've no notion of what's been going on."

Hydeia's anger evaporated like mist in the sun. This was more important than his indifference to her. "Do you know what's going on? Why so many Eaglekins have gone missing? Those Rakens were willing to barter you for pynbrew rather than outright kill you as the demon they believe all of us to be. Why? If you can tell me anything, you must. Tylan and I have been tracking an Eaglekin and her eagle from our sister eyrie this past sennight and have come no closer."

The strength of his golden brown raptor gaze captured hers, held her. "You abandoned her trail to come after me?" His brows furrowed, creating tiny lines in the middle of his forehead. "You stayed to watch over me," he said more to himself as though it was difficult to conceive of such a thought. His gaze drifted away.

She had no idea why such a simple thing would perplex him so. She wanted to smooth the lines suddenly etched so

deeply in his face. Instead Hydeia tugged on her earlobe.
"What do you know of the missing Eaglekins?"

"Beyond these canyons there are many lands with great cities." He paused. "Like hundreds of villages together."

Hydeia glared. "I know of cities. I'm not an idiot." She'd heard of them at any rate, though she'd never cast eyes upon one. In truth she'd only seen one of mankind's small villages, a long time ago with her mother, and that had been from a distance. They had traveled many days to reach it, crossed a high mountainous pass that had made her mother nervous, yet Hydeia found climbing down the steep handholds a wonderful game.

Josanne had been quiet, determined the entire journey, carrying her young daughter when Hydeia had grown tired. It was one of her happiest memories, being away from the eyrie, free from the disapproving stares and endless encumbering chores. At the outskirts of the active little village, her mother had stood very still. Hydeia remembered the strength and tightness of Josanne's hand holding hers. She recalled the laughter and noise of children and her curiosity had her taking an unafraid step forward to see what game they played in the large leaves of the turnip patch. But her mother's grip had hardened on Hydeia's thin arm, shaky and fierce. Hydeia looked up into her mother's face, sensing something of importance was taking place in their lives. Josanne had pulled Hydeia back, away from the strange village and without an explanation of why they had journeyed so far, they simply left and returned to the eyrie. Not that Hydeia had minded. She'd loved every step of the strenuous

journey, both there and back, and had often begged her mother to go again, which always brought a melancholy smile to Josanne's lips.

Strange for that memory to slide across her mind like that now. She hadn't thought of it in years. It was misty and dewy in her mind, as insubstantial as a dream. A pleasant dream since it was the one time her mother and herself had been free of the Matron's overbearing tasks and demands.

Eaglekins did not venture too close to mankind's villages where their eagles may be exposed to frightened releases of arrows. Yet Ammah seemed to know of these cities.

His hand tapped absently on the bedroll over the shape of his muscled thigh. "These cities, these vast lands on the other side of the eyrie canyons, their rulers war with each other."

"Over territories. As do eagles," Hydeia said. Territories were fiercely protected. Complaints unable to be resolved by right, or sometimes strength, were taken to the Council of the Matrons.

Ammah's flat smile was brief. "In a way. But some desire to carve for themselves much more territory than they need. In their greed, they destroy much land, many crops, many innocent people, to take what they want. Then they must war again to keep what they've taken. These rulers will use whatever means available."

Hydeia leaned forward, putting her weight on her hands. "What has this to do with Eaglekins?"

"I'm not certain," Ammah admitted. "But they're being taken, those that are true-bonded to Irrean, where there are

rumors of Mystics—the king's mages—creating new weapons for his failing war."

"You believe these Mystics are using Eaglekins as weapons?" Hydeia's heart fell to her toes.

Ammah shook his head. "I don't know. But it's been whispered that that is the case."

Eaglekins as weapons? It seemed too preposterous a notion to give any merit to. She shook her head. "Then Irrean is where I need to go."

Ammah grabbed her hand, sending a shocking ripple of heat coursing along her arm. "Even if there is some truth to it, you can't do anything for them. It would be too late for any Eaglekins that have been taken."

Hydeia stared at their joined hands, liking the rough feel of the calloused pads of his fingers. "It can't be too late. You don't know that."

"I know enough."

"I'm going to Irrean."

Silence strained between them, ripe with frustration. Slowly, Ammah nodded, seeming to sift through several decisions. His lips twisted. "You are set on this?"

Nodding, Hydeia wondered what he could possibly be thinking.

"Very well." His chin thrust out arrogantly. "But first come with me. I want to show you exactly what becomes of these Eaglekins."

Chapter Four

Hydeia followed Ammah through the damp forest, watching for any indication that the wound on his head or burn along his lower rib might be bothering him, but he walked agilely with the silent posture of a man at home in the deep woods. Her gaze roamed over the supple fluid movement of the muscles of his legs, lean hips, and bare back, enjoying the sheer masculine beauty of his body. She grinned at the way his dark hair curled up against the edge of the white linen wrapped around his head. It gave him a boyish charm, though he didn't act nearly as young as he looked. Warmth tickled along her skin, raising goose flesh across her arms.

Sweet Koric, half a day must have passed since they'd left the ancient nest. She could watch him walk all day and never grow weary of it.

Soggy leaf-mold squished beneath Hydeia's boots. Good, she'd have to concentrate on her own footing, and on where Ammah was taking her. Not on the muscles playing in his back. She groaned inwardly. This wasn't like her at all. Though she appreciated a finely shaped male when she saw one, none had ever whipped her desires and emotions into a huge whirlwind of aching need before. It had to be her *reyn*, so closely attuned to Tylan's strong feelings for the tiercel that made Hydeia yearn for Uloki's true-bonded. She could barely keep a thought in her head that didn't have anything to do with him. This was getting to be too shredding distracting. It was maddening, really. She wasn't a fledgling

who had no control over her emotions. But still, she wasn't sure she could withstand the feelings the very sight of him evoked in her, until the intensity of Tylan's courtship *reyn* simmered or she and Ammah went their separate ways for good.

Reaching overhead to pull aside shaggy mossbeard, the muscles along Ammah's entire side rippled beneath his skin from shoulder blade to hip.

Hydeia looked skyward and clenched her hands into fists, losing her mental battle, and attempted to focus on more important matters. "How exactly did you come upon her?"

The mossbeard dripped water left from the recent rain over Ammah. Shaking the droplets off, he glanced back. "On the outskirts of Irrean. She'd been through some kind of..." He paused, holding the purple mossbeard up out of Hydeia's way while she passed beneath it. She felt the water droplets and also felt Ammah's gaze slip over her, following the path of the drops falling along her thick hair. She glanced back up at him. The apple of his throat column lifted and fell in a tight swallow before he dragged his gaze away. "I don't know, something horrific. She was ill and..." His expression went hard, flat. "I found her on the side of a little-used road. There were signs showing a heavily loaded wagon had stopped there. Someone had simply thrown her out like refuse."

Dear brother sun. "She was just left on the side of the road? And there was no trace of her eagle? You're certain she's an Eaglekin?" A cold dread began to crawl along the base of Hydeia's spine. Why would any Eaglekin have left the safety of Gaspar to wander alone on the other side of the

canyonlands? For that matter, what exactly had Ammah been doing there traveling one of mankind's roads?

His fine brows furrowed. "Could you not identify your own?"

Stupid question. Of course he'd know an Eaglekin by sight, by feel, by their unique patterns and hues of luminous *reyn* while they conversed with their eagle, as would she. But without an eagle? "You believe she could be Lannis? Did she say who she was? Which eyrie birthed her?" Hydeia didn't believe the Eaglekin was Lannis. The trail she'd picked up in the forest, though not new, had still not been old enough for Lannis to have gone as far as Irrean and then to have been brought back by Ammah. It had to be another Eaglekin.

Ammah shook his head and seemed to regret the motion as pain from his wound lanced through his features. "I took her to the village where she could be cared for."

About that ... Hydeia stared at the ground. He should have taken her to an eyrie to be cared for properly among her own kind, rather than to one of mankind's villages. Twisting her bottom lip between her teeth, she doubted that would have been any better, she knew all too well the fate of one who had lost or given up her eagle.

"Were you..." Concern worried Ammah's handsome face and an unaccustomed tenderness stirred in Hydeia's heart. "Were you very close to this Lannis?" He broke the connection of their gaze, moved on.

Her heart sank, heavy within the cage of her breast. Was the Eaglekin he'd found so damaged then? And what if she was wrong in her guess about the age of the tracks? What if

she was Lannis? "I saw her once, from a distance at my first gathering as a true-bonded. I know her by her eagle's reputation mostly. Sheeannar is grand-dame to many of the most worthy eagles. She and Lannis have maintained their true-bond more than a decade, longer than even some of the Matrons were able to hold their true-bonds before the *beton trella* overtook them."

That brought him up short. The broad line of Ammah's bare shoulders tensed. He stood very still. Every word came out blade sharp, primed for battle. "Are you telling me that the Matrons sent out a near fledging to bring back an honored ten year? When you don't even know her, have no blood tie to her at all?"

Hydeia's cheeks warmed. He was twisting her words. "I'm two years true-bonded, hardly a fledgling. The Matrons honored me when they chose me for this task." She had been afraid to hope for any assignment, was humbled beyond feeling to finally be sent on a foray of such importance. She wouldn't fail in it.

"They're all self-guided, ignorant ... they shouldn't have—"

"What are you talking about? Who? The Matrons?" Hydeia sensed Tylan overhead, landing gently on a swaying branch near the top of the forest.

Uloki glided in. Ammah raised his leather-guarded arm to take him on his wrist, but Uloki sailed around him and landed on a lightning-struck stump near Hydeia.

"Ah, you're a handsome one, a fine lad. A fine handsome lad, yes," Hydeia practically cooed at him, ignoring Ammah's heated glare. He really was an amazing eagle. Though he was

bonded to the most exasperating Eaglekin of all the Fourteen Eyries. Hydeia didn't understand Ammah's distrust of the Matrons. They each had earned the right to belong on the council that selflessly served all the eyries for the remainder of their lives. Each had been true-bonded to one of the strongest and most worthy of eagles until, over the years, the *reyn* that streamed between eagle and Eaglekin became too strong, too unreliable and potent for one Eaglekin to maintain.

Before the Eaglekin female lost all her ability to suppress the dangerous emotions that seemed to grow more erratic with age, the affliction known as *beton trella*, she was released from her bond with honor and free to live among her eyrie. Or if she had earned the rare distinction, she would be admitted into the council of Matrons where her true-bond with her eagle could be maintained. Male Eaglekins weren't plagued by this strange affliction of *beton trella* in their *reyn*. A male and his tiercel could safely share their true-bond throughout their entire lifetimes. Sadly, it had never been the same case for the females.

During a hidden ceremony that no one but the Matrons themselves had ever seen or taken part in, the newly appointed Matron's individual *reyn* was somehow transferred to the group of women as a whole. Together, combined in many layers of individual strengths of their wills, the council could filter out and level among themselves the shifting unpredictable emotions that surged throughout the ever-increasing power of shared *reyn*. It was only in that way that a female Eaglekin could continue to have any further bond

with her eagle. Though there was an obscure legend that spoke of a female having found a way to remain true-bonded with her eagle until they were both far beyond the years of the *beton trella* taking hold, no one spoke openly of it. It was an affliction of the aged, not for the young and strong to concern themselves with for many years.

Yet Lannis had been true-bonded to Sheeannar for sixteen years with not even the slightest evidence of being unable to suppress her emotions at will, four years longer than the amount of time the greatly respected Matron kae sa Melanor had been able to hold off the effects of *beton trella*. Was it any wonder many of the younger Eaglekin females looked to Lannis with awe and a flowering hope? It alarmed everyone that Sheeannar and Lannis had gone missing.

Glad for the distraction, Hydeia unwrapped the quail the tiercel had caught last night from within the hare skin rolled at her waist, and knifing out a slice, she offered the meat to the eagle.

Turning his head to appraise her, Uloki dipped his beak and snatched the strip away.

Hydeia smiled.

"He's a wilder you know." Ammah's voice was chillingly quiet. "That doesn't disgust you?"

Hydeia lifted her face to him. Ammah stared intently at her as though she were a lure or a trap he couldn't figure out how to unset.

"That an Eaglekin would bond with a wilder? It troubled me, yes. At first."

Ammah turned away from her to study the ground, and nodded, as though looking at her would hurt him, make any disapproval more solid. She understood that feeling all too well.

Hydeia wanted to run her hand across his brow, smooth the lines of worry there. She stepped toward him, so close she felt the warmth of his body. His breath teased her hair. "It is known in my eyrie, taken for fact, that wilders cannot be trusted. It is taught that they do not possess the strength of will to secure the bond. But from what I've seen him do, Uloki is more than capable. He is magnificent."

Ammah's head lifted. This near, Hydeia saw that dark brown rings circled the outer rims of his dark pupils before turning golden. Her breathing slowed, her pulse was a dull thump in her ears. Desperately, she wanted to touch him, feel his firm taut skin, that dark stubble again. She inhaled his strong male scent of deep forests and storm-tossed air.

When her palm found his chest, the beating of his heart thrummed strong and quick. She was drawn to him like no other. How could he so easily spurn the connection of their bond? He was not moving away now. That was something. Or was it his *reyn* holding him? At this moment she sensed nothing of passion coming from Tylan. The eagle perched aloft, preening feathers with her glossy beak.

Hydeia stepped back abruptly. Uncertainty drifted through her mind. Was her attraction to Ammah more than just her *reyn*? "How—how did you come to bond with Uloki?" She asked stupidly, seeking any momentary distraction. Was she attracted to Ammah alone? Or was it the *reyn's* compulsion

that stirred her blood to boiling around him? If not the bond, what would happen when they parted? Would she never be rid of this feeling that made her blind and weak to real matters of importance?

Ammah hadn't moved. He was looking at her oddly, then he slowly skimmed his thumb across her jaw line. She trembled at his touch. A sudden panic stalled the faint rhythm of her heart. His eyes grew smoky, scorching all her senses.

His chest expanded in a steady breath. "I never intended to."

"Wh—What...?"

A smile crinkled the skin around Ammah's eyes. "To bond with another eagle. I never intended to bond with Uloki."

"Oh." A soft ray of sunlight broke through the canopy of trees, wavering like mist in the moist air between them.

"I found him close to death, his shoulder muscle had been torn and he hadn't been able to fend for himself. The muscle I could help. With time. But he was already too weak."

The light fractured. "To keep Uloki alive, you bonded with him so he could take from your strength." Hydeia looked at Ammah as though she was seeing him for the first time. A heady tenderness welled up inside of her, clamping around the muscles of her throat.

His eyes dark with shadows, Ammah nodded curtly.

* * * *

The village lay just outside the forest, beyond swathes of swaying dusty green grain fields and taller stalks of corn. The vegetation was lush and colorful against the fiercely stark

remnants of the golden canyon walls, which receded into long expanses of forests and soft hills. This land beyond the canyon eyries was indeed rich and vibrant.

Hydeia lingered back as Ammah walked confidently through the grain field. The long stems feathered around his lean hips. Pausing, he twisted his torso and motioned her forward. "These people won't harm you."

She wasn't as certain. It was common knowledge among the eyries that mankind's villagers blamed eagles for any killing of their flocks. As though it was possible for an eagle to take flight carrying something larger than herself. Villages were to be avoided.

Yet her mother had once brought her to the edge of a village before. Standing at the fringes of this village, Hydeia remembered the other one. Josanne had spoken about leaving the eyries for good. Yet when they arrived, she had changed her mind. Why?

Ammah extended his hand. "These people honor Eaglekins. Have faith in me."

Faith in him? When he himself was a mystery to her. But she'd come this far. If Lannis were here among these villagers...

Quickly she caught up to him and without thinking, took his offered hand. It was warm and reassuring. Safe. She reached for her *reyn* and sent to Tylan to remain at the forested pass's edge, unseen, and assumed Ammah would tell Uloki the same.

"Who's that? Who comes out of the forest?"

Hydeia flinched at the gruff voice. A large ox of a man hurled toward them through the cornstalks, carrying a long three pronged pick. Hydeia slipped out the blade she carried at her hip.

Ammah lifted his hands. "Dayan, slow. It's me. Ammah."

"Ammah?" The villager slowed, lowered his tool. "Ammah!" He had the chest of an oak and a face as weathered and seamed as bark. He caught the Eaglekin up in an embrace, lifting him off his feet.

Hydeia stepped back, her knife in an easy throwing grip.

The farmer eyed her when he let go of Ammah. "You've brought me another stray to tend?"

The skin around Ammah's eyes crinkled. The bandage wrapped around his forehead had loosened and was slanting along one dark eyebrow, giving him an unbridled demeanor. He smiled more fully than Hydeia had yet seen, and the look of him at ease sent tiny sparks snapping in her belly.

"No, Dayan. This is Hydeia. She's come seeking the other one."

Dayan rubbed a hand across his short reddish beard. "Oh, well, come then. She's up at the house."

Ammah slowed Dayan by catching his upper arm. "Is she any better?"

Dayan stopped and glancing back at Hydeia, gave a quick shake of his shaggy head.

* * * *

Villagers scurried from every direction to greet them, leaving wash and stitching at the common well, and threshing

baskets and farming tools in the fields. Some came with baskets brimming with vegetables and fruit, which they pushed into Ammah's and Hydeia's arms until they could carry no more. Then the villagers simply followed along behind them, carrying the laden baskets.

Hydeia nodded tightly all the while watching for the net to be thrown over her head or farmer's tool to hit her back.

Ammah held no such distrust. He called them by name, and clasped forearms with more than a few, genuinely happy to be among these villagers.

More people emerged from small rectangular daub-and-wattle cottages as they neared the central well. A large wooden carving of an eagle's head, one of the heavy white and black eagles of the northern eyries, proudly adorned the lintel of one of the longer cottages that looked like the north section of it had been recently added. Hydeia frowned at the carving, then her eyes widened as she felt Tylan gliding near. *Stay hidden*, she sent, horrified that Tylan was doing no such thing. The headstrong bird soared into view, and swooped low over the villagers' heads.

Hydeia listened for the faint creak of bows being bent to string. The villagers squealed with delight, pointing and laughing, growing more excited as Uloki joined Tylan in the air. He cut in tightly between two cottages and let out an excited scream.

Glancing at Ammah to gauge their danger, Hydeia took heart in his broad smile. She felt a curious tightening in her chest and her fear lifted a fraction. He must have sensed her

gaze for he turned to her, and his smile slipped away, seeing her concern.

"All's well," he mouthed. "Look."

At the end of a slow wide circuit of the thatched rooftops, Tylan landed gracefully on top of the carved eagle head where she turned her head slowly, eyeing the villagers who had all gone completely quiet and still. Unshed tears glistened in an older man's eyes as he smiled tentatively and inclined his head toward Hydeia and Ammah. The people's awe and excitement at seeing the eagles come among them pulsed in the air, thick and vibrant. She felt a strange prickling in her own eyes. This was vastly different than the reception she had assumed would greet them. But regardless of the warmth of the greetings, the crowd made Hydeia uneasy. Anything could happen with so many people surrounding them.

She couldn't have been more grateful than when Dayan hustled them away from the well and past the main village. Several people followed them as they passed homes and sheep pens, chicken coops, and penned in bowers for larger stock. The scents of hay and droppings and honest sweat and the constant low hum of noise reminded Hydeia of the eyrie where she'd been raised, and brought a sudden pang of loneliness. She'd never really belonged there either. Again she sought Ammah's face and once more as though sensing her gaze, he turned to her and gave her a smile meant to reassure.

They came to a long but squat cottage where a tiny woman with a small upturned nose and pale hair pulled back into an untidy bun, stood in the doorframe. "Dayan, there you

are. What is going on out there? Oh! Oh!" A wide smile lengthened her small features. "Ammah! That is you. Oh, Ammah!"

In quick short strides she had the baskets out of Ammah's arms and into Dayan's and was being lifted off the ground and hugged tightly by the Eaglekin. Many of the villagers still following them smiled as they put their baskets down around the grassy area in front of the cottage before they slipped quietly away, back to their own homes and fields.

Hydeia's grip tightened on her stack of baskets, until she saw the slice of pain cross Ammah's features, then all her worries seemed of little consequence.

The petite woman also noticed. "Dear skies, what have you done to yourself this time? Ammah, let me down and get inside at once. And your poor head this time, too." She clucked over the drooping bandage, almost white against his dark hair. Her gaze turned on Hydeia, measuring, then softened. "You've brought us another then. Poor little thing. Here. Come with me. It's all right. Everything will be all right now. Come along." She stepped down to Hydeia and started to guide her up the steps and in through the door as though she was an eyas. Hydeia tossed a strained look back at Ammah who watched with an idle grin. The woman's voice was low and soothing. "Let me bring you to the table, sweetling. There, that's fine. Then we'll set down these baskets together."

"I can manage it." Hydeia frowned.

The woman blinked rapidly, then her features broke into a bewildered smile. "Forgive me, dear. Oh. Dear skies, my ... I

just assumed ... since Ammah brought you ... dear me, you must think me a complete fool."

Well. Since Hydeia had never been around anyone born of mankind, she didn't think she was qualified to judge whether the woman was a fool or not, but she had thought she was rather odd. She set the vegetables down. Three wooden perches stood near the fireplace. Jesses, leather gloves, and hoods hung from pegs on the far wall. Looking around, she was startled to find a small broad-winged fisher eagle, a wilder, perched on a low cadge post. Leather jesses circled his feathered ankles.

Dayan set his baskets down as well. "This one's unhurt, Etha. She came looking for the other."

Etha's face drained of color. "Oh dear girl. I truly am sorry. Here." She took Hydeia by the hand. "Come with me."

* * * *

"She's not Lannis." Hydeia had already known that she wouldn't be Lannis, but part of her had hoped. Until she saw what had become of the girl before her. Hydeia knelt in front of the Eaglekin, not much younger than herself.

Etha had brought them outside to the rear of the cottage where the young Eaglekin female sat in the sun, her gaze flat and unfocused. The faint glow of her *reyn* suffused her entire body, opaque and pearly. But there was no eagle she communed with.

"You're certain?" Ammah asked, standing behind her.

Hydeia nodded, ill to her core. She remembered this girl, one of those newly fledged whose disappearance had been

reported by the Territorial Guardians recently. "This is Santil of the Tall Pines Eyrie. She was true-bonded this past gathering to Rakia of the Golden Heights..." She cut off before her voice broke.

"Santil," Etha sighed. "I've been calling her Sera."

"What's happened to her?" Hydeia asked. "It's as though she has been lost within her eagle's bond." Like the effects of *beton trella*, she thought. "But she's far too young."

Ammah knelt beside her, anger and frustration in his expressive features. "In a way that's it exactly. Though she wasn't consumed by her own lack of will. This was forced."

Hydeia's head snapped up. "Something like this can be forced? How is that possible? Tell me."

"Perhaps we should discuss this inside. While we eat. You look ready to drop on your feet, the both of you," Etha said.

Nodding agreement, Hydeia ran her fingers along the ends of Santil's dark hair. It had been brushed until it shined. She was dressed in a warm homespun gown. Etha and Dayan had cared for her well.

Hydeia's throat felt raw and tightened more as Etha drew Santil up and guided her inside, carefully crossing the threshold one step at a time, then set her at the large table.

Grabbing a glove, Dayan took the eagle onto his fist. "I'll take Nestan out to the mews. He may not take to your eagles. They're welcome to come inside unless they'd prefer to stay out of doors."

Ammah held the door open for him while Dayan took Nestan out into the gathering night. Shimmering *reyn*, trailing

tendrils of blue and summer green, surrounded him as he communicated with Uloki.

Not trusting Tyalan among the villagers alone, Hydeia called her in as well, hoping she wouldn't be stubborn about it. It'd be nice if she paid heed to her just once, it really would.

"Mews?" She stared at Ammah.

He nodded absently. "These people have their own eagles, some falcons and ospreys as well. Though they don't share a bond with them, they train them—"

"Train them! Like horses? Or oxen to bend under their plows!"

Anger lit Ammah's golden eyes. "I won't bother trying to explain anything to an Eaglekin."

"Stop that, Ammah." Etha's small face screwed up in a scowl. "You weren't any less skeptical when you first came here. Just sit yourself down while I see to these wounds." Etha pulled Ammah to one of the chairs and started unwrapping the bandage on his head. "Skies, what you've done to yourself."

Hydeia leaned over to see how his wound fared for herself but Etha stabbed her with a stare. "If you'd please start ladling some stew into bowls. They're on the lowest shelf there."

Hydeia started at the tone. For the past two years, no one had barked an order at her like that. Tamping down a sudden flare of anger, she stood up. She decided she preferred it when the woman had acted as a fool, more kindly. As Hydeia brought bowls of stew and bread to the table, Etha spread

salve on Ammah's head. He remained still and silent under her ministrations, though a muscle in his jaw jumped when she spread another ointment over the burn along his rib. Hydeia cocked her head, wondering what it was and how well it would work. She tried to discern its smell but it was unfamiliar, likely something that wouldn't grow in the canyonlands' harsh soil.

"This village is devoted to eagles," Etha said. "You Eaglekins have long forgotten the old ways after you shut yourselves away from the lands of mankind. After the Broken Wars, I can't say I blame you. But your Matrons neglected to pass on the knowledge that mankind and Eaglekins were once brothers and sisters and worked side by side together."

Ammah hissed in a steadying breath and both females paused in their actions.

Etha's voice turned soft. "Does it pain you so, lad?"

"No," he fairly gritted out and Etha and Hydeia shared a knowing look. "I'm sure it doesn't, so I'll just spread this salve more thickly."

Ammah grabbed the bowl and salve, yanking it out of her grasp. "It's fine. You've done enough." His features slipped into a sheepish grin. "Thank you."

Etha rolled her eyes upward and continued with her tale. "Some of us remember and know why we established a village here, on the barren outskirts of an untamed land, at the gentlest to travel of your passageways into the canyonlands. Our ancestors once took oaths to yours, oaths that we keep. We honor and revere Eaglekins, though no one in our village had set eyes upon one until Ammah stumbled

out of the forest three years past. Quite truthfully, we weren't certain you existed anymore."

"Other Eaglekins have come through." Dayan stood in the doorway. "I've seen their signs, but all avoided our village. Lass, don't think ill of us, all the birds here have been found wounded, or were neglected by their former masters in the cities. We care for them here, give them refuge. As we would do for any Eaglekin who found their way to us. Did Ammah not tell you the name of our village?"

Hydeia shook her head.

Dayan smiled. "*Amalikiol*."

Hydeia stared. In the old tongue, *Amalikiol* roughly meant Eagle's rest.

* * * *

They left the doors open while they ate. A calming breeze blew about the room, ruffling through dried herbs hanging from a crossbeam.

Hydeia watched Etha spoon small portions of stew between Santil's lips, nodding approvingly each time the girl swallowed. Each bite taken was agonizingly slow and heart wrenching to watch.

Hydeia had no appetite, her insides felt weighted with stone. Her spoon pushed carrots around the baked clay bowl. "What did this to her?"

"Who." Ammah shot to his feet, unable to contain his anger at the bare mention of the topic.

Dayan rested a shovel-sized palm on the Eaglekin's shoulder, but looked at Hydeia. "Do you know your people's history?"

"Of course," she said. "I'd memorized it before I petitioned to have an eagle choose me." She had studied many hard long hours. She couldn't give the Matrons any reason to refuse her the chance of being presented to the gifted eagles to be true-bonded.

"Only the histories the Matrons deemed fit. They hold much back from our people, they are clothed in secrecy." Ammah practically snarled it.

Etha scowled, delicate with her birdlike features. "Lower your voice. You'll upset Santil."

"Which would truly be something," he snapped, though he lowered to his chair and said much more subdued, "I'd scream to the skies to see her upset ... or angry ... or anything."

He looked so sad, so inconsolable and lost, so ready to take action on the wounded girl's behalf though there was nothing conceivable he could do for her, that Hydeia wanted nothing more than to go to him and brush all the worries from his shoulders. Which she was certain he'd take great offense to.

Dayan sat down next to Etha, pulled her small frame back to lean on his wide chest as she attended to Santil. "What do you know of your people's origins?"

"We have our legends. The oldest is that of Cesorum and Glyn, but it is only a legend." Hydeia shrugged with one

shoulder. "We just are. Have always been Eaglekins. As mankind has always been mankind."

"Perhaps. But some small truths can always be found in legend. Tell me."

Her patience was growing short, but if these people were willing to give her answers to find Lannis and Sheeannar and possibly somehow aid Santil, she'd recite the old fable for them. Gladly. "Cantila, the first eagle pecked her way out of the bowels of the world and rode the wind currents across splendid *Koric*, the sun. The first people honored and revered Cantila, Mother Eagle, and her mate and their offspring for many generations, leaving many gifts below the craggy heights where Cantila made her first nest. One day Cesorum, Mother Eagle's first hatched eyas flew over shore and sea, hunting the giant salmon. As she locked talons onto the monstrous fish, the young eagle was whisked beneath the waves." Hydeia paused. She never had enjoyed this part of the fable, imagining how terrifying being pulled underwater must have been. She took a calming breath before continuing. She liked the next part of the tale, humbled by the selfless show of courage.

"Watching nearby, a young fisher girl, Glyn, swam to the eagle's aid and pulled the young and overly brave Cesorum and the great fish above the plunging waves, only to be pulled down under the tumbling surface herself."

Hydeia felt Tyalan soaring closer, heard the whooshing sound of her wings through the warm slice of *reyn*, felt the heady rush of air flutter along her skin.

"Sensing her first-hatched's peril, Mother Eagle dove from the skies and grabbed the fisher girl in her talons, who courageously clutched Cesorum's soaked form to herself." Etha leaned forward, placing her elbows on the table, and her chin on her fists. Her eyes were huge.

Hydeia continued. "When Cantila dragged them to shore, Cesorum was alive, but the young fisher girl's chest had been crushed in Mother Eagle's mighty talons."

Tyalan and Uloki flew through the rear door, landing lightly on the tall perches. Dayan immediately went to the bin near the hearth and pulled out a dead squirrel, which he slung across one of the perches between them. Lowering his head, Uloki waited while Tyalan hopped on and set to work on the squirrel.

Hydeia's hand strayed to the lobe of her ear and continued the tale. "Mother Eagle clutched the dead child in her spiny scaled talons once more and screaming, flew to the sun where *Koric*, touched by Glyn's sacrifice, restored her life with his warm rays, taking the balance of her death from Cesorum. From that day onward, they became two halves of a whole, true-bonded forever, sustained by sunlight.

"Thus their offspring, both eagle and Eaglekin, have shared *reyn* in a true-bond through the ages." Hydeia understood that feeling of incompleteness without an eagle well. She had yearned her entire life to be bonded, regardless of the scorn and setbacks the Matrons had burdened her with. She'd only been that much more determined to succeed, to prove herself. The amazement and joy when Tyalan had chosen her, filled her still. Her heart beat rapidly, remembering.

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Tyalan nudged the remainder of the squirrel toward Uloki, and stared at Hydeia, feeling it too. The sudden warmth of *reyn* enveloped her.

"So you have it," Hydeia said to Dayan. "I've humored you with the little tale. Now, please, what has the legend to do with Santil?"

Chapter Five

Hydeia stood up and pressed her fists against the thick table.

"I believe that most legends hold truth, at least in part," Dayan said. He sat next to Etha, a giant beside her slight form. A cooling breeze skirled through the long squat cottage. The slight wind pushed long strands of Dayan's gold hair into his eyes, which he continually had to push away while he spoke. "There's no denying that Eaglekins have been touched by the sun. You glow of sunlight every time you commune with your eagles. Hear me well." He raised a palm when Hydeia frowned. It was rare that someone not born an Eaglekin could discern the soft glow of *reyn*. "You Eaglekins are different than I, blessed by *Koric*, brother sun. I can only dream of soaring upon eagles' wings."

Smiling up at him, Etha clasped her small hand into his larger palm.

"At the ceremony when the novice year is completed, how does an Eaglekin become true-bonded with their eagle?" Dayan met Hydeia's shocked gaze. "Don't look so horrified. We of the old blood here in *Amalikiol* know how it's done."

Her gaze immediately sought Ammah. The Eaglekin gave a tight shake of his head.

Dayan rubbed a palm across his short beard. "Ammah didn't reveal anything. You forget; our people are oathed to yours. We were once your protectors, and your emissaries and advocates to the rest of mankind. I believe it's likely that we know more about you than your own Matrons deem to

pass on anymore to your people. That is if even the Matrons still remember."

Hydeia resisted the urge to bring her palm up and feel the tiny slender scar just below her navel through her tunic. Her true-bonding ceremony had been wonderful even as the sudden sharp pain of it had stolen her breath.

She had given into it freely, rejoicing to do so as Tylan stood upon her hips, at once seeming both fierce and gentle. Hydeia lay in the center of a circle of Fourteen Matrons, one representing each eyrie. They had climbed that evening to a low plateau and waited for dawn while Hydeia disrobed and the Matrons washed her body in purifying herbal water. The ceremony began just as the sun's glowing red orb peeked over the lip of the far horizon.

Hydeia's heart had thundered within her ribcage. With one sharp point of her talon, Tylan had broken Hydeia's flesh right below her belly button. Her life spring. Dipping her beak into the slashed flesh, the beautiful eagle had pulled a glimmering luminous string of Hydeia's *reyn* forth. Two stakes had been driven into the stone above Hydeia's head for her to grasp onto should the pain become too much to bear, but she resisted even reaching for that small respite, refusing to show any weakness.

The tug from within was terrible when Tylan pulled and craned her elegant neck back to swallow the shimmery liquid. The heat that poured through her was almost more than she could bear. It felt like being consumed by the sun. It burned across her limbs, raging inside her core, up her spine, glowing around her naked body in bright ruby red sparks that hissed

and sizzled as though drops of water had been flung upon her. All around her, the Matrons had shed their gowns. Their naked aging bodies glowed, lustrous orange, fire opal, dusty blues and violets, and silky tourmaline greens while they swayed, each pressing their hands around the swells of their abdomens as though they felt some of the agony Hydeia was experiencing.

Staring up into the lightening sky, Hydeia saw eagles soaring just above the Matrons' circle, glossy silhouettes diving and rolling, crisscrossing above and below each other against the dawn's simmering red and violet rays. The rock beneath her back burned and boiled against her skin. She wanted to scream, it scratched at her throat, but she would not release it. She didn't know if she could handle much more. Then all at once the pain was gone and a slick warm stream poured into the throbbing cavity left vacant where Tylan had sucked out Hydeia's *reyn*. The eagle's brilliant sapphire essence poured into her strong and echoing a myriad of emotions of acceptance, peace and pride. Never in her entire life had Hydeia felt such an outpouring of feeling. And more. Tylan found her worthy, accepted her strength without condition. Hydeia felt like weeping, but even then she fervently held back. She would not disgrace herself or Tylan in front of the Matrons.

As terrible as the scalding burning had been, it was far worse when Tylan finished and the taut luminous stream snapped, recoiling back. Her body was unscathed, free of the burns she thought she'd be covered in. It seemed impossible that she could be swallowed by the blaze of the sun and have

not a mark on her. Well, one mark. The tiny scar below her navel. The ceremony had left Hydeia drenched in her own sweat, weak and breathing rapidly, delirious with joy and happiness.

"Let me show you something." Dayan's voice brought her out of her thoughts. He gently lifted Santil's long brown hair off the back of her neck and tilted her forward with the back of his hand. She bent docilely, unblinking, positioned and moved about like a child's hay-stuffed toy.

Hydeia and Ammah both moved to the other side of the heavy table to see what Dayan wanted to show them.

"It's past three fortnights and this particular wound won't heal," Etha said, scowling. "We've tried every poultice we know of and more."

A tiny hole festered at the base of Santil's neck, swollen, gray and oozing slight pearls of iridescent *reyn*.

* * * *

Unaccustomed to sleeping indoors, Hydeia took her gear and bedroll outside to the back of the cottage. After supper, Etha had shown her where to wash up and both women attended to Santil, scrubbing then rinsing her clean in the little fresh water stream that ran behind the horse shed. The girl sat motionless through their ministrations, unaware that a cool breeze prickled goose bumps on her wet and slightly glowing skin.

How long could an Eaglekin remain in that communing state? More than three fortnights already, and the glow wasn't sharp. She was waning. Hydeia could see that. Even

with Etha's and Dayan's constant care, it was obvious that Santil wouldn't last much longer.

After laying out her bedroll, Hydeia rolled onto her back and looked up into the darkening sky. The seven stars of Cantila, proud Mother Eagle, seemed dim and far away. Reaching her senses out to Tylan, Hydeia felt the bird safe on the perch inside and heavy with slumber. She let the connection of their *reyn* lull her to sleep.

* * * *

Hydeia dreamed of her mother, moving unseen through their eyrie, a pale young wraith, while she brought finely burned ash to the blacksmith. Iron hammers clanged across metal. A group of weavers laughed from under the log eaves of a red clay house, their heads bent together. Half-naked children ran playfully across the hard desert floor. Two gifted fledglings, as yet unbonded, screamed in the bright cloudless sky above in mock battle to prove their prowess while older eagles soared around them, watching. Teaching.

Abruptly veering off from the other children, a small child with light golden wind-tousled hair stopped in her play to watch the eagles contest each other in the sky. Solek Aminidi, third creed kae sa Matron of the Crystal Falls Eyrie grabbed the child by the tunic and spun her roughly around.

Large golden eyes blinked up at the plump Matron as a lash snaked out and bit the girl. A red welt appeared on her thin arm where the Matron's sapling stick had hit.

Hydeia grimaced in her sleep, seeing herself as a child, reliving the moment, seeing the subtle difference as it unfolded through her mother's eyes.

Josanne, Hydeia's mother, the unworthy *tolin sha*, clenched her hands against the assault. A tremor ran through her slender body. The Matron's gaze lifted, pinning Josanne's deeply golden eyes, challenging her to intervene on behalf of her child.

Shoving the girl forward, the Matron set Hydeia to work with the stone carvers that day, carrying rocks over the hard ground from the lodestone field. Hydeia recalled it well as she slept, feeling every slice of the rough stone on her palms and the strain to her young muscles.

After the child was on her way to the stone carvers, the Matron approached Josanne. "I believed you would put an end to this." Her voice rasped in Hydeia's mind, making her roll her head side to side outside Dayan's snug cottage.

"No." Josanne shook her head. Her eyes were heavy lidded with sorrow and shame. "She will endure. She will be stronger than I. You will see."

In her sleep, Hydeia's pulse increased.

Solek's wrinkled face screwed up. "The strength of her *reyn* will tell. *Tolin sha*, you do your child no favor. No eagle will choose her."

Reproachful stares followed Josanne throughout the eyrie. She'd given up the bond, she was a nothing, a *tolin sha*, unworthy, one of the lowly that Eaglekins deemed best to avoid so the taint of weakness would not fall upon them. As soon as she was out of the eyrie, her mother's pace

quickened as though she could outrun a breaking heart until she entered a small copse of trees where she leaned her hands heavily against the wrinkled bark of a blossoming wallen tree and let herself weep where no one would see her.

Sunlight drifted down through the lacy leaves and fell across Josanne's upturned face, striking the lighter strands of her light brown hair in gold. Her hand reached up and began tugging on the lobe of her ear. Shadows fractured the light, blurred. She stilled. Hydeia moaned in her sleep, tossing side to side on her bedroll. Her mother's delicately featured face wavered, shifted, and became the vacant unfocused image of Santil.

* * * *

Hydeia lurched out of sleep like a woman dropping from a cliff.

Tyalan's wings were rounded over her, dark raptor eyes piercing.

Her heart stumbling, Hydeia pressed the heels of her palms over her eyes and sagged back down. *Tyalan, my dream disturbed you. I'm sorry. She shivered. It disturbed me as well.*

The eagle pulled in her wings and nudged Hydeia's cheek with her cool smooth beak. Feelings of concern and comfort flowed between them. *Thank you.* Hydeia stroked the satiny head, her heart brimming with love for the amazing bird. Her true-bonded who had chosen her when none thought an eagle would.

The sky was dark, the air cool, the moon still low. She must not have slept long, and dreamed on the bare edge of drifting off.

It was only a dream. Her mother hadn't really shed any tears for her. Her mother did not share Santil's affliction, couldn't, not being true-bonded to an eagle. Thank *Koric* for that.

Hydeia sat up with a realization. Her mother had been terrified of becoming lost within the bond. That was exactly why her mother had asked to be released from her trial bonding. She didn't believe herself strong enough, did not choose to rein in her emotions so tightly. So strictly. She didn't have the courage or the strength to withstand a powerful eagle's essence flowing through her *reyn*. Josanne must have known she'd be lost to her eagle's will if she remained bonded after her trial year. Perhaps her eagle's emotions had been far too unbridled for her to control. Sweet *Koric*, Josanne had made the only decision she could—and Hydeia had despised her for it. Her hand slipped unconsciously up to her ear lobe.

"Are you well?" Ammah stood on the stoop by the open door. His hair was wet, glistening in the moonlight. "I saw Tylan fly out."

"Fine, yes." Hydeia pushed back her hair. The dream was pressing down on her, too real and rife with uncertainty. What could it mean? "I couldn't sleep."

"I as well. There's much to think on." He walked over and crouched next to her, pulled up a stem of wild grass and began fraying it. Tylan rotated her head toward him. "Now

that you've seen what has happened to Santil, what will you do?"

Do? Find Sheeannar and Lannis. That hadn't changed. Hopefully she'd find them before whoever took Santil's *reyn* found Lannis as well. Lannis's trail in the forest hadn't been that old. "My task isn't finished."

A frown disturbed Ammah's handsome features. "After what you've seen of Santil?"

"All the more reason." Unintentionally she leaned closer and drew in his scent of fresh soapwort and rain-soaked pine.

He didn't move away. "You don't know mankind's cities. They're dangerous for you."

She reached over, couldn't help it, didn't want to help it, and ran thin delicate fingers over the solid planes of his abdomen, traced the harsh line of his scar, followed it slowly down to his waistband, felt his breath hitch. He didn't stop her. She followed the dip of his waist back up over the ridges of his abdomen, higher into the soft dark dusting of hair over his chest.

"Why..." His voice was a soft whisper that sent a tiny thrill up her spine. "Why didn't you leave me?"

"What...?" she murmured, mesmerized by the way his throat column moved when he spoke. She couldn't help herself. She'd had a disturbing dream and his presence soothed the tension from her mind. Her fingers followed the shape of his jaw, slid down along his strong neck.

His eyes were intense and so ... beautiful. Exotic. Gold edged with brown beneath dark, dark lashes that had tiny streaks of gold at their tips.

"You lost days in your search," he said. He had not moved. Had not lifted a hand to touch her. Or stop her. "You chanced losing Lannis's trail altogether."

"You were hurt. How could I leave you?"

"How?" His voice turned bitter. His eyes glittered beneath the soft moonlight. "You had no obligation. We're not mated."

Hydeia drew back as though a whip snapped between them. *Not mated.*

Feeling Hydeia's frustration, Tyalan raised her wings and hissed.

Ammah eyed the eagle, and then inclined his head, surprising Hydeia. Just wonderful. He would have to go and show Tyalan proper respect when he had none for her. Tyalan quieted though she lifted her head regally.

Fine. Good and well. She'd never sleep now anyway. Hydeia slid off her bedroll and started rolling it tight enough to tie to the bottom of her pack.

Ammah's hand clapped over her arm, shooting prickles of warmth through her flesh. "What are you doing? You're leaving now? Wait. Hydeia, wait." Quick as a ferret, he snatched her pack. "Just wait. Please. You shouldn't go to the city. Tyalan is very strong. Very worthy. She'd be a prize for whoever is doing this. And you are so full of emotions, you'd draw the hunters right to you."

So full of...? Insult upon insult. She hissed, very similar to the sound Tyalan made earlier. Opening her palm, she waited for him to return her pack. "Not your concern."

"It is!" He muffled a curse.

She raised both brows.

"It isn't. You're right." He paced away, stopped with his back to her. "I'll take you to Irrean."

"I don't need you."

The sinewy muscles of his back and shoulders clenched beneath his skin. He turned and haltingly inclined his head toward her in a show of deference. "I know you don't need me to. But I'll take you. I'm going there anyway. I can show you the way. A guide of sorts. Please," he said tightly.

Well, that was better, though he was hardly the image of submissiveness, muscles coiled and strained. He looked as though he'd prefer chewing rocks. It didn't suit him at all. Hydeia decided she didn't much care for that gesture on him. And by the looks of him, he didn't much care for it either.

Her anger abated somewhat. "Very well. You can be my guide. Get your things."

Curtly nodding his head, Ammah walked stiffly back into the cottage.

* * * *

"He doesn't trust easily."

Hydeia turned toward the cottage upon hearing Dayan's husky voice.

Dayan looked back over his shoulder at where Ammah had just gone, and leaned against the doorframe, a bundle in his beefy fist.

So she'd noticed. "He trusts you."

"Not at first." He lowered to sit on a bench just outside the door and held out the bundle. "Etha gathered some clothes from some of the villagers that are about your size and

Ammah's. You'll not stand out so much in Irrean in village-made clothing."

Hydeia winced at the term. She'd been taught wrong about villagers. They meant Tyalan no harm. As Ammah had said, in truth, the people of Eagle's Rest, *Amalikiol*, did revere eagles. She accepted the bundle with gratitude. "Dayan, what happened to Ammah? He doesn't think much of Eaglekins. How can someone like him despise his own people?"

Dayan eyed her for a long moment before running a hand across his clipped beard. "He has his reasons. You've seen his scar. It's a nasty one. Three years past he stumbled out of the forest and into my crops, more dead than alive. A bear had gotten to him. Killed his true-bonded eagle as well. Truth is, I didn't believe we could save him, didn't seem he wanted to be saved either, but my Etha has a way with healing ... shredded near forced the boy to live."

Hydeia's stomach lurched, turned over. She tugged on the lobe of one ear and sat down beside the large man.

"It gets worse." Dayan fingered his beard. "Are you certain you want to hear it?"

Worse? "I do, yes. Tell me."

"Ammah was mated. In that way that your people mate. Skies, you Eaglekins mate young." Dayan watched her curiously.

Hydeia controlled her features. Of course Ammah had been mated. He was a strong and worthy male, had most likely been true-bonded with a most worthy tiercel from his eyrie ... *Shreds!* Her pulse thrummed through her veins. She didn't like it one bit.

She calmed her breathing, let her heart beat level. "When his tiercel mated with another eagle, their true-bondeds would be mated as well."

Surprise flickered across Dayan's wind creased features. He leaned forward on his hands covering his knees, shifting his weight while he measured her again. "I didn't know that part of it. Truly? Your eagles choose your mates for you then? You have no say in the matter?"

Hydeia burned under the scrutiny. It sounded odd the way Dayan said it. She wondered if he knew enough about an eagle's behavior to know Uloki courted Tylan.

"It's how it has always been done. Our mating practices have never caused any difficulties." Until now, she thought.

Mercifully he made no comment. "It is Ammah's place to tell you this, but knowing him, I doubt he will. I've a strong feeling about you, so as Ammah's friend I'm making it my place to tell you. Don't hurt him."

She pinched her ear tighter. That was the last thing she expected Dayan to say. "I wouldn't."

Dayan waved her off. "By closing yourselves off, you Eaglekins have lost your sense of honor toward mankind."

"No. I don't see—"

"Hear me out. You've placed more value upon your eagles, more than even yourselves, your own lives and wants. You've forgotten you and your eagles balance one another, equal beneath the burning rays of brother *Koric*."

"No," she whispered, though her mother's image, fresh in her mind from the dream, weaving quietly, head low, through

the eyrie as the noble Eaglekins shunned her, swam painfully behind Hydeia's eyes.

"You want to understand why Ammah turned away from the Fourteen Eyries, turned away from what he is?" Dayan's voice rattled like pebbles sliding down a hill. Hydeia's throat was closing. Dayan's eyes were hard, boiling. "When his tiercel was killed, he became as nothing to his mate. She didn't even wait for him to die, but left him wounded, to suffer death alone."

Chapter Six

Lannis shivered in the cool breeze that blew in from the tower window and kicked around the dark stone room. Goose flesh puckered along her skin, prickly beneath the thin tunic she wore. Her cheek pressed into the grainy wood pallet she lay on. The sight before her held her motionless.

On his knees, held up by his arms between two burly men in matching sky blue surcoats, another Eaglekin shuddered, his lean body bending awkwardly forward. His long dark hair dragged in the filthy rushes as Mystic Symer leaned over him. Lifting his bony elbows high, the Mystic painstakingly pushed a long pointed glass tube into the back of the young Eaglekin's neck.

Behind them, a tiercel screamed, flapping dark glossy wings as he tried to fly from the perch, pulling tight the delicate chain attached to the leather anklet on his leg.

At another perch, Sheeannar, Lannis's own precious true-bonded, shifted from foot to foot. Her silent cries shrilled in Lannis's head.

The young Eaglekin male cried out, his firm torso arched back like the curve in a bow, muscles tight and straining, seeming as though the juices of his body were about to burst. A thin shimmering string of subtle violet lit Symer's hollow features and sharp curving nose while he dragged the luminous liquid *reyn* out from the hollow glass tube bobbing against the Eaglekin's nape.

Slowly and steadily. Very slowly else the fine translucent thread would snap too soon and recoil.

The Eaglekin's shuddering cries broke off when his violet *reyn* did snap off. He crumpled against the men holding him in a boneless heap until they let go of him and he sank to the floor. The tube detached from his neck and rolled across the moldering rushes.

In cages all about the tower room, eagles shrieked and hissed. The air pulsed with the sound of fluttering, thrashing wings.

Lannis closed her mind to the terrible noise.

Holding the writhing glimmering violet *reyn* between wooden tongs like he would a snake, the Mystic examined it, his lips a thin harsh line. Then his dark eyes flicked up to her, sharp chips of onyx in the glow.

Lannis's heart began to pound. It raged through her temples, harder as Symer stepped around the slumped Eaglekin and walked toward her. His thinning hair, worn long around his narrow shoulders, lifted in the breeze, dark, like flapping wings.

He bent down and smiling, rolled her onto her back. The chill of his hand sent miniscule prickles racing across her skin. Her chest rose and fell in short breaths as the Mystic stood over her, nakedly assessing her behind the luminous glow of *reyn*, bright in front of her eyes. It cast a warm light over her lean form.

Sheeannar screamed from her perch. The chaotic emotions shot into Lannis like a crossbow's bolt, piercing, painful.

Lannis moaned lightly, arched upward and took the dangling end of the *reyn* between her teeth.

Upon Eagle's Light
by Clover Autrey

The spicy hot slick taste of life and sunlight spilled silkily smooth down her throat, swirling through her breasts, and suffused her entire body in thick syrupy warmth. Greedily, she strained her neck, consuming more. More. A frightful need welled up in her. She gulped, pulling it down her throat like a starving eyes until the last of it trickled warmly down to her toes. Images exploded behind her eyes of stark canyonlands and blue crystal lakes seen from a great height. Warm air rippled across her fingers, through her feathers, while she soared along misty banners of white clouds, moist and heavy. Wind whistled through her ears and her sleek muscles strained as she flapped, pulling through the currents, gaining height.

She heard the tiercel scream, felt him flapping wildly before he dove off his perch inside the tower room. The chain snatched him back and he hung upside down, screaming and dangling in fury as Lannis traveled across the skies he had once known while she swept forcefully, uninvited, inside his keen mind, touching memories and places she had no right to. She tasted his intelligence and anger and fear for his true-bonded lying facedown helpless on the floor as he fought her invasion. Yet his Eaglekin's added *reyn* had made her stronger than him, and she quickly overcame the eagle's will, subdued him and dominated his fierce mind, reveling in the fact that she could. She was stronger than him. Stronger than them all. For the moment, his will belonged solely to her. She could make him do anything, even kill his own bonded if she so desired. The tiercel dangled limply from his perch, exhausted. In despair. Completely hers.

More. It was never enough. Symer always held back, afraid she would drown in the ecstasy of it. He might be correct. The power and control over the eagles through their true-bonded's *reyn* was a heady forceful thing.

The caged eagles watched in knowing silence.

Lannis smoothed her lip then licked the last remaining fluid of the delicious *reyn* from her finger, stretching languidly on the old pallet before rising fluidly to her feet.

Patting Symer's sunken cheek, she stepped lightly to the fallen Eaglekin male and lifted his head to see his profile. His lashes fluttered, briefly exposing dark tawny eyes. He was a tasty morsel. Not as strong as she suspected the Eaglekin she'd attempted to lure in Stone Pass Forest would have been, but sweet nonetheless. She'd intercepted this one herself, without Leurise's aid, near Neckbreak Trough.

As long as they didn't siphon too much at one time, he would produce more *reyn* by which to control the tiercel with. Less should he continue to fight the process and end up like many of the others with his mind lost far inside his own true-bonded. Mystic Symer had yet to discover how to avoid that. Yet even those lost ones still had their use to draw *reyn* from, though it was not nearly as potent.

She trailed a finger along the side of the young Eaglekin's pale face, wondering how long she would have to wait before she'd be able to taste his unique *reyn* again. She ran her thumb across the back of his neck, finding a little more of the glowing liquid, and licked it off. Smiling, she lifted her head.

"Put him with the others."

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Hydeia walked by Ammah's side, tugging furiously at one ear. The evening's conversation with Dayan weighed heavily in her thoughts. How could anyone leave Ammah like that?

Especially his mate! She should have protected him, cared for him. Or at the least remained until he ... Her heart jumped in her chest. But he hadn't died.

She glanced sidewise up at him. Sunlight and clouds chased each other across the sky, tossing shadows along Ammah's lean profile.

They'd left the village late in the night, covering a good distance before dawn. Tyalan and Uloki soared above swells of emerald hillocks, so different from the dry inhospitable canyons and wild, tangled forests of Hydeia's home territory in Gaspar. Ammah handed her one of Etha's biscuits. "What's in your head?"

Hydeia's frown deepened.

Slowing his pace, Ammah took her hand, pulled it down. A little shiver snapped through her like a whip, sharp and quick. "You tug your ear when you're upset. What is it?" His grip was strong and warm, gently circling her wrist so she couldn't go anywhere.

"I tug...? Oh." His eyes were so ... exotic, sultry, that nimbus of brown that darkened the gold ... She could fall into those tawny depths, stay there happily forever. For the trace of a moment she let herself wonder what it would be like to be mated without the interference of their eagles. Not that she would ever give up her bond with Tyalan. But what would it be like to look at Ammah without the *reyn* compelling her

attraction to him? Would she still be so completely drawn to him? Would the slow swirls of nerves stutter through her and tangle her thoughts with just one look from him? Or was it all the *reyn* flowing, resonating, heating, between them? Would there be any attraction at all?

Etha and Dayan had no eagle bond, no *reyn* shimmering through them, enhancing their attraction, yet the way they touched each other, looked at each other mattered. It mattered a great deal. They had chosen each other on their own. Hydeia tilted her head, staring at Ammah, wondering.

Tiny lines formed between his dark brows. "What is it?"

"I..." She lifted her other hand to her ear. His eyes crinkled. Everything inside of her seemed to be jumping around. Her heart was in dangerous territory with him. Better to place defenses around it and direct her thoughts to more pressing concerns. "The Rakens were going to trade you for pynbrew."

"I know."

"To someone called Looo-reese." She didn't quite say it the way the Rakens had. "I was thinking that if we find this Looo-reese, we'd be able to find Lannis."

"I agree." He released her hand and lengthened his pace. "Finding Leurise will be a start, but I doubt the trail ends there. He's nothing but a greedy thug for hire. He wouldn't have the talent or the means to drain Eaglekins of their *reyn*. There has to be a Mystic involved. But Mystics employed under the crown are numerous."

The ground slopped as they moved uphill. Birdsong echoed along the wide expanse of azure blue sky.

"How can you know this?" she asked. "Do you know this Leurise?" She put the emphasis on the name the same way Ammah had.

"No, but I've heard of him." Anger flashed across his face. "Doron Leurise, a mover of obscure merchandise. And I know his kind."

Hydeia had never heard of such a trade. "You've spent a lot of time in mankind's cities, then. Why would you do that?"

Ammah stopped, turned, his entire body stiff. A slant of sunlight through the clouds gleamed over his skin. "Mankind are not the monsters the Matrons believe. Most anyway. Most are good people. They try to make their way in the world the best they can. I've lived among them for three years and yes, I've seen terrible things, but I've also seen incredible courage and convictions, kindness and sacrifice. Acceptance."

Unlike being considered no longer of worth and left to die alone. Bitterness on Ammah's behalf rose like bile in Hydeia's throat. "Like Dayan and Etha, yes. They are extraordinary people. The Matrons are wrong in their assumptions of all mankind."

Humor widened Ammah's expressive eyes. "Did you say the Matrons are wrong?"

"I..."

"You did. The Matrons are wrong, you said it. I heard you plainly." He smiled crookedly.

Something pulled in Hydeia's heart at the glimpse of that mischievous smile, pulled hard, but she couldn't get a hold of it, couldn't draw it out like a thorn that had become embedded too far. The Matrons weren't wrong, cruel and

hard, yes, but they had to be for the betterment of the Fourteen Eyries. Eaglekins lived a lonely, harsh existence. They had to be hammered and forged in strength ... but ... oh, shred it to pieces, her head hurt. "The Matrons aren't wrong."

"No. They just hold back the truth from our people when it suits them. And it suits them far too often." Ammah scowled and trudged uphill.

Hydeia ran to catch up with his long strides. "That's not true."

Burnt golden eyes, jewel-sharp, jerked to hers.

She met his glare with one of her own. "Perhaps it is. Somewhat. Maybe. But whatever the Matrons have done, or held back from us, they did it for our people."

He moved swiftly, faster than she could react, grabbed her forearms and looked as though he wanted to shake her. "Why do you defend them? Can't you see they are a council of liars? They know no other way to keep boundaries and constraints on our adventurous curious people but to hold back the truth of mankind and how it once was between our two peoples. They've even lied to you, but you can't see it. Or won't. They've sent you out here on a fool's errand after this Lannis, knowing she is most likely already dead, or worse. It's her eagle, the great Sheeannar, they want back and they're only using you to sniff her out. It's the eagles alone that are worth something to the Matrons. The eagles, that once bonded, will also trickle some of their *reyn* to the Matrons as a whole. Didn't you know this? That the Matrons hold back for

themselves a little of every Eaglekin's *reyn* during the bonding ceremony."

Something about what he said tapped at Hydeia's mind.

"That's all that is important to them. Their surplus of power, of knowledge, of rank, or whatever you want to call it. They are so desperate to hold onto their own eagles, to hold off their own *beton trella* that they take *reyn* from all of you. And you are so shredded determined to prove yourself to them; you're their perfect loyal little scent hound sent off to do anything they ask of you without question or thought. You and I and all Eaglekins mean as little to them as the tares that are burned in the fields."

She pulled out of his grip. "You don't know anything! You've turned away from the Fourteen Eyries and allowed your bitterness to stain your feelings toward us all."

"I've done what?"

"No. I'll hear no more unfounded accusations of the Matrons." Maddening male! He had no notion of what he spoke, of whom he was speaking about. Though the image of the circle of Matrons at her true-bonding ceremony circled in her head. They had been glowing and holding their stomachs around their own true-bonding scars. Hydeia swallowed around the hard lump that was forming in her throat.

"I shouldn't have expected you to listen. You won't hear anything I've said. A hound is loyal only to her masters," he threw back.

She froze, surface quiet and still but her blood burned beneath. "When we reach Irrean and you've pointed out

Doron Leurise, why don't you just stay in your precious city of mankind and keep out of my shredding path?"

"Gladly." He let go of her wrist.

"Good." Good and well. Her hand was cold.

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She was not the Matron's hound. Arrogant maddening intolerable male! A scent hound. Of all the stupid things to call her.

Hydeia climbed down the other side of the little hill, and slid in her careless haste, sending rocks and dirt rolling and creating little plumes of dust rising up along the ground.

Hearing Ammah crunch gravel under his boots above, she gave into a smug smile. He had to go much more slowly and carefully to avoid tumbling rocks down on her. She glanced up and her smile melted away. Rotting shreds, it was difficult to remain angry with a considerate male, especially when that considerate male just slipped a few paces on his backside.

She muffled a laugh while he pulled himself up, muttering something she couldn't hear, with a glower sharp enough to slice through a tree. No, no. Definitely no. She forced her grin away. She would remain angry. She wanted to be angry. Anger was easier to control than those other turbulent emotions his nearness made roll through her. A scent hound! She stomped to the base of the slope and into a meadow of brilliant yellow and orange wildflowers that stretched to the next hill. Butterflies colored the air like bright fluttering gems. *Admit the truth, Hydeia.* She wasn't angry with Ammah. She was hurt.

She was more than attracted to him. He fascinated her, the way he looked at things and put new perspective on everything. Even everything she'd believed, taken for granted, about the Matrons. She'd never known another Eaglekin like him. He certainly was as arrogant as most of her people, but there was also so much more. He had a rare tenderness about him. He possessed a kind heart. The way he'd talked and laughed comfortably with Dayan and Etha and then spoke so soothingly to Santil made Hydeia's heart ache.

And blessed *Koric*, just looking at him hurt. Long and lean with the ropey muscles of a man who was conditioned to survive, even thrive in nature's capricious conditions. And those beautiful flashing eyes that betrayed every thought and emotion, making him seem somehow vulnerable, yet unafraid to show that part of him. The sun struck his dark wind-blown hair, making it shine almost blue, so similar to Uloki's slate-dark feathers. The soft glow of his unique ruby and meadow green *reyn* surrounded him as he must have been conversing with Uloki in the sky. He was ever patient and studious with the wilder.

Yet Ammah had no soft words for her. Worse, he thought of her as a shredding hound, trained to heel at the Matrons' ankles.

Well ... fine and good. She wouldn't give it another worry. He could believe what he wanted. She didn't care. She really didn't. She was weary of constantly trying to prove herself to everyone. Especially to the likes of him.

She adjusted her pack across her shoulders, feeling better already and swatted a cloud of butterflies out of her way.

* * * *

The last thing Ammah wanted to do was to hurt Hydeia, but he had to keep pushing her away. Never again would he get entangled with another Eaglekin female. He'd left that all behind when Emlen had left him mauled and bleeding in the forest. He quickly closed himself off from that flash of memory. It still had the power to make sweat break out across the back of his neck.

They were all cruel and heartless. Eaglekin females doubly so, trained almost from birth to be unyieldingly strong, to be dominant and worthy of their sister eagles. Cold. Impassive. Like the stark canyons of their rocky territories. He'd discovered there was so much more while living among mankind and in their cities and villages. More than just the endless tradition of revering eagles above all else. Above people.

He kicked a stone up the slope and watched it tumble back down, billowing tufts of dust and gravel in its path. A small horny plated lizard froze, lifting its head while its tongue flicked out to test the air, before the lizard seemed to fly across the slanting grasses.

Ruined prey! How did he get in this situation?

Because he was soft, always had been. He couldn't just leave well enough alone and go his own way. When he'd found the Eaglekin girl, Santil, on the side of that worn road, her clothes soiled and tattered and hanging on her frail body, tenderness welled up in his heart. She was half-dead and damaged in her head to a degree he'd never seen before,

alone in the most desolate outskirts of Irrean. He couldn't just walk away.

So he'd done the only thing he could think of for her. He'd taken her to the one place he knew she'd be given care without judgment or reservation. He knew Dayan and Etha would take her in, as they had once taken care of him.

The bald truth was that they had saved his life in more ways than one. Because of them, he'd learned an entirely new way of looking at things, of looking at himself, and discovered that he did have worth, contributions to make, with or without being true-bonded to an eagle.

Perhaps it would have been better for Santil if he had just walked away, instead of having to live a horrific existence, locked in her shared *reyn* with her bird. His jaw tightened. He had done Santil no kindness by bringing her to Dayan, just prolonged her bleak existence. And Dayan's and Etha's as well because their kind hearts had opened for the girl and fallen in love with her. And watching her suffer daily was tearing them to pieces. He had glimpsed it in their weary countenances, though they put a brave face on it. He hadn't done any of them a kindness. A dark weariness settled deep within his muscles.

And now, here he was, playing guide to a headstrong spirited Eaglekin female in an attempt to keep whatever befell Santil from happening to Hydeia. Rot it all, he couldn't stand the thought of seeing Hydeia's vibrant countenance go slack and unfocused. He wouldn't let that happen to her. He couldn't.

Though if he possessed any intelligence at all, he'd walk away right now. Better yet, run. To make matters more difficult, the shredding female considered them mated!

Mated!

He glanced up at her, climbing the rise above, and his heart flipped over in response to the very sight of her. He understood well the slick compulsion of the Eaglekin mating bond. When their eagles had first been courting, he and Emlen had been drawn together in a wild seductive heat that flashed hot and quick then burned to embers. The heady attraction from the bond had run its course and he and his new mate had adjusted to an easy friendship with sudden flashes of quick passion whenever their eagles took to frolicking in the skies.

He'd also been among mankind, without an eagle before he found Uloki, to experience the difference of attraction to woman without any of the *reyn's* influence and heat.

This was more than either. Certainly the bond's consuming attraction was present, a low underlying persistent resonance, but regardless of the mating bond's presence, Hydeia stirred his blood more than he expected any Eaglekin—or woman—ever could. And it scared the shreds out of him.

He'd hoped to make her angry, keep her from looking at him with those light golden expectant eyes, but *Koric's* might! She was even more beautiful when she was in a temper. A man could only withstand so much and he felt his barriers weakening by the moment.

Her long wheat colored hair hung unbound to the small of her back in thick swaying waves. As she climbed, her brown

rough spun breeches tightened pleasantly across softly rounded hips. Her body was so tight and femininely strong, well-conditioned to the solitary lifestyle of an Eaglekin where strength meant survival. Yet she was also soft and silky, with a rare vulnerability that sometimes surfaced in her guarded eyes. He was drawn to the subtle contrasts of her textures, attuned to her, senses heightened.

What was he thinking? He should leave her to her fool's quest. She didn't really need him. She was more than capable of taking care of herself.

Another quality he liked in her. That, and the way she had incrementally relaxed her guard and accepted Etha and Dayan on equal terms, so unlike any other Eaglekin would have.

Reaching the crest of the hill, Hydeia's posture went absolutely alert. Suddenly alarmed, Ammah raced up the hill. When he saw what had her so transfixed, he smiled and let his pulse level. Across a vast plain of multihued squares of crops and fenced pastures, beyond tiny clusters of farmhouses and barns, sprawled a great city. Far to the distant north, Irrean lay along the horizon like a long gleaming wrinkle, winking pink and dewy in the setting sunlight.

Hydeia's delicate face filled with wonder. Her fierce frown had turned to a radiant smile. Ammah's heart staggered to a stop. Fists clenched, he forcefully dragged his gaze from her to stare purposefully at far off Irrean as a man crossing the desert anchors to a distant landmark. He couldn't keep this up. He had to get her to Irrean by the quickest possible route.

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Then he had to get away from her for good before he let her pull him back into Eaglekin traditions. He'd given up that life and wanted nothing to do with it. No matter his growing attraction to Hydeia, he would never place his trust or his heart in the palms of another female Eaglekin. But bury it, did she have to be so shredded beautiful? Yes, he was in trouble. And unfortunately at this time of year, the quickest route would be impassible.

Chapter Seven

"Don't go in there. Not another step."

Hydeia paused mid-step at Ammah's tone. He said it quietly, but there was a biting edge to his voice warning her not to argue. Her eyes slid across the dusty blue swath of leafy low-lying vines then back to Ammah. "Why?"

"That's tanglevine. We can't cross it now." Shrugging his pack off his shoulders, Ammah lowered it to the ground and began rummaging through its contents. "See that broken hillock over there? With the flat sunken top."

"Yes." Nodding, Hydeia looked to the side at a small hill that indeed appeared as though the lower part of it had been sheared off by a giant axe.

"There's a narrow fissure at the juncture below the flat sunken top where the break is that passes all the way through to the other side." He lifted his chin toward the small vine-carpeted hill to his left. "The cleft has made a natural pass that is home to anvil head spiders and mute scorpions, but with torches, they should leave us alone."

Hydeia frowned at the little hill. It looked as though once they went through it, they would still be on this side of the tanglevines. Why not cross the field and be done with it?

Ammah pulled out a flat, stoppered vial from his pack that reeked of clotblur grease when he opened it. "This is sufficient. We only need enough pitch for two days."

Two days? Hydeia whipped around. "This pass will take us two days out of our way?" She didn't care for the spiders or

scorpions, but losing any more precious time was unthinkable.

The look Ammah leveled at her was grim. "Two days to go through, without resting for the night, and another day to angle back toward Irrean."

A dull ache pressed between Hydeia's eyes. Three days. She began to pace in front of the gently stirring tri-pointed leaves. Their sharp tips were veined and edged with what looked like gray fluff. The vine field stretched far to either side, up, over, and across the surrounding hills, coating the ground in soft blue ripples. A beautiful sight, really, seemingly tranquil. "How far across do these tanglevines go?"

Rising to his feet, Ammah moved to stand beside her as they looked across the river of blue foliage. "It takes half a day to cross. But..." He scowled. "They are tanglevines." His set expression said that should be enough of an explanation.

"But it's the shorter route," Hydeia stated the obvious.

One side of Ammah's vastly appealing lips twisted in a grimace. "You don't know what tanglevines are, do you?" He ran his hands over his face, back up through his hair, muttering under his breath as he began pacing in anger. Hydeia caught little snippets of his muttering, "interfering ... cruel ... leaving her ignorant..."

His eyes were flashing golden fire when he finally came back to her. "The Matrons didn't prepare you for anything. They should have warned you about the dangers of crossing outside of Gaspar. *Koric's rotting breath!* How do you think the Fourteen Eyries have remained so isolated and left in peace these many centuries?"

"Mankind didn't want to trifle with such an inhospitable land?" She shrugged one shoulder.

Ammah's angry gaze bore into her. "There's very few ways into Gaspar and each lethally dangerous. Quagmires dot the south end of Whisper Bluff, fire pools spout all around Kraignell Pass where anyone fortunate enough to avoid being burned and scalded will certainly fall into the pools where the ground gives way underfoot. Rage lions prowl across the field inside the mouth of Neckbreak Trough just to our east, and the only way off of Gaspar's Northern Cliffs are barely visible hand and footholds in the stone face. Any Eaglekin preparing to travel outside of Gaspar would have been taken aside by their eyrie's Matron and made well aware of these dangers and carefully instructed on how to get by them. It's unthinkable that the Matrons sent you out here neglecting to share that knowledge—"

He cut off abruptly, went chillingly still. Hydeia could see his mind working, was heading toward the same horrific conclusion herself, though she didn't want to and fought the uneasy knowledge creeping like a shadow into her mind. The muscles in her stomach clenched.

Ammah's voice was quiet. His eyes were furious. "The Matrons sent you out here to fail."

He'd said it out loud, made it tangible. Gave it form. Hydeia stiffened her spine against it, clamped down on the sick feeling sliding up her neck. It wasn't true, though she knew better. She was the daughter of a *tolin sha*, a nothing. Worthless. Unworthy of such a task as bringing back the grand dame, Sheeannar. Cold shame stabbed into Hydeia like

sharp shards of ice, biting deeper because she knew Ammah had seen it.

But he didn't step back, didn't look away. Instead he shifted closer, still enraged. On her behalf. No one had ever taken her part before. Never. Not even her mother, who only stood quietly watching. She stared at her feet, waiting to feel him recoil from her with disdain. Her stomach flipped and rolled into slippery tangles as long buried hope lifted her gaze to him.

Ammah grabbed onto her wrists, his dark brows furrowed. "Why would they do that?" He seemed to be asking the question more of himself than her. His eyes widened fractionally before narrowing once more. "They used you as a lure. Didn't they? Of course they did. Ruined hateful vipers! They sent you out here as a rotting defenseless lure."

"Hardly defenseless." Hydeia tried to break away from his hold on her wrists but his big hands circled tighter.

"Ill-prepared then," he practically growled. "Did you know?"

Defeated by the concern she saw in his gaze, she twisted her arms to get free. This time he let her go and she turned away. Of course she had known, but she'd been too thrilled with the idea of her own foray to let it stop her.

Just before she left the eyrie she found the old Territorial Guardian Orlaith readying his pack for a long foray. She had dismissed the uneasy feeling settling in the pit of her belly, and walked away. She could still feel the burn of his knowing eyes on her back, following her.

But she hadn't let it stop her. She'd known the Matrons wouldn't expect her to succeed and would send others, more experienced Eaglekins like Orlaith to track Lannis as well, but she'd never considered the Matrons capable of sending her off like a piece of meat on the flying end of a lure string. They would have known she'd had to cross out of the territories. Ammah was correct. The Matrons should have given her the knowledge to safely leave Gaspar. Perhaps they thought she would have been captured before then and had become just another Eaglekin to make it easier for Orlaith to track what had happened to Lannis. She hadn't thought of any of that when she first left. Why would she?

Instead, she'd let the implications of Orlaith preparing to leave storm through her, had let it fan the fire of her determination. She had needed determination.

She turned back to the scrutiny of Ammah's perceptive gaze. "You said there are known ways through each of these obstacles. Can the tanglevines be crossed?"

Ammah watched her, wariness sliding over his face. "It's too dangerous."

"But it can be done."

"With great difficulty. Watch." He pulled a small bundle of folded leather from his pack and untying it, brought out a thin strip of lamb that Etha had given them. He tossed it out over the tanglevine field where it landed on a spongy blue leaf. Instantly the surrounding foliage came alive, trembling, and several vines whipped up, snatching at the strip of meat until one twined around it.

"That's it?" Hydeia's hand slipped over the knife sheath secured at her hip. "Those thin vines will nip at our ankles? They look easy enough to cut through. Are they poisonous then? Is that the extent of the danger?"

Folding his arms across his chest, Ammah chuckled. "No poison. Just wait. And try being quiet."

Hydeia opened her mouth to argue that she knew how to be silent when a hideous noise that sounded very much like the sharpening squeals of a turning grindstone erupted from within the blanketing field of vines. Dusty tri-pointed leaves flew in the air as thick snake-like beasts shot up out of the vine stalks. They appeared to be all mouth with triple rows of viciously sharp teeth, dragging slime covered grayish wrinkles and folded skin behind them. A swarm of them attacked the strip of lamb, attacked each other, then disappeared back beneath the thicket of vines as though they'd never been.

Ammah lifted his pack to his shoulder. "The tanglevines will only slow you down, try to hold you. It's the teethworms that keep travelers out of the fields."

Tugging on her earlobe, Hydeia grimaced. "You said there are spiders in the hill's passage?"

* * * *

The passage was a narrow slit cut between two hard earthen slabs that looked like part of the hill had shifted and fractured off. The pass's ceiling was no ceiling at all, but layers upon layers of the exposed and dried underside of long dead interlacing tanglevine roots from the field that expanded up onto the hilltop above.

Hydeia peered into the murky darkness. At this end of the gap, it hardly looked wide enough for one person to squeeze through, similar to the tight curling canyons of Crystal Falls. "You brought Santil through here?" How in *Koric's* light had Ammah guided the unknowing girl through that black wedge while keeping scorpions and spiders off them both?"

Close to the jagged entrance, Ammah cut a section out of the dead tanglevine root and began wrapping a pitch-soaked cloth around one end. "I didn't bring her through there."

Hydeia's knife stopped on the root she was cutting through.

Hooking his thumbs in the straps of his pack, Ammah adjusted them in a movement that looked more like an unconscious shrug. "I carried her through the tanglevines while the teethworms slept."

"They sleep." Hydeia stepped around to Ammah's front when he tried to avoid her gaze. "Then why aren't we simply waiting for them to sleep so we can cross over?"

He winced at her tone. "Because we'd be waiting close to a sennight. The worms only fully slumber when the moon is empty. Even with the worms no longer a threat, the vines are still active and will still attempt to trip you, or worse, twine around your leg and drag you down. They're nasty clumps of vegetation. Last time I came over, I followed the path of stones Dayan once showed me. They are barely seen beneath the leaves, but with Uloki's sight and guidance, I followed them well enough. Trust me, I've made this journey several times, both across the vines and through the pass. Though longer, the gap is far safer and at this time of the season, our

only option unless we want to go back into Gaspar and come out at Neckbreak Trough just to the east."

Shred it to pieces. There was no choice. Hydeia was tempted to point out that they could follow the path of stones, but being skilled in woodcraft, she understood the teethworms were more likely to be near such a path if prey had been acquired there before. Surely there would be more boulders submerged within that sea of dusty blue that Tylan and Uloki could spot from above. She glanced into the pass. She really didn't want to go in there. Eaglekins did not do well inside close spaces.

"I suppose following the field along the edge going up either hill wouldn't bring us to the end of the tanglevines where we could go around? Or to a more narrow expanse where we could cross perhaps?" she asked hopefully.

Ammah's smile was so kind, Hydeia's heart rapped against her ribcage. And rapped hard.

"Eventually the field does end, yes," he said. "Swallowed in quagmires to the west and after a four day walk to the east, the vines dry out on the plains where the Rage lions guard Neckbreak Trough."

"What of the teethworms? Will they not come down through the ceiling of tanglevines?"

"They don't come down into the dead exposed roots."

Those exotic brown-gold eyes captured her gaze. His voice gentled to the soothing quality Eaglekins used on young nervous eyas. "Going through this gap is the least dangerous path for us. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise."

He laid down his finished torch and pressed a hand meant to sooth on her shoulder. His palm was warm.

The gesture did little to sooth her, just the opposite. Heart slamming, looking up into that sensitive face, Hydeia could believe anything he'd say. Forcefully, she had to break away from his gaze and look over her shoulder into the thin slash of black. After all, he was the one who needed looking after. Not her. Faint tingles still warmed Hydeia's skin where he touched her. Sweet sun, she didn't dare move. To either step closer to that warmth or away would make her breath catch, giving away just how much he affected her emotions. Drawing on all her reserves, she squared her shoulders and took a step back, stilling a shiver as his hand slipped away.

She quickly steadied herself and stared into the dark hole. If Ammah had the courage to slide into that black chasm, then she had the courage as well. It was ever her way to move forward when threatened. "Very well. Let's just get it over with."

* * * *

They sent Tylan and Uloki to fly over the field and wait for them for the next couple of days there, on the other side until they emerged from the dark cleft. Tylan had not been pleased with allowing her true-bonded to enter into the dark place where she could not easily follow. Not pleased at all. But Hydeia was able to get through the bird's stubbornness and convince her it was the safer course for them all.

The hard grainy walls scratched across Hydeia's skin as she edged sideways. The passage was tight and unyielding. It

was like stepping into an earthen cage. The ceiling of dead twisting vines made strange lacy patterns as her torchlight played over them. Several long strands hung down and felt like brittle bones when she moved them out of her way. She had slung the end of her bow across her back and wished she had thought to carry it differently so it wouldn't be scraping across the wall, loosening little falls of dirt that trickled into her hair and down into her tunic. But there was nothing she could do about it now as long as the passage continued to be so tight. It felt like tiny spiders were skittering across the nape of her neck.

She suppressed a shudder, and concentrated on edging forward. Her hipbone banged against some sharp protrusion, she sucked in a breath and twisted her body to angle through. She fleetingly wondered how Ammah's larger more muscled body was making it through. He must be thrice as squished as she was. Well, if he could bear it...

Her arms were uncomfortable. Holding the torch out left no room to twist her arm and ease the slow burn building in her aching muscles.

And this was the least dangerous route? Shred her to pieces, she'd prefer the danger of the tanglevines to this. She really would. She didn't think she could last two days and a night in this dank close trap.

"Hydeia." Ammah's voice filled the narrow fissure though he was just a pace ahead. "Move your torch just a little closer to you."

Rotting Koric! She wasn't sure she wanted to know why. Hydeia looked up to see a shiny gray spider with a two-part

body as large as her hand and legs half again as long, walking down the wall just above her head. They really did have heads the shape of tiny anvils. Rot that. She didn't just wave the flame to hinder its approach, but stabbed the end of her torch into the thing, pinning it against the hard dirt wall.

The shriek and sizzle and wild curling of spindly legs was immensely satisfying.

She flicked the torch and tossed the ugly thing away.

Ammah's grin was a slash of white in the flickering light.

"You enjoyed that."

Waving her torch back and forth while the blaze regained its vibrancy, Hydeia watched several shiny bodies skitter back up into the lace of brittle vines. "Very much. Venomous?"

"Yes."

"Fatally?"

"No, but excruciatingly painful. I don't suggest getting bit."

Hydeia squealed as Ammah shook a spider off his leg that flew under her foot. Stomping down hard, she felt the crunch all the way through the supple leather boot. She didn't care if the slick purplish sludge left a stain.

"Keep waving your torch!" Ammah encouraged. "They seem to be receding." He swung his own torch back and forth in front of him.

Hydeia's elbow rapped against the wall. Her bow scraped loudly. "Is it this closed in the entire way?"

"No. It will widen out in a bit."

"Praise *Koric*."

Ammah chuckled. "But there's one stretch ahead that is much tighter than this, where the scorpions tend to linger. We'll have to crawl through there."

"Shredded luck."

Ammah laughed full out at that. The richness of his laughter echoed warmly around the walls. "There's a slight bend up here. Watch for—" His words ended on a grunt of expended breath. "there it is ... a sharp point about ..." He muffled an interesting curse. "It's about your knee level."

"Are you hurt?"

"Banged ... my shin ... it's fine," he ground out then disappeared behind a corner. His torchlight threw shadows across the corner's jagged edge.

Before Hydeia reached the bend, Ammah had returned, sidestepping backwards as there was no room to turn. "Go back," he ordered, bumping against her bent elbow, almost running into her torch if she hadn't stretched it up quickly. She felt the hard coils bracing his body.

The danger in his tone had Hydeia moving. "What is it?"

"We can't get through. Go back. Qui—"

A low snarl vibrated along the walls. A sense of menace skidded up Hydeia's spine as a shadow moved out from behind the corner. A pair of eyes glittered, reflected orange in the torchlight, at the height of Ammah's chest.

He lowered his torch's burning end out between him and the large shadow, bringing whatever it was more fully into the light.

It was the largest lion Hydeia had ever seen. Lean and rangy, the cat's shoulders came to Ammah's mid-section. Her

fur was a dark brown with creamy folds of shaggy skin behind her neck, forming a kind of hump, and black feathery tufts at her long ears.

As they backed away, the lion plodded forward, keeping a wary distance from the flickering flame, but not shying from it either.

"What kind of lion is that?" Smaller light-coated lions were abundant within the canyonlands of Hydeia's home territories. This lion was thrice their size. Hydeia swallowed.

"Rage lion." Ammah's voice hushed to an anxious whisper. "The dry winter must have forced some of them off the plain. I'm sorry, Hydeia. I didn't know they'd taken up going through the pass. We're going to have to go farther out of our way to Breakneck Trough after all."

That was all she needed. More time for Lannis's trail to grow old. "How pleasant for us." Hydeia's fingers curled into the coarse fabric of Ammah's tunic, guiding him back with her. She'd argue about the best route with him later, after they got away from that lion. Rot, she was big. "We have to do something once we're out of this cleft. I don't believe we can outpace her. *Oh, Koric*, look."

Two more pairs of eyes shone behind the first lion. Ammah muttered a ripe string of curses.

Hydeia's fist tightened harder in his bunched tunic. "How many do you think there are?"

"With *Koric's* sweet favor, only the three."

"Only?" Hydeia peered at the glowing eyes in the dark.

Ammah's free hand found and covered hers at his shoulder. "Do you think you can work your bow off your back?"

"When we're closer to the entrance and it opens up more, yes. What are you thinking?"

"I'll hold them in at the mouth until you can ready your bow."

Hydeia ran her tongue around her teeth. "Once this fissure widens, I don't think your torch will hold them off you. Look at them. They have little fear of the fire as it is. You slow your pace now and I'll move out more quickly to be ready for you. Is your knife clear?" Without waiting for his reply she felt along his side, down to his hip where he kept his blade and checked it to make sure it slipped out easily. "You're ready."

Eyes focused on the closest rage lion, he simply nodded.

"Be careful," Hydeia said and slipped away from him. She would have to be deadly accurate to bring down the first lion, and swift to draw again to even slow down the second. Both she and Ammah had knives. If they could just scare them off, make the lions wary enough to leave them alone while they went up over the hills, they would have a chance. It was far from a safe plan, but the best they could hope for.

She edged sideward as quickly as she could, not liking one bit that she was leaving Ammah alone in there. The first rage lion could easily swipe Ammah's legs out from under him and be on him, tearing out his throat in a flash. It could be happening now and she wouldn't know.

Menacing snarls curdled the still air. Even the spiders had retreated.

Edging through as quickly as she could, Hydeia ignored all the scrapes and jolts to her elbows and knees as she ran into sharp angles and rocky protrusions. Loosened dirt spilled over her, making the torch lit air cloudy and hard to breathe.

Reyn filled her, warm and sweet, as Tylan's swirling sapphire essence stormed through her, demanding to know what had Hydeia's emotions on edge.

Quickly forming a mind image of the large rage lions, Hydeia sent back the details of the situation and what they intended to do about it, and for Tylan and Uloki not to be concerned, to continue to wait on the other side of the vine field.

Abruptly Hydeia felt the wind swoosh around Tylan's wings as the stubborn bird changed direction. Not that Hydeia had expected Tylan to do anything less. She could never hide her fear from her true-bonded and those rage lions moving so close to Ammah had her emotions clamoring up her throat and thundering in her heart. She smiled grimly, grateful for Tylan. Whatever happened with the lions would be finished before the eagles could get back to them anyway. But if their situations were reversed, Hydeia would do the same. She would expend every bit of energy she had to get to Tylan.

A cooling breeze rolled across her side. She must be getting close to the opening lip of the fissure. Thank the skies. As the cleft widened, Hydeia eased her pack up to slide her bow from her shoulder, and better center the quiver along her spine. Good. By the time she stepped from the dark jagged slant in the hill, she was ready.

Daylight was sliding gently toward dusk, not yet full dark. Even so, the sky seemed bright in comparison to the blackness inside that suffocating hole of a tunnel.

She planted the burning torch upright in the ground. She had to hurry. The low rippling snarls grew closer. Bending to one knee, just to the side of the passage's mouth, Hydeia placed the open quiver on a slant against her knee within easy reach. She estimated the short distance to where the first lion would step out, and the height of the beast's shoulder, adjusted her bracer, placed an arrow on the string, brought her shoulder forward, and waited.

Ammah's life depended on the accuracy of her first shot.

Her pulse roared in her ears, clawed at her throat, threatening to shatter her tightly controlled emotions. She'd never been so afraid that she might miss a shot before. She excelled with the bow. She shouldn't have such nerves, not now. Lifting her head, Hydeia gathered her strength of purpose just when Ammah backed out of the jagged cleft, jabbing the torch.

Fear fled behind resolution.

Hydeia's fingers relaxed, loose. Ready.

Vicious snarls vibrated along the warm air. The first rage lion's head emerged from the darkness, low to the ground. Experience warned Hydeia that the cat's powerful body was crouching, coiling to pounce just out of her view behind the rocky edge. In a blur of dark rangy fur and sleek graceful muscle, the rage lion leapt forward in the air, stretching toward Ammah's head. Ammah threw the torch into the cat

and dove, though he would never be quick enough. Flame and sparks showered the air in arcs.

All of that registered in Hydeia's mind instantaneously while she let her fingers slide and loosed the arrow. The string twanged sweet and full in her ears, resonating across her bracer.

In mid-leap, the rage lion jerked in the air and thudded into Ammah and onto the ground, shaggy head and forelegs bent awkwardly across the Eaglekin's legs. The shaft of Hydeia's arrow protruded from the vulnerable undercarriage between the thick shoulders.

Eyes huge, Ammah lay half under the beast. He looked like his breath had been knocked out of him. Please *Koric*, let that be the extent of his injuries. Something indefinable pulled in Hydeia's chest. She quelled the wave of emotion that washed over her. She didn't have the time. Placing another arrow on the string, she swiveled on her knee, releasing the shaft toward the second rage lion streaking from the hill toward Ammah.

The arrow went long.

Her next one embedded in the lion's glossy flank of shoulder muscle while the shiny glint of Ammah's knife sailed into her paw. The great cat skidded to a staggering stop, roaring, and tried to pull the blade free with her teeth.

Ear-shattering roars erupted to her right, echoing around the hills.

Hydeia spun again, searching for the third lion and found him running up the hill, a young male not yet old enough to leave the females to strike out on his own. Hydeia released

another arrow into the ground behind him to encourage his flight.

Low rolling snarls rasped across the quiet air, raising gooseflesh along the back of Hydeia's neck. Slowly turning her head, Hydeia felt for the quiver on the ground.

Two more female rage lions and another young male stepped out from the fissure. Snarling, they began to pace back and forth between her and Ammah, stalking them both. Ammah had gotten out from under the fallen lion, but he was out of space. They had him backed up to the edge of the tanglevine field.

Hydeia heard a huge intake of breath rumble across the air. Her gaze flew to the hill. Another rage lion stepped out of the cleft, followed by another. How many shredding lions were in there? Their huge rangy heads swung to her, eyes sharpening, reflected in the glow of the torch beside her.

A muffled roar snapped Hydeia's attention back to Ammah in time to see a huge body slinking around Ammah's side, muscles coiled and readying to pounce.

Hydeia screamed a warning. Ammah twisted. Sharp claws slashed across him, across his pack on his back, rolling him in the air and rage lion and Eaglekin both fell into the tanglevines.

Chapter Eight

Grabbing up her quiver and the torch, Hydeia ran. The quiet sound of labored breathing and paws striking soil pursued her. She swung the torch into the closest lion's muzzle where it broke apart in a shower of sparks that flittered across the darkening sky. Without sparing the effort to look back, she laid an arrow across the bow and released it behind her, shot another ahead toward the lions between her and Ammah and raced past them, every muscle and all her strength thrown forward.

She knew the only thing saving her so far was a good head start and the unexpectedness of her action to race toward them, and luck. The lions would rapidly be able to close the distance.

She ran knee-deep into the tanglevines, stunned that she had made it at all.

The rage lion that had sprung into Ammah, thrashed against the vines tightening around her, coiling around her legs and head. Her roars were hideous and painful. And too close. A swiping paw could still reach her or Ammah.

Vines crawling around him as well, Ammah remained very still in an attempt not to draw the teethworms to him first. A sheen of sweat stood out on his brow. His eyes locked onto hers as Hydeia, thigh-deep in the vines, made her way toward him. She drew out her knife and began cutting through the thin vines.

The remaining rage lions prowled along the edge of the tanglevines, intermittently stretching their necks up and

roaring their displeasure. The tanglevines slapped out at them every time a lion ventured too close and the offending lion would leap back out of the way.

Hydeia jerked, and stabbed the tip of an arrow into a vine snaking around her ankle, pinning it to the soft soggy ground underneath.

"Are you hurt?" Hydeia grabbed the vine across Ammah's chest. It was so tight and pulling against her even as she held it. "Did the lion's claws get you?"

"No. I don't think so." Ammah gritted out, barely able to speak with the vines constricting around his chest.

The air seemed brutally hot. The tangled lion's breathing, brutally loud. *Reyn* pulsed along the inside of Hydeia's skin, warm with Tylan's reassurance. She and Uloki were soaring across the field. They were coming.

Hydeia got through a vine across Ammah's chest. He sat up and began pulling them away from his wrists and arms while Hydeia worked at the plants pinning his legs.

The captured rage lion screamed. Two teethworms lifted out of the foliage. Their sharp nasty rows of teeth sank into her, shredding the great cat's flesh like parchment. Blood splattered across the blue leaves.

Not waiting to cut through the last remaining vines, Hydeia pulled Ammah to get him to his feet, dragging and ripping the vines from their roots as they ran.

"This way!" Ammah hauled Hydeia up onto a flat white stone after him as blue tendrils whipped around them. Several teethworms shot out after them, clamping down on

air just before they slid back under the foliage. Their slimy writhing bodies couldn't find purchase on the smooth stone.

Ammah led Hydeia across the trail of stones, slightly buried beneath a thin layer of intertwining vines. Something about the white rocks also kept the tanglevines from latching onto their surface as well. In fact, the vines crossing the rocks were decaying or already long dead.

They hopped from stone to stone, following the haphazard twisting path they made toward the center of the vine field. Their boots slipped on the slick stone and crunched on the dying vines interlacing across the hard surface.

Ammah was whole. That one thought circled Hydeia's brain, choked in her throat. He was whole. The rage lion's claws had slashed open his pack. He'd most likely lost half its contents, but Ammah's flesh didn't bear any such marks, not that Hydeia could really search every inch of him to her satisfaction while they raced across the tanglevine field, but he looked unscathed.

Ripples moved just below the surface of blue fuzzy tipped leaves, keeping pace with Hydeia and Ammah, increasing in waves as more and more of the teethworms joined the hunt.

They lunged upward, grinding teeth together in ominous ear-raking squeals before flopping back beneath the vines, growing more aggressive as their numbers increased.

Hydeia and Ammah stayed as close to the center of each stone as possible, leaping high when they crossed from one to the other, so far managing to stay out of reach of the snapping wreaths of teeth that surged toward them at every crossing. Though most of the stones were wide enough for

three or four people to stand safely upon, others were not big enough for one person. Hydeia curled in as close to Ammah as she could get on those stones, moving quickly to the next in the path before the teethworms rose.

Stringy blue vines lashed out at them.

Balancing on one of the larger stones, Ammah pulled his bow from his back and found it broken in two. He stabbed both pieces into the stretching maws of rising mouths while Hydeia sent arrow after arrow into the muscular slimy folds.

A tanglevine clamped around Hydeia's thigh, yanking her off her feet. The leaf-covered sea seemed to fly at her, then spun, tilting crazily as Ammah caught her and tossed her up onto his shoulder while he ripped the vine off her leg, and jumped to the next stone.

"Put me down!" Hydeia shouted as she sighted a shaft over the top of Ammah's torn pack. The arrow thudded into a gray body much too close behind Ammah's heel.

"Can't." Ammah tightened his hold across her legs. "This is quicker. I know where the stones are. You do not. Just keep those worms and vines off me."

He had a valid point, *Koric* take him. So Ammah darted from stone to stone while Hydeia, slung over his broad shoulder, spent every last arrow she had.

Panicking, she climbed higher over Ammah's shoulder and pack and felt him nearly slide back off one of the stones. He kicked out at a yawning maw.

"What are you doing?"

"Arrows! I'm out of arrows!"

Strong hands swept up under her bottom, lifted her higher.

She didn't bother with the cord fastening the flap down, but plunged her hand inside one of the slashes the rage lion had made and felt around inside until she found the long supple leather pouch that Ammah carried his arrows in.

It took several attempts to get it out of the rip. In frustration, Hydeia forced it out, tearing the hole further and spilling more of Ammah's belongings behind them, bouncing on the stones and slipping down into the nest of vines, lost forever.

She slipped forward, almost tumbling over Ammah's back while he stumbled on a whipping vine, caught himself, and grabbed Hydeia's legs before she toppled down the other side.

Face bouncing against his firm backside, Hydeia screamed as teeth closed down on her hair, wrenching her head back. She felt her roots ripping inside her scalp, while the teethworm fell back into the tanglevines, taking long strands of her hair with it. At the same time Ammah flipped her upright in his arms, and tossed her back up onto his other shoulder like she was a sack of grain.

"Are you hurt?" he shouted gruffly.

"No, just bald." *Koric*, he was stronger than she'd thought. She untied the supple leather and unwrapped the arrows. Not quite twenty of them. They were longer than she usually used, fitted for Ammah's longer bow and greater strength, but they would serve. At this close range and with so many targets, she could as easily throw them and hit one of the horrible worms. They were everywhere. And before she could get an arrow nocked, Hydeia did just that. Rammed a shaft

straight down the throat, almost to her fist, of a worm that had launched itself off of one of his brothers, flying as high as Ammah's shoulders.

As the worm fell away with her arrow bouncing in its throat, several teethworms clamped onto it, dragging the blood darkened body beneath the churning, slapping vines. Hydeia noticed that the same thing was happening scattered back along the path of stones. The teethworms were preying on each other.

That gave her an idea. She rummaged through Ammah's pack again, hoping it hadn't fallen out. Her stomach was taking a brutal pounding against his hard shoulder with every jarring stride and she braced her muscles against it. His breathing was ragged and heavy. He couldn't keep this up much longer. No one could.

Her fingers curled around the packet of dried meat and she pulled it out and began flinging the strips of lamb out over the tanglevine field as far from the stones as she could.

At first she thought it had been a wasted effort, until she saw lines of ripples moving beneath the plants, veering off in the directions she'd thrown the meat. That got rid of some of them. But there was no way to know how many were down under those shredded vines anyway.

When it was gone, she went back to her bow.

Reyn coursed through her, strong and penetrating, filling her insides with sweet warmth. Hydeia embraced it greedily. Tylan and Uloki soared over their heads, cacking loudly. So attuned to each other's moods and needs, Tylan's *reyn* flooded Hydeia's mind, sifting out images and thoughts. The

eagle knew exactly what to do and immediately overlapped Hydeia's vision with her own keener sight.

Hydeia blinked while she grew accustomed to seeing two wavering surroundings, hers and the eagle's. Though she had learned to focus tightly on one image while letting her wider vision rest on the other until something caught her attention, it was one of the states of being an Eaglekin never quite got too comfortable in. Through Tyalan's viewpoint from above, Hydeia saw herself and Ammah moving across the sea of light blue foliage. Ammah's features were set in fierce determination, the muscles of his arms braced and hard as they held Hydeia's hips against his chest. It was more than a little disconcerting to view herself with him like that. Her sapphire *reyn* and his of blues and turbulent greens seemed to meld harmoniously as it enwrapped them together in a soft muted glow. Uloki and Tyalan dove at the foliage. Talons crashed and lifted writhing gray bodies up into the sky before dropping the teethworms. Shrill screams rang through the air until the tapered bodies thudded to the vine cloaked ground.

From the sky borne vantage, Hydeia made out the path of gray-white stones peeking out from the large blue tri-pointed leaves. Ammah's gait increased, became more sure, his long body glowed and heated with *reyn* as Uloki guided him across the stones while Hydeia released arrow after arrow, each shot hitting her mark. With Tyalan's sight, Hydeia saw the leaves ripple in circular waves just before a teethworm rose up. Gray bodies piled behind them, more as they became prey for their own in erupting frenzies until the arrows were gone.

"Put me down! I'm out of arrows. Put me down! Ammah!"

She found herself swept down into his arms, turned and set on her feet, supported until she gained her balance while they ran across the stones.

He should have put her down sooner. Ammah was near the end of his strength, breathing heavily. Hydeia didn't know how he'd carried her this far. They were more than halfway across. She could see through her gauzy vision interlaced with Tylan's, the end of the tanglevine field. Beautiful green summer grasses lay beyond. The sun burned at the horizon's edge, a red nimbus in the dark sky.

With Tylan's sight, Hydeia viewed the path of stones from above, knew exactly where to step and saw the teethworms before they leaped out to snap at her. She took the lead, keeping watch over Ammah through Tylan's sight as well, slowing when he appeared to be lagging. He hunched slightly over his torso as though that brought some relief to painful knots in his side. He somehow remained on his feet, remained focused on Uloki's safe guidance. They continued on for several more hours until the blue vines quieted, shining silver beneath the pale silver gleam of the moon.

Finally they were through, leaping ungracefully down from the last white stone. Together Hydeia and Ammah fell forward to their knees, dragging huge draughts of air into their labored lungs. His strength exhausted, Ammah swayed then rolled onto his side and was asleep in moments. He mumbled, barely stirring when Hydeia lifted him under his arms and dragged him away from the edge of the tanglevine field. Uloki landed near and hopped over to them, turning his elegant neck to peer closely at his true-bonded. The light shimmer of

reyn enveloped them both, a soft bluish green shining in the darkness, while the tiercel searched Ammah's essence for any hurts. Apparently satisfied, he walked a few paces to where Tyalan surveyed all that was going on, shifting her head from side to side for any threats.

Sitting down beside him, Hydeia pulled Ammah's head and shoulders up into her lap. She pushed a damp lock of hair back across his forehead, skimming her knuckles across the silken heat of his skin. What he had done today was remarkable. He had tremendous endurance and strength, more than she'd given him credit for. She'd never forget it, never forget him. With the eagles watching over them, Hydeia gently shifted back to lie on the ground. Making sure Ammah's head still safely rested on her stomach, she drifted to sleep.

* * * *

They passed the night while warm summer winds blew across the stretching flatland to break upon the first little hill. Hydeia floated from sleep on the tingling swell of the true-bond swirling through her stomach as Tyalan soared beneath Uloki in their sky bound courtship. Hydeia opened her eyes to a muted gray sky brushed with ethereal predawn light.

The breeze tickled Hydeia's skin, feathery light with little whorls of spindrift. Wind whispered through Tyalan's outstretched wings, luxuriantly soft. Hydeia curled her fingers into the dew-misted meadow grass.

Tyalan craned her long neck, seeking sight of Uloki. Something was warm and solid beside Hydeia. She turned her head.

Ammah slept next to her on his side. One arm was above his head, the other rested across his chest that rose and fell in deep breaths.

Without thought, Hydeia rolled up and knelt beside him. Her hands splayed just above his ribs. She ached to touch him, to glide her palms over his smooth skin and feel the planes and ridges of lean muscle beneath. She imagined following the curving line of his scar with her finger, across his flat hard stomach and lower to discover exactly where the scar ended past his breeches. Did it slant across his hips?

She did not touch him.

He was hers.

He didn't want her.

He had carried her across the tanglevine field.

Because he was honorable and worthy, nothing more. He had carried Santil across the field as well.

Tyalan's joyful call echoed in Hydeia's head. Warmth flushed through her body, tightening every muscle, every joint.

Ammah moaned and the pure masculine sound of it sent shivers shooting across Hydeia's already sensitive flesh.

Unfair. How could she be mated to a male who wanted no part of Eyrie tradition? Who wanted nothing of her? Shredding eagles, why did they have to court in the sky this morning with Ammah so near? After she'd seen just how deep his

valiant courage ran. The mere sight of him, scent of him, scattered every sense she possessed.

His full lips quirked in almost a sleepy smile. The soft haze of his bond with Uloki illuminated his handsome features. It bothered her greatly that he was able to withstand the compelling force of *reyn* that drew them together while she was drowning in its overpowering current.

Hydeia shuddered from the sheer compulsion of it.

He was hers.

It took every fiber of her self-control to keep from just touching him. Just one little touch.

She leaned forward, ever so slightly, to inhale his scent. Rich forests and ash smoke lingered about him and something else, heady and indefinable, a scent all his own, masculine and spicy that sent a jolt of adrenaline scorching through her, burrowing under her skin right down to her heart.

Inhaling deeply, she leaned closer still. A strand of her hair brushed across Ammah's sun-darkened chest and his eyes flew open. He sat up fluidly while Hydeia shrank back, mortified to be caught so close over him.

Both startled, they stared unmoving at each other.

Hydeia searched his unique eyes for anger, afraid to back down now and look away. His pupils were dark. The muscle in his jaw flinched and he exhaled a long breath.

His hand lifted to her hair as though he were inspecting the damage the teethworms had inflicted. Wanting him so badly, Hydeia's breath caught at the soft touch.

Ammah's fingers were shaking. Hydeia was shaking. Nerves licked across every fraction of her flesh. She could not

control the raging force of emotions, of want, of staggering need roaring to the surface. Ammah's eyes were heavy lidded and locked on her. His neck was rigid with tension. A low guttural sound came from deep in his throat, sending Hydeia's already shattered emotions skidding down her spine.

"I can't..." Ammah's hand cupped the back of her head, tangled in her hair. He was fighting this. Why? It was right. She knew it was right. They were mated. His incredible eyes were dark and intense. So full of passion and longing. Vulnerable. She felt the moment he yielded to his emotions, knew the precise moment his tight control fractured, devastatingly so. Her own control crumbled, flew from her tenuous grasp like cottonweed fluff.

She couldn't stop what was flowing between them if she'd wanted to. And she wasn't anywhere near wanting to. Skies, she wanted to touch him. Just touch him.

His throaty rumble was irresistible. "I can't ... *Koric* be shredded! I..." In a heartbeat Hydeia found herself in his arms, he had moved so swiftly. He crushed her to him as though she were driftwood in an empty sea.

Tyalan turned over in the air, plummeting backward through the sky.

Hydeia spun with her, breathing rapidly. "You want this? You're sure?" she rasped.

"No. Yes. Shred me, yes, dear *Koric*, yes," Ammah murmured low and husky, the sound of it was liquid fire scorching through Hydeia's blood. His lips found her shoulder, the curve of her neck, burning drops of molten heat along her flesh and the quivering nerves just beneath.

As she'd hungered to do, Hydeia ran her hands over him, along his back, across his strong chest, below his ribs. Her lips brushed his shoulder, his collarbone, his throat. He was a pleasing mixture of strength and firm smoothness.

Uloki crashed into Tyalan. Talons locked, they spiraled through the sky, wind roaring along sleek bodies. The light fractured.

Hydeia rolled across the meadow grass with Ammah. They came to a shuddering stop in a heart pounding jolt, arms and legs entwined. Tiny flickers of pleasure swam in his sultry eyes. Her mouth slanted over his in a frantic searing kiss. His taste was hot and spicy and male. Oh so very male.

He was hers.

He was hers!

She needed more of him. More! Aggressively she took what she wanted, teetering between maintaining some semblance of control and reckless abandon. Barely breathing, she deepened the kiss. It was small consolation that Ammah's heart beneath her palm was thrumming as hard as hers, his skin as hot and moist.

Her body was aflame, ignited by the solid strength of his hard planes beneath her, the saltiness of his warm glowing skin. He groaned, a sound of sheer torment that shot vibrant pulses resonating across her flesh. His hands tangled in her hair, pressing her lips closer upon his with the force of his grip. *Koric*, she couldn't get enough of him, she'd never have enough.

Tyalan's sudden scream of alarm pierced Hydeia's mind, scattering the haze of passion.

Ammah broke the kiss, his features both stunned and tormented, flushed, smoldering beneath the surface. His chest rose and fell like he'd just ran a great distance. The glimmer of lake-blue *reyn* crackled around him.

Heart hammering, Hydeia gasped for breath, trying to make sense of what happened, groping for any coherent thought.

Then it all slammed into her. "Tyalan!" she screamed. "*Dear Koric*, Tyalan!" Tyalan was in danger.

Already on his feet, Ammah pulled Hydeia to hers. "Get your bow."

Chapter Nine

"I'm out of arrows! What is it? What's coming?" Hydeia flung her senses out to Tylan, attempting to see what was happening. Abruptly her sight merged with the eagle's. Long wings stroked through the warm air, climbing higher. Fear, on the cusp of panic rolled into Hydeia, emotions she'd never before felt coming from Tylan.

Hydeia's pulse banged in her ears. What is it? She couldn't see what was pursuing Tylan. She tried to grasp onto any mental images in the bird's mind, but Tylan was too full of fear, blocking Hydeia's ability to search for any distinct thought. Where was Uloki?

"Tell her to stoop!" Ammah shouted. His image was blurred behind Tylan's sight, lean and hazy. "Lead them close to the ground." Grabbing up his pack, he shook the contents out on the ground. "Shred it! There has to be something in here."

"What...?" Hydeia shook out her own pack. Everything she owned spilled out onto the summer grass while she relayed the directions to come in on a fast stoop to Tylan. She grabbed up a length of rope, flicked it out and tied a sliding knot in one end then slung it over one shoulder so she could pull out her knife. That was all the weapons she and Ammah had left between them after crossing the tanglevines. One blade and a rope. And the tanglevines. Her gaze flicked out across the deceptively quiet blue field.

Her heart stilled when she felt Tylan plunge and her pursuers came into the transparent view.

A handful of massive blotchy brown and gray birds turned on the wind to follow Tylan's downward stoop. The smallest was easily four times the eagle's size, with a curving gnarled beak and long outstretched talons.

Hydeia's heart roared to life. She pulled all her senses back to herself, focused and ready. *This way Tylan. Bring them here.* "What are those things?"

"Gortures." Ammah searched the skies. He'd unfurled his bedroll. "There!"

Uloki soared out from between a cleft in the hills, a sleek black dart soaring just ahead of three larger, thicker forms. Their wide wings were thrice the width of their leathery bodies. *Sweet sun*, how many of those things were there? Hydeia was seriously beginning to not like this land very much. Rage lions, teethworms, plants that tried to hold you, now these vile gortures. Let her go back to the untamed lands of red canyon and forest and dark sea. At least those dangers were familiar.

Tylan swerved low to the ground. Her lithe form ruffled the tall grass and sent colorful blossoms spinning into the air. The loathsome gortures glided just behind her. Long three-toed talons stretched toward her as a gorture arched her wings in the air.

Twisting agilely, Tylan slipped sideways and rolled beyond her reach. Hydeia and Ammah raced forward to meet the great birds.

Tylan shot past them just as Hydeia went low to her knees. Using both hands, she shoved her blade up into the vulnerable exposed throat of the closest gorture. The impact

and momentum jarred the knife hilt deep into the fluffy breast feathers and dragged Hydeia backwards beneath the bird while the blade tore a sharp slice down along the underbelly. The rope across Hydeia's shoulder burned the skin on her back as it dragged between her and the ground. Crunching bone and tearing flesh vibrated through the knife into Hydeia's arms until she was ripped away, sliding across the grass. Fluff and ropey strings of blood flew all around her, coating her face and lashes.

Squealing like the yelps of a thousand dogs, the huge bird skidded beak first into the grasses. Its neck twisted awkwardly.

Ammah had a second gorture's head tangled in his bedroll, wrestling it to the ground while the sharp talons snapped open and closed, trying to latch onto anything it could reach. It hopped several feet off the ground, lifting Ammah with it, but he somehow kept his hold and they went down, rolling in the grass.

Terror slammed into Hydeia as Tylan banked a tight bend and came at her again, a giant beak nipping at her long tail feathers.

Hydeia pulled the rope from her shoulder, swung around, waited a heartbeat as the eagle soared a finger's breath above her head, and let the rope fly. *Koric* favored them both that the gorture flew right into the wide loop. Hydeia leaned back, bracing her body, bracing her hands on the rope for the sliding knot to tighten upon the gorture's neck. It snapped tight, hurling Hydeia to the ground with unexpected force, cutting across her palms as the rope streamed through her

groping grasp. She clenched it tight, pulling back on it with every fiber of strength and muscle she possessed. The bird jerked in the air then whirled end over end to the ground.

The air exploded in a riot of angry brown and gray feathers. The remaining gortures swerved low to the ground in sweeping attacks.

Hydeia ran to the first gorture she'd killed with the knife and screamed against the sudden pain that exploded when her torn palms slipped around the hilt. She tugged out the knife so forcefully she fell back while another of the great birds swept over her. Its talons whipped across her shoulder, tossing her in the air. She fell with a wrenching thud to her shoulder and scrambled across the grasses to the fallen gorture, using it for scant cover. She slashed through another's wing, while she kicked another's curved beak away from her. Momentarily stunned, the winged beast soared high into the sunlight. She heard Ammah cry out, but she could not get to him, could not see him past the darting gortures swooping around her. She had no idea what had become of Uloki, not sharing a bond with him, and unable to search for sight of him in the melee. She prayed he had escaped.

Hydeia became furious motion. Rolling and diving beneath talons, she grabbed up a travel cook pot, and swung it into wings, necks, talons, beaks, until it ripped out of her bleeding grasp on a sharp-edged shoulder bone.

Exhausted and without a weapon, Hydeia grabbed onto passing wings, pulling feathers with her bare hands that burned and cut across her already wounded palms, until she stumbled upon Ammah's torn and tattered bedroll, nearly

tripping in it, and threw it into the talons that stretched for her.

Wings arched out in a talon-first plummet, the gorture flapped backward, further tangling in the bedroll. Hydeia pulled with the little strength she had left, dragging the large bird from the sky. They toppled to the ground together, feathers, bedroll, legs and arms tangled. The gnarled beak caught in Hydeia's tunic, wrenching her back.

Hydeia hung onto the wings with all she had.

The battered cook pot suddenly flew past her head, slammed against the long neck, cracking hollow bones. The wings flapped harder, nearly sending Hydeia rolling except for the painful hold on her tunic, near to choking her.

Ammah's body covered hers as he added his greater strength to hold the gorture down. His muscles strained, jaw clenched, while he drove the heel of his large hand into the bird's neck. The sound of bones snapping creaked through the charged air.

Finally the bird went still. All was quiet but for Hydeia's and Ammah's ragged breathing.

"They're ... leaving," Ammah said between gasps.

Hydeia looked up to see five of the gortures flapping away.

Tyala! She flicked her senses to the eagle and let out a shuddering breath, finding Tyalan unhurt. Turning her head, she saw Tyalan nudging her neck across Uloki's. Both eagles were well. Dear skies, they were well.

Ammah grunted as he moved off her. Alarmed, Hydeia tried to turn, but found herself pinned. "You're hurt."

"I'm well."

He wasn't. He had deep bleeding gashes on his forearm where talons must have gotten a hold of him. With their strength, it was a wonder his bones weren't broken or crushed. *Koric's teeth*, they had been lucky. Hydeia shrugged off an immobilizing wave of emotion.

Ammah pried open the gorture's beak a fraction and worked her tunic free, unintentionally tearing it further. "Are you hurt?"

"Sore, but it's you who is bleeding." Sitting up, she shook her hair free.

"No?" Ammah pulled her torn tunic across her shoulder where there were several red scrapes. "This needs to be tended."

His gaze held hers, worried. A bittersweet smile graced his mouth. A quick shocking burn traveled her spine down to her toes that curled inside her boots. His name swirled around in her head, slipped whisper-soft through her lips.

His golden eyes darkened to a deeper shade of autumn-leaf brown. His hands slid lightly down her arm, warm and solid, then he shifted away, grew reserved, but Hydeia perceived the longing and fear for her that he tried to hold back. She tamped down her own tormented worry and the stuttering nerves that went with it.

His eyes came back to her, controlled. A lopsided grin crept over his strong features. "I've never seen anyone fight off a gorture with a pot before. Is that a technique they teach in the eyries now?"

"No, but I'll suggest it." Hydeia's answering grin melted away. "Is mankind's land full of so many such creatures? The Matrons are correct to keep our people from these dangers."

Ammah frowned. "Perhaps. But closing yourselves off from the world of mankind deprives you from many wonders as well. Besides, would anyone of mankind's race find the sand wolves or horny plated river beasts or lumbering maspbulls of Gaspar any less threatening?"

Hydeia clucked her tongue. Which made Ammah smile again. "The king's archers are usually enough of a deterrent to keep the gorture's west in their own territory." He scowled at the western skies. "The Border Archers should be here, should have met us by now. By their creed, they render service and escort to travelers among the hills. They know me by sight, would have given aid at the gortures first appearance."

Hydeia's head snapped up. "They know you?"

Ammah shrugged one shoulder. "I scouted with them for a season. Uloki and I. The war with Pagona must be going badly for King Baruck to summon the archers from the southlands."

"This king commands many bowmen?" Hydeia did not like the sound of that. Though many Eaglekins were skilled with the bow themselves, they did not trust other archers near their eagles. Archers of mankind especially.

"Thousands. In truth it concerns me that he would have need of more, even those few of the Border Archers. King Baruck should have more concern over his people in his own lands."

Hydeia sucked in a breath at his tone. "Why would he have need of more archers?"

Ammah scrubbed a hand across his face, back into his dark hair. "I don't know." He rose fluidly to his feet and stretched out his arm. "Come. Let's leave this place before the scavengers arrive."

Aching with fatigue, Hydeia gladly accepted his offered hand and found herself placed easily on her feet by the power of his arms, though she couldn't keep back the sharp intake of breath. Ammah's features exploded into a snarl. "What happened to your hands!"

* * * *

Hydeia tried to snatch her hands away, but Ammah held her firmly by the wrists, turned her palms upward, and hissed through his teeth. Bleeding welts puckered lines across both palms where the rope had burned and cut her. As well they were covered in scratches and gashes from fighting barehanded with the ghastly gortures. Her leather bracer had saved one arm and wrist from the same fate. The wounds throbbed. Hydeia supposed her hands would never look the same as before, but since Eaglekins saw beauty in strength and worthiness, and would find calluses and scars borne of hard work and hard living beautiful, she didn't much worry about their appearance. As long as she could still loose an arrow and hold Tylan on her wrist, all would be well.

"They don't look so deep." Ammah stared at her bleeding palms as though he'd been the one to mark her. She could see the tendons tightening in his neck.

A rush of tenderness consumed her. She tried to step back, needed the distance from her own growing response. She still hadn't recovered from that kiss, wasn't certain she could withstand the danger of giving into all her turbulent emotions again. Ammah's greater strength held her firm, and a little shiver trilled through her with the heady realization that he could.

Her voice was strangled, thin. She curled her hands within his grasp. "I'm fine. It doesn't matter." Her gaze lowered to the dead gortures, their brown and gray feathers lifting in the light breeze, then slid over to the two eagles, standing together. "We all fared better than we had any right to under the circumstance. If burns from the rope and scratches are the worst of our injuries then I'll bear them with gladness." And a little pride. She had brought down a gorture with nothing more than a bedroll, a cooking pot, and her bare hands.

Ammah's gaze came back to her face, his exotic two-toned eyes appraising her. Slowly, he nodded and released his hold on her. "I have some salve." He turned, planted fists on lean hips as he surveyed the wreckage of their scattered belongings flung across the summer grasses. "At least, I had some salve."

Hydeia smiled at his back. "It may not be here at all. It could have fallen out among the tanglevines."

The look he turned on her was ripe with frustration.

Hydeia held out her hands. "I had nutwort. I emptied my pack over here. Ah, over there, maybe?"

They both searched the area, shoving things back into her pack as they went along. Hydeia lifted the dented cook pot, liking it even more, and shoved it down inside her pack. Her hands really were throbbing now.

"Here, is this it?" Ammah brought her a small pouch and poured the small tough-skinned berries into his palm.

"Yes."

A frown furrowed Ammah's dark brows. "These don't grow near my eyrie. What do I do?"

"Just chew them into a paste."

"Chew them?"

Hydeia nodded. Her hands were growing numb. She kept her fingers curled, finding that kept them from hurting so much. "The natural moisture of your mouth combines with the nutwort and helps with the healing qualities. Here, I'll chew it."

"No, you're growing pale." He drew her down to sit in the tall grass next to him. Studying the brown seed-like berries with a silent frown, Ammah popped several in his mouth and began chewing. Abruptly his jaw stiffened and his eyes widened in horror. Hydeia winced, knowing only too well the cruelly bitter taste. One of Ammah's eyes closed while he began chewing again with exaggerated slowness. It wasn't long before he spit the paste out into his cupped hand, and turned to spit the last remains into the grass.

She tried not to, but seeing Ammah's pained expression, laughter bubbled out of Hydeia's throat.

He attempted to appear annoyed, but his eyes went soft and amused. "We should have just shoved these down the gortures' throats. *By Koric*, that is foul."

He took her right hand and began applying the paste across the overlapping wounds. "Am I hurting you?"

Of course it hurt. Like being stabbed by stinging needles. Hydeia controlled her features, steadied her breathing. "No."

He took her other hand in his. Tylan and Uloki came near, watched intently. Ammah's gentle ministrations coaxed Hydeia's fingers to uncurl. He removed her leather bracer. His fingers moved up her arms in turn, over the scratches, leaving lingering pulses across her skin. His tongue ran across his white teeth. His voice was a rough murmur. "You applied this to the burn along my rib."

Hydeia nodded. "Yes. Of course."

"You chewed a lot of this nutwort."

She smiled. "It had to be done."

While Ammah considered that, his eyes went flat and hard. "Not everyone would have bothered."

He was going under. He could feel the steady pull of it, clamping around his shoulders and shoving him down.

Hydeia's hand had stilled in his palms. Her incredible golden eyes had gone all soft and velvety. And it scared the rotting shreds out of him.

He couldn't go through it again. Wouldn't. He'd never survive a second time. Almost hadn't survived before. Absently, Ammah's hand strayed toward the jagged scar slanting across his abdomen, until he stopped himself with a jolt. The skin along the scar seemed to tingle like an itch.

Ammah swallowed, steadied himself, gathered his resolve, and barricaded the last tender part of his heart. He couldn't allow another woman near it, especially an Eaglekin female. But one look at Hydeia and he knew he was already in deep. She'd somehow wiggled her way far too close to his protective barrier and he'd felt it beginning to crack.

He'd only been curious when he'd first felt Uloki soaring in the throes of the courting dance. He had wanted to see for himself the female who was true-bonded to Uloki's new mate. He hadn't expected her to be so breathtaking or for the compulsion drawing them together through their eagles' *reyn* to slam into him with such force.

He had prepared to be dismissed and sent on his way when the female Eaglekin realized that Uloki was a wilder, had counted on it in fact, waited for the revulsion to slide across her features when he first approached her in the canyon, but not Hydeia. Instead she had stunned him by thrusting that mating feather at his chest.

Ammah's lips quirked up into a lazy smile. Hydeia was a rare Eaglekin, a treasure. He wondered if she knew how different from the other females she really was. Her hands and arms were a wondrous mixture of strength and softness. The nutwort paste slid between their touch. He worried about her wounds, whether she'd retain her dexterity, but the paste seemed to loosen her hands.

"What?" Hydeia flexed her hand, testing the ache. He felt her eyes slide over his face and felt his heart lose its steady rhythm.

"We should be going." All he could think about was shaping his mouth to hers again, gliding his hands along that smooth satiny skin. But he couldn't do it. Not when he knew he wouldn't stay with her. He couldn't go back to the eyries, to that way of life again. Especially not bonded to a wilder, even if he had considered going back. Which he didn't. So as much as he wanted Hydeaia—shreds! Wanted? He craved her. Craved her like he'd never wanted anything or anyone more in his entire life. He blew out a breath. He couldn't be with her that way, knowing he would leave her. That he could never be her mate. He wouldn't hurt her like that.

And she wasn't helping matters in the least. Waking up to her coaxing touch, tentative and soft like the caress of a spring breeze, her shining hair floating over both of them like a gossamer veil. How was he supposed to resist that? And he hadn't. He had given in, surrendered to her completely.

He pulled her to her feet, doing his best to ignore the flash of heat that skidded down his spine every shredding time he touched her. "Irrean's not much farther." And the sooner he got her there, the safer his heart would be.

Chapter Ten

"It's a horse."

"I know it's a horse." Hydeia planted a fist on her cocked hip. The rough spun wool of the gown felt heavy and unfamiliar. "I know the people of mankind ride them. I've just never seen it in practice before."

"In practice?" Ammah's eyes lit with amusement. He pulled Hydeia away from the brightly garbed highborns on horseback and farther into the press of people afoot.

Hydeia preferred being near the large exotic animals far better than the crush of the noisy, jostling crowd. Her muscles were tense as Ammah led her through the wide cobbled streets of Irrean. Outside the city gates, she'd changed into a creamy white blouse with a snug fitting bodice and wine-red skirt Etha had supplied her with. It twisted around her legs, not exactly hampering with its full lines and folds, just different. Though she was grateful to have it as the majority of the females in the city were garbed in similar attire: plain skirts of pale-dyed wool or homespun, some had more colorful long tunics cinched with bright sashes over their gowns. She could move around unnoticed in the village-made gown well enough.

"Keep your eyes lowered," Ammah whispered close to her temple. "Their unique hue and shape marks you as Eaglekin."

Perhaps not as unnoticed as she'd hoped. "What of your eyes?" she said, while he gazed up at one of the thick gray stone bridges that arched above a packed road where large draft horses were pulling heavily laden merchant wagons

toward the eastern city edge. Ammah had told her that the markets were located near the eastern river that carried watercraft larger than five wagons from city to city. She would like to see for herself so large a vessel on the water.

She liked the city and its streets that crossed each other, winding between double-storied buildings like dried riverbeds between canyon walls. In the distance toward the center of Irrean, colorful banners hung down from tall circular towers adorning the high castle wall. Smaller imitations of the round towers dotted the city, their curved structures adjoined to brightly painted buildings and larger manor homes.

"My eyes are not so piercing gold as yours." Taking her bandaged hand, Ammah led her into a smaller street between rows of tightly spaced buildings, just as crowded.

He pulled her to a stop and averted his gaze as four tall men strolled by, all in matching sky-blue surcoats with silver winged trumpets emblazoned across their chests. Curving short swords in white metal scabbards were strapped at their right hips. They didn't spare them a glance when they passed.

"Queenswatch," Ammah whispered. "The queen's own personal watchmen. They say they are more active in stopping theft than the King's City Guards."

Hydeia watched them move down the street, unimpressed. They moved with the gait of persons not caring if they left a trail or if anyone saw their approach, boisterous and arrogant. They passed several men in the violet cloaks that Ammah pointed out were the City Guards. The two groups of soldiers glared as they approached each other. The people around them had grown quiet, shifting back as though they expected

a conflict, but the two groups merely shoved passed each other, and the tension thrumming in the air settled.

They were about the only young men visible in the packed streets among the older men and youths, and women moving about. Most men and boys of an age to the Queenswatch had been conscripted to serve in King Baruck's armies far to the north in his bid to overtake the lands under the rule of neighboring Pagona.

Dismissing the soldiers, Hydeia looked back at Ammah as he herded her forward. How could he believe he didn't stand out among these city people? Even if his vibrant eyes wouldn't mark him anywhere, certainly his carriage, confident and straight, set him apart from these people who walked so briskly, hunching their shoulders just to carve a path for themselves.

She supposed living on the outskirts of war might have something to do with it where most of Irrean's stores of supplies and grains were sent north to support Baruck's unwanted war. The people seemed full of pent-up frustration, their countenances gloomy and hard as though they had to be quick to fend for their own needs while the city grew scant on food and necessities.

Hydeia sent a tendril of *reyn* to Tylan, safe with Uloki in an old mill just outside the city where Ammah was also once employed for a short season while he dwelt among mankind. The young family of millers had been truly joyous to see Ammah again and welcomed the eagles while she and Ammah ventured into Irrean.

Tyalan's bond touch was comforting. Hydeia grinned, feeling Tyalan drop headfirst from the croft's rafters and seize a plump rat in her talons.

"Ammah!" A young girl squealed, nearly overturning a barrel she sat on as she jumped off. Thin as a sapling with a grin full of recklessness, the light haired child plowed into Ammah, tangling herself around his knees.

Pulling her off him, Ammah lifted the girl to his chest and she flung skinny arms around his neck.

"Grechle, what are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for mean Hanold to deliver ma's eggs. I'm to keep an eye out for him."

"No doubt to keep you out from underfoot." Ammah tweaked the child's pert little nose.

Hydeia stared, entranced by the gentle interplay and the genuine openness the child brought to the Eaglekin's unguarded features. A little flutter teased at Hydeia's heart, soft like dew collecting on leaves.

Grechle placed her hands on either side of Ammah's lean face. "Have you come to stay again? Mamma has several more tasks needs tendin' since you left. A board in the stairs needs mending. Fron Near hasn't paid in a sennight, the wagon's tongue is splitting, and hog-nosed Andreth is bothering the girls again. But not me. Did you bring your eagle? I stepped on his fat foot."

"Whose foot?"

"Andreth's. He'll run scattered quick when he sees you're back. Who's that?" The child eyed Hydeia.

"A friend." Ammah set the girl on her feet. "Is your mother inside?"

"Preparing for the midday crowd. You're staying, yes? You'll fix that old Andreth again?"

Ammah took Grechle's small hand in his large palm. "I can't stay. Not this time."

"Oh." The girl's lips circled into a tiny pout and she threw an accusatory glance at Hydeia before she pulled Ammah to the door.

"See who I brought!" Grechle exclaimed as they entered the rear of a spacious kitchen.

A trio of young women paused in their preparations of chopping carrots and turnips. A large eyed girl dumped partially shredded meat into one of many pots hanging by the large hearth. Not much older than Hydeia, each wore long aprons over ruffled hems high enough to expose feet encased in slippers tied with ribbons that crisscrossed up their ankles.

"Ammah!"

"You've come back!"

All three women left their preparations and came around the large oaken worktable to surround him at once, taking his arm, pressing overly curvy bodies against his. He hugged them all in turn, twisting his torso slightly to avoid them pressing against his healing burn.

He lifted one of them, a dark-eyed woman, off her feet even while he winced. She squealed in delight like a little suckling pig. Dark curls swished about her round hips.

The large fire blazing in the hearth made the room stifling hot. Hydeia scowled.

He was hers.

"What's this banging in here about?" A slender woman swung open the door to the adjoining room. Narrowed dark eyes instantly widened. "Ammah! Dear spirits, Ammah! Pansha, let go of the boy. Get back to work, all of you and let him breathe." She glided across the kitchen, all cool demeanor until Ammah opened his arms and her reserve vanished, softening against him.

Hydeia uncurled her fingers, noticing the serving women watching her while they went back to chopping and sliding vegetables and meat into waiting pots. Grechle giggled.

The older woman slid from Ammah's embrace, still holding him by his forearms, and turned her sharp gaze on Hydeia. "Who's this? You've brought me another?" Her grip tightened on Ammah's arm. "Why she's Eaglekin."

Every head snapped up. Even Grechle grew still.

Hydeia lifted her chin under the sudden scrutiny.

"Nedarra." Ammah slid his hand down the woman's arm to her wrist. "Is there a place we can speak?"

"Of course." A troubled frown pulled on Nedarra's features and she cocked her head to the side. "Smallest room, end of the hall is vacant."

Smiling, Ammah squeezed her hand.

A clatter of dishes breaking sounded from the adjoining room with a strangled feminine scream, followed by a bellowing laugh.

"Scour that man!" Nedarra stalked toward the door.

Ammah caught her by the elbow. "Andreth Narin?"

Nedarra nodded.

"I'll take care of it."

* * * *

The door to the adjoining room wasn't large enough for all four women to pass through at once, though they gave it a fair attempt when they all scurried after Ammah like little fluffy brown mice. Impatient as well, Hydeia pushed after them, spilling into a long narrow room filled with various-shaped dark wooden tables and sturdy chairs of assorted workmanship, most with simple slatted back detailing. Small unlit lanterns sat in the center of each table beside little ladles and bowls filled with grainy salt next to tall wooden peppermills. Scarcely more than a handful of people occupied the smoke-layered room. Two men, in their later years, looked up from meals at the table closest to the large hearth, and an even older drooped-shoulder fellow hunched over an overly long and tall table with four-legged stools bellied up to one side of it.

Ammah had a large oaf of a man down flat on his back, anchoring him with a knee to his barrel-sized chest and the legs of a stool pressed up against his head, pushing his neck back. A red haired serving girl with freckles smattered across her cheeks, stood above them boggle-eyed, broken dishes around her slippered feet.

Two more men, younger, at an age with the soldiers in the streets who had not been commissioned to go off to the king's war, were in the process of rising from their seats at a table just to the side of Ammah. The flash of a small blade

flickered from beneath the wide sleeve of the closest's worn green coat.

Hydeia pushed past the women, grabbing up a peppermill and slammed it neatly across the knife-welder's wrist before he realized she was there. Pepper dust floated to the planked floor.

"Oww!" the man roared, half-bending over his arm. "Mother of rot!" He switched the blade to the other hand, turning to Hydeia, but she already had her own knife out, pointed just a fraction from the lout's crude belt buckle.

"Don't." She neatly flicked up her blade toward the hollow at his throat. "Agreed?"

He looked horrified, not so much in fear, but at being taken unaware. He glanced at his friend on the floor and Ammah, then at all the women, shock evident on their faces, then back to Hydeia. He slipped his knife under his coat then backed away. "As you say. No concern of mine anyway."

She tossed a satisfied look at Ammah. How had the rash man survived this long without her? He looked over his shoulder, quickly taking in the situation with a glance, before he turned his full attention back to Andreth Narin.

Hydeia went completely still. Ammah trusted her. A tiny thrill fluttered low in her belly at the same time her head swam with the uncertain realization that his confidence in her ability to watch over him mattered a great deal to her. She didn't wish it to matter, not when he made it clear that he could not tolerate being her mate. But there it was, shining pure and bright behind his eyes.

Turning to glare down the second fellow at the table, Hydeia found his palms already facing out. Thick brows protruded over wide dark eyes. He was slender of hip and leg yet powerful looking in the shoulder beneath a jacket of dark burnished red. Proving he had no intent of interfering, he slid back down to his chair, all the while staring at Hydeia with a probing intensity that swept shivers along her arms. Hydeia set her face in an intimidating stare and hoped she did it well. She didn't feel so intimidating, in fact she had the subtle impression that the seated man was more interested in studying her than on what was going on with the two men on the floor. Did her eyes truly make her stand out that much around mankind?

"I believed we had an understanding, Andreth." Ammah shifted down on the stool, which twisted Narin's head back awkwardly, stretching his blotchy neck. His red flesh was already chafing white where the wooden leg pressed on his chin. His eyes bulged, his bulbous nostrils widened. He really did have the nose of a hog.

"Look, here. It's nothin' like that." Narin attempted to twist his head forward. His grip tightened white knuckled around the stool legs. "Ease up a might. I've no breath!"

Ammah's pressure didn't lift. "Nedarra and her girls are my friends. You were warned to leave them alone. My friend Carew was to make sure that happened."

"The Border Archer?" Andreth croaked. "He left with the rest of 'em, off to fight against Pagona."

"Even so." Ammah frowned. "Perhaps the fault is mine, and I hadn't made my point clear enough."

Narin's face flushed even redder, if that was possible. "No, no. You made your point plain enough. It's just that I thought you were gone for good, and with fewer City Guards about, seeing as they all run off to war, I figured the girls could use my protection about—oof!"

Ammah wrenched the stool a notch. "Your protection? I'd hoped you could govern yourself better in my absence. I told you I'd return and what would happen if I caught you around here..."

"Rot you!"

Wrenching the stool aside, Ammah's fist connected with Narin's jaw with a resounding pop before the man got his shoulders off the floor. He laid sprawled unconscious on the polished floorboards.

Rising fluidly, Ammah turned to the two men Hydeia guarded. His gaze was furious and icy cold. "If he's of any importance to you, you can collect him after nightfall, back of the stables."

His friends didn't come back for Andreth Narin that night. Ammah tied him out back behind the stables in the sow's pen. Andreth awoke lying in the filth with three little piglets nosing at his red face while passersby stopped to laugh and point at the man trussed up like a side of ham ready to be hauled to market.

Ammah forgot him as soon as he left him there, knowing that for a man like Andreth, he would likely flee to another part of the city, rather than face the daily burn of humiliation.

"You won't have any difficulty finding Doron Leurise."
Nedarra sat on the edge of the narrow bed beside Ammah.

Hydeia perched uncomfortably on the only chair in the small whitewashed room. She'd prefer to be outdoors, stretching her legs out on wild grasses or even hard-packed soil. The bed, a chair, and small wooden stand holding a shallow washing bowl painted with delicate blue flowers with a matching pitcher on a shelf beneath were all the furniture that fit in the small room. Even those seemed to take up all the space. Hydeia was grateful for the three stems of tiny blossoms of nymphhair within a slender fluted vase that scented the closed-in air with a summery fragrance of outdoors.

Nedarra smoothed wrinkles from her deep blue skirt. "If it's as you say and Leurise is indeed gathering any Eaglekins he can get a hold of, he'll come to you."

Hydeia leaned forward with a sudden intensity. "How would he know about us or where to find us?"

"I suspect he already knows both those things by now. Doron Leurise is a known dealer in trades, a master at the craft really. He's able to buy and sell a large variety of products even while the war has whittled the city's supplies down to nothing. Though he isn't always reputable or fair to deal with, the craftsmen and tradesmiths around here have come to rely on his services. Since the war, I also have had to conduct business with him on occasions when the salt barley and malts have become too difficult to acquire by other means. He can supply anything and everybody looks the other way. No one asks where the products have come from ... nor at this point, does anyone care. We do what we have to do to survive. You understand this, yes? If it was anyone

but you, Ammah, telling me Leurise is taking Eaglekins I'd ... well, truth is I'd try not to believe it, not wanting to throw away a vital resource, but I suppose deep down I'd wonder."

"Why is that?" Ammah's fists were pressing into the mattress.

Nedarra's chest lifted with a sighing breath. "Leurise doesn't dabble in so many varying trades for profit alone. It's the challenge of bringing in merchandise that others can't that drives him. He'd find the task of acquiring elusive Eaglekins irresistible."

The chair squeezed as Hydeia shifted to the edge of her seat. "You said he would know we are here. How?"

"Leurise has many suppliers working for him in his myriad of ventures. That friend of Narin's you kept from interfering with Ammah was one of them."

"The weasel with the knife?"

"No, the other, the lean one with dark as pitch eyes. His name is Dunwyn. Though if he knows anything of the Eaglekins being marketed, I can't tell you. He may only be apprised of one of Leurise's other ventures."

"He knows." Hydeia remembered the penetrating way he'd looked her over and how easily he had backed off. Shreds, he had been right there at her blade's tip. She could have had Lannis and Sheeannar's location from him by now. She turned to Nedarra. "Show me where this Doron Leurise arranges his business matters and I will force him or his weasel Dunwyn to tell me who he hunts Eaglekins for."

Ammah hissed between his teeth. "It's not that simple. You could be waiting there for a sennight. Besides, you're

missing the point. Dunwyn has seen you. Regardless of the skirt, he has seen your eyes and has undoubtedly marked you as Eaglekin. I've got to get you out of the city now."

"What? Are you addled?" Hydeia rose to her feet.

Ammah stood as well, his shoulders straight, cloaked in arrogance. He was so shredded commanding sometimes. She'd made peace with the fact that he was in no part submissive, had actually come to like that about him, but now he sought to tell her what she could or couldn't do? Not rotting likely. "You'd have me flee and hide, now that I'm this close?"

"Yes."

She closed the distance between them, scowled up into his handsome features, and immediately realized that was a mistake. When he looked at her like that, worry evident in his serious expression, the urge to placate his fears consumed her. She forced herself to meet his gaze straight on. "You guided me safely here and helped me navigate my way through the city. You've completed what you set out to do. Now I must finish my task."

Strong hands suddenly gripped her forearms. Instinctively she twisted to get free and found herself rooted immobile.

"It's dangerous for you." His voice held a firmness she'd not detected before. He really meant to protect her. Living among these city-bred females had made him forget the strength of eyrie women.

"Let me point out that this Dunwyn saw you as well and would have just as easily marked you as an Eaglekin, whether you want to admit to yourself that you're one of our people or

not." She steadied her gaze against the hurt that sliced across his face. She waited a heartbeat to make sure her voice would not crack. "I know the risks. It's what I came here to do." She couldn't return to the Matrons without Sheeannar and Lannis, whatever the cost to herself. "I have to do this."

His gaze held her as strongly as his grip. His golden eyes darkened, matching the circle of deeper brown at the edge of his pupils. "I know." Abruptly he released her and stepped back, running a frustrated hand through his dark hair. "I do. I know."

"Shredded prey," he muttered under his breath and heaved a great reluctant sigh. "There's a better way. There has to be a better way. By now Leurise knows we are here. We'll simply wait for them to come to us. I'll do something. I'll, I'll, well, I'll allow them to take me while you watch, hidden, then follow us to where they're keeping the others."

It was a logically simple plan and absolutely unacceptable. They still didn't know what was being done to the Eaglekins and their eagles or why, but—it wasn't going to happen to Ammah. Hydeia's heart skipped a beat. *Dear Koric!* She would die a hundred times over before she'd see his expressive features empty and unresponsive like the girl Santil's.

Hydeia realized she was shaking. Both Ammah and Nedarra were staring uncertainly at her.

"No, I'll do it," she murmured. "I'll act as the bait and you follow..." her voice faltered around a lump in her throat as she realized the impact of what he'd been willing to do. He trusted her. Completely. Ammah was ready to put himself at risk, trusting that she would get him out. That not only

required that he believed in her skill to track his captors, but that he believed she would do everything in her power to get him away. No one had ever placed so much faith in her before. A silent pressure seemed to be squeezing around her head. She swallowed past the growing lump.

More to the point, without thought, she was willing to do the same. She had no doubt that in the reverse situation, he had the ability and the loyalty to come for her as well. Warmth shivered down her spine. Her legs felt like liquid.

Her body grew weary as though she'd just run a great distance. Ammah's features were angry. He was pacing and ranting, not paying any heed to her as she slipped back down to the chair.

"...not going to happen!" he was nearly shouting, though Hydeia hadn't heard a previous word of it. "I won't allow it."

That brought the strength bubbling back to her surface. She was on her feet again. "Won't allow it! It was your shredded idea!"

Ammah's tawny gaze snapped to her, sharp as a blade. This was a true son of the Fourteen Eyries, a fierce and worthy male, albeit at the moment, an angry and defiant one. And completely domineering and iron-handed. Though many tiercels were known to chastise their usually dominant mates when they felt the female was in danger or threatened, it didn't happen often.

Hydeia stared at Ammah, seeing the wide breadth of his shoulders, the defined muscles, and the raw untamed strength in his long body, and she knew that in this he would prevail over her. He would never allow her to do something

he thought was foolhardy. He truly was a unique male among her kind. And though Hydeia knew she should be insulted, emotions of being cared for and cherished nearly buckled her knees. Her hand rose to cover her heart in a protective gesture.

"Enough. Both of you." Nedarra stood at their sides with a placating hand on the swell of Ammah's upper arm. "Neither of you will do this. Find another way. The risk is not only too great for yourselves but for your eagles as well."

The fire scalding Hydeia immediately extinguished. *Koric's light!* She hadn't thought of the danger to Tylan or Uloki. What was wrong with her? She'd been thinking only of Ammah. The male addled her wits completely, emptied her head of all clear thought. Shame stabbed straight through to Hydeia's gut.

"You're right." Ammah looked as though he'd been chewing nutwort again. "Of course you're right, Nedarra."

Hydeia nodded her agreement. "I'll begin watching Leurise's place tonight." She pulled her lower lip between her teeth, unaccustomed to asking for favors, and looked to the innkeeper. "You'll direct me to where he conducts his trades?"

Nedarra slipped her palm lightly over Hydeia's arm and smiled gravely. "Of course."

Nodding once, Hydeia drew her own hand over Nedarra's and lowered her gaze. "My gratitude. For everything. But we must leave now. In daylight with our packs. I want it known that we have left your place. I would not bring trouble here."

Nedarra opened her mouth to argue, but stopped herself and simply patted Hydeia's arm.

All traces of his anger gone, Ammah looked at Hydeia as though he wanted to say something but he wasn't certain how to go about it.

"Come, eat before you go," Nedarra said, pulling Hydeia with her. "I can at least offer you that, and Ammah, the girls will all want to say their farewells. When this is over, you'll still have a place here, you know that. Always." She spoke to Ammah, yet her gaze was fixed on Hydeia.

* * * *

The common room was swollen with local workers, stopping in for an early evening meal. Ammah explained that only a few would leave for their homes immediately after supping, while most would linger, swapping tales, until far after dark. Being near the center of the areas of trades, most of the women and older men coming in were craftsmen and wheelwrights, blacksmiths, and dock laborers. The air soon swirled with smoke spiraling from glowing pipes or puffed from fat rolls of brown hantar root. The spicy odor seemed to blend with the scents of steaming bread and the evening's meal of smoking beef with some kind of thick dark gravy and colorful glazed squashes.

Eaglekins being mostly solitary, Hydeia found the concept of gathering together nightly in such a manner a little unnerving, yet there was also something about the spontaneous noise and the growing rhythm of laughter suddenly erupting in waves around the room, and the way the serving girls moved briskly between tables, juggling meals,

and bottles, and flirtatious conversations with a hearty rhyme, sometimes a wink or a giggle, that appealed to her.

Hydeia sopped up the last of her turnip and goose stew with her wedge of warm grainy bread, mesmerized by the scene. She'd never experienced anything like it. Not even the gatherings of the Fourteen Eyries held every third year compared to the boisterousness of just one regular evening in one small inn of mankind. She'd like nothing better than to be able to watch these people of mankind interact for days.

But she didn't have days. It may already prove to be too late for Lannis and Sheeannar. As soon as the meal rush was over and things quieted enough for them to be noticed, she and Ammah would leave while there were still many eyes to note it. While they were waiting for the right time, Hydeia wanted to check on Tyalan. She excused herself, though Ammah appeared too distracted by dark-eyed Pansha, leaning far too close over him while she refilled his bowl with stew for him to pay much attention to Hydeia moving away.

He was hers.

Maddening male. He could do what he wanted. She glared at the serving girl as she walked away, angling sideways through the crowd. Pansha tossed her dark hair out of sultry eyes and pursed her lips smugly as she ran slender arms over Ammah's broad shoulders from behind. A tiny pang of jealousy stabbed Hydeia's chest, sharp and icy.

She pushed through the kitchen and threw open the rear door. It meant nothing. Ammah could do whatever he wanted. He'd made it more than startling clear that she had no claim on him. She really didn't care what he did. She really

didn't. She shivered against the sudden coldness creeping up her back.

A light rain was falling, making dark circles on the dirt road. The alley was quiet, the darkening air cool and fresh, a relief from the cloying smoke from the common room. No one else was about, safely tucked inside amid the noise and clatter, instead of seeking the quiet of a still and rainy evening. Hot tears pressed against Hydeia's eyelids. No, she would not allow tears. She sniffed and pressed the heels of her palms on her eyes, regaining control of her emotions, and readied herself to commune with Tylan.

She missed the eagle's presence fiercely. They hadn't been apart this long since they were true-bonded two years past.

Finding the same upright barrel Grechle had been sitting on when Ammah first brought her to the inn, Hydeia sat down, unmindful of the water soaking through her dark wine red skirt, and opened herself to her *reyn*, seeking the warm serenity of the bond. Her flesh was immediately enveloped in pulsing heat. Another Eaglekin would be able to detect the telltale glow of *reyn* as she communed with her bonded, but most of mankind would not notice.

Her breath caught as Tylan's essence flowed into her, strong and pure and exhilarating. Joy and love speared through her. The tears she'd tried to hold back were suddenly cool on her hot cheeks.

She felt the top of Tylan's beak rub beneath Uloki's soft neck feathers, felt the warm down and straw beneath her belly. The eagles had been busy, recoating the inner layer of an old nest in a copse of trees near the mill. Hydeia heard the

musical splashes and turning of the mill's giant wheel close by.

Soon Tylan, Hydeia sent. I'll come for you soon.

She felt the lift of feathers, before the eagle shook, then flattened them back closer to her sleek body.

Hydeia smiled at so familiar a touch at the exact instant her breath choked off.

Tylan's alarm screamed in her head through the shared bond as Hydeia dragged the *reyn* back to herself, shutting the eagle out.

Something pulled her up—off the barrel. Her hands flew to her neck where a rope squeezed into her flesh, pulling upward. She arched off of the barrel, managed to get a bandaged hand between her throat and the noose, took a pinched gasp.

A shadowy form emerged from across the alley, running toward her. Another dark shape loomed out from over the inn's dripping roofline, heaving on the rope. Hydeia balanced on the tips of her toes, straining to get her other hand beneath the rope and off of her neck. Her already wounded hand burned with stabbing pain. She spun on the rope, slipping on the tips of her toes along the wet ground. They'd caught her completely unaware while she was at her most vulnerable, focusing inwardly on Tylan.

She couldn't breathe. Ammah! He was just inside. She wanted to scream for him, wanted to warn him. She couldn't breathe. What breath she had was a tight pressure in her chest, unable to release, as tiny blotches of white exploded in her view just before the world went black.

Chapter Eleven

Hydeia took a small experimental breath before drawing in a great strangling gulp. Her throat was raw and hurting, yet she could breathe. A cooling draft chilled her. She lay right where she was for a moment, letting her lungs fill and release before slowly opening her eyes. The side of her face was pressed into moldering rushes on a wooden floor. Her wrists were secured together with thick rope.

The room was dark except for the soft light of a night sky silhouetted beyond open arched stone windows on five fluted curving walls that made up the round room. Outside, the light rain had ceased, yet her clothes were still wet, the damp skirt tangled around her legs. Long arching beams reached upward and connected at the top of the domed ceiling. She must be in one of those towers she'd seen from the streets in the city. But there had been so many of them, conical-shaped buildings attached to great manor houses and several inns alike. A few one-storied residences had boasted smaller versions as well.

She could be anywhere in this strange city and Ammah had not been able to follow. She had no way to know how long she'd been there. He may not as yet know she'd been taken.

A part of her was relieved that Ammah would be kept out of this. Another part yearned for his strength of presence as though by him simply being near all would be well. That was ridiculous of course, but just thinking of him and what he would do in this situation calmed her.

After all, being captured hadn't been all bad. She inadvertently was exactly where she intended to be. If Lannis wasn't here, at least the people who knew where she could be found were. Granted, Hydeia hadn't intended to come here bound and as a prisoner, but that couldn't be helped right now.

Feeling a bit better now that she had at least the workings of a plan—search for Lannis and Sheeannar then find a way out—Hydeia rolled to a sitting position and began studying how her wrists were tied and how best to unknot the rope. A slight ruffle stirred behind her. Hydeia froze, heart pounding as a cloud moved beyond one of the windows and a shaft of moonlight speared into the round room, illuminating a wall of cages in silver light.

Several eagles slept in small closed cages, most on the floor with some even smaller cages sitting on top of them. Hydeia could make out at least six birds, all hooded. The rest of the cages were empty, waiting. Hydeia shuddered. It was unspeakable. She couldn't imagine Tyalan in one of those foul things. A slow boiling rage bubbled up inside her.

Without bothering with her own bonds, she pushed to her feet, stumbled slightly in the water heavy skirt, and slogged through the filthy rushes on the floor.

The eagles awakened, stirred, turning heads to eye her though the hoods blinded them. Feathers ruffled. One of the eagles edged back as far in his cage as he could. They were all in different stages of health. Four seemed well enough, glossy and clean, but the others had lost their sheen and proud bearing.

What kind of people would do such a thing to an eagle?

With her wrists still bound, Hydeia went to work on the first latch. Pulling the door open, she spoke soft words, gingerly unlacing the hood. The eagle rounded out his feathers nervously.

"There's a good lad, let me get this off and you'll be free." Hydeia used her most soothing voice.

"It's no use," a pain-filled voice spoke from her right.

Hydeia jerked around, seeing no one in the gloom.

"They can't leave, not without his say so. And he won't allow it. He'll never let us go."

"Who...?" Hydeia searched the dark for the speaker, and found her, lying on a thin dirty pallet against the far wall, knees tucked nearly to her chin, both wrists and ankles bound.

Hydeia rushed to her, sinking to her knees. The soggy red skirt fluffed out around her. A loose tunic was all that covered the other woman's thin shivering body. Piercing golden eyes looked up at her from a wide, blunt cheeked face between strands of tangled hair.

"Lannis," Hydeia breathed out. "Dear *Koric*, what have they done to you?" Hydeia's heart was a stone in her chest. Lannis was here, alive, and her eyes blazed with intelligence, and ... and ... something else. Rage at her mistreatment perhaps. She was not as yet lost in her eagle.

"Let's get you out of here." Hydeia pulled the Eaglekin up. She seemed not to have the strength to move on her own.

"Can you walk?"

Lannis shook her head. Heavy shadows, most likely born of weariness, lurked at the corners of her tawny eyes. "It doesn't matter. I can't leave Sheeannar. And she won't leave of her own will. He's done something to her."

Glancing around, Hydeia pulled at the knots on Lannis's wrists. Lannis could then untie her—if she had that much strength. It was doubtful. "Where is Sheeannar?"

"The room below. He comes up from that door in the floor, there."

There was indeed a square cut into the floor. It had neither handle nor rope on this side. They'd have to pry it open with something.

"Who is he? Who keeps you here?"

"Mystic Symer." Lannis's voice hitched. "He's a monster, a beast. He has no remorse, no conscience. He does things." She squeezed her eyes closed. "He draws out our *reyn*." Her hands now unbound, Lannis clutched Hydeia's forearms in a panicked grip. "He takes our *reyn* and gives it—" Lannis began to sob.

Hydeia went perfectly still. "What does he do with the *reyn*? Lannis, what does he do?"

"He ... he's experimenting on us. Some of the *reyn* he fed to the eagles, all of it so there was none left in the Eaglekins he took it from ... they, they died. So then he learned to take just a little at a time, that way we can generate more until our minds can simply no longer take it. Some of us have become..."

Hydeia swallowed past the bile rising in her throat. That would explain what had been done to Santil.

"...he's also fed the *reyn* to other Eaglekins."

"An Eaglekin sharing *reyn* with another Eaglekin?" Only the Matrons were capable of achieving that state, and only then it was done during rituals with great caution and many of them participating.

Shaking with sobs, Lannis nodded. "He's attempting to create unstoppable spies for King Baruck's armies."

Hydeia frowned. A bonded eagle and Eaglekin would make a formidable spy, as the Eaglekin could see whatever her true-bonded saw from the sky. Though finding an Eaglekin who was concerned enough for mankind's wars and squabbles who would be willing to place her eagle in harm's way ... a sure arrow or crossbow bolt would take down the swiftest, most cunning of eagles. Unless this Symer found a way to force them to take away their choice of will, take the Eaglekin's *reyn*...

"He went further than using us only to gather information." Lannis trembled as she spoke. "He turned them into assassins."

Hydeia's gaze snapped to her. "Assassins?"

Lannis began unknotting Hydeia's ropes. "It's whispered the queen dabbles in unholy arts. She commissioned Mystic Symer. It is the queen's gift to her king, her way to aid in the war. Think of it, an eagle could soar right into a man's vulnerable throat before he knew what was upon him. Directed by her helpless Eaglekin, the true-bondeds could go after generals or captains or whomever the queen wanted eliminated."

The implications were staggering. Hydeia's hands went to her head, reeling with this new information. The eagle, of course, would be killed once she got that close, and worse, bowmen would be called upon to shoot down any eagle they saw. Eagles, wilders most likely, would be slaughtered by the thousands. She had to get Lannis out of here and inform the Matrons of this.

Lannis leaned forward, a hair's breadth away. "Call your true-bonded. Bring her here. She'll be able to persuade my true-bonded to leave here. Surely another eagle could convince Sheeannar to leave. She'd listen to another eagle. They all would." She swept her arm out to point a shaky hand toward the caged eagles. Tears spilled down Lannis's cheeks. "Please, call for your eagle. It's Sheeannar's only chance. Please. Please, you must. Please."

Hydeia pulled the loosened rope from her wrists and tossed it aside. Lannis was right; it made perfect sense to call Tylan. Eagles had an instinctual bond with one another. Tylan just might be able to break through and reach Sheeannar, where Lannis had been unable to do so. Tylan might be able to reach her at least long enough to lead Sheeannar and the other poor eagles out of there.

Yet ... Hydeia had a queasy feeling pressing in her gut all the way down to her toes. It just didn't feel right. Yet nothing about Lannis's and the eagles' ordeal was right. She hesitated in calling Tylan when there should be no hesitation. Time was too precious to be wasted. This Mystic Symer could come upon them at any moment.

Lannis's fingers bit into Hydeia's arms with iron strength. "Please! You must help us. Help us..."

The desperate plea undid her. Bringing Sheeannar and Lannis back to the eyrie was the one task the Matrons had entrusted her with. She wouldn't fail them. Nodding, Hydeia released herself into her *reyn*, *Koric's* light, and summoned all her will to send her essence loose upon the wind to fly toward Tylan.

Warmth flowed into her, liquid heat, like mulled amber wine. Tylan's sapphire essence was there at once, alarmed and determined and already close, flying over the dark city, searching for Hydeia as the eagle soared above twinkling blotches of lamplight.

Hydeia drew back from Tylan, anchoring herself to where she was in the tower room to give the eagle a line of their *reyn* connection to follow like a luminous light that Tylan would be able to trace all the way to her—yet, a warning stirred within Hydeia's breast, pounded at her temples. Something about this was very wrong.

She couldn't bring Tylan here ... to this.

She'd find another way.

With abrupt force, fearing it may already be too late, Hydeia jerked away from the *reyn*, leaving it so suddenly she fell forward onto her hands, instantly bereft and cold.

"What have you done?" Lannis shrieked, seeing the glow surrounding Hydeia vanish.

Swaying, Hydeia pressed her palms to her temples. "I ... I couldn't. It wasn't right."

"What do you know about right?"

Lannis rose fluidly to her feet, and shoved Hydeia to her back. Looming over her, Lannis was angry indignation, hale and strong, standing with a powerful haunting aura.

Hydeia's blood turned as cold as her skin.

"Gedard! Earon!" At Lannis's shout, the little door in the floor banged open. Two men in boiled leather surcoats of sky blue emerged from the stairs. Silver winged trumpets were emblazoned on their chests, denoting them as soldiers of the Queenswatch.

"She won't do it! Refuses to summon her eagle," Lannis shrieked.

Hydeia stared in shock, momentarily so stunned by the transformation in Lannis, she could scarcely move, until the two Queenswatch started toward her.

She scrambled to the side, pushing to her feet, watching them come. She was agile and strong. If she stayed low, she could get by the Queenswatch, and escape through the floor hatch and take her chances in the rooms below.

The older of the two Queenswatch grinned between an oiled mustache and clipped beard.

But what then? Her task was to bring Lannis to the Matrons, more precisely, Sheeannar. If she had to bind and drag Lannis the entire way back to the eyrie, she would do so.

Shred it to pieces! She could not remain here a prisoner, nor could she leave Lannis behind.

The younger Queenswatch, a sallow fellow with nasty scars covering one side of his face and a gleam of hatred in his drooping eyes, lunged for her. Hydeia deftly spun away. The older chuckled while the other nearly tripped to his knees,

and pulled his curved short sword from his hip's scabbard. The rasp of metal rubbing across metal stirred the eagles. Wings rounded out, heads swiveled on regal necks as the hooded birds listened in blind anxiety.

"Put your weapon away, for *Koric's* light!" Lannis commanded. "I need her whole."

The older goat-eyed Queenswatch shoved the sword back into the hip scabbard.

Now Hydeia smiled, blade sharp, beckoning them closer as they circled her from either side. Two great lumbering bulls, trying to catch a moth between them. Hydeia watched them both, the younger slightly less. When the bearded Queenswatch gave an imperceptive glance to the other, Hydeia moved just as they simultaneously lunged for her.

Using his own forward momentum, Hydeia slammed her heel onto the soft part of the younger's foot, breaking bone, at the same instant she shoved him more forcefully into his flailing spin.

The ploy did nothing to stop the bearded more seasoned Queenswatch from leaping to the side, then coming for her again, but she was swifter, and while the younger man screamed over his foot and was crashing forward, Hydeia reached around his back and withdrew his short blade from the sheath on his hip.

Before they realized what she was about, Hydeia stood behind Lannis, blade to her throat and long matted hair twisted around her fist.

Immediately, Lannis struck back only to have Hydeia's fist arch into the small of her back, pulling her hair and her chin up in the process.

"Don't," Hydeia warned near Lannis's neck. "You two, open those cages and take the hoods off those eagles."

They stared at Lannis for confirmation.

She tried to pull her head forward but Hydeia held her hair firm. The sword's edge pressed into her pale bobbing throat. "It won't matter. The eagles won't do anything without their true-bondeds. And their true-bondeds belong to me. I've consumed partial amounts of all of their precious *reyn*. The eagles obey me. Only me." She smiled. "Gedard, do as she says."

"Wait," Hydeia said. "Step back." All she needed was to have Lannis direct the eagles to attack her. She'd have to free their Eaglekins first, figure out a way to rid them of Lannis's influence. Shred it all. She had come to save Lannis, not have her oppose her. Could nothing ever be simple? Lannis apparently needed a constant supply of *reyn*. Perhaps the effects wore off. Perhaps the control she held over the eagles would wear off.

A cold wave of nausea threatened to swamp Hydeia by the very thought of what Lannis had done. Blessed sun, it wasn't possible. Could one Eaglekin hold the essences of several eagles? And what of the other Eaglekins, what would happen to them? She tamped down a rising panic. She couldn't just leave them, any of them, to whatever these mystics had been doing.

"I count six eagles. I assume there are six Eaglekins somewhere below us?" She made her voice sound sure, confident. She hoped the Eaglekins were below. She didn't know what to do for them except get them out. "You," she looked at Earon, the less experienced Queenswatch on the rush-covered floor, holding his foot. "Use those ropes and bind him. I warn you, I'll know if they are tied well. And slide his blade over there to the far wall."

That would take care of the more dangerous Queenswatch.

The other she'd have to bring with them, though he couldn't be much trouble with his injury. Perhaps she could find a room to lock him in.

"You realize you chose the wrong man to bind," Lannis snapped. "Earon was once gored by an eagle. A wilder, I believe, but he doesn't distinguish between the two. He had his own reasons for wanting this assignment. Despite my wishes, he'll kill you if he gets the chance."

Lannis was trying to put her off balance, but by the hatred in the young scarred soldier's eyes, Hydeia suspected there was some truth in what she said. She couldn't show them any doubt or hesitation now.

"Down." Hydeia pulled Lannis toward the open hatch. "Were you speaking the truth when you said Sheeannar was below?"

Lannis hissed. "Of course she's below. Do you believe I'd harm my own true-bonded or keep her far from me?"

"Scant little of this is believable. Lannis, you were one of the strongest among us. True-bonded to the most revered of eagles. How could you do this to your own people?" Hydeia

motioned Earon to follow them. He left Gedard trussed hand and foot among the moldy rushes.

Hydeia stepped lightly, feeling her way across the floor as they walked backwards toward the hatch. She kept a wary eye on Earon, and motioned for him to stop when they came to the edge.

Twisting her head to speak over her shoulder, Lannis gained some slack in her thick brown hair. "You are so pliant in the Matrons' palms, so trusting and eager to fly to their lure, ankled by their time-honored traditions. I was once like you. Enamored by being bonded to just one eagle for only a few short scant years before we'd be forced to give up our true-bonded to the Council of Matrons. My time with Sheeannar was almost gone. Do you think I would ever give her up to those self-serving witches? With the strength gained from another's *reyn*, I'll never have to give up my true-bonded. Never. I wield more power and strength than all the Matrons together. I offer a new age for all Eaglekins, an escape from meaningless isolation to live among mankind. With our abilities, strengthened tenfold from what we once were, mankind's kings and queens will know our value, seek it out, and reward us with positions of power and wealth."

Hydeia couldn't believe what she was hearing. She wet her lips around her dry mouth. "As assassins?"

"As Eaglekins! Superior to mankind in every facet. More so with added *reyn*." Lannis's eyes glittered, jewel-bright. Madness danced on the edge of her dark pupils. She had held her bond with her eagle longer than any female Eaglekin had ever been able to. Perhaps her mind had already started

slipping into Sheeannar's essence and the Mystic's tampering had thrown her over the edge. Lannis's voice turned oily. "You have a modicum of strength, due more to stubbornness than natural ability, I think. I can offer you so much more. No Eaglekin, not the fool Matrons combined, will surpass the force of the *reyn* that you can possess. Join me. Help the Mystic learn more. Imagine never having to give up your eagle. Never letting your essence feel the effects of *beton trella*. You'll be doing all Eaglekins a service. And for your efforts, you'll command dozens of eagles, perhaps hundreds."

Santil's limp expression and unfocused gaze filled Hydeia's vision. "At what cost?"

"Knowledge and power exact a price."

"This coin is too heavy," Hydeia whispered mournfully. "What of the Eaglekins you've taken the *reyn* from? What of their lives? How can you say you do this for all our people when some must suffer for it?"

A hissing sound whistled low in Lannis's throat.

It was dark below. No one seemed to be moving about.

Lannis was one of the strong, an Eaglekin she'd long admired and aspired to be like. It broke Hydeia's heart that Lannis had become a person who placed power-lust above the value in another Eaglekin's life and choices. She wanted to believe it was only an effect of holding so much *reyn*, a kind of induced madness. Perhaps it wasn't too late for Lannis. She could be brought back to herself. If Hydeia could get her out of here.

"We'll take the steps slowly." Hydeia moved the short sword from the Eaglekin's neck to the small of her back.

Resting the tip up between Lannis's shoulder blades, Hydeia lowered her foot down to the first step, then the second, tugging Lannis by the hair to follow her. She watched Earon taking slow steps to follow at a distance. Hatred blazed in his cruel damaged features.

At the third step, Hydeia turned to look down and gauge the distance to the bottom.

A cloud of shimmering orange dust exploded in her face, blown across a long slender palm in front of rounded lips and ruddy cheeks.

That's all Hydeia glimpsed as the dust filled her eyes and clogged her throat. Immediately a chilled tingle swept over her, and her arms flopped to her sides. She heard the short sword clatter on each step while it fell. A rapid numbness shot over her and she lost control of her legs. Strong arms curled around her waist as she folded over and was dragged back up into the tower room and thrown onto the soggy rushes.

* * * *

She couldn't move, could not so much as close an eyelid and squeeze the grainy dust from her eyes. They'd rendered her as helpless as a newly hatched eyas. At least her heart retained the ability to pump, her lungs the capacity to fill and release. She swallowed, worked moisture into her mouth, willed her tongue to move, her eyes to blink or roll to the side—anything!

"Your arrival was timely, Sir Mystic," Lannis's smooth voice floated above Hydeia, commanding and firm. "This one has a reckless spirit."

Hydeia's sight began to clear, hazy and grainy, yet she could make out the rushes on the floor by her cheek. The curve of the wall began to settle behind a watery orange view.

The Mystic bent low, his weary hollow-boned face studied Hydeia like he was picking which fruits to barter for. She could only stare straight ahead at his blurry countenance. He grabbed her chin between bony finger and thumb. "I gather that your little mummurs farce failed to bring in the eagle."

"No." Lannis's pitch was sharp. "It didn't. The girl's far too distrustful. Gedard, make yourself useful and fetch my gown."

The rushes rustled as Gedard walked through them. His boots slapped noisily in loud echoes when he ran down the steps.

Finished with his scrutiny, the Mystic shoved Hydeia over onto her back. His hands were icy cold. Her head rolled awkwardly and Lannis came in to view, frowning down at her.

"This can't be comfortable for you," Lannis said. "Call your true-bonded. It will be easier that way." She rubbed her toes along Hydeia's cheek, then laughed.

Hydeia's pulse banged in her chest as panic threatened to choke her. She would never summon Tylan here.

Heedless of her nudity, Lannis stripped off her ragged tunic, letting it drop in folds to the floor and stepped into a soft rose-colored gown that Gedard held open for her. As she tied the cords at the tight-fitting bodice she stared at Hydeia. "Siphon her *reyn*. If her eagle is close, that may be alarming enough to bring her."

"If it doesn't?" the Mystic asked.

Lannis shrugged. "We won't let her be a complete loss. I'll enjoy her *reyn* regardless."

The two Queenswatch hauled Hydeia to her knees and held her there by her arms. Their hands dug into her flesh. Earon whispered close to her ear, "This is my favorite part. I'm glad you didn't cooperate."

Unable to move, her head flopped forward to her chest. Her hair spilled around her face like a veil. All she could see were the men's boots to each side and parts of the floorboards between layers of rushes. Calloused hands moved her hair off her neck then she became aware of a prickling streak of coldness, like a thin shard of ice, moving from her neck down her spine. Her skin tingled in gooseflesh.

She wanted to arch her back, get away from the sensation. Instead she hung limply. She could not even scream.

Warmth flooded through her, comforting *reyn*. She clutched at it, held it to her, determined that whatever they were doing to her, she would not allow them to force her to call out for Tylan.

Yet her *reyn* did not flow outward, seeking its bonded. It remained inside, building, swirling through her, then compressed into a tight spiral. Like a heated auger, it burrowed through her insides until heat met ice across her spine and her *reyn* was drawn up and away through the back of her neck in a merciless stream.

The scream she could not utter exploded behind her eyes. Her entire insides clenched as she hung loose.

Her thumb and forefinger curled ... ever so slightly.

Her heart pounded with relief. The paralyzing dust the Mystic had thrown at her was not permanent. It was wearing off—but not soon enough.

She felt her *reyn* being sucked away through the cold tube, leaving her light-headed and weak. The floor grew hazy, seemed to rise up toward her.

Tyalan shrieked in her head. Close. She was so very dangerously close.

No! Tyalan go back! It's a trap! Please, please go back. Dear brother sun, make her go back!

Hydeia tried to close her out from their bond, but Tyalan wouldn't let her. The eagle's strength filled her with worry and anger.

Reyn's heat flooded back into her, pulled by Tyalan's fury and strength. As hard as Hydeia tried to break away from her, Tyalan clamped down. Ruthless and determined, the eagle pulled Hydeia's essence to her. All at once Hydeia felt the wind rushing through feathers, the lift of wing and tail as Tyalan banked above the city and coasted through an open arched window.

Hydeia saw herself through the eagle's eyes, hunched over between the two Queenswatch. She saw Lannis and the Mystic look up in surprise.

"Oh my, shreds! The eagle has come already. Get the net!" Lannis shrieked as though from a vast distance as Tyalan's talons raked across Gedard's face.

Hydeia felt him jerk away, felt herself fall at the same instant Tyalan's view filled with flesh and blood and hair then turned upward as she soared around the room.

A large net flapped in the air, fell like a cloud. Tylan turned sharply. Hydeia lay useless in rotting, prickly rushes.

Uloki's cry screeched out as he sailed through the window, talons first and crashed into the back of the Mystic's head, then was gone from sight as Tylan flew by, diving toward Lannis. It was a heady confusing sight to see through Tylan's eyes amid the chaos of the room.

Hydeia's head was wrenched off the floor, pulled back by her hair. Earon, the younger Queenswatch, pressed his cheek to hers. She could feel the roughness of his stubble, smell the stink of his excitement. "Time to pay back your kind's bloody coin."

Tylan's sight shifted and Hydeia saw herself as a ragged limp heap on the dirty floor and Earon hunched over her back, stretching her head back. Hydeia looked down upon the young Queenswatch over her, his short sword was swinging down upon her neck while Tylan dove with frightening speed. Already light-headed, the room swam in nauseating layers until, startled, Earon turned and everything seemed to clarify and slow.

Instinctively, the young Queenswatch swung up his hands holding the short sword to protect his face. The scars stood out starkly against his flushed skin. The sword's glittering edge slid into Tylan's breast.

Chapter Twelve

Sharp pain lanced through Hydeia as she was hurled from Tyalan's senses, severed from her sight and touch and hearing. She felt something terrible breaking inside of her and slipping away into a dark void where she could not follow. She screamed from within, silent, as the room filled with Uloki's wrathful piercing screech. Heavy boots ran past her, kicking up the filthy rushes and debris.

Lannis screamed. "What have you done! You destroyed her eagle, you fool! You Idiot! What have you done!"

Hydeia felt Earon's rage like a palpable breathing thing in the air, felt him roughly pull back her head again. "Your eagle's dead, witch. By the same blade that's going to take you."

Hydeia closed her eyes, the only defense she possessed against what was about to happen. She wasn't afraid. It was all too unreal. Tyalan couldn't be dead. She couldn't. She let her senses storm through the turbulent air but there was no shining sapphire essence to latch onto. *Tyalan!*

The whirr of a blade whizzed past, followed by a close grunt, and a solid weight fell into her, pushing her hard against the floor. Facedown in the rushes, Hydeia couldn't breathe. The weight and the rushes were smothering her, dank with rot. Empty screams clawed at her throat.

The weight lifted. Strong hands rolled Hydeia over and Ammah was there, bending over her. Relief nearly drowned her.

"Are you hurt?"

Unblinking, Hydeia could only stare. Tears pooled in her eyes.

Ammah's features contorted in fear. "Hydeia, are you hurt? Hydeia!"

He glanced aground the chaotic room, then lifted her into his arms and ran.

From the higher vantage point, Hydeia could see both Queenswatch were down. Earon clutched the hilt of Ammah's knife in his stomach. Tremors were jerking his body. The scars were purplish bulges slanting across his blotchy red face. The Mystic was crawling through the rushes on his belly and Lannis was out of sight. The hatch door had been flung open.

Focusing all her strength into one small function, Hydeia hooked her finger into Ammah's tunic, willing him to look at her.

His worried eyes met hers, held, and understanding filled their depths.

He lowered her to the floor beneath one of the long open windows where a tri-hook and attached rope had been thrown in. The metal hooks had been pulled taut, partially embedded in the wood beneath the window's low sill. Ammah dashed across the room where he knelt and pulled his tunic over his head.

In a moment he was back with a precious bundle in his arm, which he placed on Hydeia's lap and lifted her again. His arms beneath her were hard with tension. Heartbroken, Hydeia's fingers clamped more securely around Ammah's

tunic. That she was able to move her fingers at all was little solace.

Voices and boots slapping on wood sounded on the stairwell. Lannis must have summoned more Queenswatch.

"Hang on!" Ammah said and stepped onto the sill. If only she were able.

Squeezing her and the bundle against his warm chest, Ammah grabbed the rope and dropped out the window.

Ammah carried Hydeia through the intersecting dark alleyways. Overhead, Uloki watched behind as at least three fistfuls of Queenswatch spilled through Irrean's streets and alleys in tight pursuit. Uloki's anguish over Tylan's death strummed between the edge of Ammah's and the tiercel's shared *reyn*. Heartsick for his true-bonded, Ammah sent a steady current of strength and purpose to Uloki. They had to get Hydeia away from here. He didn't know exactly what they had done to her, what kept her limp and unmoving. At first he'd feared she'd been trapped in her bond, the same as Santil, until he looked into her eyes and saw the raw pain and loss that filled those depths. Her eyes begged him.

His heart broke for her, even in his relief.

When he'd found the overturned barrel outside Nedarra's kitchen and the signs of a struggle, he was desperate to find her. He'd experienced a blinding coldness that had nothing to do with the rain, so intense and brutal he had thought his blood had turned to ice. For a moment he'd been unable to move, just stared at the barrel, at the gouges in the mud where Hydeia's small boots had groped for purchase. He could not control the raging fear in him until Uloki at the mill,

sensing his distress from the distance between them, flooded him with *reyn*, spurring him to action.

He was able to track her captors to the eastern edge of the city, near the river docks and trading houses but lost the trail in the rain-slickened cobbles. With enough time, he'd be able to pick it up again, but he didn't believe Hydeia had that time.

Sick with worry, Ammah called Uloki to him, hoping the tiercel's mate would be in contact with Hydeia. The eagles came at once, were already on their way. Tyalan was extremely agitated as she circled, her head turning side to side, searching frantically.

Ammah waited in helpless frustration, his worry mounting with each circuit. Opening himself to his *reyn* he'd soared with Uloki, adding his eyes to the tiercel's lofty vision and keener eyesight, when flying just below, Tyalan turned her glossy body, soaring with determination.

Ammah's breathing hitched. His heart leapt to life. Tyalan must have had connected with Hydeia at last, hopefully long enough for them to find her.

Pulling back to himself, he had run through the streets, so afraid of not making it in time...

He clenched her tighter to him, reassuring himself that he had her now, that she was safe. That he could ensure she remained safe.

Her hand slipped around his bare waist, stronger now. Her other arm curled around the bundle in her lap between them. A whisper of a sob escaped her tight lips and tore at Ammah's heart.

Uloki sent him the impression of a group of the bad men gaining on him from the western labyrinth of streets and for Ammah to head immediately east then south, doubling back to pass by the Queenswatch and move into the area they had just come from, which was clear of the men now.

His strength waning, but determined not to slow, Ammah ran between the dark buildings, guided by Uloki who now flew below the rooftops to not give their pursuers the opportunity to follow him right to their prey.

The tiercel reported that the bad men were far to the south now and moving farther away just when Hydeia cried out and squirming, slipped out of Ammah's tired grasp. She fell to the cobblestones. Water left from the rain pooled around her knees while she clutched Tylan, wrapped in Ammah's tunic, to her breast and wept.

Ammah stood stock-still. She appeared so vulnerable, so filled with grief, he didn't know what to do. All he wanted was to fix her, take all the anguish and the hurt away. He remembered too vividly the stunning pain of losing his first true-bonded ... as well the shock of having Kele's *reyn* torn away, just abruptly gone.

Seeing Hydeia experience the same ... his throat constricted.

Without knowing how he got there, he was on the ground, holding her, encircling her and the bundle both. Hydeia turned into his chest, pressed her face against his heart and cried so hard he felt the enormity of her grief through the tremors running through her slender body.

Landing by their legs, Uloki's sorrow flooded into Ammah as well, nearly overpowering his senses, but Ammah took it, accepting whatever he could if just doing that could ease the tiercel's grief even a little.

Hydeia's cries intensified as she poured out her sorrow. She'd probably never let out her emotions so forcefully before. Females of their people were taught from a young age to never show any semblance of weakness, of feeling. It was sometimes difficult to remember they had emotions. But they did and often times their emotions were as strong as their wills to keep them controlled and hidden. Ammah held her that much more firmly while tears slipped down his own cheeks. He felt the subtle shift when she finally surrendered her weight to his strength while he rocked her in his arms.

Tenderness welled up inside of him and he felt his defenses crumbling. Felt her slide deeper into his heart. But it didn't matter. Not now. He couldn't put up a barrier between them now. Couldn't hold her out. Not while her grief was so raw and open. Nor, he admitted to himself, did he want any barriers between them. He opened his heart completely, felt the strength of his buried emotions concerning Hydeia flood through his body, his essence, his *reyn*. *Dear Koric*, he was lost.

The sky had lightened to the dark muted glow that comes just before dawn by the time Hydeia exhausted herself. Her weeping quieted into muffled sobs and hiccups.

Without asking if she needed him to, Ammah lifted her into his arms once more and started off. Something shifted inside him, tender and sweet, as she pushed her head into the

strong press of his shoulder. He knew of a safe place to take her.

* * * *

"Lieutenant Rardan, sir. General Niel requests your attendance in the command tent."

The young soldier patiently waited for the officer's response. The day was cool and bright. A ruffling breeze was blowing up off from the long river below.

Rardan glanced at the soldier, just a boy really, in his worn, but cleanly brushed green jacket of the elite Wind Riders, most likely a cast-off jacket from one of the veteran Riders. A frown creased Rardan's face, deepening the lines around his full mouth. They'd resorted to training children now, his Rider's numbers had diminished that greatly.

He looked back toward the city. Ezell's high towers and crenellated spires gleamed golden in the threads of sunlight filtering through the white clouds behind the legions' defensive encampment. Sitting at the crossroads of three mighty nations, Ezell was called the city of light, more so for her crowning museums and multitude of libraries, great and small, that contained rare books, ancient scrolls and parchments, even clay tablets. Knowledge that had been sought and collected from across the continent and the far lands beyond the Gareen Ocean. Gazing upon the golden sparkling city though, Rardan believed the reference of light more suited to Ezell's vibrant structures and delicate seeming architecture with gilded domes and arching bridges that spanned smartly laid-out streets.

Though Ezell was mostly empty now, her inhabitants fled during Baruck's long siege to Ion and Emingreal farther inside the borders of Pagona, it pained Rardan to know the blue cloaks would soon occupy the beautiful city.

Under General Niel's leadership, though outnumbered ten to a man, the Pagonan smaller forces had been able to hold King Baruck back long enough for the people to flee and the sages and chroniclers to save several wagonloads of the precious artifacts and texts from the great libraries. But what they'd been able to salvage hadn't made a dent in the vast treasures of knowledge that would have to be left behind.

And their orders, too, were to withdraw and abandon the city of light to King Baruck's blue cloaks and pull back their forces into the narrow valley of Aylmer to regroup and better defend all of Pagona. What did Baruck hope to gain with this bitter war besides Javan of Pagona's head? The contest to secure Amindi's hand and to father her heirs to the provinces had been rightfully won by Javan. Baruck had shamed himself that day, ungraciously throwing his banner down and stalking off the tourney field like an ill-tempered bull. An unworthy exhibition for a king. And he had been awarded the more comely of the sisters, Eleina, who's heirs will inherit a vast amount of Pagona's province cities once she conceives regardless. All the land King Baruck's armies have already taken he could have had peaceably by spilling his seed into his queen. It was madness. Though it was not Baruck's madness the Pagonan's whispered of. But Queen Eleina's madness. Always had she burned beneath her sister's shadow, never as beloved by her countrymen as the carefree

Aminidi. And now that she had a strong king and army beside her, the people of Pagona feared it was Eleina who fueled the war against them.

Rardan tapped the delicately balanced hilt of his saber as he walked through the morose encampment. Though prone to unbecoming fits of cruelty and rage, Eleina was also known to be a shrewd and intelligent woman. She knew Pagona's generals and her captains and their tactics and methods of fighting well. Rardan frowned as he stepped over a rope securing a small triangular tent. The men, packing equipment and tents, didn't like the idea of retreating any better than he did, but in the past half year since he'd earned his battlefield commission, though he was younger than most of the veteran Wind Riders by half, Rardan had witnessed again and again the wisdom of the cunning tactics and strategies laid out by the General. He had Rardan's complete trust and loyalty.

If General Niel said it was better to pull back to another location, Rardan would plow through a mountain with his bare hands to see it done.

"Ah, good. Everyone's here. Lieutenant, come here and take a look at this since the majority of this evacuation plan's success will rest on your Wind Rider's backs." General Niel motioned him forward as he entered the unassuming command tent. "We'll attempt to give the blue cloaks one last cut to their throats as we retreat."

The general and his closest officers stood over charts and maps spread out across two rickety wooden tables pushed together. The walls of the tent's opposite side had been rolled up out of the way, open, to fully view the invading army's

encampment sprawled across what was once ripening grain fields, now plucked bare and razed over, on the other side of a wide dark river. New bridges were being constructed across the River Reinne where the old ones had been burned.

The King's camp was a noisy, living slash of brown tents and blue and violet banners whipping in the breeze. Rardan could make out the blunt wings of Irrean's Gray Owl stretching across a square of white, Salah's flame-spewing serpent, the fat badger of Geitle, twin snakeheads of Hornsheart, and black bear of Tel-Melah. Queen Eleina's own house banner of winged trumpets threaded in silver across a field of vibrant blue flapped above the largest tents beside King Baruck's rearing destrier, snowy white upon a square of violet. Flecks of sunlight glinted off mail and weapons, twinkling like a thousand winking lights as men moved about the long trampled fields.

General Niel tapped one of the charts, drawing Rardan's attention. The general's stocky frame pressed into the tables as he absently rubbed a scarred and blunt finger down one side of his tapered graying mustache. His light blue eyes were narrowed as he contemplated his plan, weighting every possible outcome, before tapping the chart again.

"This here, is the place, Rardan. While Duncal takes his Ice Lance's and Nelem his three thousand Storm Foot Ghosts through the city, I want the Wind Riders here..." He pointed to the retreating northern edge of the city just before the merchant district trailed into fertile farmlands and pastures.

General Niel locked gazes with Rardan. A bittersweet smile curved his mouth. A sense of dread pressed down on Rardan when Niel finally nodded.

The general assessed him coolly, his blue eyes steel. "Hold back while the rest of our forces escape. Though the city will be theirs, there will be some headstrong troops that will give us chase. There always is. Those hotheads will be our final message to Baruck, here. I dare say he'll be expecting it so we won't disappoint him. I want the Wind Riders to dispatch as many of those foolhardy pursuers as you can before you make your final retreat."

Rardan nodded curtly. He'd been expecting his men to take the brunt of the evacuation, was proud and expectant on their behalf to be called upon for such a task.

General Niel's lips twitched in barely suppressed amusement. "Eager, are you? Good and well."

Rardan grinned. "I wouldn't want to leave here unremembered."

The general roared with laughter. "Oh, they'll remember you." His wide hand slid onto Rardan's broad shoulder in an almost paternal gesture. Rardan felt his chest lift with a surge of pride before the hand fell away and the general turned his attention to Major Doncal to more precisely lay out his instructions for the Ice Lances.

Picking up another map from the table, General Niel turned, stretching it out before his face when the dry parchment fluttered from his grasp, torn in pieces as a silent shadow soared fractions past him and into the wall of the tent.

"An eagle!" Nelem roared.

"Don't let it out!" Another of the officers, Rardan couldn't see who in the sudden confusion, actually brandished his sword.

The general was standing very still. He pulled his hand away from his throat and rubbed blood between his fingers. A gaping slash opened his neck like a dripping red smile.

Clear blue eyes latched onto Rardan. A thousand glimmers of ageless intelligence rose from their depths then went still, flat and vacant as General Niel folded over and slumped to the ground.

His officers clustered around him, but Rardan knew it was already too late.

"Get that eagle!" His voice was a whip of command. Doncal and Nelem had the bird cornered in the tent, waving arms and swords, as the eagle flapped furiously, darting back and forth for an escape.

Rardan strode angrily out of the tent's open wall and plucked a crossbow out of the hands of one of the soldiers who had come running at the calls of alarm. After checking the four-sided bolt and cranking the hand bow, Rardan shouted to the officers inside, "Stand away and let her fly!"

The eagle burst from the tent in a frenzy of flapping brown wings, screaming savagely. With short swift strokes of her long tapered wings, she climbed the rising currents of warm air.

Rardan sighted down the crossbow's short wide stalk and released the bolt.

The bolt flew swift and sure.

The eagle lurched to the side then plummeted, spiraling to the ground.

The encampment across the river had stirred. Men all along the bank watched the eagle fall from the sky.

Rardan glared at the distant figures across the Reinne. They knew what had transpired. Pierce them all to rot! They knew.

A steady anger of absolute certainty brewed in Rardan's blood. Eaglekins had left their secluded eyries behind the sentinel mountains to join with King Baruck. They'd acted as his assassins. Rardan would never before have given such a thought viable credit.

There was a profound stillness in the air. The men watched him expectantly. He stood strong and straight as an oak, his rage barely contained as he issued the order.

"Get me twenty of our best bowmen. Shoot down every eagle within ten leagues."

* * * *

Far to the south, Lannis's lungs burned with exertion while the brown eagle burst from the tent. The primal exhilaration of the hunt was still greedily upon her. Through the pristine clarity of *reyn*, across the vast distance, startled faces of green-clad soldiers streaked past Lannis's vision while she directed the eagle to use every muscle to flee.

Rakia had been an extremely pliable bird, one of the first she'd been able to break down all barriers with and fully command, which surprisingly had become easier since the eagle's young little true-bonded had ended up missing from

the wagon while the captured Eaglekins had been moved to the tower house closer to the heart of Irrean's merchant district where Doron Leurise conducted his affairs.

Somehow the little chit had rolled out from under the cloth stretched across the wagon bed. Though she suspected the Queenswatch escorting the wagon may have had a hand in the girl's disappearance. She had been somewhat pretty and completely rendered mindless by Mystic Symer's inept blunders of first attempting to draw out Eaglekin *reyn*. Not that it mattered. The girl was ruined, utterly useless, but her eagle had turned into a valuable prize. It was as though when the young Eaglekin's mind was lost, the eagle's strength of will completely snapped as well. Rakia had become an exceptional assassin.

Lannis raised a fine brow. It might be advantageous for Mystic Symer to go back to his earlier cruder methods of extracting the *reyn*, though even he resisted that. He hated wasting the valuable *reyn*, that without a viable Eaglekin he could no longer harvest.

In that, Lannis and the Mystic agreed. Consuming other Eaglekin's *reyn* had become an elixir to her. She'd no idea months ago that when the Queenswatch had dragged her from that moldering cage, biting and kicking, to be the trial subject for another of the hated Mystic's vile experiments, that he would be bestowing on her a gift ... rare and powerful.

A silken shiver of heat flamed up Lannis's spine as Rakia stroked upward, leaving the winding river and two military encampments to either side far below.

To me, Lannis commanded the eagle and gave into a smile at yet another success. Queen Eleina could no longer doubt the potency of her new weapon. The general's death had been swift and complete. It had taken him and his officers totally unaware.

Lannis sank back, luxuriating in the power of Rakia's muscles, the burning vibration of stolen *reyn* humming through her, rippling across her skin, pushing out onto the heady threshold of danger. Her every nerve seethed with it, greedy with the latent ability flowing through her veins. As the power rose up in her, Lannis flung all her senses out to Rakia to take and plunder more. Lannis had always been strong in her *reyn*, but with consuming that taken from others, she was as unconquerable as a mountain, as powerful and relentless as waves breaking upon the shore.

She stretched on a swell of sensation, arching her back, thin arms flexed on a fine tremor of delicious torment. *Sweet Koric!* She'd stay with Rakia across her long flight home, make the incredible rapture last as long as possible.

Lannis twisted, stretching languidly on the cushioned bench, practically purring, and—

A blade of pain pierced through her breast, burning bone and muscle. She jerked upright, eyes huge and wild, trying to gain a breath.

Riding on Rakia's senses, sky and ground, sky and ground whirled by, rotating in increasing speed. Wind screamed through feathers, rushed across skin as the eagle plummeted.

Lannis tried to pull back, disengage from the forced bond, but unexpectedly and violently as though it were Rakia's last

act of defiance, through the shared *reyn*, the eagle clung to Lannis's pearly essence, hurtling through the sky with her.

Lannis recognized the danger at once.

With all the strength she now possessed, stolen and naturally born to her, Lannis clawed at the bond and ripped her senses away. Instantly cold and shuddering with weakness, she cried out, falling from the cushioned bench to the soft rugs covering the floor.

Immediately she felt hands lift her back up to the bench. She strained furiously to inhale a breath and clutched the fading pain in her chest. Mystic Symer—she'd know those cold hands if she were hooded and blind—and one of the attending Queenswatch steadied her.

"What is it? What happened?" barked Woldmyr Blent, Captain of the Queenswatch assigned to her from the queen, his authoritative voice deplete of even a pretense of concern.

Lannis pulled in a blessed breath and lifted her cold gaze to the captain. "They killed the eagle."

Blent waved an uncaring hand in the air. "That was to be expected."

Expected, yes. Lannis controlled her expression. It hurt to breathe. Yet she'd hoped, guided Rakia even, to avoid that outcome. The other eagles weren't half as broken enough to control as well. Rakia had been her best assassin. Mystic Symer would have to give up another of his precious Eaglekins to rectify that and give her another eagle she could control as forcefully. Another would have to be near totally drained of their *reyn* and completely lost in their eagle for Lannis to have that same control of the eagle's will. Like that

young girl had been. It was a necessary waste. She'd have to find some way to make Symer realize that and give up one of his prizes.

Blent adjusted the sleeves of his blue uniform. The vivid color made the top of his bald head somehow shine violet. "Was that before or after?"

"After." Lannis seethed at the insult to her skill. "General Niel is dead."

"You're certain?"

"Quite. Though I've little doubt you'll have it confirmed when your reports trickle through."

"Indeed." His dark eyes raked over her like a man who was disgusted by the whole business yet had his duties to fulfill. Fool. He had no idea of the untapped power she could claim. Of how much danger he stood in at this precise moment. All she had to do was send one of her eagles after him. He nodded curtly. "I'll inform the queen."

With that he strode arrogantly from the room. Shred the man! No, he wasn't important. Lannis reeled her anger in. That had been one disconcerting effect from trying to contain so much *reyn* at once. Her emotions, before so easy for her to control, now seemed to run rampant, wild and dangerous. She'd have to command better restraint.

Captain Blent was of no consequence anyway. He was merely a means to her rise to power, an annoyance she must put up with for a short time. Soon enough the royal kings and queens of not only Irrean, but Pagona, Lionsmarch and Kalonmer would grovel at her feet in their bids to have access

to her unique assassins. She could rule them in fear, have ruling nations at one another's throats if she so desired.

Not that the trappings of mankind's power held any allure for Lannis. She was an Eaglekin after all. Obtaining wealth and prominence and having people preen for her did not interest her in the least. That was not her purpose. It was the enhanced *reyn* that fueled her, that incredible delectable surge of strength assailing every one of her senses simultaneously, where she dominated the eagle's will, where she was master.

Lannis accepted the fact that her position was tenuous at best. She knew too well that she alone among the imprisoned Eaglekins had been strong enough to consume another Eaglekin's *reyn* without losing herself, her mind inside her bird. The Mystic had tried giving it to others but each of them had gone mad, lost within the *reyn*. That, too, had been Rakia's young true-bonded's fate. Though Lannis had always been among the strongest in her eyrie, she knew it would only be a matter of time before another Eaglekin with a will strong enough to rule the assassin birds would be captured.

If such were found, Lannis would take measures to ensure the Eaglekin was disposed of before Symer realized what he had. Just like she had done with that latest captive. Lannis had felt the strength of that girl's *reyn* and had taken immediate issue with the dangerous situation. It was regrettable that the little strumpet's eagle had perished in the commotion. The bird would have made a powerful assassin. But having the girl around wasn't worth the risk to Lannis's

own position. She was glad she'd escaped, though she would have loved to have sampled her *reyn* first.

Her teeth clicked together like a sharp metallic-bright beak. Even now the craving for more *reyn* assaulted her, leaving her light-headed and feverish. A headache was building behind her eyes. The doses Mystic Symer gave her were no longer enough to sustain Lannis. She needed more, ever more. If he would have given her what she required, Rakia would never have been able to hold Lannis as long as she did at the end. She had to have more. Her stomach was clenching with terrible need.

But she could not reveal that to the Mystic. As far as Symer knew, Lannis was the only Eaglekin capable of controlling the eagles. She was not about to let him find out otherwise.

For now, she would send eagles out as assassins. She wasn't concerned about who she would direct them to prey upon. Mankind's squabbles were irrelevant. Queen Eleina's little vindictive war was self-serving and pointless, except to give Lannis the means to perfect her control over the eagles and demonstrate her value. It mattered not one wit to her who foolish Eleina wanted killed—but the feel of that *reyn* heating and pulsing along her skin—a fine tremor ran through her body—for that, she needed the Mystic and he needed Eaglekins.

And from them both, Queen Eleina demanded winged assassins.

Mystic Symer was peering into her eyes, studying. Always questioning, analyzing her results. "How do you feel? That

was the farthest distance you've controlled an eagle yet. Was there any resistance?"

The question irritated her. Oh, yes, there had been resistance. Rakia had fought her at the end, attempted to pull Lannis's essence into death with her. Would she have died with the eagle? Just suddenly have gone limp and toppled over? Was that even a possibility? They were trampling across new ground here. No one knew exactly what could be achieved. She wondered what the Mystic would have made of that. Lannis tamped down the disconcerting thought that the eagle had been merely biding her time. She had an ache throbbing behind her eyes and felt much too weak and ill at ease to answer the Mystic's questions now.

"I don't feel well." She needed to be replenished. Rakia had somehow pulled a great deal of her *reyn* back to her. Not that it would do the eagle any good now. Spiteful little bird. "Fetch one of the Eaglekins up to the draining chambers. I don't care which."

Mystic Symer and the Queenswatch on duty looked at her incredulously. "So soon?" the Mystic ventured. "Perhaps you should rest."

Lannis whirled on them to get them moving. Tiny beads of perspiration broke across her forehead. She had to show them her dominance, her strength of will. "Well? Are your feet as slow as your wits? Get me an Eaglekin."

* * * *

Etha lifted her small face to the sunlight, enjoying the warming rays while her water-wrinkled hands rested a

moment in the cool wash water. She'd been scrubbing Dayan's shirt against the washboard quite some time now, certain she'd more likely rub holes in it before she'd ever get it clean. How the man managed to get so filthy was beyond her. If she didn't know better she'd swear Dayan rolled around in the mud with the pigs every night just for relaxation after he left the fields.

The unlikely image brought an indulgent smile to her face. She glanced over at Santil sitting just outside the cottage near the flower bed, her constant silent shadow, and the smile melted away. She made a pretty sight next to the bright yellow and violet blossoms, tendrils of her long smooth hair lifting in the warming breeze.

They were losing her. Etha could feel it. The faint glow of what the Eaglekins called *reyn* that had sustained her all this time was so very dull, and the girl very weak. Though it was breaking Etha's heart, she knew it would be a mercy for the girl.

Her mood distilled, Etha went back to scrubbing the infuriating shirt when a barely heard sound stilled her raw hands upon the soggy homespun.

Etha's gaze snapped to Santil. The young Eaglekin was bending over, gasping, slim hands pressing against her chest.

Stunned motionless, Etha could only stare. The girl had not once moved like that of her own accord since Ammah brought her to them.

Shaking herself out of the stupor, Etha ran to the Eaglekin, sliding in the grass to her knees. She gripped the girl's

shoulders with her dripping hands, unaware that she still held Dayan's shirt that was sluicing water down the girl's left side.

Santil's own hands swept up and clasped Etha's delicate wrists. "Rakia!" she cried out in a keening wail, her gaze anguished, fierce ... and startling clear. Bright shimmering coils glowing pink and orange fairly crackled around her.

With a sob, Etha brushed the girl's hair back from her cheeks. Her heart was pounding in her skull. Tears ran down both of their faces. Santil's golden eyes were alert and knowing and terrifyingly anguished before she sagged over against Etha's smaller body and wept.

Chapter Thirteen

"Tyalan!" Hydeia tore out of sleep like a fledgling thrown from the nest, heart thundering.

A strange lapping sound came from the other side of the oddly curved wall. A lantern hanging on one of the low ceiling beams, tossed a muted glow around the narrow space, a storeroom of some sort, she guessed, with all the barrels and crates. The dank smell of manure and hay lingered in the air from empty animal pens and chicken cages. She must have still been somewhat weak and faint for the room seemed to be softly swaying. Or maybe it was her. A residual effect of the Mystic's orange powder?

She sat on a thin mattress near a wide box holding what looked to be smooth stones. The bandages had been taken off her hands and her wounds from the rope burns had been coated with some kind of sweet smelling salve. They were healing well and no longer hurt. She had no idea what hour of the day it was in the strange windowless room with what looked to be a tree trunk running up into the low ceiling, nor did she really care.

Warm tears pressed against her eyes as she sobbed out Tyalan's name, and reflexively sent her *reyn* out to find her. But there was nothing to take a hold of. Shivering in the coldness, she floundered in the desolate emptiness like a woman at the brink of drowning, until she felt warm arms enfold her and draw her back against a hard chest. Unmistakably Ammah as she inhaled his clean forest scent.

She melted into his strength, unashamed after how she'd already wept in his arms, and eagerly accepted his compassion and security like a starving child snatches a fallen crumb.

"Shhh, let it go..." Ammah kissed the top of her head.

But there was nothing left. She was drained of tears, drained of spirit, drained of pride or will. It would have been better if Lannis had taken all her *reyn* before Tylan found her. Then Tylan wouldn't be dead ... hot moisture slipped down her cheeks. It appeared she wasn't deplete of tears after all.

"Where is she?" Her voice was hoarse, throat raw.

"She's here." Ammah scooted back to reach for something and Hydeia felt immediately bereft of his strength.

He came around to kneel in front of her and gently placed a small metal chest in her hands. As she lifted the lid, the scent of enelm oil drifted out. Tylan had been carefully wrapped in a soft white cloth tied with delicate silver twine.

Ammah had prepared Tylan's small body for the sun ritual. An Eaglekin ritual, even though he wanted nothing to do with Eaglekin tradition. Throat tight, Hydeia looked up into Ammah's handsome face, seeing him anew, though he had not changed, not really. Hydeia just hadn't known what she was seeing before, hadn't been ready to look so closely.

He was kind and honorable and strong. Love echoed in her head, in her heart, but was stayed at the edge of her lips. She closed the chest with an audible click between them.

"Where are we?"

Ammah pulled back as though he wasn't certain she'd like his answer. "A small vessel."

She didn't. "We're on water?"

"It was the safest place. We were fortunate. A captain I know gave us the use of his smallest watercraft, a Chaim-built *slin*, from his merchant fleet while they're finding buyers for their latest cargo in port."

Hydeia fought down a rising nervousness. "You once rode on these watercraft?"

Ammah winched at her incredulous tone. "I was employed as a riverman, yes."

"Oh."

"All's well, Hydeia. We're not that far from either shore."

"From either shore? So we're in the middle of the river...?" Her fingers clenched until they were white around the small chest enclosing Tyalan's body.

Ammah leaned closer, resting his long hands over her knees. "It was the safest place for you. Trust me."

Drawn into his intense gaze, Hydeia dumbly nodded. She did trust him, more than she had wanted to.

Ammah's sorrow-filled smile fractured her worry. "Good. The sun will set in a few hours. You'll want to prepare."

* * * *

As the sun sank to the rim of the world, Hydeia took Tyalan from the metal chest and carried her up the ladder. She hesitated on the open deck, staring at the rippling water stroked in broad strands of orange and pink sunglow. Timbers

creaked as the sleek watercraft lifted in a soft roll of the dark water.

She glanced at Ammah, standing tall and calm, waiting for her to take her place. Above, Uloki was perched on the cross bar of a furled sail. His dark shape was outlined in the lowering sun, proud and princely and utterly still.

A lark sang across the water, but Uloki did not so much as turn his regal head.

Lights flickered across the river on both sides, a great distance away. Hydeia breathed deep of the damp, cool air, and pressed her dear bundle to her cheek.

She didn't have the strength to do this, couldn't. She would. This was the last thing she could do for Tyalan. She wouldn't fail.

Trembling, Hydeia held the eagle over her head. Her heart felt like it was breaking all over again, a thousand tiny little splinters that fell, stabbing her insides. "Call her!" she shouted to the dying sun, her voice raw with emotion. "Call her back to your embrace, brother sun. Free her from this shroud. Let her fly!" She shouted it forcefully, without a break in her voice, even though her throat felt like it was closing. *Sweet Koric, let Tyalan fly again in your embrace.*

Tiny waves splashed against the hull. Hydeia felt herself sway with the gentle swells. The air was tight with energy.

Tyalan's wrapped body moved to and fro in Hydeia's loose grasp as she released the emotions she had taken such care to always control. A torrent rushed through her, warm and fluid and powerful, coursing with raw and exposed feelings, combining and undulating in a fierce and primal rhythm.

Caught up in its current, Hydeia moved in a slow sinuous dance. The wind picked up, slapping low waves harder upon the hull, creating a cadence of creaking rope, jangling hasps and pulleys, and splashing water. She felt tears stream down her face. She gave into the tide of emotion, surrendering completely for the first time in her life, whole-heartedly, unashamed and fully responsive to the ebb and flow cascading through her.

Locking gazes with Ammah, she bared everything to him, every emotion, every fear, all her sorrow and grief. Secure in his acceptance.

He stood completely still. As still as Uloki above him. The veins in Ammah's strong neck swelled. His golden brown eyes were knowing and safe, compelling her to not look away.

Her dance increased in speed and energy, keeping time with her rapidly beating pulse, with the river's primal rhythm. Her heart was weighted with sorrow, her insides were wrapped in heat as *reyn* flowed into her. She thought she heard Tylan's call echo upon the potent air.

Ammah's chest expanded with a great intake of air. He couldn't take his eyes off of Hydeia if he wanted to. And he was far from wanting to. He'd never witnessed anything so profound, so moving. His heart beat thickly while the sun's glow slid gently over the beautiful female like a caress, framing her in muted rosy light. Her sweet translucent *reyn* lifted around her like pearly puffs of amethyst mist, twisting in flows and streamers that followed the rolling movements of her graceful dance.

Her face was serene and at the same time so full of sorrow and unbridled love, Ammah felt beads of perspiration break out across his forehead. The cry of an eagle streaked along a keening moan of wind, but all Ammah's attention was focused on the swaying young woman in front of him. Her slender arms were raised over her head, holding Tylan's shrouded body up to the sinking sun, while her delicate wrists moved side to side in a sweeping mesmerizing motion that seemed to join with the throb of nature's music.

Her body weaved and rolled, a slender mixture of lean strength and soft swells glimpsed beneath the thin rough spun gown in a silhouette framed in rosy sunlight. The soft curves of her hips moved in the same swaying cadence as her wrists, soft and innocently tantalizing. Her hair was a tumble of light flowing around her waist—wheat and flaxen with the lighter strands soaking up the amethyst and rose hues of sunlight and streaming *reyn*.

Ammah stood transfixed as though he'd stepped into a dream. He'd never witnessed any Eaglekin female, or any woman, so fully relinquish all control of her tightly defended emotions. It was the fulfilling act of an Eaglekin who no longer had any thing left to prove to anyone, who surrendered all that she was, all that she could feel to open herself up to experience every heartbreaking emotion for the simple and pure love of her true-bonded. Each powerful emotion moved across her expressive face, flowed through her body where they were expressed in graceful movement. He swallowed around the tightening muscles of his throat. His eyes burned with tears. Hydeia's dance, her last loving rite for

Tyalan, surrendering all emotion, was an act of extreme courage, especially for an Eaglekin ... and exquisitely beautiful.

He would never forget this for as long as he had breath.

Hydeia stumbled and Ammah poised himself to run and catch her should she fall, though he in no way wished to interfere and break the poignant spell. Just when he thought she could endure it no longer, Uloki launched into the sky. Screaming, he wheeled sharply around and snatched the bundle with outstretched talons from Hydeia's upraised arms.

His wings beat powerfully, fighting the weight. Ammah froze, knowing Uloki must drop Tyalan or be dragged down to the water with her. Watching Hydeia, the last defending wall around his heart melted away at her frightened expression. He could no more control his burning reaction to her than he could call back Uloki. The tiercel's fierce and determined emotions raged through him, battering his worry. Uloki knew what he was doing. Through his *reyn*, Ammah sent his trust and encouragement. He wished he could so easily communicate reassurance to Hydeia. Though she valiantly held back her tears, her torso was tense and rigid, her chest rising and falling with harsh breaths, not knowing what Uloki was doing with Tyalan's body.

The sky suddenly burst open with the sun's rays, the final surge of the dying day. Ruby light shimmered on every ripple of water. Low flying insects glowed brightly, flicking above the water like tiny sparkling gems.

As the eagles fell toward the churning river, a single bright ray poured forth through the sky and seemed to catch them.

Their dark silhouettes hovered, suspended in mid-air, then the lower bundle glimmered, pulsed brightly and exploded in piercing fragments of light so intense, Hydeia and Ammah had to look away as the concussion of energy rolled over them.

All at once the world went quiet and dark. The streaky orb of the sun sank below the dark watery horizon.

Emotionally exhausted, Ammah wiped a hand across his face and looked out across the water where Uloki soared alone.

* * * *

The sky was dull with clouds and a suggestion of approaching rain. Hydeia stared at the circle of ripples where Ammah had disappeared, and smiled when he broke the water's surface.

For three days, they rested on the small watercraft while Hydeia worked through her grief. Ammah had been ever attentive. He brought her meals, cleaned her village-made blouse and skirt, even washed and combed her hair for her. He also taught her how to fish with a hook, line, and net.

They were anchored across from the port where Ammah could keep an eye on his former captain's larger river craft so they could bring in the smaller one when they were loaded and ready to leave.

Until then, Hydeia and Ammah would remain secluded on the little *slin*, precious time away from the threat to all Eaglekins that they must eventually face.

The clouds hung low over Irrean, misting the city in gray streaks. Her buildings nestled right up to the riverbank, spreading as far as Hydeia could see, stark and shadowed. Light shapes of river birds dove and soared along the banks.

"Ready to learn?" Ammah said behind her. He'd been threatening to teach her how to swim.

"No." She turned and her breath hitched.

Water ran over his strong bare chest, down the hard lean length of him, dripping off his wet breeches to pool on the deck. Hydeia's mouth went dry. The heat of her *reyn* flowed into her where her stomach was already fluttering.

He was hers.

As the heady sensations flooded her, understanding dawned.

Her fingers curled into her dark red skirt. She had been so mistaken. Her attraction to Ammah was as strong as it ever had been, possibly even more powerful. Coming from her alone.

Hydeia had thought her attraction to Ammah stemmed from her true-bond with Tyalan and his with Uloki's. But these feelings, all this longing from simply looking at him that stirred every sense ... It had always been hers alone. From the first time they met back in the canyonlands, she had responded to him, and only him. Tyalan's and Uloki's courtship had only resonated with what was already there.

He flipped glistening dark hair out of his eyes, flinging fat drops of water on the deck. Hydeia's chest rose and fell with her rapid breathing. His voice, husky with concern caressed her skin.

"Wh—what?" she said.

"Are you well?" He stood in front of her, had a wet palm on her arm, ready to steady her. Concern swam in his exotic eyes. The ends of his wet hair were already curling up around his ears and neck.

He was hers.

She reached up, ran her palm along the side of his face. The brown in his eyes deepened in color. Her entire body tingled from wanting him. She leaned in close, ready to take ... then stopped.

Reyn immediately drained from her, leaving her cold and disorientated as a disturbing thought growled for attention.

With Tylan's death, the bond had been broken.

By tradition, Ammah was no longer her mate.

She had no claim upon him. No right to take what she was about to take.

The realization hit her like a slap.

Ammah's expression turned troubled once more. "What is it? Here, sit down. You don't look well." He pulled her down to sit with her back against the rail. Then he lowered to sit by her side, waiting for her to regain her voice.

Stunned by the thought that she had truly lost him, the emotions still so new and close to the surface from Tylan's death re-emerged, latching onto this fresh unexpected loss.

She'd lost Ammah as well, in all of this.

"Hydeia?" His voice was tender and worried, sending delicious shivers along her arms. *Shred it to pieces!* He had no notion of what he did to her. He was simply too kind to abandon her so soon after her true-bonded's death. Hadn't he

taken Santil to Dayan and Etha? And how many orphans had he cared for and found a place for them at Nedarra's inn for a better life? He had even been willing to help her find Lannis, though he did not know her. Ammah was a compassionate person, compassion he now gave to her. Nothing more.

He felt nothing more for her. When the merchant ship was ready to sail, he would leave her. He'd go off to wherever he and Uloki were headed before they'd run into her and Tylan. Hydeia steeled her heart against it, pulled back the tears that wanted to spill, and focused on something else, anything else.

"Have you felt Uloki?" she asked.

The question seemed to startle Ammah. He slanted a sideward glance at her. "He still grieves. As do you, but is otherwise well. He went back to the mill, and remains there. I'm not certain why. Perhaps because that's the last place he and his mate were together."

"Perhaps," Hydeia whispered. "What were you doing in the canyonlands when we first met? As someone who wants nothing to do with Eaglekins, you didn't avoid our territories very well."

His grin was wry. "I had run across the Raken's trail on the other side of Stone Forest Pass. I was curious to see what drew them to cross over into Gaspar."

"Oh." That was just like Ammah. She began pinching her ear lobe between her finger and thumb.

Ammah nudged her knee with his. "What will you do now? Return to your eyrie?"

Her gaze searched his. He couldn't wait to be rid of her. She shook her head and let her hair fall forward, covering her face like a curtain. "No. None of that matters anymore."

He pulled her hair back and tucked it behind an ear to better see her face. "None of it?"

Hydeia's breathing caught, swirled slowly while his hand lingered by her cheek. "The Matrons sent me to bring back Sheeannar, Lannis's bonded. You were correct. I was their perfect scent hound, completely loyal and bent on succeeding just to prove my own worthiness to the Matrons and now Tyalan is..." The muscles around her throat grew thick, raw.

Ammah spun to one knee in front of her, took her by the shoulders. "That wasn't your doing."

"If I—"

"If you hadn't been in the city, they would have found another Eaglekin, and another and another. They already have Rakens capturing Eaglekins as far as Stone Pass Forest. And they'll push even farther into the canyonlands and into the eyrie's territories. Eventually you could have been taken anyway. As many others will be and are. They most likely have replaced you already. I saw those poor eagles in the cages ... well." He muttered a low curse she couldn't make out. "I wouldn't have wished that on Tyalan."

Hydeia mulled that over for a moment. "Regardless, I won't return to the Matrons. Everything I believed was important doesn't matter. It never really did. I had everything that mattered already. I shared *reyn* with the most worthy of eagles. That should have been enough, but I had to prove myself to the Matrons, to myself, and in the end none of that

holds importance. Tylan loved me. She wouldn't let me suffer and it cost her her life.

"You tried to tell me, Ammah. That the Matrons' focus was too restrictive, that I should question what I was doing, but I wouldn't listen."

"Hydeia..."

She grabbed his forearms. "I know what I have to do. I suppose I do have to return to the eyrie. After. I still have to free Sheeannar, if she still lives and the other eagles as well, then I must go back to my eyrie long enough to warn the Matrons about what Lannis and the Mystic are doing. They can send the Territorial Guardians to stop Lannis or simply better patrol the passes into Gaspar to keep anyone hunting Eaglekins out of our territories. I don't know. After I warn them, let them know of the danger, it will be their concern. They'll know what to do about it."

And what would she do then? She had lost her true-bonded and was nothing to her people any more, a *tolin sha*, though she had learned from Ammah that that was not true. She did have worth. Surprising herself, she didn't care what the Matrons would think of her. Something inside of her shifted and opened with that realization. It really wasn't important to her whether the Matrons found her worthy. She was her own person, skilled and strong, ungoverned by their whims. One of the stones that had weighted her heart for so long seemed to lift.

Nor would she stay among them. She wanted to go with Ammah and experience the wonders of mankind. She looked

at him hopefully, knowing he had always resisted being with her. That stung.

Regardless, she would live among mankind without him. He had made his way alone. She could as well.

"I'll help you," his voice brought her out of her thoughts.

"Help me?"

"Free the captured eagles and their true-bondeds. You're right. We can't leave them there to suffer like that." Hydeia had the abrupt suspicion that Ammah had been planning on going back to aid them with or without her anyway. His kind nature wouldn't allow him to leave anyone in that kind of awful circumstance. He smiled crookedly. "I'll help you. Together we should be able to come up with a workable solution. Perhaps slip in while there are fewer Queenswatch about."

Hydeia nodded, relieved not only to have his aid, but to stay with him for just a while longer."

Chapter Fourteen

Santil inspected the water pouch and tossed it beside the other things she had laid out beside the pack on the large table. She'd fill it in the stream on her way out.

Dayan planted his knuckles on the table. "Don't do this."

"I have to do this." Santil barely glanced at him. She couldn't. "You don't understand."

"You're the one not understanding." Dayan frowned down at her. "Etha has worried over you all this time. We believed you were lost from us, then ... now. You're barely healed. I won't have Etha worrying all over again because you think you owe something to the Matrons. You don't."

Santil's hand slowed in the middle of tossing dried and wrapped goat's meat into the pack, her heart softening. Etha was not the only one worried. "Dayan," she sighed. How could she make him understand. She remembered all of it. Everything. And it had been horrific. Trapped in her own body, unable to speak, to tell anyone, to move her own limbs. While on the inside she had been screaming.

She had been with Rakia. Had been Rakia, forced to kill several people. Too many. She didn't even know who they were or why Lannis demanded their deaths, yet while she was Rakia, she had silently soared into them, those people one by one, talons ripping across their throats ... until the crossbow bolt pierced Rakia's breast.

Santil swallowed back the bile that rose to her throat and looked across the thick wooden table at Dayan.

She remembered him as well, not as clearly, mostly fragmented bits of memory, but she did remember Dayan's gruff kind voice, and the gentle hands of Etha while she cared for her. They had been a trickle of warmth in the cold dank terror her world had become since she and Rakia had been captured by the Rakens and taken to mankind's city where they were sold to the hated Mystic.

Her heart swelled with unaccustomed emotion. She owed Etha and Dayan so much. They had saved her, changed her as well.

No, not them alone. Everything she had experienced in the last four fortnights had changed her irrevocably. Santil would never be the same person she had once been.

They had cared for her while she was helpless. Santil was no one's fool. She was certain that her own people would have left her to perish. They couldn't have done differently.

Yet ... another clouded memory struggled to the surface of her mind, like a dark shadow that had to be brought to the light. One of her own people had forsaken Eaglekin tradition and not left her. It had been an Eaglekin who found her in the deserted field at the outlying area near mankind's city where those Queenswatch had used her, though that memory was hazy and unreal as well, then worried about what the Mystic would say about that, had dragged her from the wagon's bed and dumped her out on to the side of the muddy road.

An Eaglekin had found her, taken care of her, carried her upon his shoulders to bring her to Dayan and Etha. It was all bits and fragments of images, of worried brown gold eyes and a kind, soothing voice. She was sure the young man who had

saved her was an Eaglekin. She couldn't have just dreamed that up.

It had given her a brief center of hope for Eaglekins, for what kind of a person she now wanted to become. There was at least one of her people out there who did not fear weakness in others ... or fled from it. In fact, she found a remarkable type of courage in that. To show kindness where one had been taught that kindness was the sister to weakness. Captive in her *reyn*, alone in her mind, Santil had clung to these new concepts like a lost soul clings to a navigating star. This stranger, this Eaglekin she could not clearly remember, who she sometimes wondered if her fevered mind had invented as a safe refuge to flee to from the devastating things Rakia was forced to endure ... he had courageously helped her even though she was weak. When she was at her bleakest. Whether he was really an Eaglekin or she had just imagined that part of it, she would remember how it had felt to be rescued from that filthy road, suffering alone, weeping without any tears being able to flow for death to release her. She would never turn away from another person who needed aid. Never. Even if a hundred Matrons were watching, scowling at her. And her people needed her now. She could not turn away no matter how painful the expression on Dayan's face.

Being inside her eagle, Santil had discovered just how much fortitude and inner strength she possessed.

Rakia had died horribly, but within those last fleeting moments of life, while they had tumbled together in the sky,

the eagle had fought Lannis for control of her *reyn* ... and triumphed.

Rakia had been able to thrust all that *reyn* across the vast distance separating them, back into Santil.

And at that moment, though the Matrons would deem her *tolin sha* for no longer being true-bonded to her eagle, Santil understood the wrongness of that.

Rakia would never have sent the last of their shared *reyn* if she believed Santil had no worth. Santil's hand stilled on top of her pack while she let the pain of Rakia's sacrifice wash over her.

"Is there nothing I can say to make you change your course?" Dayan's voice was low, troubled, a weight pulling upon Santil's bruised heart.

Whether her people accepted her or not, Santil was going to warn the Matrons about Lannis and what the Mystic was doing to their people. She would make them understand, make them listen to her and take action to stop it. That was what Rakia had died for and that was what Santil would throw all her energy into. That gave her worth.

"Dayan, I have to do this."

The farmer's thick chest expanded in a despairing inhalation. He scrubbed a meaty hand across his face. "You put us to shame."

Santil's eyes flicked up to his. "Shame? You've done nothing to shame you in any way. The opposite holds true."

His smile was weak and flat as he grunted. "Nothing indeed. We who hold ancient oaths to honor and protect your people have done nothing. It's past time we of *Amalikiol* did

more than watch at your borders and wait to give you rest. The moment is upon us to once again stand as protectors to all Eaglekins." He inclined his big head toward her. "We'll see if your Matrons remember their oaths taken as well, for you won't have to stand before them alone."

* * * *

"This was a stupid thing to do. Ammah, I want to get out now." Terrified, Hydeia clung to Ammah's strong neck. The cool water lapped around their shoulders. Whatever madness that had convinced her to get into the water in the first place had abandoned her with the weightless feel of the river around her. There was nothing solid in here. The male truly addled her better judgment.

The loose undergarment swirled around her legs but Hydeia wasn't about to release the death grip she had on Ammah to smooth the light skirt back down. If she would have had claws no doubt his flesh would be torn under her pressure.

"You've barely entered the water and haven't let go of me since." A mischievous dimple popped into Ammah's cheek. At any other time Hydeia would have found that intriguing. Who knew the dour lad had dimples? Yet the incorrigible lout would have to display them at the precise moment he was attempting to kill her.

For that was what Hydeia was certain he was trying to do. There was no other reason for him to have lured her into this deadly rippling moving liquid of terror. *And rotting prey*, there was nothing to hang on to but him.

She felt his long legs tangle with hers while he kicked to keep them both afloat on the splashing waves. The sunlight sparkled on each ripple with lazy strokes.

"Hydeia, you're going to need to move back a bit or you'll pull us both under."

Of course that declaration only made her cling to his neck more tightly and they both did go under. The world abruptly went silent and dark. She could see absolutely nothing in the brackish water. Strong hands ripped her away from her fierce hold on Ammah. Dear *Koric*, he purposefully let go of her. He had left her. Sheer terror engulfed Hydeia, choking off any rational thoughts as it flooded through her chest. Her tightening chest that was quickly losing air just as she was wrenched back into the realm of sky and air and strong powerful arms that lifted her shoulders clear of the water, holding her there at arm's length while Ammah kicked powerfully, treading water for them both.

Terrified and relieved, she lunged to grab hold of him again, but his greater strength held her back. She shrieked as she felt herself dropping back into the dark depths, yet Ammah kept her head from going under again.

"Sh, shh, be calm." His voice was smooth, deep, and compelling. "Stop fighting me or we really will be in trouble. Hydeia!" His fingers pressed hard into her arms. "Be calm. Do you really think I'd let anything happen to you?"

That got her attention. She stopped fighting him, yet her hands were locked on to his wrists as tight as any eagle's talons. Water splashed into her face. "I didn't think so when I let you talk me into coming out in this wretched river. Take

me back to the *slin*." She glanced at the watercraft just to make sure it was still there. It seemed leagues away though Ammah could reach it in only a few strokes.

His incredible gold-brown eyes regarded her beneath knitted brows. "You really are afraid."

"No, I'm not." Hydeia's grip tightened as another wave lifted them, splashing their faces. "It's just that this is unnatural. Eaglekins don't swim."

"Of course they do. All children of the Black Sands Eyrie learn to swim before they can walk."

"The Black Sands Eyrie is perched above the shores of the Boranase Sea!"

Amusement crinkled Ammah's eyes. "All Eaglekins should know how to swim. How can you claim to be a mistress of survival otherwise? Even eagles love to swim, do they not? How do you bathe?"

"I bathe fine. When my feet can touch the solid bottom! I come from the canyonlands, Ammah. We thrive on little water. Just take me back to the *slin*!"

"As you wish. Just calm down first. It really is dangerous not to be able to swim." He spoke low and soothingly. Hydeia knew exactly what he was doing. All Eaglekins knew how to speak softly when their eagles were agitated. She was not agitated!

"So you've been saying," she lashed out. "You've gotten your way. I'm in the shredding water. Now get me out."

A smile tugged at his lips. "I will. I am," he amended at her glare. "Just keep moving your legs like you're doing. There. Good. You're doing fine."

Hydeia stilled and immediately sank until Ammah hauled her back up. Infuriating male. He'd had her mind off what they were doing as though she were a naughty fledgling about to go into a full out tantrum. She moved her legs back and forth as he instructed, but was certain she'd sink if she let go of his arms. They really were the only things keeping her afloat.

"What eyrie did you say you came from?" he asked mildly.

She saw right through his deceptive ploy to keep her calm and out in the water. Her eyes flashed but she decided to humor him since this was the first interest he'd taken in her personally, even though it was merely a ruse. She felt a sharp pull of longing, wishing it were otherwise, knowing he didn't care for her, not in the way she ached for him to.

"Tyalan and I came from the Eyrie of Crystal Falls."

"Near Narrow Head Pass," he supplied for her. "Lay across my arm like so."

"Not shredding likely! No. No. This is good."

That infuriating dimple popped back into his cheek. "As you like."

Fine. She would play his game. She let go of one hand experimentally, felt herself slipping, and snatched it back to his safe wrist. "Have you been to Crystal Falls?"

"No. But near there. Emlen and I traveled as far as Red Hills and Rearing Horse Rock Eyries."

Hydeia frowned at the mention of his previous mate's name. A sudden lick of jealousy speared right to her gut, sharply pointed. Accustomed to controlling wayward emotions, she clamped down on the troubling feeling.

He didn't seem to notice, or perhaps he had since shadows had slipped into his eyes and he rushed on ahead to avoid reflecting on the casual slide of his tongue. "Crystal Falls is where the main body of Matrons reside, is it not?"

"Yes." The word seemed to be a wedge in her throat. "They convene their annual councils there. It was a convenience for most to reside there, as they are past the age of easy travel. Also the climate is mostly mild and to their eagles' liking."

Ammah nodded, his look betraying nothing. The cool water lapped around his chin. "I remember my mother being chosen to travel to council with our eyrie's Matron when I was very young. She was gone half of that year. I missed her very much."

Hydeia swallowed around the growing knot in her throat. The water splashing around them seemed to be colder. Ammah watched her as though he wondered what thoughts hid behind her sudden stony stare.

He pulled her closer through the silky water, gently as though he were afraid to startle her. "It must have been difficult growing up beneath the notice of so many Matrons."

She snorted, planting her palms firmly upon Ammah's wide shoulders, feeling much more secure now that he was closer. She could feel his powerful legs moving, pulsing little rivulets beneath the surface as he kept their heads above the laughing waves. She mimicked his movements with her own legs, finding she was able to move herself up and down in the water.

Ammah inclined his head. "The Matrons can be hard, cruel in their determination to keep the Eaglekin people strong. I know firsthand their relentlessness. Thank *Koric* my mother kept them at bay."

Hydeia understood what he was speaking about. There were only so many eagles to be bonded and the Matrons were harsh in their pursuit of winnowing out the most worthy of Eaglekins. In their search, they could be dauntless, even cruel, taking younglings from their parents to raise in the most austere circumstances apart from the eyries. Hydeia's mother had been one of those, taken and trained early, and had been a biting disappointment when she'd rejected everything the Matrons had bred into her to become.

"Ammah, did the Matrons take you from your home?"

A frown marred his handsome features. "They made the attempt, but my mother would not allow it. She was unique among those who were true-bonded."

She would have had to have been to go against what the Matrons deemed best for all the people. And she had raised a rare son who had learned to reason things out for himself. Hydeia frowned into the glistening water, absorbed in thought. So many times, she had wished that her own mother would have stood up to the Matrons.

"Your mother and father sheltered you from the Matrons' greed as well?" Ammah unnerved her with his simple directness.

A long festering anger uncoiled from the pit of Hydeia's belly. "My father died before I was born. My mother—" She reeled back as the hurt blazed fresh in her mind. It still had

the power to ice her blood. "My mother, she..." Hydeia took a calming breath that did nothing to calm her at all. "She begged to be released from her bond before her trial year was complete. She voluntarily gave up the chance to be true-bonded to a most worthy eagle."

There. She'd said it. Now Ammah knew and Hydeia's shame was complete. It burned hot and rancid, drying her throat. She'd just handed him the final reason to not want to have anything further to do with her. Not that he needed any more.

How the shredded prey had he gotten her so relaxed that she would tell him that? She'd never meant for him to know that. Slick coils of pain and hurt tapered along her insides, stiffening her spine. She let the cold feelings pass over her, hopefully to be carried away by the lapping water. She stared at his chest, too mortified to see the look of disgust in his sensitive features.

Why wouldn't he say anything?

She'd shocked him.

Embracing her *reyn*, Hydeia absently flicked her senses out toward Tylan, seeking comfort from the one soul who hadn't judged her by her mother's weakness, and met ... nothing.

It hurt. Sweet *Koric* it hurt. It pinched at her heart. For a few brief moments in the water with Ammah, she'd forgotten.

The pain of Tylan's death and the raw humiliation of her weak parentage burned in her chest. Refusing to meet his eyes, Hydeia turned in Ammah's grasp toward the small *slin*. "Take me back now," she demanded.

"Why? You were doing so well."

"Just take me back!"

"Not until you look at me. So your mother gave up her bond, was shunned for that, am I right?"

Of course he was right. He was an Eaglekin. He understood how appalling the thought of showing such a weakness was on an entire Eyrie. How demoralizing it was in the face of a people who's survival depended on strength. And he must know how she had been treated afterwards, the daughter of a *tolin sha*, a nothing. How she'd been taunted and abused. How anyone in the eyrie had the right to demand that Hydeia work at any task they deemed, and at any hour whether she was rested or not, as well as the right, even the responsibility the Matrons had ingrained into them, to punish and beat her for an unsatisfactorily completed task, which happened more often than not in an attempt to strip the husk of her mother's weakness out of the child.

Which they had. Hydeia was not weak. Strong tremors rolled across her body. Her blood pounded on a hot tide of self-loathing and buried shame. Her mother never once stopped them, never once stood up to them, or made excuses so Hydeia could have a small respite. She only tended Hydeia's wounds and cried over her bruises. Being strong and worthy of an eagle was Hydeia's only way to prove herself. She'd fought them every day and worked doubly hard to even be deemed worthy enough for a chance to be presented to the newly fledged eagles.

She spun in the water as Ammah turned her to face him, spreading shimmering ripples across the rough surface. Hydeia kept her gaze averted.

"But what of you, Hydeia?" She hadn't expected his voice to be so hard, yet she should have known. "Did you also shun your mother?"

His question caught her so off guard, she looked up at him ... and wished a hundred times over that she hadn't.

She'd seen him like this before. He wore the same look when he'd been unable to do anything about Santil's condition. And again when he'd itched to throttle Andreth Narin on behalf of Nedarra and her girls. His body was still, relaxed in the water, but his eyes weren't quiet. Ammah's kind and gentle heart wanted to champion those who couldn't defend themselves and at that moment that look was directed at Hydeia on her mother's behalf.

Hydeia couldn't believe it.

She'd been the one who had been wronged. All those years trying to overcome her mother's weakness. Hadn't she?

Shreds, he wasn't going to turn this all back on her. She wouldn't allow it. But she couldn't bear the look he directed at her.

Quickly turning, Hydeia lunged for the *slin* and immediately sank.

Thick murky green darkness slid around her, dragging her down. Panicking, she forgot everything Ammah had just tried to teach her and thrashed wildly with her arms and legs, getting nowhere and sinking like a stone.

Everything was dark and intangible.

Then something snaked around her waist and she flailed against it, certain it was some foul river creature come to pull her down faster.

She beat at it, but it clamped down harder in an iron grip around her and shot toward the surface, pulling her with it. They broke through in a shower of flinging spray and only then did Hydeia realize it had been Ammah squeezing her about the waist.

Inhaling huge coughing draws of air, Hydeia threw her arms around his neck, clinging to him as the only thing solid in this *Koric*-forsaken realm of water.

Ammah's voice was furious. "Why did you do that! Why didn't you attempt to stroke?" His hand cupped the dip of her waist, holding her steady against him.

"Stroke?" she squeaked out, mortified at the strangled sound that came out of her throat.

His other hand slid up her back, strong and firm, and tangled in her wet hair. She could feel his heart beating wildly. "You'll never learn how to swim," he snapped, yet still held her tight against him. "You're too shredding stubborn."

Stubborn was she?

She'd show him just how stubborn.

When her toes safely landed on the *slin's* deck, Hydeia stomped all the way over to the narrow prow where Ammah couldn't see how wobbly her knees were or how shaken he'd made her. She'd long ago hardened her heart against all the sneers and pointed glares of disapproval she'd borne from the Matrons and her people, but none of those had torn her heart to pieces like that one crushing look from Ammah.

A shudder washed through her from her shoulders all the way to her fingertips. Worse, because she was beginning to see he was right. Imagining her mother through Ammah's

eyes, he would see a woman afraid and lonely, who had suffered the worse kind of degradation and derision at the hands of her own people who should have given her comfort and aid. He would not see Josanne *tolin sha* as other Eaglekins did, a woman too weak and worthless to be true-bonded to an eagle. Ammah would see all her hurt and all the strength she did indeed possess to remain in the eyrie, when she could have easily slipped away to live among the other outcasts in relative peace. It was all startling clear now. Josanne had remained in the eyrie, taken every abuse, so that her daughter would have a chance at her dream of being true-bonded with an eagle. The very thought of Hydeia sharing *reyn* and possibly being lost in her bird must have terrified her mother, yet Josanne had stayed.

Dear Koric. Hydeia's throat was closing, her pulse unsteady. How could she not have seen that? That was why they had gone to that village of mankind so long ago. Yet even then, when Josanne could have lived a peaceful life, she returned to the eyrie so that Hydeia could bond with an eagle.

A low guttural moan shivered from her, tightening around her throat as she gripped the railing, fearing her legs would no longer support her.

She had been no better than the Matrons. Though she had never spoken harshly nor added to Josanne's burdens. In fact as she had grown older, Hydeia had quietly taken on some of her mother's tasks without letting anyone else know. And when Tylan had chosen her, before they left for their trial together, Hydeia had helped her mother move to the outskirts of the eyrie, far from the Matrons and their relentless

demands where Josanne could live in peace. But even so Ammah was right, she had distanced herself from her mother, pulled away from that weakness, from the shame.

But all along it had been her who had been weak. She should have stood with her mother, shielded her. Isn't that what a person of strength would do? Yet it had been her mother all along, taking the brunt of the derision to shield her.

The burn of tears watered Hydeia's vision.

Something brushed the nape of her neck, light and warm. "Hydeia?"

She whirled around, inwardly cringing that the *slin* was too rotting small. "Don't touch me!"

She swatted Ammah's hand away when he reached for her again. "Just don't touch me." She couldn't bear it if he turned that sensitive gaze on her now, not while she was wallowing too far down in her own self-loathing.

She deserved no tender compassion from him, not now, not knowing that everything the Matrons had said about her was true. She was weak and unworthy, just not in the way they had thought.

Not knowing what to do with his hands, Ammah thrust them back through his hair. The sun was streaming at his back, sloping long shadows across his features. "Skies, Hydeia. I didn't mean to get you so upset."

His sincere tone was like a blade in her heart. Apparently not only was she weak, but a coward as well for at that moment she wanted nothing more than to flee across the deck, run down into the hull and bolt the hatch door behind

her. But backing down was not in her nature so she rooted her bare dripping feet to the deck and met his wary gaze.

Weeping also was not in her nature, though *Koric* knew she'd done enough of that already, and she could feel the pressure of it bubbling up into her chest. She clamped down on her emotions, tried to, was failing miserably when another tremor took her.

"*Koric's teeth!* You're shaking." Ammah's torn expression very nearly melted her to a puddle at his feet.

"No I'm not. Well, I, a little. But that shredding river was freezing." She sidestepped him as he reached for her again. "I said not to touch me." Not now. Not ever.

"Stop this!" Temper hitched in his voice. "I'm just trying to help you."

He would. "I don't want your help." She wasn't worthy of it.

"Don't pull away from me. Not when I'm the one who made you cry. *Sweet Koric*, you are crying. Don't do that. Not over something thoughtless I said. No. No. You have to stop. Don't cry."

"I don't cry." She hiccupped. "And you didn't do anything."

"Didn't I? I badgered you into the water when you were clearly afraid." She winced at that. "Then I accused you of cruelty when I had no cause or right to do so."

"But you were right," she broke on a strangled sob. "I was horrible to my mother." Defeated, her bones turned to liquid and she slumped toward the deck.

Strong arms caught her up, lifted her off her feet. She tried to wiggle free though she had no energy for it. "Don't be kind to me now. Don't you dare be kind to me."

"Quiet you. I'll be as kind as I want."

She stilled in his arms, letting him take all her weight, all her misery, which made her feel even worse.

His warm breath feathered her temple. "I was not right. Not even close. Nor fair to you. I shouldn't have said what I did. Sometimes when I hear of these, these, well injustices I guess, I just react without weighing the situation. The Matron of my eyrie was only too happy to point out that fault of mine."

Hydeia risked a cautious glance up at him. "Truly?"

His beautiful eyes were half-shielded behind heavy lids. "Truly. Many times. Just the peak of a long list of hers, detailing my many faults."

"Oh."

His eyes opened fully, unnerving her with the vulnerability she saw there. *Koric*, it was wounding him greatly to believe he had hurt her in any way. A strange sensation sliced through Hydeia without warning. She felt hot, feverish. Skies, she needed to get out of his arms. She wanted him to hold her tighter.

The muscles in Ammah's forearms beneath her legs clenched. "What I'm trying to say is that, shred it all, I'm trying to apologize and not doing a fair job of that either."

Now Hydeia really couldn't look at him. Though immensely kind of heart, Ammah had the sun's share of arrogance too. Apologizing wouldn't come natural to him. She fleetingly

wondered if his eyrie's Matron had arrogance listed on his mountain of faults as well.

She started shaking her head. "Don't."

He slid down to sit on the deck, but held her firmly in his lap.

"Don't apologize and don't hand me your pity. I deserve neither."

"Oh, gosling." His voice was a sultry, shimmery sound that rippled along her skin. "Of course you do. How old were you when your mother gave up her trial bond?"

Hydeia's throat was closing up again. "Four, five summers maybe."

His look was far too tender. "Just a child. Don't you think I know how it would have been for you? What you must have endured? How could a child withstand what an entire eyrie tells her? You must have fought long and hard for your own survival. How could you have been expected to take care of your mother's feelings as well?"

Hydeia wasn't about to accept his pity. "But I'm not a child now."

"No, you're a woman." He lowered his forehead to touch hers. His voice was a gentle caress barely loud enough to hear above the waves slapping the hull. "A strong, proud, and extremely stubborn Eaglekin, bred and honed for survival in the harshest of circumstances, who has felt hurt for her mother though she tried not to. I can see it in your eyes. And here." His long fingers brushed just below her collarbone, leaving a faint echo of warmth.

His lips dusted over hers, a soft sweet pressure that was gone too soon.

Silken heat shivered up her spine, a jolt of icy sensation.

Ammah leaned back, his features startled and confused.

This time it was him that fled from her gaze. His eyes averted to her hips, her stomach, nearly bare beneath the wet undergarment, and darkened to deep, deep brown before he jerked his eyes up to her face again.

Hydeia felt him stiffen fraction by fraction as he drew away from her, not physically, but there was a leaving, she could sense it. She perceived an almost aching need scalding beneath his shattering control.

Her lips parted in wonder, which had him steeling his jaw, his arms, the core of his will against the powerful current humming between them.

Hydeia blinked, realizing he did want her.

At least he was attracted to her. That was something.

Pleased that she could have this affect on him fluttered nervously in her belly just as a fine tremor ran through his long body. *Koric*, it had been only a light brushing of lips. Something so simple shouldn't have this affect on them both, shouldn't pulse so thunderously between them. Hydeia knew she should move away from him but she didn't believe she had the command of her body to do so. Nor did she want to. Was it weakness on her part to want to stay in his arms, to feel the strength and heat of his chest molded firmly around her? Sweet skies, she was lost.

Then suddenly Hydeia found herself on the deck, cold without his warmth. The male could move fast when he

wanted to. He was on his feet and backing away, looking very much like a flightless eagle with a pack of red canyon wolves snapping at him.

"I have to ... to ... Rotting prey!" He didn't have any excuses for an abrupt departure ... nor anywhere to go. He ran his hands back through his wet hair.

Hydeia would have laughed if her own emotions weren't tangling a hard knot inside her breast. Instead her look turned tender, which only seemed to agitate him more. If he would have had wings, he would have shot up into the air.

"Sweet light," he moaned, clenching his fists, looking like he desperately needed something to do with them. His eyes cast about the boat, seeking any safe corner. He practically fled to the other end of the *slin* and began hoisting up the anchor. "Let's take a sail."

Chapter Fifteen

She was flying.

The wind buffeted Hydeia's body, streamed through her hair, and swelled the white sheets to bursting. The foam tipped water splashed and fell around her. She felt the roll become deeper while they tipped sideways. Hydeia gripped the rail with a white knuckled hold.

It was beautiful, wonderful, glorious. She felt weightless and alive, close to the feeling of freedom when her *reyn* had soared with Tylan. And yet this was somehow vastly different ... more solid, the motion more reckless and abandoned.

Sunlight played over the drenching green, sparkled to either shore where the lines and lifts of Irrean's buildings and manors seemed to glide past them. A yellow fisher grawl skimmed across the surface, then rose in a stretch of blue-tipped wings.

Kneeling in the stern, a large slap of water doused Hydeia and she laughed. The sound just poured out of her. It felt good and right to laugh again. And light. With the laughter and the blowing splashes of water and the wild caressing wind came a feeling of peace.

Hydeia closed her eyes, lifting her face into the streaming air and water. And she could almost feel Tylan gliding with her. Feel her joy and her love. Hydeia's own love for her true-bonded leapt up inside her, filling her heart, her head to breaking. It would be all right. She would be all right. The loss of Tylan hurt so terribly. And as much as Hydeia

embraced the laughter, and this joyous feeling of flying across the water, of freedom, of life, she also wanted, needed, desperately to cling to the hurt. She didn't want to not hurt.

Even after time dulled and softened the edges, after years would pass, she prayed the hurt she felt now would be just as intense. Just as painful. She didn't want Tylan to mean less to her then. Not ever. She was alive and Tylan was not. How could she allow the pain and the guilt of that to ever diminish? How could Tylan ever not matter?

Yet speeding across the water, the wind pulling through her hair, she felt so alive and loved and at peace. So free of the hard knot of pain, and she felt Tylan close. The eagle's soft sapphire essence whispered through her *reyn*, warm and comforting somehow. Tylan loved her, would want her to go on. To live. To know joy. She would be all right. Hydeia knew she'd be all right.

She opened her eyes to the beautiful blue sky. Water drenched her, slid down her face. Sweet laughter tumbled out of her. She couldn't have stopped it even if she had tried.

"Do you want to slow?" Ammah called from the wheel.

"No! Can we go faster?" She looked back and her wet hair whooshed across her face. She pulled it away to see Ammah adjusting the sails and the *slin* slipped even more to the side.

"That should do it." Ammah called, grinning. The water sped by frighteningly close to the rail, but the speed and the freedom were too exhilarating, too powerful to worry about drowning now.

She wished her mother could feel this. Wished Josanne had the chance to feel the powerful healing rush of wind press into her body, sluice across her soul, and scour all the bitterness and hurt and pain away. The hurt that Hydeia had added to. She hadn't meant to, didn't realize that was what she had done in her refusal to see past her own pain and sense of survival, but she had not been a comfort for her mother, had not stood up to the Matrons and her people for her. Not once. Instead she had been ashamed of her.

Hydeia closed her eyes, let the stinging spray and buffeting wind stream over her, pummel at her guilt. She had been so wrong. Josanne was not weak. She had been strong, and resolute, and beautiful. And alone. Something hitched in Hydeia's throat. And hitched hard.

Never again. Never again would she look at anyone and see that person through the Matron's eyes, judging weakness or strength. With her hands clenched into fists and wind and water buffeting her, Hydeia made that promise and felt the hard knot of self-loathing unravel and pull away through the wind as peace settled over her and slowly her fingers loosened, opening to the grazing current of air that pushed on her. Beyond the roar of the *slin* cutting across the water, she thought she heard Tylan's joyful *cack* and the last buried part of her guilt rose to the crumbling surface of her heart to be washed with light.

She opened her eyes to an azure bright sky and smiled, tasting the slapping water flying into her face and unconsciously turned to seek Ammah's steady presence.

The *slin* was sleek and narrow enough to allow Ammah to quickly maneuver her on his own without too much difficulty. He stood at the wheel, tilting with the craft, legs braced wide, a carefree smile lighting his face. She would always remember him like this, handsome and sure of himself.

Hydeia's heart melted within her chest, grateful for his unique way of viewing things, and relieved to see that smile once more and know they were on equal footing again.

* * * *

Equal footing, her teeth! It was well and good that she and Ammah would be parting ways soon because his nearness was distracting Hydeia to madness.

They leaned over maps Ammah had drawn of Lannis's tower house and the surrounding streets and buildings. Their heads close, she smelled the river that clung to his skin and dripped from his dark hair after his morning swim. She had his scent inside her skin now and would know him in pitch darkness.

In a few hours they would take the *slin* to the docks and travel by foot closer to the little tower house and find a place to watch the activity going in and out, count how many Queenswatch the queen had spared from the war front to guard the Mystic's experiments. But sweet skies, it was hard to concentrate on that now while Ammah stood so close.

"Here. There is a stable with a window facing west from the loft. We should be able to have a good view from there. Another possibility is this tannery." He reached across the

table to point and the muscles in the back of his arm rubbed across Hydeia's stomach, leaving a trail of heat.

She fought the urge to grab his arm and turn him to look at her, to take his face in her hands, pull him down to her. They hadn't spoken more than a string of cursory words to each other since they brought the *slin* back from their sail in sight of the larger merchant vessel. It was surprising how easily Ammah managed to avoid her on such a tiny watercraft.

Her fingers splayed on the rough wood of the table. Now that she suspected he was at least attracted to her on some level, she couldn't keep from glancing at him, trying to see that hint of desire brewing just beneath the currents again. Just the thought of him thinking of her in that way sent a rush of heat trickling along her skin.

Why did she deny herself? He would be leaving her soon and she'd likely never set eyes on him again. Why couldn't they have just one day? One small moment between them that she could treasure.

"Are you paying attention?" he asked. "This is important."

"Uh, yes. Actually no," she sighed. "I'm not."

"You're not?" He stood back and crossed his arms over his still-bare chest. His sinewy muscles rippled with the movement and she groaned.

Shredding prey, he was beautiful. Tall and lean. Dark wet hair glistened around his serious features, the tips already curling below his ears. Relaxed, he rested a hip against the table. Her gaze traveled the length of his sun-darkened chest, over flat stomach, and lower on to loose breeches that hung

low, heavy with water, across his hips. Her mouth went dry. She pulled on her ear lobe.

No challenge or prey had ever made her doubt her abilities before. But ... But this prey mattered far too greatly to make a mistake. One snap of a twig, or soft exhalation and he would be gone, ears pricked and out of arrow range. *Oh, dear sunlight*, he wasn't some shredded animal she hunted. He might again reject her, most likely would, but Hydeia would risk it. *Koric*, what was she thinking? He didn't want anything to do with her. No, he just didn't want her as his mate. Tylan's death had made that a surety anyway. But he felt something for her, she knew he did. She just didn't know how strongly. But for him, for one brief moment of being close to him, she'd risk anything. And hold that memory to her for the rest of her life.

This was madness beyond reason. She swallowed, met his gaze, held it.

His golden eyes immediately darkened to winter brown in that way that made her heart flutter. He pushed off the table, watching her with the sharp interest of an eagle. He wasn't running now. In fact he seemed rooted to the deck.

A promising reaction that boosted Hydeia's courage.

"Hydeia?" The way he was looking at her made Hydeia feel feminine, beautiful, and powerful. Something stirred low in her belly, aching sweet and blistering hot.

She needed to touch him. Her hands splayed over his firm chest, hot, memorizing all the planes and angles, the satin of his sleek skin. A shiver rippled through him. *Koric*, just her touch had done that? She traced the tiny scars near his tight

belly button and slid her thumb across the rough healing skin of the burn along his ribs. His rapidly pounding heart added a rough texture of excitement to her already churning insides. She could feel something powerful building in him, burning through his flesh. She felt his eyes drift over her face.

Craning her head back to look up at him, she melted into the depths of his eyes and a spiky stream of nerves skittered back down to her toes.

At once her hands were in his wet silky hair, pulling him down to her. Just like she'd imagined doing. Better than she'd dreamed. Their mouths met in a frenzy of wanting too long denied. Closer. She pressed herself against him and wanted to get closer still. His wet breeches were rough against her softer skirt, his strong chest, velvety. The two contrasting textures sent shivers spiraling through her core.

"Hydeia." He groaned in surrender. "Dear. Mother. Of *Koric*." His hands finally swept over her, calluses over silk, pulling her even closer as they moved across her back, leaving exquisite pinpricks of heat blushing across her flesh.

She couldn't get enough of him. His taste was spice and forest with a lingering sweetness of the apple he'd eaten earlier.

She took what she needed, giving him everything she had. He answered in return. His name swirled in her head, poured through her lips that were pressed to his. Her fingers dug into his shoulders.

Dear Koric, the emotions pulsing through her were more exquisite than she'd ever experienced before, more strong

than she'd anticipated. This one moment would never be enough. It had to be.

This was not a gentle kiss. This was a possession, strong and empowering and ancient.

He was hers!

And she was marking him as hers.

She could feel the raw currents of it surging through Ammah, knew the exact moment the tight control he held over his emotions shattered.

She wanted him to always remember her. To remember this. *Koric, sweet brother sun*, she would be the one who would never forget.

Her pulse sizzled. Her senses were beginning to blur. Warmth flooded her, the heat of *reyn*.

The dark of Ammah's pupils began to spark. As he, too, became enwrapped in the shimmering glow.

She could feel the steady shivering beat of it winding through him, meeting her own as they crashed together, enfolding, teasing in an ebb and flow of translucent liquid light. She couldn't think, could only let her spirit and heart respond.

She'd never heard of anything like it, hadn't known their *reyn* and essences would combine into hot glimmering twists.

They gasped simultaneously. Ammah took what he wanted from her, what she ached for him to take. She clung to him. His summer green *reyn* thrilled through her, was inside her, hot and masculine, and frighteningly beautiful. Her eyes slipped closed as she spiraled, felt wind tear across her skin, slap at her cheeks, roar in her ears, as they tumbled through

the skies, talons locked, plummeting toward a glorious release. They fell through the air.

Rioting luminous hues of *reyn* exploded around them, filled them with pulsing heat. When their lips joined, all emotion was bared, shattering the last fragments of her tightly guarded control, the last hidden reservoir of her heart, fraction by fraction, as they spiraled headlong together.

"Blessed mother of all eagles," Ammah gasped between huge inhalations of breath.

"You are pleased?" Feeling mightily pleased herself, Hydeia pushed a lock of damp hair off his sweat soaked forehead.

Ammah laughed, rolling onto his back beside her. "Pleased isn't strong enough a word. *Koric's teeth*, Hydeia!"

She turned onto her side and began fingering each of his ribs. She couldn't get enough of the feel of his smooth tight skin stretched over hard muscle and bone. She lazily circled her thumb along a small flat mole beneath his lowest right rib. "Is it always like this? I mean, between Eaglekins. When you and your previous mate—"

"No." Ammah grabbed Hydeia's hand, kissed each tip of her fingers. Tiny prickles of warmth tingled down the length of her. *Sweet light*, after that how could her body still respond so urgently to him? Would she ever have her fill of him? "No. Never. It was never like this between me and Emlen. I don't think ... I've never heard of anything like this." His voice held a note of wonder.

"Good." Hydeia said, making Ammah grin. Such a handsome grin—a slight curl of mischievous lips that she'd never seen him wear before.

He was hers. For now.

At least for today, the gloomy thought passed over her, tearing at her heart. She wanted him, wanted to be with him, like this, for always.

She'd never again love anyone how she loved Ammah.

Dear Koric, she loved him. How could she have thought it would be a simple thing to walk away from him? She loved him.

A real love, not compelled by Eaglekin custom through their eagle's bonding, but a deeper unforced love flowering from within her. Her pulse quickened with the realization. Her cheeks warmed. What was she to do now? She couldn't have him. She no longer was true-bonded. They were no longer mated. She had no claim on him. And he'd never once spoken in terms of them remaining together. Panic clawed at her throat.

Ammah kissed her neck. "You are so beautiful, so soft." His voice was a sultry, smoky sound.

Shivery rivulets danced across Hydeia's spine, her panic forgotten. They had today. They had now and she would make the most of it, even if it meant leaving her heart behind with him. All the tiny broken pieces of it.

"Soft? Are you trying to insult me?" She grinned, shifting closer to him, inhaling his masculine scent.

Ammah chuckled. "Did I say soft? I meant strong and powerful."

"Better." Hydeia nipped his ear.

Upon Eagle's Light
by Clover Autrey

Ammah's features transfused with light. "With muscles as firm as stone and skin, prickly and as tough as a gorse runt's hide."

He laughed at her outraged gasp, tracing his thumb along her jaw. "Soft."

Chapter Sixteen

Talwena Ondri, sixth creed kae sa Matron of the River Claw Eyrie studied the young girl. Though she stood poised, the girl's fingers fluttered nervously at the side of her thighs. And somewhat arrogantly, or perhaps ignorantly, she still wore the leather bracer upon her left arm. It was unprecedented that a true-bonded that had lost her eagle be allowed to address more than one member of the Council of Matrons at a time, but the young female had marched undaunted into the council lodge, followed by a handful of mankind's women and men. She had brought mankind across the territories and into their eyrie. Unthinkable.

Three of the Territorial Guardians stood inside the eight-sided lodge, eyes taking in everything, their eagles on their bent leather-enwrapped arms. More Territorial Guardians waited outside, pacing and alert.

Several eagles watched intently from perches spaced around the room. The perches were brightly decorated with dyed and braided twine and seashells from the coast. Talwena embraced her *reyn* to touch on Aoirse's shimmery cream-soft essence. Though Aoirse was no longer her own, but bonded to the council as a whole, Talwena could still filter through all the multitude of color and emotions to find her. It had taken her years to sort through the others and find the eagle's unique gem-bright *reyn*.

The travel-stained villagers watched the eagles with varying degrees of wonder and awe. Talwena worried about how much of their tale was true. It seemed impossible that

Eaglekins could once have been allied with any group of mankind. *Amalikiol* indeed.

Yet the large bearded spokesman made his words carry weight. The tale he related of binding oaths and the ancient Broken Wars was worthy of the most talented of tale-weavers, yet ... Talwena leaned forward ... truth struck powerfully through every nuance.

Even now, Ottracta was testing the large tree of a man, this Dayan of *Amalikiol*, measuring every word that slid off his Human tongue. Indeed he did have a knowledge of Eaglekin traditions and ceremonies that no one born to mankind should have. That their sacred rites were known outside of Gaspar was frightening.

Talwena glanced at Ottracta. The presiding Matron's sharply dark golden eyes were focused on the villagers, yet the small telling way her light gown kept fluttering as she shifted lightly on her feet made a chill skidder up Talwena's back. Ottracta believed him. Somehow she knew that what this Dayan was saying was the truth.

Talwena sent a little trickle of *reyn* to touch upon the presiding Matron and nearly sprang back as though she'd been slapped from the slice of emotion coming off of her.

Everything these villagers had told them must be true. An alliance with men? Talwena reframed from the urge to shake her head. So much of the old ways, their traditions, had been lost after the Broken Wars when the Eaglekins had retreated into the harsh canyonlands of Gaspar and closed themselves off from the atrocities and treacherous natures of mankind.

Regardless of ancient oaths or alliances though, more troubling to Talwena's way of thinking was the grave tidings this young Santil *tolin sha* brought. Grave indeed. The girl had actually been captured by the Rakens, stolen from within the territories. At the mention of that, the Territorial Guardians exchanged tight looks, and shifted uncomfortably on their heels.

As well they should, letting filthy Rakens enter Eyrie territories and leave again with captured Eaglekins. The Matrons had long known the Rakens were taking their people. And when the grand dame Sheeannar had gone missing, they acted.

Orlaith and his Territorial Guardians had not returned yet with word of Sheeannar. The Council had counted on that troublesome young daughter of the *tolin sha* to have been good enough of a lure to bait the Rakens for Orlaith to follow and discover where the beasts have been taking their people. There was no word of Orlaith or the girl.

But now that Santil had confirmed it, and worse, gave a detailed account of what these Mystics were capable of doing to their eagles and people ... stealing their *reyn*! Using eagles as assassins and their true-bondeds as nothing more than mindless vessels to produce more *reyn*. The ramifications were horrific.

Talwena's blood boiled with anger. It was even hard for her to look at the girl and see her as *tolin sha*, a nothing. After all she'd been through and experienced, she had risked coming here to face the Matrons without her eagle, just to give them warning.

And if the Rakens continued to capture their people, there would be more *tolin sha*, enough to outnumber the true-bondeds. It had to stop.

The season was upon them to gather all their strength, from every source, even the *tolin shas*, and take action against these Mystics.

Ottracta ordered the villagers to be escorted to wait outside of the lodge, jarring Talwena out of her thoughts. The people of *Amalikiol* looked to Santil and this Dayan while they filed out the oval doorway with the Territorial Guardians watching their every move.

As soon as the Matrons and their eagles were left alone, a snarl of colors shimmered in the air like the vapor that rises off the desert horizon. A turmoil of emotions lashed out, rolling through the Council's combined *reyn*, as strong and as powerful as all the women who held it. No one person alone could restrain such a forceful entity. The eagles rounded their wings. Some flew up to the rafters of the high conical ceiling.

The Matrons all seemed to speak at once.

"...guard all the passages into Gaspar..."

"...no further lone forays..."

"...words of a *tolin sha*..."

"...need to pull back farther to the sea..."

"...has always been our way..."

"...can't believe outsiders..."

"We must go to mankind's city and stop the Mystic ourselves," Talwena heard herself cry out, though no one else seemed to hear her. Aoirse flew to the perch just behind her shoulder, a silent comfort.

Weighing all their words before speaking, Ottracta silently lifted her age-gnarled hand and one by one, the Matrons shifted their gazes to her and settled. The eagles flew down to the perches in whispers of ruffling wings.

Ottracta looked at all the Matrons in turn. "It appears mankind once again turns their sight toward Gaspar. We will strengthen our Guardians at each known way into our territories and send a call out for all our true-bondeds and their eagles to retreat back toward the coast. We'll gather at the Black Sands Eyrie."

"Our people are natural-born wanderers," Nillilan's squeaky voice rose. Reserved in nature, she had an iron will, spiked with tenacity, though it was rare to see that side of her. "This isolation in our own territories has been difficult enough these many decades. And Gaspar is vast, has many layers and folds in the land for exploration. Isolating us even further is not the way."

"I agree," doe-eyed Sianor, fifth creed, said, holding her wide hands up for emphasis. The loose folds of her sleeves slid down her muscular arms. "Strengthen the borders if we must, but we cannot take what little freedom our true-bondeds have from them."

Ottracta shook her head. "I understand your misgivings, sisters. But each year there are fewer eyas hatched to us that have the strength and abilities to bond. Already the grand dame Sheeannar and her wisdom in guiding the fledglings to be ready to bond is lost to us. Our way of life, our traditions are in jeopardy even without this new threat to our young

fledglings from the Mystics. Pulling together and fleeing southward is our only chance."

"Not our only chance," Talwena spoke up and felt all eyes, Matrons and raptors, slide over her. "Perhaps our hatchlings numbers are diminishing because we have isolated ourselves for too long."

She waited until all the sudden murmurings quieted. "Sisters, I do not know of these old alliances with mankind, but I do know that our people once roamed freely across the entire land without hindrance or fear. I believe Ottracta is right. We must protect our newly hatched and fledglings. They should be taken to the Boranase Sea." Talwena took a calming breath, knowing what she said next would be met with opposition. "I also believe that the time to cower behind our stark canyon walls is long past. We must venture out among mankind and meet this threat head on. We must prove to the nations and provinces that Eaglekins will not be pushed."

"Talwena, you are speaking like a true-bonded, ever bold." Ottracta smiled indulgently. "As Matrons, we are charged with reining in our willful natures and moving forward with caution for the safety of all Eaglekins."

Talwena's temper snapped. Her violet tourmaline *reyn* flared bright and strong. "And after we have fled to the sea, where shall we go next when mankind spills farther into our territories? Where will our young hunt and learn their skills? You say our way of life is in danger. Fleeing to the coast will end it succinctly."

The room went silent. The air hummed with energy and sparking color.

The presiding Matron nodded. "Our emotions are strong in this. We are not all in agreement." She tightened her lips in thought. "I am sorry, sisters. We will journey to the coast." The sparkling hues expanded then dimmed as though in a common sigh of relief.

Disappointed, Talwena turned to make a hasty departure. Ottracta came to her and took both her wrists in her hands. "I fear your words hold weight. Will you go?"

"I see no other way."

Ottracta nodded. "Select the strongest true-bondeds among us and do what you can to stop the Mystics."

Talwena's eyes lifted. She swallowed. She had not been far from within the embrace of the Council of Matrons for too many years to count. "We'll leave right away."

* * * *

It was dusk by the time Hydeia and Ammah conned the small vessel into the docks. The area was quiet. Most of the dockworkers and rivermen would be home by now or holing up in taverns and alehouses for the evening.

Ammah tied the sleek little *slin* up between his former captain's long merchant craft and a double-storied vessel with a flat bottom and a giant miller's wheel that powered her.

"Ho, there," a skinny man jogged toward them. He wore the loose baggy breeches and lightweight shirt Hydeia had noticed the majority of rivermen wore. She finished securing

the rear of the *slin*, aft, Ammah teased she must call it, and stood poised.

"It's all right." Ammah also stood. "I know him. He's from the merchant, most likely saw us come in and is here to ready the *slin* to take supplies."

"Hmmmmmm." Hydeia narrowed her eyes.

"Javan." Ammah clasped the man's forearms. The riverman glanced over at Hydeia, then quickly away. His eyes darted back and forth, never quite landing on Ammah. If Ammah noticed, he gave no indication. "Has anyone come around asking about me?"

Javan's eyes flicked to the side. "Several times, yah. Askin 'bout you and that bird you got. But you know Captain Aldon. Won't tolerate no ones napin' with his crew."

Ammah smiled. "Good. Captain Aldon's a man to be trusted."

Suddenly Ammah groaned and hunched over to bring relief to an obvious pain in his abdomen. He clutched Javan's shoulder for support. The soft haze of *reyn* surrounded him, though Hydeia could plainly see his features had whitened.

Alarmed, she rushed to him, put her hands on his waist. "What is it?"

As though shaking something off, Ammah straightened, slowly and painfully, and Javan immediately stepped back.

Ammah pressed his fingers on his forehead. "Something's wrong with Uloki. Everything's dark. I think ... Shredding rot! He's been hooded." Starlight streamed across his worried features. There was nothing worse for an Eaglekin than to be far apart from his eagle when his true-bonded was in danger.

Ammah must be sick inside. No wonder he looked as though he'd taken a punch to his stomach. Hydeia knew that feeling all too bitterly. She'd been helpless to save Tylan. And devastated.

"*Koric*, no," Hydeia whispered. "We'll get him back, Ammah. Ammah? We'll get him back."

Javan was sloughing away. He hadn't once looked toward the *slin*. As part of the crew of the merchant, he should have shown an interest in its condition. The fine hairs on the nape of Hydeia's hairline stood on end. "This Captain Aldon of yours would not betray you?"

Ammah's arm flexed by her side. "No," he ground out.

Hydeia cocked her head toward the back-stepping riverman. "What of him?"

Ammah took Hydeia's elbow. "Let's be away from here. Quickly. I can feel Uloki. I know where he is, which direction to go. He's gone still, waiting for me to find him. And he's angry." Ammah flashed a small prideful smile. "Extremely angry. We need to get to him before he does something reckless." The dewy glow of blue *reyn* surrounding Ammah perceptively brightened as he communed with Uloki across the distance, most likely in an effort to calm the eagle and let him know they were on their way.

Javan suddenly turned and fled across the wharf.

A grave look passed between Hydeia and Ammah.

From the shadowed recesses behind wagons and crates, and dark corners and alleys between wharf storage and office buildings, dark figures of thick-muscled men emerged.

Hearing movement from behind, Hydeia looked over her shoulder to see several more slipping from the darkness toward them. Seven by her count, yet there could be more still lurking in the shadows.

She edged back toward the watercraft, pulling Ammah with her. Light from a lantern stretched across the dock's swaying planks, as another figure, a head shorter than the smallest of the others, approached, carrying a square lantern. The glow flickered across his face, and moved the shadows around the dock, briefly illuminating some of the men. These were not the blue coats of the Queenswatch, but hired thugs, hunters of Eaglekins for coin.

Hulking river vessels rose and fell in the sloshing current behind them. The creak of wood and hasps groaned in the quiet air. Hydeia and Ammah had no weapons.

"Doron Leurise," Hydeia spat out the name as though it burned her throat.

The shorter man, dressed in too fine a coat for tracking Eaglekins, smiled as though pleased his reputation made him so easily known. So this was the merchant who dealt in Eaglekin trade, who hired these trackers, even drunkard Rakens to capture her kind. His features were far too mild for his dark soul by half.

Leurise held the lantern higher to better see. "You can come easily..." He glanced at the grinning hunters and shrugged. "Or not. It won't make any difference to me. In the end, I always deliver exactly what my clients are in need of." He tipped his head and spoke to the closest tracker. "See he's delivered in one piece."

"What of the girl?" the largest thug asked.

"Ah, yes, the girl..." Leurise pursed his lips in disappointment. "Unfortunately, without her eagle, she no longer has enough value to compensate for the effort of delivering her. Kill her. Keep her. I leave that to you."

"No!" Ammah shouted, but Hydeia was already running forward. Men welding clubs and nets closed around them from all sides. Doron Leurise leaned back against a large crate by the river to wait. Ammah spun into a whipping net, using his own body weight to wrench the man down, caught up the club and swung. A tracker folded over with a whoosh of air and sank to the planks. Angered, the majority of hunters converged on Ammah. "No, Hydeia, run!" he shouted. "Please run!"

Hydeia dodged a club as she ran up a stack of crates, then jumped to the other side. Another net pulled Ammah from his feet. Hydeia screamed. Ammah was lost from view beneath a cluster of bodies and boots. Hydeia circled around and flew into Leurise. They rolled across the dock, arms locked. Hydeia shoved his chin back, knocking his head against wood. By Leurise's word, Ammah could be freed. The hunters were loyal only to coin. Leurise's scream was a high-pitched wail. A coward's wail. Blood leaked out his nose. Hydeia yanked him up by his fine brown collar when one of the hunters kicked her in the side, sending her flying off the edge of the dock.

Hydeia hit the water like a cold punch. Her heavy skirt tangled in her legs, pulling her down as panic washed through her. The tracker's kick had stolen what little breath she had.

Her ribs, and every bone and muscle seemed to be compressing painfully around her.

She couldn't panic. She could not. *Stop it! Stop it!* Fear coiled through her while she floundered and flailed at the water. Why hadn't she let Ammah teach her how to swim? Because she had given in to a foolish fear, now he would suffer under the Mystic's hands. She could not bear the thought of his expressive beautiful features going slack and lifeless. Not to Ammah. Not to him. *Oh, Koric!*

Not if she could stop it! Panic fled before her anger and Hydeia stubbornly began pulling her arms through the water. She still sank. Her lungs were burning, tightening upon her. She could see nothing but thick consuming blackness. Her booted feet landed on soft silty ground and instinctively she kicked off the river's bottom and kept on kicking.

To her astonished relief, she found she was moving upward through the dark cold water. She kept kicking, lungs screaming, using her arms to pull through the water as well and abruptly she lunged through the surface and immediately slipped back under, flailing about for purchase where there was nothing solid to grasp, until she pushed her head back through and sucked in a painful gasp of air only to fall back down.

Stay calm! she screamed to herself while her legs twisted around the floating skirt and despite her kicks she was still sinking. Her lungs felt like they were bands of iron constricting off all her air. That small gulp of breath would not sustain her long enough to get to the surface and see where they had taken Ammah. *Dear Koric.* They had taken Ammah!

She forced herself to be calm for his sake and suddenly she knew what to do. Just like when she aimed her arrow toward her prey and loosened her fingers upon the bow, her mind became clear and focused. Nothing else mattered but her aim. Hydeia stopped kicking and let her body completely relax, loose with a crystalline clarity. She fell through the soft dark water while she gathered the fluffing skirt around her waist, tucking the ends in upon itself, while she waited for her feet to touch the silty river bottom again.

It seemed to be taking much longer. Maybe what she had landed on before wasn't really the bottom but a higher protrusion along the river floor that she just happened to hit? *Stop it. Stay calm.* Her heart was beating rapidly, eating what little breath she had left. There! Finally her boots touched the soft mushy ground and bending her knees first, she kicked up off the bottom and stroked upward.

Her relief was a palpable thing as she actually felt herself move through the water. Her kicks and strokes became more sure as she fought for the surface, certain she would run out of air first as her throat compressed. She burst into the dark world of stars and sound and wavelets that splashed into her face while she dragged in scratching gulps of breath into her burdened lungs.

Finding the rhythm to keep herself afloat, Hydeia moved toward the darker line of the dock and towering river vessels.

When her hand caught a sagging rope that secured a small fisher's scowl to the dock, she hung there, breathing heavily, shaking with oxygen depleted exertion while her body regained a semblance of strength.

Ammah would be pleased to know his instruction had not gone to waste. She smiled grimly at that and used the rope to haul herself back onto the solid wood.

She was not any where near where she had gone in. And she was freezing. Teeth chattering, Hydeia stared down into the water, trying to judge which way the river flowed, then simply guessed and ran that direction along the wharf.

By the time she reached the area where they'd been attacked, a broken crate and a few drops of blood were the only signs left that anything had happened.

Breathing hard, Hydeia bent over, pressing her palm against a pain in her side. It throbbed where she'd been kicked. No doubt she'd have a nasty bruise, but it was nothing compared with her worry over Ammah. A sense of dread closed around her heart.

In the darkness, she scoured the streets and alleys that led to the dock for any track, any indication of which way they had taken him, but in the end there was nothing to go on. Dock workers burdened with heavy loads just hours before, had left too many shuffled prints in the hard-packed roads.

Shivering not only from her wet clothes, but also from a growing fear, Hydeia sprinted up the center alley that turned between two tradesmen buildings.

From Ammah's map she at least had an idea of what to look for. She had little doubt that she'd be able to recognize the tower house's tall arched windows even from outside on the street.

Daylight streamed through the city. The streets came alive and grew crowded before Hydeia finally found the tannery then the tower house across the cobbled lane. Sick with worry, she slipped through a lower door where steps led into a cellar. No Queenswatch seemed to be about, yet Hydeia moved cautiously.

Inside she discovered three empty cages, just large enough for a human to crouch within. A soiled blanket remained in one. She went completely cold.

Eaglekins had been kept here, she knew it to her bones. As she moved upward, she found the rest of the building vacated as well. Her heart grew heavier with each step she climbed to the tower room.

The hatch door in the tower room's floor squeaked as she lifted it and peered into the dank foul-smelling area.

Gone.

They were all gone. The few bird cages that were left sat empty. The eagles had been moved somewhere else, possibly no longer in the city. Climbing into the room, she swayed, exhausted and shivering. A brittle coldness seeped way down deep into her core. She felt as though she was going to lose the contents of her stomach.

A tiny noise made her jerk around. Hydeia's boots dragged through the moldering rushes as she approached the cages. In the corner of one of the lower cages, an eagle lay on his side. At first Hydeia believed he was dead, until she rested a finger on his filthy breast and found a tiny flutter of life.

A sob caught in her throat, imagining Uloki in the same condition. "I'm so sorry. Shh, shh. I'm so sorry." She gently lifted him from the cage and cradled the dying eagle in her arms as she would an infant, heartsick that she could do nothing for him, as she could do nothing for Ammah and Uloki and all the others. No, that wasn't true. She wouldn't let it be. There had to be something she could do.

* * * *

At the edge of waking, one thing ran over and over through Ammah's slurred mind. The image of Hydeia falling into the river gripped his throat in a fist of ice. Hydeia feared the water, couldn't swim. *Sweet brother Koric*, she couldn't swim. Ammah struggled to consciousness like a drowning man gropes for the surface.

Water dripped in loud echoing splashes. The stagnant air felt oppressive and close. Ammah's eyes slid open to a view of shiny vertical lines of reflected light where water glistened along the bars of his squat cage.

"Are you awake then, son?" A deep voice brimming with the slur of the southern Black Rock Eyrie asked from the shadows.

Ammah looked over his shoulder into a wide face weathered with deep creases pressed against the wet iron bars of another cage. Smudges of grime slashed across his nose and into dark whiskers.

"Where are we?"

"In the rotting belly of nowhere. The only way out of this place is through madness. Look at them, son. That's your

fate, all our fate. Just a matter of who the filthy she viper favors most. Has a heart of stone, she does."

Ammah peered into the darkness, seeing more faces move closer into a muted shaft of light coming from a small barred window high in the water glistening stone wall.

Ammah pressed fingers to his head. "The she viper? You mean an Eaglekin, tall, thin, with long chestnut hair?"

"That's the viper, turned on her own, that one. Sick in the head, she is. I think the effects of *beton trella* had already caught up to her. She should have severed her true-bond long ago, and when the Mystic began feeding her strings of our *reyn*..." He shook his shaggy head. "That was the end of her hold on sanity. She's different than us all. Evil."

"They fed her your *reyn*?"

"All of ours. They've had the most success with that. They'll give her yours too. She started in the cages with us a short time ago, now she's the one given orders. And she's worse than the Mystic ever was. Drains some o' those poor soul's *reyn* in a matter of days. I tell you, if I could, I'd free them from the suffering of it all." He pushed his hands through the spaces between the bars and made a motion of snapping a neck.

Ammah swallowed, trying to glimpse the number of cages. There were at least twelve, yet it was too dark to tell if they were all occupied. He got up into a crouch as that was all the room the cage allowed his body and pushed at the door. It rattled and stayed firm. An iron pole ran through small holes welded into the cage and door, locking it in place. One end of the pole was curved while the other end had a notch with a

chain running through it. The chain ran a short pace to where the other end was secured out of reach to a bolt and eye hammered into the stone floor. Each cage was similarly secured, making it impossible to slide the pole out of place.

There had to be a way. *Oh, Koric, Hydeia had fallen into the river.* There had to be a way out of here.

"You're wastin' precious energy," the southerner said. "I told you there's only one way out of these cages."

"Through madness, I heard you." Ammah tried twisting the pole just to see how far he could move it. The chime of metal turning in metal echoed around the musty room. "You don't seem so mindless." He felt tired, sluggish. Hydeia had drowned. Something inside of him broke. He couldn't breathe. He felt like lying back against the bars and letting whatever fate had for him to just take him and be done with it. Uloki's essence flowed into him. The eagle was near, in this building somewhere, and he felt Ammah's despair and desolation. A steady stream of love and determination flowed into Ammah's *reyn*. Though it came gently, there was a slapping edge to Uloki's resolve. Pain swelled around Ammah's heart. Hydeia had drowned.

The older Eaglekin tapped his temple. "The little strumpet don't care much for the taste of my *reyn*, she don't. But a fine strapping boy like you with all that bright shimmers streaking off ya ... you won't last long."

"Leave him alone, Rustus," a feminine voice spoke from the cage at Ammah's right, weak and void of energy or spirit, and startling familiar. "Don't bleed away his hope. It's the only strength any of us has left."

Ammah pushed closer to that side of the cage. His neck suddenly felt rigid with tension. "Are you...?" He couldn't ask it. Sweet skies, it wasn't ... "Are you well?"

The female made a low noise in her throat, exactly the way Ammah remembered. Rot and shreds, it couldn't be. It felt like burning needles were stabbing into his chest. He had no moisture in his mouth.

Dear brother sun. His hands pressed around the slick bars and he felt beads of sweat break out across his brow.

* * * *

Emlen knelt over him, her young face splattered with mud. His blood coated the side of her round face in long bold strokes. Koric help him, it hurt. He felt like he'd been thrown into a cauldron of liquid fire, then doused in viciously piercing ice. Fine tremors stuttered through him as he curled over the long jagged gash that slanted across his abdomen. His youthful palms, sticky and wet, pressed and held his own flesh together. His hands were shaking and weak and slippery. He couldn't get a hold on all of it. Everything wanted to spill out. "Help me, Emlen. Everything is coming out. It's spilling out of me. Hold me in. Hold me in. Please, help me hold it in, Emlen, please. Emlen. Kele. Where's Kele?"

Ammah embraced his reyn, flung every sense outward, seeking his true-bonded.

A few paces away, the great brown hulk spasmed in the grip of a final death throe. The dying bear's throaty growl resounded thickly, vibrating through the dank forest, along the spongy pine needles beneath Ammah's shuddering body.

Emlen knelt beside him, ran a hand through his tousled hair, confusion and fear gracing her usually implacable features. Shock rippled through him, a heavy assault. His true-bonded Kele was gone, killed by the great bear. Koric, no. Please no! Ammah forced his reyn out wildly through the air, into the skies, frantically searching, meeting nothing but terrifying stillness.

Another tremor slammed through him and he drew a breath against the swollen brutal pain of it. His vision was dimming, pearly and unreal.

"Ammah. Your wound, it ... I can't ... Oh, Ammah." Emlen's voice hushed to a ragged whisper as her hand slipped from his abdomen, leaving a velvet soft trail of red across his torn breeches like a faint moan that travels on the wind.

Lifting a weak bloody hand toward her, Ammah's stomach convulsed in another surge of pain, intensifying. He tried to call Emlen's name, ask for her aid, for her compassion, her comfort, but he didn't have the strength to both speak and clench his jaw against the consuming savage tide.

Emlen stood. Stepped back, almost running into the stiff bear. Her eyes locked with Ammah's. She was so young, so confused, afraid.

Through the haze of red pain, he could see her mind working, the last tender part of her resolve turning to stone as in one fervent instant her decision was made. And once made, she would not step back from it.

The knowledge sliced through Ammah like the edge of a blade. His reyn seemed to harden within and became impossibly heavy, dragging him down into a cold dark cavern.

Her outward expression became controlled, determined, lips rigid, as Emlen clenched her fists, turned her back on him and strode purposefully away.

Shock and fear stormed through Ammah, clenching his abdomen even harder, more fiercely. Emlen! She just walked away. She left him. She left him? Left Kele's fragile and torn body untended. Emlen! Terrible pain roared through his weakening body across his bleeding stomach as he rolled, screaming, to his knees and began to crawl across the soft-needed forest floor.

Everything became a muted dreamlike blur, but he had somehow reached his pack and found his herbs, needle, and sinew, and with shaking slippery blood soaked hands, he had fought back the blackness coming for him and sewn his own stomach together. Hours later, or perhaps days, he pushed Kele's torn body into his pack and dragging it with him, began to crawl out of the forest.

* * * *

Shocked, he sat back against the slick bars and ran a shaking hand through his hair, wishing he could so easily push the memories away. "Dear *Koric*."

"*Koric* won't show his face here," Rustus mocked.

Ignoring him, Ammah crouched and pressed his face against the bars. "Em—" He choked back the name. Swallowed. "Emlen?"

He heard a sharp intake of breath. She, too, moved closer and the sight of her bruised round face compressed the breath in Ammah's chest. She was thinner and paler, but the

uncompromising sternness remained about her large golden eyes. Her dark hair was matted and tangled around her round face. A lump formed in Ammah's throat.

"Who are you?" Her slender fingers curled weakly about the bars. "How do you know me?"

A dull ache throbbed at Ammah's temple. "You don't recognize me?"

"No, I ... there's something about ... but, it couldn't be ... Ammah...?" Her voice wavered on a sigh. Her eyes squeezed shut. "Ammah. I believed you were ... dear light."

She believed he was dead, that's what she had left unsaid, died where she had left him, her mate, bleeding and torn hip to navel from wounds taken from the bear he had shoved her out of the way from. Stunned, Ammah couldn't tear his eyes away from her. He needed air, gulped it like water through a closing throat. Her thin hands slipped down the bars as though she hadn't the strength to stay upright.

Ammah stared at her, muscles rigid, expecting the anger and hurt of betrayal he'd carried around his heart for years to surface. Because of her, to prove himself different from her, he'd never left another person defenseless and hurt. As she had done to him. Not once had he just walked away. Even when he could do nothing, he stayed. Remained, gave comfort when the final shudder of death took hold. And each time he remembered the way she had looked when she turned away. And how he had felt at that moment. So hurt and lost and afraid. And abandoned. He thought he hated her, by all rights he should, but far different emotions emerged.

As he looked at her through the glistening bars, he saw an Eaglekin who'd been raised to honor nothing but strength and worthiness and to despise, even fear any form of weakness, especially in one's self. Fleeing from him as he lay dying and wounded and suffering the grief from the death of his true-bonded as well as the shock from the abrupt disconnection of their *reyn*, was born out of Emlen's deep abiding fear of weakness and innate powerlessness to never fail.

He'd witnessed Hydeia cling to the same hurtful indoctrinations, yet even so, despite the pride and stubbornness augured into her from birth, when it came down to it, Hydeia threw off the cloying cloaks of wrongful teachings and embraced life, regardless of strength, weakness, or worthiness. She had fought for him, against the Rakens and had remained, guarding over him until he was conscious.

While he looked at Emlen, he realized he'd already accepted that she had only reacted how she'd been trained from birth to react according to what the Matron's taught all Eaglekin women. A dominant female must think of her own survival first. Since meeting Hydeia, and coming to know her better, Ammah understood how difficult it was to throw off the hurtful teachings of a lifetime. His throat tightened at the thought that she had perished in the river. He felt a low shudder roll through him under the horrific strain of that image. *Hydeia*.

Shaking, he reached across the gap between their cages and pressed his fingers over Emlen's, knowing the hate he'd held for so long had no place in him now.

They sat like that as the pulsing moments passed between them under the steady dripping of water. Ammah didn't know for how long. His dismal thoughts were far away. As the light from the lone window grew dim, the heavy oaken door banded with bronze grated open and lantern light spilled over them, revealing the other Eaglekins in their cages. Only a few were alert enough to cower back in fear while the others didn't flinch or move, gazes flat and unfocused, their beautiful shimmering essences lost in their *reyn*. Tiny glows emanated from them, not even enough to push back the bleak shadows.

Three Queenswatch, garbed in their neat blue surcoats over padded vests, pressed into the room. The obvious leader crouched down to better see inside the cages.

The one with the lantern lifted it higher. "She says to bring the new one. There. That one over there."

Chapter Seventeen

Hydeia didn't know if it would work. She unlaced her bodice and pulled her gown open to her navel and stretched out on the moldering rushes. With both hands she cradled the dying tiercel on her stomach. His feathers were cold and stiff on her skin. The fragile pulse of his life was waning.

Taking one of his talons between her fingers, she held her breath and pushed it into her flesh, just below her navel. Below the scar Tyalan had given her. She blinked back sudden tears and coaxed the eagle's beak down into her wound.

She remembered Ammah had said he bonded with Uloki to save the eagle's life, giving the tiercel his strength. She wondered if she could do the same, even knowing it was most likely too late.

The eagle lay unmoving. Hydeia stroked his head, urging, afraid it wouldn't work, hoping desperately that it would.

She gasped at the tiercel's tiny unexpected nip. Lifting his head, he burrowed his beak farther inside her open flesh. *Reyn's* warmth licked the inside of her belly as he pulled, sliding it through her. His head lifted a fraction higher when he gulped down a slender iridescent string.

As far as Hydeia knew, one eagle had never shared *reyn* with two Eaglekins at the same time. Nor did males true-bond with females. She had no idea what the effects of this would be, but she had no other choice but to let the tiercel die. And Ammah and Uloki with him.

She had been helpless, paralyzed by that orange dust when Tylan had died. She couldn't save Tylan, but she was determined to not let this eagle go. Eaglekin tradition be cursed.

Cupping the tiercel in her palms at the dip of her stomach, Hydeia waited for the smallest indication that a flow of light passed between them.

If she could give him her *reyn*, her strength, revive him, then maybe somehow she could also reach the tiercel's slight remaining *reyn*. She might be able to follow his connection to his true-bonded Eaglekin.

Cold enveloped Hydeia. She felt as empty of life and hope as the vacated tower room. It had been a vain hope at best. Her stomach felt weighted with stones. A tear slipped down her cheek. She was powerless to help anyone. She gently stroked the eagle's head. "It's all right. Shh. Shh. Be at peace."

* * * *

He fought them when they pulled him from the cage, kicking the first Queenswatch's legs out from under him and sending two tight jabs into the second's temple, which knocked the soldier unconscious before his body slammed against the side of the open cage and dropped to the damp floor. But more Queenswatch rushed through the doorway and came at Ammah in the tight dark space. It took four of them to wrestle him down to the floor and drag him out into the cramped hallway where he continued to fight them.

Emlen cried out his name. Her voice followed him down the hall, screaming that she was sorry. She was sorry. The Queenswatch had him up off the floor, carrying him, each securing one of his limbs, but he would not make it easy for them. He thrashed wildly like an eagle in a bate, trying to roll in the air. Ammah managed to get one leg free and kicked the Queenswatch into the wall with a resounding crack only to be punched in the stomach along his half-healed burn. His breath left him in a whoosh, momentarily stunning him while they shoved him through another doorway.

Uloki screamed in anger. The eagle's essence immediately flooded Ammah in a hot powerful tide. Ammah's head jerked up to see Uloki. The tiercel occupied one of the three cadge posts, thrashing his wings wildly. Another eagle perched silently on another. She was one of the largest eagles Ammah had seen, the size of a well fed cat, with glossy gray feathers tipped with white. She roused her chest feathers and hissed. Her black raptor stare took in everything. She could only be Lannis's true-bonded Sheeannar, the age-honored eagle Hydeia had been sent by the Matrons to find.

Uloki! Ammah fully embraced *reyn* and called out to his true-bonded, enraged that they had brought the tiercel here and were ready to do *Koric* knew what to him. *Leave me if you can. Uloki!*

Ammah struggled against the men holding him to the floor. A large hand pushed his head securely against the flat smooth stones. Another pressed down on his shoulders while the other men held his arms and legs and hips tight. Every

muscle in Ammah's body strained against them. He could not let them lay a hand upon Uloki.

"See how he glows," a feminine voice strummed above him. "Take him now. Take him while he communes with his true-bonded. Sweet skies, I can feel the heat of it pulsing upon the air."

"Let me paralyze him with the tisin dust. Hold his head steady." A male's harried voice.

"No!" the female demanded. "Take him quickly. Before he cuts himself off from the bird. I've never tasted the strength of *reyn* taken while eagle and Eaglekin were communing. I want that *reyn*!"

Which upon hearing that was precisely what Ammah did. He let go of his *reyn*, ripping the luminous strands between he and Uloki, though the tiercel clung to him fiercely, not letting go.

While they were still joined, something sharp and viscous pierced the back of Ammah's neck, shot down through his spine. His already tensed muscles tightened even further, painfully rigid.

"Pull him up to his knees," the robed man standing behind him said. He held the cool tube that pierced Ammah's neck. "Push his head forward. There, good. Now hold him steady."

Muscles locked and shaking, Ammah felt them drag him up to his knees. His head was pushed and held forward and the cool tube slipped farther inside, down along his spine. Ammah raged against the assault.

His *reyn* was being ripped from him. He could feel the hot spirals swirling away through his back. On his knees,

Ammah's hands took all his weight on the fitted stone floor. Two Queenswatch held onto each of his arms, ready for him to fight. As though he could fight them when every bit of strength he possessed he used to hold onto his *reyn*, keep it from being torn away. He grew weak and disoriented as if they had taken his life's blood as well. A dank coldness was spreading through his chest.

His breathing was loud and ragged in his ears. His will clutched at the shimmering trails of light leaving his body. Then it finished. The hollow tube slipped out from Ammah's spine, cold and icy.

Uloki screamed in anger. His great wings flapped, lifted him off the cadge post only to strain against the delicate chain attached to the slitted leather anklets looped around his leg.

Startled, the Mystic almost dropped the long hollow tube he carried gingerly in his thin papery hands. Swirls of blue light shimmered within incandescent emerald.

Ammah stared at his own *reyn*, never before seeing it contained in glass. It was beautiful and alive. He felt somewhat detached as though it couldn't possibly be his *reyn*, none of this could really be happening. His muscles shuddered, his arms gave out and Ammah found the side of his face was against the cool stone floor.

The small room was cold and sparsely furnished with three simple chairs, and a great wooden desk, used as a worktable. Its surface held several more of the long glass tubes as well as wooden tongs and slender tipped knives.

Lannis, for that was who she must be, paced the length of the small room, her fists tapping her lips. She was a tall lithe woman, past the age of Eaglekin females that had passed through the *beton trella* and had given up their true-bond. She was surprisingly beautiful in a severe way. The Queenswatch had moved away from Ammah, believing he was too weak now to cause them any more trouble. The floor under Ammah seemed to sway. Perhaps they were correct. The three Queenswatch that remained in the windowless room followed Lannis's anxious pacing with their gazes, talking quietly with one another near the only door. They were each tall and wide, their heads fractions below the low ceiling.

"Is it ready?" Lannis snapped.

"Almost, yes. Nearly." The Mystic waved her aside as she leaned over his knobby shoulder.

"He is bonded to a wilder, did you know that? Strange."

"How would I know that? Does it make a difference?" The Mystic's head darted up.

"None, I'm sure." Lannis said, "It's merely a curiosity. How much did you get?"

"More than half."

Lannis stared down at Ammah and let a thin smile creep across her long features. Her lean figure wavered as he tried to focus on her, tried to remain alert, and think of what he needed to do. Uloki was only a few paces away. If he could unfasten the leather anklet ... Uloki would at least have a chance to defend himself, but the door would have to be opened for the tiercel to get away. Perhaps in the disturbance

Uloki would cause after he was free of the anklet, Ammah could get to the door.

That was a huge perhaps. But he had to try. So far Uloki was unharmed. Fighting tremors coursing through his body, Ammah pushed to his knees.

"Take it all," Lannis demanded of the Mystic.

"All?" the Mystic's voice was laced with incredulousness. "Taking all his *reyn* will certainly kill him outright. He's strong. If we leave him to recover for a few days, he'll produce more *reyn* as he regains his strength. I can't let a specimen such as that go to waste. These Eaglekins are too difficult and expensive to come by. Besides you've never ingested this amount before. I simply don't know what it will do to you."

"It makes me strong. More will make me stronger still. And with the Eaglekin gone, his eagle will become a pliant assassin. Better than Rakia. I can feel it. Maybe because he is a wilder." Lannis spun on the Mystic, her eyes gleaming fierce and wild. "He and his little friend have caused me no end of trouble. I want everything he has. Now."

* * * *

It was a thin trail and an even thinner hope, yet Hydeia followed the infinitesimal stream of the tiercel's violet *reyn* linked to his true-bonded, hoping that wherever the Eaglekin was being held, Ammah and Uloki would be there—unharmed—as well.

She ran through the streets, her boots slapping hard on the cobblestones as she dodged small carts and vendors carrying full baskets of loaves and vegetables. She veered

into a narrow alleyway, skidding as she turned then immediately ducked beneath the arms of a tailor carrying an armload of fabrics, and turned left into another alley.

Her mind clung to the fading string of *reyn* through sheer force of will. It grew weaker by the moment. Hydeia barely sensed which direction it led. She threw all her energy into running, all her focus into following the thin luminous trail. It seemed she'd been running for hours.

Abruptly she was there. Hydeia stumbled to a stop. Her chest heaved up and down. Her breathing was loud in the nearly vacant street. A man huddled in tattered clothes against a long wooden building with peeling faded yellow paint. He glared at her as he pulled a bulky bundle of his possessions closer to him.

The tiny spark of now pale violet *reyn* pulsed softly from inside that building, low, most likely in another cellar.

Hydeia watched, seeking movement behind the windows. Ah. She glimpsed the sky-blue shoulder of a Queenswatch uniform pass inside. She waited until he passed again. Only one there, at least walking by the window.

Unarmed, she crossed the street. She'd have to be quick and she'd have to be silent, a true and worthy Eaglekin.

Glancing at the ragged man watching her coolly, she slipped inside. So close now. She steadied her breathing, slowed her pace. Her emotions would have her tearing through the walls to find Ammah and Uloki, but she had to be smart about this, take it slow and cautiously. Their lives depended on her cool head. She waited by the closed door, a shadow, until the pacing Queenswatch's eyes lifted. He

stopped mid-step, saw her. Taking advantage of his surprise, she smiled sweetly then was on him in the space of a heartbeat. As quietly and fluidly as a hill cat, Hydeia pounced, grabbing him by both ears. The back of the guard's head smacked the wall, and Hydeia had his short sword pulled from the sheath at his hip before he sank to the rough stone floor.

Hydeia spared only a moment to look around and wait for any more Queenswatch to come from either hall at each end of the long entrance room. Hearing nothing, she focused once more on the thinning trail of the eagle's *reyn* and slipped into the farthest hallway.

The translucent thread led her unerringly down the dim hall. She heard voices coming around the corner of another sharp adjoining hallway. She peeked around the wall and saw the blue garbed back of another Queenswatch, but the *reyn* led her past that hall to an unassuming door.

Heart pounding, she tried the latch. Unlocked and unguarded, the door grated open, loud in the musty darkness. Hydeia shifted the short sword she'd taken from the unconscious Queenswatch in her grip and stepped into the damp rot-stenched room. She could barely make out wet-slickened bars and lengths of chains crossing each other and bolted to large loops secured to the muddy floor. Splashes of dripping water echoed along the stone walls.

The darkness didn't hinder Hydeia. The *reyn* pulled her to a cage, the fourth in a line of cages. Shadowed forms moved cautiously in some to watch her.

Hydeia knelt at the cage. "Josoh," she whispered.

She heard the quick reflex of movement, then, "Who's there? What new evil is this?" The reedy voice was full of desolation, deplete of life.

"Nucian led me here."

The Eaglekin scrambled to the bars, latched onto them with white knuckles. "Nucian? I felt him ... I felt him, weak, dying, then there was another ... that was you?"

"Yes." Hydeia covered his hands with hers. "Nucian gave me his last bit of strength to find you. He is a most worthy eagle."

Josoh sank down along the bars, his fingers slipping out from under hers.

She ran her fingers along the chain, discovering the reason why it was so taut. "I've come to get you out. All of you."

Whispers erupted from some of the other cages.

"Just leave me," Josoh said. "Without Nucian I'm of no worth."

Hydeia's hands stilled on the large eye and bolt attaching the chains to the floor. "You're wrong. Nucian gave what he had left so you might live. You aren't nothing to him. I felt the enormity of the love he bears for you. Now get out of this cage. Nucian needs you."

Josoh's head snapped up. "He's not dead?"

"No. But he is weak. I gave him as much *reyn* as I dared to fill his frail body, and even then he used much of that to guide me here. I had to leave him, but he is safely hidden where those Queenswatch will not find him. Are you strong enough to follow his *reyn* back to him?"

"Oh, yes." Josoh seemed to have strengthened while she worked. "Yes. I'll crawl to him if I must."

"Good."

She didn't have time to help him further or give him direction. He'd have to do that on his own. She had to find Ammah and Uloki.

The bolt was wet and cold and tight. Hydeia used the hilt of the sword as a wedge to get the bolt moving. As soon as there was enough slack, the Eaglekin pushed aside the pole locking him in. Rasping metal rang across the room.

Josoh clenched her forearm. "May the sun forever rest his light upon you. Thank you."

Hydeia nodded and Josoh slipped away.

"Ammah!" Hydeia raised her whisper. "Ammah?" She peered inside the dark cages that held the Eaglekins that had not the strength of mind to realize they were free. She hurriedly used the blade to turn another bolt and open the cage. "Here." She handed him the pole that had secured his cage door as he came out. "Use this to turn the other bolts. Get everybody out." He nodded and slipped to the row of cages on the other side of the small room.

She went to the next cage, growing more anxious that Ammah hadn't answered her. "Ammah?"

"They've taken him," a young woman crouched inside that cage near Hydeia's shoulder.

Hydeia spun on her. "Where?"

Even in the darkness, Hydeia could see the woman's delicate features whiten. "To be drained." She gripped Hydeia's hand through the bars. "I'll show you. Down the hall,

around the corner. Rustus," she called to a squat man pulling a listless girl out of a cage. "Get to our eagles."

Rustus grinned and set the limp girl down. He pulled one of the poles off a cage. The chain twirled on its end like a heavy black vine. "Guess I've gone mad at that. I look forward to it."

Once Hydeia got the cage door open, the young woman grabbed up a pole and chain of her own. "Come on. Let's get Ammah. That viper had better not put a hand on my mate."

Her mate?

As they ran down the hall, Hydeia reeled with the thought that this was Emlen, Ammah's former mate. The girl who had left him without a fraction of mercy to die alone. Now she was charging recklessly down the hall to save him?

Rounding a corner, Emlen slipped against the opposite wall with a thud that jerked the attention of the Queenswatch standing to the side of a closed door. Using his surprise and her momentum, Hydeia ran headlong into him, bowling him over before his short sword cleared his scabbard.

She rolled off him just as the chain flew past her ear and slammed the soldier's head back against the floor. Circular red welts started seeping across his face, forehead to nose to chin.

Emlen grabbed the top of her chain to slow its ruthless swing. "In here." She hugged her arms around her stomach.

"Are you all right?" Hydeia pulled her up. The woman looked ill.

"Fine. Let's do this. Besides," she tapped the pole in her palm, "This will more than make up for the strength they've

taken from me. Ammah's in there. I, I owe him." She pushed off Hydeia and tripping the latch, shoved the door open.

Hydeia scrambled across the downed Queenswatch to climb to her feet and lunged inside. In the space of a breath, Hydeia took in the scene.

Another Queenswatch flew to his back almost on top of Hydeia, his legs high in the air as he fell while Emlen's chain whipped below his body in its final arc. Across the room, Lannis knelt, back arched and head craned so far back her long hair brushed the floor. The thin Mystic stood over her, feeding her the last strings of shimmering iridescent blue and green liquid from a glass tube. Lannis gulped at it, her throat muscles moving like a baby bird's. Her eyes flew up.

Uloki flapped against a delicate chain on his ankle, furious and terrifying. Another larger eagle lifted long tapered wings as though marking her prey.

And Ammah...

The world slammed to a brutal stop.

Ammah lay unmoving on the stone floor. His face was completely white, his lips turning blue.

She took it all in instantaneously. A feral scream borne from the depths of grief and fury rang in Hydeia's ears before she realized it came from her.

She was on her feet, cutting past a third Queenswatch and running toward Lannis and the Mystic.

With more malevolence than Hydeia had ever witnessed, Lannis glared at Hydeia and gulped the last of the shimmery filament down.

Arcing the sword as she ran, Hydeia swung it with full force into Lannis—and it felt as though she'd hit a stone wall. The hilt wrenched from her grip and she was thrown back into the table. Bottles and glass tubes flew into the air as the table toppled with her.

Lannis stared in disbelief at the blade. The sharp edge was buried two knuckles deep across her abdomen.

She laughed wildly and with both hands on the hilt, pulled the short sword from her ripped flesh. Luminous fluid coated the blade like sparkling morning dew. The same fluid also began seeping from her gaping wound, spilling down the front of her gown like a long weeping eye.

Lannis licked the *reyn* from the blade and tossed it aside.

Hydeia pushed up from the table, steadying her legs as Lannis came toward her. The Queenswatch and Emlen stumbled between them, pole and short sword clanging together.

With impossible strength for her slender frame, Lannis shoved them out of the way like they were bundles of fluff and grabbed up Hydeia by her throat.

"Too much!" the Mystic shouted. "You've taken too much!" Fumbling in his robes he drew out a small pouch and turning on Lannis, blew orange paralyzing dust across her face. Hydeia quickly squeezed her eyes against it. Her breath was already choked off as the dust flew right into Lannis's face.

The older Eaglekin sputtered, shaking her head, then slowly a sneering smile crept across her face. She rolled back her head and laughed. "You've made me invincible, Mystic. I haven't taken near enough!"

The Mystic's face drained of color and he fled out the door, the hem of his robe flying around his skinny ankles. The sound of his ranting followed him down the hall.

"Not near enough, pretty little bird," Lannis gritted into Hydeia's face. The veins in her neck bulged so tight Hydeia could see her pulse, too rapid, too strong.

Gasping for breath, Hydeia clawed at Lannis's iron grip. Her chest was a painful knot.

The Eaglekin tilted her head, smiling, ever so still and silent as Hydeia struggled. Her throat was closing off. Uloki's shrill shriek faded behind the loud rasp of Hydeia's breathing in her ears as the room fell behind a hazy curtain.

A roar erupted from the doorway as a bearded bulk of a man stormed through, chain swinging, followed by another, his face mottled in anger, followed by more of the Eaglekins. The captured Eaglekin, Rustus, whipped his chain into Lannis's thin body.

Hydeia fell to the floor, straining for air.

Lannis turned and with an inhuman screech, grabbed up the closest Eaglekin and threw her across the room.

With a savage cry, Rustus and two others rushed at Lannis, throwing their combined weight against her and ran her into the opposite wall. The impact of Lannis's unbreakable body shattered the wall and all four fell through it. Wooden splinters and debris showered the air, clouding everything in gray dust.

Hydeia scrambled through the hole after them. Rustus was shaking his head, pushing up to his knees. A short Eaglekin

male was facedown on the rubble, blood coating his leg and a dark haired woman moaned, cradling her arm.

Lannis threw a chunk of wall off of herself and rose fluidly, her gown in tatters and coated in gray dust. She looked every bit a vengeful spirit rising from the floor.

The veins in her arms and neck, down her forehead bulged, growing like blisters ready to burst. Her eyes blazed with hatred and madness, past the brink of any safe return.

Her fist rose above Rustus's back and without thinking, Hydeia shoved him aside and rolled into Lannis's legs. They toppled back with a resounding *thunk*, cracking the stones in the floor into a myriad of spider web lines. Dust and small pieces of stone flew up over them.

Taking advantage of Lannis's momentary shock, Hydeia lunged off the floor and ran down the hall, hoping the woman would follow her away from the others and also hoping that she wouldn't.

By taking too much *reyn* at once, Lannis had become unconquerable—or at the least, difficult to stop, and she didn't show any signs of tiring or any indication that her wounds effected her endurance and strength.

Lungs heaving, Hydeia rounded a corner and found herself in the street-facing room where she'd encountered the first Queenswatch and who's short sword she'd taken. He was no longer there.

Maddened shrieks echoed after her and the wall to her left burst apart as Lannis simply smashed through it. She was as intent on her prey as any raptor ... and Hydeia had become the prey.

Hydeia pushed open the main door and fled into the narrow street, her boots slapping on the hard cobblestones. She charged into an alleyway and out onto a crowded street. She plowed into several people, knocking them from their feet while she screamed for them to run.

Crashes and screams followed her onto the street. Hydeia looked over her shoulder and saw Lannis fling people out of her way. The street erupted in chaos as people fled into buildings.

Running was not the answer. Hydeia was only getting people hurt, nor could she keep up the pace indefinitely. Hydeia searched for solutions as she dodged right into another alley and right again, running back toward the more deserted vagrant parts of the working city. She ran through endless alleyways that began intersecting narrow curving ditches that snaked between close buildings where water sluiced into small streams.

She cut into one of them, splashing and sliding on the slick stone. Startled rats squealed and fled into the darker shadowed recesses. Filtered light barely reached the waterway far below between the narrow canyon of buildings. The water rose around Hydeia's ankles as she fled down the sloping channel, realizing it must lead to the river.

At the river she might have a chance. Most Eaglekins avoided large bodies of water. As she had.

Hydeia's side ached. Her muscles and lungs burned. Her boots slipped on the slimy wet surface. A hideous scream full of anger and madness and loathing pierced Hydeia's ears, coming from just behind her.

Wincing, she looked over her shoulder and found her shirt grabbed as Lannis yanked her backward, slamming her into the side of one of the buildings. She bounced forward onto her knees, shaking off the daze and felt herself hauled up once more.

This time she pushed her legs against the opposite building, and wedged herself mid-air against Lannis. Using the limited mobility in the confining space, and Lannis's own forward motion, Hydeia knocked Lannis's head against the cut and layered stones.

Streams of blue glimmering liquid ran out of Lannis's nose. The throbbing vein on her forehead seemed to decrease. Eyes widening in horror, Hydeia slapped a palm across the vein, snapping Lannis's head back, and the skin ruptured, spitting out a burst of *reyn*. The warm liquid ran down the side of Hydeia's face, down her arms and chest.

Enraged, Lannis flung out her arms, sending Hydeia flying to the ditch's watery floor, and crouched over her while she held a palm against her oozing head.

Hurting all over, Hydeia pulled herself up and rammed her fists into Lannis's abdomen, punching, squeezing, pressing as hard and as fast as she could. Beautiful *reyn* flowed out of the gaping wound left from the short sword. Cloth from Lannis's gown and raw flesh were dragged down with the flowing liquid.

Screaming, Lannis backhanded Hydeia, throwing her into the wall, then flew on top of her. Hydeia tried to make herself as small a target as possible, pummeling the woman's midsection. Warm liquid spilled over her.

Lannis fought like a maddened beast with no skill or method to her blows. She threw Hydeia away over and over again, yet Hydeia dragged herself over to strike again. She didn't know what else to do. She couldn't outrun her. Facing up to this was the only option left, though it would likely mean her death. But if she could get enough of the *reyn* out of Lannis, give the others enough time to escape. She hit Lannis over and over until she could hardly feel her own arms. Everything was a watery blur. And Lannis hit back harder, but each time Lannis's punches were weaker, slower. Her strength seemed far less as the *reyn* seeped out.

Hydeia crashed against the wall again and felt her arm break. She cried out in pain and used the wall against her back to climb wobbly to her feet.

Liquid streamed down Lannis's face, leaking from her eyes, nose, and between thin lips in shimmering streaks.

"You little snake! Viperous puppet!" Lannis threw herself at Hydeia, feral and furious, striking Hydeia down to the gutter, plunging her head under water. Hydeia fought with every ounce she had left, but even in Lannis's weakening condition, her strength far surpassed Hydeia's.

With the last of her endurance, Hydeia pushed on the veins of Lannis's neck, barely forcing her own head out of the dirty water and taking a strangled gasp of air, then she was slammed back under again.

The water barely dampened Lannis's ferocious howls.

Hydeia strained up, gasping again, and the light overhead changed as dark silent wings soared between the buildings.

Lannis screamed as Uloki's talons raked her back, wiping strands of *reyn* across the air, streaking the walls in translucent glow.

Eyes huge with shock, Lannis was ripped off of Hydeia by a second eagle. The large brown female locked talons around Lannis's shoulders and with wings rounded, threw her back.

Plummeting from above the buildings, Uloki tore between the narrow space and pulled up to smack into Lannis where he immediately plunged his deadly beak into her middle. As he craned his head back, strands of iridescent *reyn* pulled away from Lannis.

She shrieked, clawing at him. Fluffy breast feathers floated in the air. Great long wings flew over Hydeia, momentarily blocking out the muted light. Sitting in the water, Hydeia stared in horror, her chest heaving for breath, as Sheeannar, Lannis's own true-bonded alighted upon Lannis and joined Uloki in drawing out the remaining *reyn*.

Lannis's screams melted into hoarse whimpers. Her arms fluttered limply below the movement of the two eagles dipping their beaks then arching back their heads.

At last it was done. Spilled *reyn* lost its vibrancy and floated down the small stream around Hydeia's legs and hips.

Ammah's *reyn*.

A mournful scream gathered in Hydeia's throat but she choked it back down to her heart. Long tremors ran through her. She wasn't sure she'd ever be able to get her breathing under control again.

Tipping his beak straight up, Uloki let out a painful cry that bounced around the walls. Then he spread his wings and launched into the air.

Sheeannar nuzzled her beak under Lannis's chin, rocking her head back before straightening. Her neck turned to fix her keen gaze upon Hydeia before she, too, took to the air. Hydeia watched until the great dame eagle passed above the buildings out of her line of sight.

With the use of her good arm, Hydeia crawled over to Lannis. Water was pooling around her, lifting her head and thin arms. Her weak gaze latched onto Hydeia, unclouded and knowing. The wound across her abdomen was an open flap, raw and pink but with no blood. It was as though all the months of consuming *reyn* had somehow completely replaced all her life's fluid.

Lannis's lips twitched. "Sheeannar has killed me." Her eyelids lowered, coated with water droplets. "She's killed me."

Hydeia took Lannis's hand in hers and smiled weakly. "She has saved you." Her voice was raw and hoarse, her throat a slash of angry pain. "Sheeannar loves you."

Lannis's lips curved at that, her eyes went soft and dewy, then she slipped away as though the effort it took to smile used the final store of her strength.

Eyes brimming with tears, Hydeia swallowed, painfully, and sat with Lannis until the pooling water lifted her thin body. Hydeia let her hand's slip off Lannis's arms and watched the water carry her away toward the river.

Upon Eagle's Light
by Clover Autrey

She sat there, alone in the gutter while the water flowed around her legs, with her face buried in her hands and the last tender part of her heart shattering.

Chapter Eighteen

Hydeia walked slowly back to the long faded yellow building, afraid of what she'd find. *Dear Koric, Ammah*. She couldn't bear to see that he was truly dead. Nor would she just leave him to lie there in the filth and debris. A crowd had gathered in the alleyway, peering around the destruction and the hole in the building's wall. She heard scraps of conversation as she pushed through the people.

"Eaglekin ... threw my Henrick ten paces ... rutting Queenswatch ... this is the king's business..."

They hushed when they noticed Hydeia's golden eyes, her torn and filthy gown, and backed away. Even the violet-caped City Guard allowed her to pass, seeming just as bewildered by what could have transpired inside as the crowd.

Hydeia was too weary and heartsick to pay any of them much mind. Holding her injured arm, she stepped into the debris-littered hall, climbing over chunks of wood and stone, barely recognizing the hall. More City Guard frowned at her as she made her way past them, but didn't make a move to stop her.

The area outside the draining room looked like a boulder fallen from a great height had smashed through it. Hydeia hesitated, afraid to see Ammah as she had seen him last, pale and motionless on the floor after Lannis had drained him of all his *reyn*. *Sweet Koric*, she had brought him to this end. Everything wanted to die inside of her with him.

Inhaling a shaky breath, Hydeia stepped across a slanted piece of wall lying in the hole and froze. Hot pressure seemed

to squeeze upon her temples as her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

In the center of broken chairs and chunks of wall and table, Emlen sat on the floor, one leg stretched out.

Ammah was pulled back against her chest in the circle of her arms while Uloki perched on his hips, with long rounded glossy wings over them both.

The other Eaglekins watched anxiously. Several eagles perched upon the cadge posts, heads turning from side to side, taking everything in.

Though she couldn't see, Hydeia knew Uloki was doing what he could to quickly restore enough *reyn* to keep Ammah alive.

Instinctively, Hydeia pressed her hands to her heart. Ammah was still alive. He was alive. Her breath whooshed out of her in a dizzying rush. She reached for the jagged wall to support her buckling legs. *Oh, skies*, he was alive. Nothing else mattered. Ammah was alive. Hot tears scalded the back of her eyes, but she took a calming breath and blinked them back.

He must have felt her gaze for his beautiful exotic eyes slipped open and fixed on her. A tiny curve lifted the corners of his lips as relief filled his expressive features.

Relief flooding through her, Hydeia remained stock still, afraid to make the slightest move and break the connection of his gaze even when Emlen's arm snaked around his chest and drew him closer while she pressed her lips against Ammah's temple. He was alive. That was all that mattered.

* * * *

Anger festered beneath General Rardan's calm demeanor. He loosened his grip on the reins, knowing he was unintentionally making the gelding nervous. The horse danced sideways, bumping into Lieutenant Tenner's mount at his right. The gelding was unaccustomed to him. Rardan's last horse, Lisi, had been arrow shot out from under him two days past. She'd been his finest battle mount.

Lieutenant Minda was at his left, with two fists of Wind Riders in their green jackets flanking him on either side.

General Rardan patted the gelding's neck to calm him. He needed to give the horse a name. He'd just been too raging occupied to give it any consideration. No one knew what the horse's name had been. His previous owner and a third of Nelem's Storm Foot Ghosts, including Nelem himself, had fallen at Mizpah's last bridge.

Moonlight glistened across slivery mist that lifted from the small pond before them. A midnight larket whistle shrilled out across the moist night air, high and throaty. Rardan just wanted this done with. He would hear them out. Nothing more. That's all the missive he'd had returned to them promised.

They walked out of the darkness, nine shadowy figures on the opposite side of the small pond. Tendrils of mist swirled around their legs so that their upper torsos appeared to float eerily above the thick wavery air.

All but two carried an eagle on bent arms, dark silhouettes of sharply curved beaks and regal heads.

Rardan heard the creak and clicks of crossbows being adjusted behind him, and the soft whisper of leather while the Wind Riders shifted forward in their saddles.

The Eaglekins moved into a line, walking two abreast across the narrow arching bridge that spanned the pond, hidden beneath the flowing whorls of liquid air. Rardan had chosen the meeting place well, having been counseled about Eaglekins' distaste for bodies of water. Yet they had crossed the bridge without any outward show of hesitation or fear.

When they stepped onto the solidness of packed soil, Rardan heeled his gelding forward a step. Nine sets of velvet golden eyes quietly took his measure. They were tall and graceful men and women, with the long and lean muscles indicating the runner, and stony countenances that seemed to take in all of their surroundings and the Wind Riders with a silent glance.

Wings ruffled in the charged atmosphere, then stilled when graceful palms came up to quiet and sooth. Rardan noted that none of the eagles wore jesses or were restrained in any manner.

"Thank you for meeting us, honored General." The woman in the center, the only one in a gown rather than a tunic and leather worked breeches, inclined her graying head. She was older than the others, her eyes far paler, seemed to hide countless secrets behind their intelligent depths. She wore a simple black kirtle belted with a thin golden chain over a brown gown and a heavy cloak slanted back across one shoulder. "I am High Matron of Gasper to the Fourteen Eyries,

sixth creed cea ty of the River Claw Eyrie kae sa Talwena Ondri."

Rardan did not dismount. The Eaglekins had knowingly entered this war when they sent their eagles as assassins. "Tobyn Rardan, Chief General of the Pagona Elite Forces." Enough of these formalities. "What is this about?" He looked down at the proud group of Eaglekins from the back of his horse with his lieutenants and ten veteran Wind Riders behind him. A slender girl at the end of their line caught his attention. She was beautiful. Light brown hair floated around her waist and brought out the startling color of her tawny eyes. Though younger than the rest, her eyes bore a wisdom and a hurt that pierced right through the center of Tobyn's heart. He had the strongest urge to jump off his horse and go wipe away all the miseries from her delicate features. Such burdens had no place on someone so lovely. She was also the only one of them, besides the Matron, who did not carry an eagle on her arm.

The Matron did not appear cowed by his abrupt tone in the least. Her angular chin lifted. "Rescind the order calling for the killing of all eagles."

He'd suspected as much. He climbed out of the saddle and handed the reins over to Lieutenant Minda. "Three of my officers have been killed by your assassin eagles, two wounded. I've lost count of the attempts on my own life. Giving the bowmen free rein to exterminate any eagle they find has been the only thing sparing my men's necks. I will not rescind the order. I cannot. You are mad to believe otherwise."

"But we have not sent these eagles against you." The vein in the Matron's forehead reddened, which was the only indication that she was agitated.

"Then I suggest you and your eagles remain behind your canyon walls where they are safe from our archers. Any eagle seen in the skies will be shot down."

"We would gladly do just that, but our eagles and our people have been taken from our territories and forced to become King Baruck's assassins. You are fighting a greater evil than you realize. And it is our people, innocents in this war, which are paying not only with their lives, but with their minds."

Rardan glared at her. "There are many innocents who suffer for this bloody war. The people of Pagona did not seek this either. War was thrust upon us, and we, too, are fighting for our existence and way of life. Take your eagles and go. Tell your people to keep from our borders. I will give you safe passage out of our lands. I am sorrowed for the loss of your Eaglekins, but I dare not relent."

The silence spanned between them, ripe with frustration and anger. An owl glided low across the field, long blunt wings stretched to fullness. Simultaneously, every raptor turned an elegant head to watch. Rardan's breath hitched in his chest at the graceful majesty of the beautiful birds. He did not desire the killing of eagles, but the lives of his men, especially his vitally needed officers, took precedence. It had to.

The Matron glanced over her shoulder at the other Eaglekins then back to the General. "If that is your final vow,

then we Eaglekins have no choice but to join this war. These..." She swept her arm out to indicate the three Eaglekin males and five Eaglekin women. "These will remain with you. If any other eagles approach, they will sense them and will shield you and your officers from threat of assassination. We must stop the use of eagles being forced to be assassins no matter the cost. They must no longer be considered a viable weapon. Otherwise our people will never again be left to our own in peace." Her frown deepened the lines around her tight mouth. "I fear it is already beyond that, but we must do what we can."

General Rardan's eyes slid over the Eaglekins, lingering on the girl at the end. They were all young and beautifully proud. Perhaps his people and the Eaglekins shared a common cause. And if it meant no more eagles would have to be slaughtered, it was well worth it to find out. But could he trust them? His eyes slid to the young woman again.

"It is acceptable." He nodded curtly. "But make no mistake. Your eagles can never fly free among us without fear of crossbows trained on them.

Expressions tight, the young Eaglekins each stepped forward.

"It is acceptable." The Matron inclined her head, then turned to the Eaglekin without an eagle. "Santil, go with him and tell the general all you know about the queen's Mystics."

* * * *

"Hydeia! Wait!"

She turned to see Ammah running toward her through the long grass and her heart stumbled to a stop. His handsome face was suffused once again with health ... and something else she'd never seen before that made her heart start beating again, a playful eagerness. "Uloki wants to show you something." His gaze took in her pack and bow slung across one shoulder. "You're leaving?"

She had brought Ammah and the eagles and Eaglekins out of the main city to the miller family while they regained their strength. It had taken several agonizingly long days for Ammah to regain all the *reyn* that Lannis had taken from him. Hydeia had barely left his side. Nor had Emlen. It hardly seemed that doting Eaglekin could have been the same woman that had once just left Ammah to die. Josoh and Rustus had already left for Gaspar and Crystal Falls Eyrie, taking the three Eaglekins who were lost in their eagles back with them. With their eagles, hopefully the Matrons would know of a way to help them.

Ammah's dark brow arched. "You're going back to your eyrie?" His voice couldn't hide his disappointment.

"Yes."

Not saying anything, he just stared at her oddly. "I see. I guess you still have your task to fulfill toward them. Now that the process of taking our *reyn* is known, Eaglekins will be hunted. The Fourteen Eyries are the safest places for our people. I'll grant that the Matrons were right in that. Though even there I fear our people will not be completely safe. We'll have to strengthen the Guardians around the borders."

He said *we*, accepting himself as an Eaglekin again. A great heaviness came over Hydeia. She didn't feel like explaining anything to him, not now. Not while he had Emlen again. "What did Uloki want me to see?"

Ammah took her by the shoulder, careful not to move her injured arm wrapped tightly in layers of cloth, and turning her, took her other hand and pulled her through the meadow grass and into a copse of snarl-leaf trees.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Ammah only smiled and lengthened his pace. He brought her to one of the larger snarl-leafs and pointed up into the thick interlacing branches. Broken branches and twigs and hay from the miller's barn formed fairly recent additions to an old abandoned nest in the crook of three large branches.

"Is that...?" Hydeia grinned.

Smiling broadly, Ammah nodded. "Can you climb?"

In answer, Hydeia hoisted herself up onto the lowest branch. It was an easy climb, even with the use of only one arm, yet Hydeia's heart raced faster the higher she went.

Straddling a branch, she peered into the nest. Inside lay two white, lightly blotched eggs speckled with shades of red and brown. Uloki ruffled his wings then laid them back against his sleek body, head lifted proudly.

Pulling himself up onto a near branch, Ammah grinned for all the world as though all of it had been his doing.

Her heart bursting, Hydeia ran a finger along a creamy white shell. "Oh, Tylan." Stunned, she couldn't find her voice to say any more. Uloki and Tylan's offspring would be

magnificently beautiful and strong. Hydeia silently vowed to come back here soon when the time came for them to hatch.

"Uloki will care for them well," Ammah said.

"I know."

"Hydeia." Ammah leaned forward, all of a sudden looking unsure of himself. "I kept something from you."

"You did?"

He looked away from her gaze and pulled a small piece of rolled cloth from his shirt. "When Tylan ... when I prepared her body with the ceremonial oils, I took something."

His incredible eyes flicked up, holding her gaze as he unwrapped a shiny dark tail feather.

Something pulled in Hydeia's chest, fluttering rapidly on the verge of shattering every fraction of her control.

The apple of Ammah's throat moved up and down. He held the feather out between them. "You offered me the same once before and I refused. I was wrong to do so."

Across the space between branches, Hydeia reached for the feather. Tylan's feather. He had kept it all this time. A hot prickle of *reyn* shot up her arm when their fingers touched.

She took the feather from his hand and stared hard at it. "You have a mate." She hadn't intended for her voice to sound so forlorn, so dispassionate.

"Yes. I know I fought it at first, but you have always been—"

"No. Emlen. She's back."

Ammah's lips parted in surprise. "Emlen? Hydeia, when Kele was killed, according to Eaglekin tradition, Emlen and I were no longer mated."

"Exactly. I no longer am true-bonded to an eagle either."

Ammah went very still. "Did you think I would discard you?"

"I..." Her throat burned. She didn't know what to think. Emlen was back. She had changed and she appeared to care for Ammah a great deal. And her eagle lived.

"Emlen's eagle and Kele brought us together. She was part of my life, yes. I guess she always will be in some way. She, she, well, she ... Shred it all. She isn't you."

Hydeia's eyes lifted.

Ammah raked his hands through his dark hair. "I'm not saying this right. Rotting skies." His white teeth grazed over his bottom lip. "She's not you. I understand why Emlen did what she did. I understand how the Matrons train our people to abhor, even fear, any source of weakness. She must have been terrified by my wounds." He held up a hand. "I'm not excusing what she did. It was wrong, unthinkable, but I understand it better now and I've forgiven her. Even if I didn't understand it, I would have forgiven her. I don't want to carry that heaviness around my heart anymore ... because of you I want to forgive Emlen for leaving me wounded, *Koric* help me." He shook his head. "But that doesn't matter because even if Emlen didn't do what she did, I still never felt about her the way I feel about you."

Hope blossomed way down low in the pit of Hydeia's stomach. Ammah leaned closer across the empty space.

"Emlen doesn't tug on her ear when she is deep in thought or worried."

He reached over and pushed Hydeia's hair back behind her ear and tugged gently on the lobe. "Emlen doesn't scowl when she loses an argument. Tiny creases don't crinkle around her lips when she laughs. She does not have flaxen wheat hair that teethworms seem to favor, nor does she put herself recklessly in danger for anyone who needs it, Eaglekin or otherwise." He paused, his wonderfully exotic eyes pierced through her. "Eaglekin ways have no claim on me. Emlen has no claim upon me, but you have completely laid claim upon my heart. I don't want Emlen. I love you, Hydeia. You. I would do anything if I could get Tylan back for you, but even had you never been true-bonded, I would want you. It's always been you. I love you. Please say you'll accept me as your mate."

His lips compressed, his soul laid bare before her.

Fearing her voice, Hydeia twirled Tylan's feather between her fingers. Tenderness swirled through her body, riding a hot crest of yearning and need.

He was hers.

Her heart ached with love for this male. "You love me? Not just because of our *reyn*?"

"Don't you know?"

"I? Yes, Ammah. Yes. I do know it. Oh, yes." She crossed over onto his lap, pushing him back against the outside of the nest with her uninjured arm, the feather pressed against his strong chest, and brushed her mouth over his.

He pushed her up to look into her face. "Does this mean you love me as well?" He was grinning, yet she could see the vulnerability, the nervousness touching his eyes.

She kissed his throat, his chin. "I love you." Her mouth found his ear lobe. "More than I wanted to. Shredding more." She moved over to his lips, nibbled, coaxed...

A long time later as they lay across the interlacing branches, most of their clothing hanging scattered on branches below, Hydeia traced the tiny scars of his *reyn* along the smoothly defined muscles of Ammah's tight stomach.

Pulling her closer, he kissed the top of her head. "We should leave for Gasper before dark."

She lifted her head to peer into his wonderful exotic eyes. "You would come to the eyrie with me?"

"The eyrie. Anywhere. If that's where you're going."

Pushing a lock of dark hair off his sweat-dampened forehead, her heart swelled with love for him. "Rustus and Josoh will take the news of Lannis to the Matrons. I no longer feel compelled by that task. I'm free of their demands." And she was. Completely free.

Ammah studied her intently.

She smiled, took a shallow breath. "I want to see this world mankind has made, know its wonders, see the things you've known. I want to experience it all. Especially ... especially with you."

The smile he gave her was brilliant, making Hydeia's heart lose its steady rhythm. He was hers. Would always be hers.

"Then we need not go to your eyrie?" His expression was so hopeful, it made Hydeia laugh.

Upon Eagle's Light
by Clover Autrey

"We do. For a short time." Hydeia felt a soft tear slip onto her cheek. Her stomach clenched into a tight little ball. "I want to see my mother."

A word about the author...

Inspired by her love of Louis L'Amour heroes, Clover (yeah, that's her real name), packed up and moved to Texas where she found a real live Texan of her own. She's been there ever since where she and Pat (who else would a Clover marry but a Patrick?) have one beautiful daughter and four not-so-beautiful, but extremely handsome and always busy boys.

Clover has had a love of stories and reading for as long as she can remember, especially inventing her own. She writes the kind of stories she loves to read, high fantasy with powerful elements of romance, where the hero and heroine must each make sacrifices to gain something even stronger.

Visit Clover at www.eaglekinseyrie.com

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