

Celina Summers

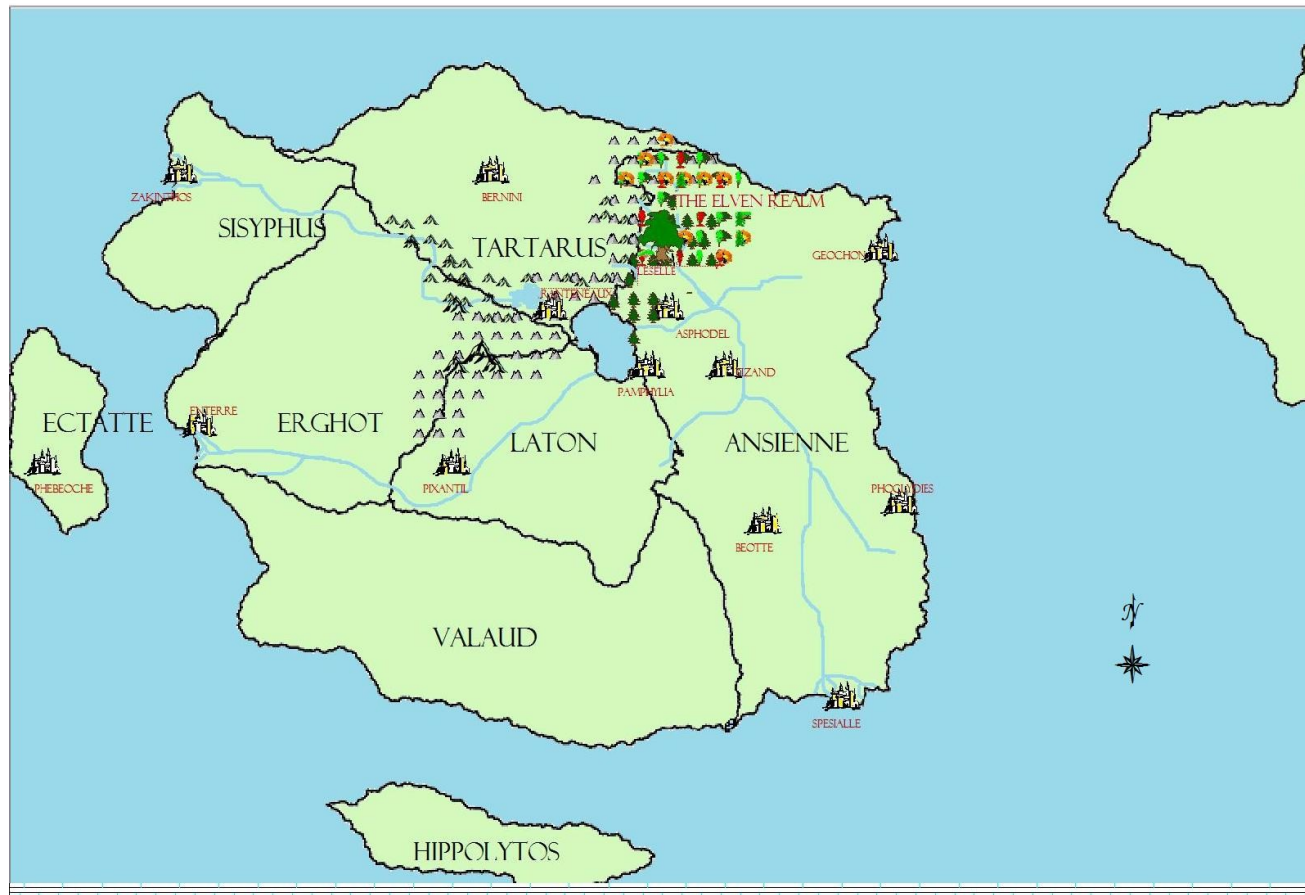
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THE RECKONING OF ASPHODEL

Aspen Mountain Press

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The Reckoning of Asphodel

Dramatis Personae

Asphodel

Prosper de Asphodel – Count of Asphodel, Tamsen’s father

Solange de Spesialle – wife of Prosper, Tamsen’s mother

Tamsen de Asphodel – ruling Countess of Asphodel

The Elven Realm

The House of Ka’antira

Kaldarte – the Elven Seer, wife of Ar’ami, mother of Lamec, Wilden, and Morrote

Ar’ami – Woodlands Lord

Lamec – member of the Elven Council of Elders, father of Liliath and Cetenne

Ardenne – Lamec’s wife

Liliath – Tamsen’s foster-sister, Cetenne’s twin

Cetenne – Tamsen’s foster sister, Liliath’s twin

Wilden – Elven Scout, fealty-bound to Mariol, Marquis de Beotte, Morrote’s twin

Morrote – Elven Scout, fealty-bound to Mariol, Marquis de Beotte, Wilden’s twin

Antir – last of the Elven Kings, brother to Kaldarte

The House of Ka'breona

Brial – Elven Scout leader

Beron – commander of Elven armies, member of Elven Council of Elders, father of Brial, Balon, and Berond

Balon – Brial's brother

Berond – Brial's brother

The House of Ka'Charona

Acheros – leader of the Elven Council of Elders

Leither – Acheros' wife, mind mage, head of Elven Mages

Geochon

Lufaux – King of Ansienne

Mariol – Marquis de Beotte, cousin to the King, member of Privy Council

Anton de Ceolliune – Duke de Ceolliune, co-ruler of Callat-Ceolliune, father to Anner

Anner de Ceolliune – heir to the duchy of Ceolliune

Jeshan de Callat – Count of Callat, co-ruler of Callat-Ceolliune

Glaucan de Pamphlyia – heir to the duchy of Pamphylia

Mylan de Phoclydies – Earl of Phoclydies

Myrielle – Mariol's mistress

Gabril de Spesialle – Duke of Spesialle, brother to Solange, member of Privy Council

Hyagrem de Silenos – warmage, tutor of Tamsen

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Prelude

My life is divided into two parts: before, and after. My memories of before are almost sacred to me, with all of the wistfulness most people lend only to their dreams or ambitions.

I have driven my memories of after away from my consciousness in some desperate attempt to recapture the untroubled serenity of before. Squarely between the two halves of my life is a single day.

I will never truly understand what happened that day. If I did not weep then, I do now. The gods never grant omniscience to us at these times, and they never grant forgetfulness in the dark days that follow.

Memory is a chancy thing, and I must rely upon mine to tell me what happened in my father's orchard. Ultimately, the remembrance brings me nothing but the thought of death and the taste of fear. The image hangs like a painting in the hall of my dreams: frothy pink blossoms tumbling against the black and green clouds as a brutal wind shreds them from the trees, the whispering touch of the snow pelting against my bare skin, and the profound malodor of ruin and devastation and death. The smell returns to me most vividly, still hovering in my nostrils, more than the pain, the grief, or the fury. I

will carry the stench with me to my tomb. Snow was once a joy to me, child of the northern forests that I am. Now, it bears me into the abyss of horror that forever dwells for me in the winter clouds.

The sun rose upon a lovely early spring day. Its rays streamed through my windows and awakened me with the promise of another day in the meadows. I lay in my bed, watching the new light brush beauty along the trees. My family's orchards were renowned, and that particular spring they were particularly lovely.

I was a girl just coming into herself: twelve years old, skinny knees, unruly hair and all. Where my mother had the fair beauty of the oceans, and my father the earthiness of the orchards, I was a different matter. My hair was deep black, and my eyes were so light a blue some people called them silver.

I jumped out of bed that morning before my nurse came to wake me. Eagerly, I scrambled into my clothes and pulled my hair roughly from my face. The day called to me. I snatched a chunk of warm bread from the kitchen and ran outdoors. I darted into the orchard for my favorite pastime--annoying the workers. I was happy as I slipped through the new grass that was just tall enough to brush the sides of my feet after the long winter's reign.

I do not remember how long I remained in my contented reverie that day, or what finally jarred me from it. I was perched about ten feet up in one of the cherry trees when an abrupt shift of wind caught my attention. I looked up.

The sky was lurid, a swirling greenish-purple, suspended from the heavens with a chain of wind. Then, the wind blew cold and my dangling feet became instantly chilled. Mindful of all of the repeated admonitions against cold-catching that I received from my nurse, I carefully climbed down the tree. A sudden electric charge whirled past my head, making the hair rise from my scalp, and I turned to look at the terrace.

My mother stood in the center of the courtyard, the basket she used for her weekly rounds of the laborers' cottage spilled at her feet. Six men confronted her. Five wore the plain garb of soldiers and the sixth was unrecognizable in a long, dark cloak. As if something warned me to stay hidden, I slid behind the broad, gnarled trunk of the tree, crouched close to the ground and watched.

The cloaked man spoke to my mother. I could not hear what he said; the wind snatched his voice away and spun it into the swirling clouds. A sudden shout rose from my right and I saw my father run toward the tangle of men on the terrace.

The stranger turned and gestured. His dark cloak billowed and a flash of lightning streaked down from the clouds. My horrified eyes saw a jagged bolt of blue-white fire strike--oh, so slowly--and cleave Prosper de Asphodel's sturdy frame. My father stiffened in the split second before the searing flash sundered his body, and he fell without a sound, rolling into a blackening heap on the grass.

My mother swayed, her eyes widening and her mouth opening in a silent cry of anguish. My hands tightened on the bark of the old tree, and sparks flew before my eyes. My first impulse was to run to my mother. But, even as I thought it, Solange de Asphodel's jaws snapped shut and she jerked herself straight. Her face fell into a blank, shuttered expression and her lips pressed into a thin line.

The man laughed and I saw him for the first time. He was tall and slender, with blond hair the same chameleon shade as my mother's that whipped around his arrogant, strongly cut face. He grasped her throat in one hand and drove her to her knees. The capricious wind died down for a moment and I heard what he said. "You will not live beyond this day. Your small powers cannot harm me, as you know. I will grant you an easy death if you give me the child."

"I have no child," she said, her voice roughened by the pressure against his throat.

"You lie," he replied as her hands curved around his wrist.

"You will have to kill me, brother!"

"Brother!" he spat. "I am no brother to a half-Elven bastard! Your death is a certainty, Solange. If you give me the brat, I will make it an easy one."

"I will not."

He struck her and she crumpled to the flagstones of the terrace, stunned. She put her hands, those long, elegant hands that soothed me to sleep every night, to her bruised throat and looked up at him.

"I have a prophecy for you, my brother," she said and the words sounded in my ears as if I were right next to her. "You will kill me on the order of the usurper, but you will not find my child. She will find you. You will lead this kingdom into war, and your name will be Death. You will fear many things: treachery, revelation, and betrayal. In the end it will be your name that you fear the most, for it will mean all three."

He stared down at her, a frown stretching his cold, handsome face.

She drew her knees up to her chest, dropped her head, and closed her eyes. A small, hidden smile crept across her face. "You don't know what your actions have created this day, my brother," she finished and I detected a thrill of triumph in her voice. "Your doom watches you even now."

He turned his back on her and peered into the orchards and fields around the house. I did not move, knowing if I did, he would see me. Once again, he turned back to my mother, who huddled in that defensive and submissive position with an exultant smile on her concealed face.

“So be it, my sister,” he replied, gesturing behind him. “My doom may be watching me, but yours is already here.”

Two more men approached from the stable yard. Without looking at them, he said, “Kill the people. Burn the house but leave the orchards. I will deal with them.”

My mother did not move but her eyelids flickered just once. The man’s back was to me so I edged closer to the orchard wall. The hard winter had tumbled some of the stones from it. In my mind, I felt an urgent order to get out of the orchard and beyond the wall. Cautiously, I slid through the early spring debris of fallen branches and exposed roots. Gasping, I sped toward the breach.

I tumbled through the gap, panting with fear for my mother. Rolling to my knees, I turned back to the scene on the terrace. As my desperation grew so did the wind, as if it somehow fed upon my emotions and it sliced through the thrashing trees. A squad of soldiers ran into the castle, drawing their swords as they did so.

“Solange de Asphodel, I convict you as a traitor and a renegade sorceress. Your half-spawned brat will pay the ultimate cost of your treachery.” The man smiled as he drew his long sword from the sheath at his side.

“Fine treachery, Gabril. You convict me for the blood I bear.”

She looked beautiful in that moment as she knelt before his naked sword without a tremor, her back straight and her eyes fixed upon his face.

He stared at her for a long moment, apparently searching for something in her eyes. “Just so,” he said. Without another word or extraneous gesture, he ran the blade through her throat.

The blood fell onto her simple blue gown, splashed onto the long, pale

rope of her hair, and then cascaded down to burst upon the stones of the terrace. She fell with a gurgling rasp into the widening pool of her blood. He wiped his blade clean on her skirt. Her breath bubbled in her throat as she drowned in her own blood. An evil gleam of light glanced off the blade as he brought it up and sliced off the long braid that coiled around her in the blood.

The wind wailed. Without knowing why, I turned my tear-streaked face to the sky. It swirled faster now, green-black and boiling with fury over the castle. Smoke gyrated over the orchard like a twisted, gnarled finger. I screamed out my anguish at the heavens and a sudden chill slashed through my body.

The murderer in the courtyard whipped around, his cloak snarled around his upper body. As he scanned the orchards, his face burned into my memory. Hatred, hot and vengeful, filled my mouth like blood.

The blood of Solange and Prosper de Asphodel.

The clouds screamed. Snow howled from the skies, obliterating the terrace from my sight in seconds and screening me from the evil that was my uncle and the destruction of my home. The cherry blossoms, delicate and frothy against the black spindles of the trees, writhed as if in pain. They looked blood-red as the wall of punishing snow tore them away.

I clambered to my feet, ran into the forest and never saw the men leave. I never knew when the house finally succumbed to the torches set to its wooden parts, collapsing in upon itself and my world. I ran, barefoot and mindless, through the thickening trees while the snow began to mound on the ground. It seemed like endless, numbed hours, with slender branches slapping across my face and roots tripping my purple feet as I headed deep into the woods.

I must have fallen. Gentle hands lifted me from the ground, wrapping me in a heavy cloak. Some unknown person cradled me next to a warm, solid body

and carried me away.

The last image of this memory is the snow, crisply sparkling as it drove through the orchards under that evil, angry sky. The smells of roasted flesh and fresh blood, the sulfuric reek of the lightning and the sharp tang of the snow, the taste of fear and hatred all mingled with the clean scent of the flowering orchards blended irrevocably in my mind.

This is the origin of the dreams that haunt me. Everything that I am, or became, spawned from that spring day. My childhood was over, relegated to the memories of before. My real purpose started with the death of my parents and my world. The gods had sealed my destiny; locked my fate in the undying embrace of hatred, fear, and revenge.

When I sleep, I dream.

When I dream, I kill.

My name is Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel.

Chapter One

I was unprepared for my first sight of the city of Leselle six years later.

The ancient grove of massive oaks soared toward the sky, the thick trunks melding together in a giant cluster at its center. The roots of the trees twisted around the grove like tentacles, and among the natural contours of them little homes nestled, surrounded by small gardens and tiny brooks. The branches of the trees curved with broad grandeur, winding up the trunks like roads. The trees were so colossal that I couldn't see the tops, which were lost in the low-hanging wisps of fog just drifting into the forest.

For two days, we'd travelled through the dense vegetation of the forest, pushing our way along a nearly invisible path. Even the light was subdued, filtered through the autumnal tatters that drifted from the canopy overhead to lie in a richly colored carpet upon the floor of the woods. I was helping my tutor Hyagrem, whose gnarled hands were wrapped around his walking stick, to climb up a small rise when the city reared before me in its aeons-old majesty.

I stared at the city in amazement, Hyagrem momentarily forgotten. All my life, even as a near-infant on my mother's knee, I'd heard stories of the fabled beauty of Leselle. Now, at last, I was finally seeing it for myself.

"Tamsen?"

The voice brought me back to myself. A few feet away, Kaldarte smiled at

me. Her warm, amber eyes were twinkling with humor. My foster mother nodded and then turned back to her husband, Ar'ami.

Every circumstance of my first visit to Leselle was unusual. To begin with, I was human—or, at least, apparently so. In fact, I was actually half-Elven twice over, descended from the noble house of Asphodel among my human kin and the legendary house of Ka'antira among the Elven. Kaldarte was actually a great-aunt to me, which explained why she'd adopted a human foster child to begin with. Unless one knew the relationship, I appeared to be completely human: a slightly-too-slender, slightly-too-tall daughter of the northern plains of Ansienne.

The Elves were notorious for their distrust of humans and understandably so. Quite possibly, I was the first person of human descent to see Leselle since the Elf wars had ended almost two centuries before.

The other side of the coin, however, lay in the fact that I had been *summoned* to Leselle. The ruling Council of Elders, who'd controlled the Elven Realm since the abdication and subsequent murder of their last king Antir, sent word to Kaldarte and Ar'ami to bring their three wards to the city. That meant their twin granddaughters, Cetenne and Liliath, as well as me, the human foster child. Although Kaldarte and Ar'ami accepted the summons with equanimity, my Elven cousins and I had speculated on the true nature of the Elders' command.

"There's no reason for the Elders to wish to see Tamsen," Cetenne had argued. "They probably want to submit us to the coming-of-age ritual; but there's no need to do that for her. After all, she is human."

"Half-human," her sister corrected. "She is of our blood, too."

"She looks human," Cetenne retorted.

I'd remained silent while the argument continued, pondering my own significance in this turn of events. Both of my cousins were correct to some degree; as for myself, my curiosity was tempered with a slight tinge of unease.

Now, three days later, Cetenne nudged me, her pale face burning with excited color. "What do you think of it?"

"It's beautiful." Even at this moment, I felt a pang of envy for the beauty she flaunted so casually, her dark auburn hair falling around her delicate pointed ears and the face so like Kaldarte's. She was even bound to the same element: fire. Liliath's beauty was more ethereal, running towards the blonde loveliness and affinity for water of her Elven mother, but Cetenne had all of the Ka'antira hallmarks that I desperately wished to possess myself.

My hair was long and dark, inclined towards heavy waves, and my eyes were pale blue, almost silvery. I took after my human forebears in looks, although a slightly Elven cast of feature sharpened my face. I craved the coloring. The bright, vivid hues of the forest seasons that all Elves possessed: eyes of the green of spring leaves, or the dark blue of the little springs that gurgled merrily under the trees; hair of autumnal auburns and browns or the winter's ice-white blonde or the summer's golden cast upon the hilltops. Human beauty couldn't hope to compete, not with its washed-out shades and mundane temperament.

Hyagrem snorted. The mage was eying the city with a sour look upon his face, which was already creased with the marks of mortality that the Elves never achieved. I glanced at him, noting that his lips were pressed tightly together.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not yet," he replied, but his eyes softened a little when they returned to me. The others began their descent down the little hill, but my tutor's hand

grasped my wrist. "You have the pendant hidden?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes."

"Good. Keep it that way for a time."

* * * *

We followed Lamec down the hill into the grassy valley that bordered the outskirts of the city. He was the twins' father and an Elder himself. His ruddy hair was the beacon I followed, still too overwhelmed for the moment to look at the city looming ever nearer. So it was understandable that I was surprised when the two Elven scouts rose from the grass. One minute the way was clear, the next minute two young men stood before us with arrows notched to their bows.

"Welcome honored travelers, to the city of Leselle," one of them said, his voice so neutral that it was obviously a sham. I stared at him curiously; he was the first Elf outside my foster family I had met. The scout had long golden hair pulled back from his face and exotic black eyes that narrowed at the sight of me. He returned my stare with a contemptuous air, his beautiful mouth twisted into an expression of distaste. My eyes hardened and I fought the urge to smack his face. So much for the fabled courtesy of the Elves!

Lamec smiled, holding his left hand up in greeting. "I thank you, Revered Scout. I am returning with my family at order of the Council."

The scout nodded, his cold, black eyes sliding back to me. "And the humans?"

Until that moment, I truly hadn't realized the abiding mistrust the Elves held for humankind. A world of inflection lay beneath his words, tinged with disdain and contempt, telling me clearly that here, at least, the Elfvars were neither forgiven nor forgotten. The knowledge hit me in the face, hard, and I held back a gasp at the sudden slice of it.

To his credit, Lamec's face changed into a stern mask. His voice throbbed with the power of centuries as he replied, "The Council requested their presence, and that should be enough for you, Brial Ka'breona. It does not become you to offer such scant courtesy either to the Ka'antira or to myself, who serves with your father on the Council."

The young Elf accepted the rebuke but his expression did not change. His hard, black eyes slid from me before he turned back to Lamec.

"I beg you to forgive me, Honored Elder. Enter then, and be welcome," he said, his face smoothed into an apathetic mask. He bowed and walked away at his comrade's side without another word.

I glanced at Hyagrem. He stood in dignified silence. I took my cue from him and drew myself to my full height. It would serve me best to remember that I was a daughter of Asphodel; the Elven blood that flowed through my veins spoke of the bond between my family and the folk of this city. As I lifted my chin, I met Ar'ami's eyes. He nodded with an approving smile. Without another word, we shouldered our packs and entered the legendary city of Leselle.

* * * *

Lamec took us to his home in the center of the city. As we walked

through the twisting neighborhoods, the beauty of Leselle struck me again. My one, scarcely remembered trip to Geochon, the human capital of Ansienne, had instilled in me the thought that all cities were smelly, loud, and dirty. Not so in Leselle. The Elves tolerated none of those elements. We could have been in the clearing at home; the smells and sounds were no different.

Our surly reception by the Elven scouts had angered the twins. Liliath, usually so retiring, took Hyagrem's arm and helped him along the thoroughfare with a tight, defiant expression on her face. Cetenne walked by my side, her face strangely neutral. Because I knew her so well, I detected the tight set of her jaw and took comfort from her support.

The others acted completely unconcerned. Their conversation as we went on centered on the growth of the city. The compliant trees of the grove had spread from their deep-rooted base to hold the swelling number of Elves forsaking their hereditary care of the forests. I listened to them in growing bewilderment. If more of the Elves were coming here, then what was happening to the forests?

Some years before, Ar'ami had told me the story of the founding of Leselle. A sage had wandered for some time in the sacred Elven forest, communing with the purity of the natural order of things there, when he had discovered a laurel tree standing alone in the center of a grove of oaks. Surprised at the discovery, since the climate was too cool to support the existence of the tree, he had approached it with wonder.

When he reached it, a sudden light shone forth. A beautiful Elfmaiden stood before him, so lovely that she astounded him. Her eyes, however, held the knowledge of the ancient gods. While he listened, she told him that she was Daphnis, a legendary priestess of the Virgin Huntress, and that the tree was a symbol of her protection of his house. She told him that in honor of that bond,

she wished him to build a great city around the laurel tree. In this city, they could gather and protect all of the learning and wisdom of the Elves. The trees themselves stood as surety for that promise. He agreed, and brought his kin with him to lay the foundations for Leselle.

The Elven nation, in return, named him as their king. They said that Leselle would stand until betrayed by one of her own. Daphnis' sanctuary remained in the laurel tree that stood, hidden, in the heart of the foundations of the city.

Lamec stopped before a twist of branches. Over the centuries, the Elves had developed a way of hiding their homes from prying, unfriendly eyes. The house was concealed within the trees, masked by the spirits of the trees themselves, called guardians. The Elves' ability to talk to the guardians allowed them to interact with the trees themselves. The Elves protected the trees of the forest, and the trees accommodated the Elven dwellings in return. Lamec laid his hand upon the bark and a moment later, the trunk dissolved into a door. We left the thoroughfares of Leselle, and followed him into his house.

Lamec's wife Ardenne was a glowing, golden Elf. She embraced her daughters, her parents-in-law, and her husband with gentle affection. When introduced to Hyagrem, she greeted him respectfully. When she turned those lovely blue eyes onto me, however, I sensed a reserve behind them. She welcomed me as she would any guest, but I could not ignore the expression behind her eyes.

In very little time, she had us settled on comfortable couches and served some of the delicate light wine the Elves prefer with chilled fruits and sweetbreads. While the others talked, I sank into an introspective silence.

All was obviously not well with the Elves.

Judging from the dark looks I had received, they were still embittered. The scout who had met us outside the city had only been the tip of the iceberg, it seemed. The resentment was tangible and touched with fear. Something had infiltrated Leselle and it lurked beneath the beauty and delicacy of the city. I had been isolated with Kaldarte and Ar'ami for some years now. I had been completely unaware of the political turmoil that surrounded the Elven Realm.

The uneasy feeling I had entertained since Lamec had come for us grew stronger. Although Lamec had termed it as a request, it was, in fact, a summons. The matter must be urgent, judging from the swelling population of Leselle. Gauging from our reception, it must also be well known. I concluded the situation was a bit more dangerous than inferred.

What would the Elven Council want with me? I had done nothing, save stay with my foster family and study. I knew that Kaldarte and Ar'ami had informed the Council of the occurrences surrounding me. Another motive . . . a political motive...lay behind this summons and I decided I did not like it at all. As I thought this, my eyes narrowed and my mouth tightened.

Just like that, my political nature emerged: belligerent, assertive, repulsed by subterfuge.

I stood up, my mouth dry and tasting of bile. Everyone's eyes jerked to me as I said, "Please forgive me. I am rather tired. I think I wish to find somewhere to rest, if it doesn't inconvenience you, Ardenne."

She smiled the smooth, bland smile of a hostess. "Of course, my dear. Liliath, show your guest to her room. The Council wishes to see you after sunset and I'd wager you'd like to rest before you meet them."

* * * *

My story is unusual, a strange quirk of the times that could never have happened at any other moment of history save for the one I was born into some eighteen years earlier. I was the daughter of Prosper de Asphodel, a minor nobleman whose estate lay upon the borders of the forest of Leselle, and his southern-born wife Solange, once the only daughter of the infamous Duke de Spesialle.

My early childhood was unremarkable, save for the fact that I was the only offspring from a completely happy marriage. I played around the orchards and nestled in my room with my books, secure in the love of my parents and the safety of my world.

I thought about that as I prepared for my appearance before the Elders. Would any of these Elves who looked at me askance from the safety of their gardens have taken in a terrified human child? Probably not. Probably only Kaldarte and Ar'ami, or one of their kin, would ever have considered such a thing.

The clouds exploded. Snow howled from the skies, obliterating the terrace from my sight in seconds, and screened me from the evil that was my uncle and the destruction of my home. The cherry blossoms, delicate and frothy against the black spindles of the trees, writhed in blood-red pain as the wall of punishing snow tore them away.

I shook the memory away. A noise from the doorway alerted me to someone else's presence and I turned to see Hyagrem regarding me with compassionate eyes.

"It does no good to force that memory from you, child," he said. "You will remember it all the days of your life."

"I know."

"That day made you what you are; you cannot escape that now." He drew nearer. It may have been a trick of the light, but he was stronger-seeming, younger almost. "In the ancient Elven tongue they would call you *ceratira*: storm-bringer."

"No. They would call me mage and human and despise me for both."

"Elven magic is elemental. Human magic is learned. What you possess is a combination of both, inherited from your forebears. They cannot deny what you are as long as you accept it yourself."

I knew his words were true. I had called the storm down upon Asphodel unknowingly, shocked into magic by grief and fury. When it became apparent to Kaldarte that she could not teach me in the manner of the Elves, Ar'ami had gone to find Hyagrem and brought him back to the forest to instruct me in the discipline of magic.

"And now I find myself here, summoned by the Elven Council to answer for it," I noted dryly.

"That is not why you are here." His voice was calming with just a hint of reproof.

"Then why?"

"Your presence in Leselle is your birthright, as is the pendant you wear about your neck. Several generations ago, during the great war between the Elves and man, a daughter of your house saved an Elfmaiden from the battlefield. She took her to a place of secrecy and nursed her back to health. When the Elfmaiden was strong enough to travel, this brave daughter of Asphodel got word to her brother. The Elf came, a well-beloved and noble man

of his race, to fetch his sister away to safety. His name was Antir. He fell in love with Elyssia de Asphodel, and married her. They had a son, from whom your father descended. Antir gave Elyssia that pendant, and it has been in your family since.

“The Elven Council did not approve of either the gift, or the prophecy that accompanied it. They called Antir before them, and attempted to force him to rescind the gift. He refused, and the Elders exiled him from Leselle and stripped him of his rank. They only had a very few happy years together before mysterious assailants ambushed and murdered Antir in the forest near his home. Elyssia brought up her son, despite her grief, and your house was bound to the Elves ever since.”

“So that’s where the Elven part of my lineage comes in,” I said wryly. “I still don’t see why I have to hide the pendant or why they summoned me here at all.”

A smile stretched across Hyagrem’s face, tightening it so that I could see the bones beneath his wrinkled skin. “But I do not wish you to hide the pendant tonight, Tamsen,” he replied softly. “I wish you to wear it among these Elves and walk with your head high. You are the only descendant now of that line, unbroken in millennia, and by the pendant you wear you proclaim yourself as the heir to Antir. You are royal, here among the Elves, and you should not allow them to forget it.”

I turned my back to him. I had the uncomfortable feeling that I looked like a speared fish as I stammered, “But what about Kaldarte and her children? What about Lamec? I am half-human and they are full Elves. Shouldn’t they be considered the heirs over my tainted claim?” My voice was bitter at the end, tinged with the anger I’d felt at the Elves’ response to my presence in their city.

“Not by the laws of the Elves,” Hyagrem replied. “True, Kaldarte is your

aunt, for lack of a better term. She renounced any claim to the monarchy when the Elders sanctified her as a seer. The Council tried to force Kaldarte to forego her calling, in order to replace her brother, but she refused. Lamec and his brothers have no claim to the throne."

"It is true," Kaldarte's voice added quietly. I had not heard her enter the room behind me. "Your mother was also the daughter of an Elf. Solange did not know until much later that she was bastard born, and half-Elven at that. You have powerful enemies, both human and Elves, but we watched over you. It is my great sorrow that I did not see where the danger ultimately lay. Only your mother's quick thinking when your uncle came that day enabled Ar'ami to get close enough to you to help you."

"My uncle." My voice was flat. Another swift glimpse of the terrible reckoning at Asphodel flashed across my mind, but I discarded it as I had before. "Then this summons from the Council means that they know everything."

"They do," she affirmed.

"What do they wish me to do?"

She paused.

"They want me to renounce my claim in favor of someone else, don't they?"

"I don't know." The answer was immediate and unstinting.

"I don't want them; they don't want me. I wouldn't even know how to begin." I declared. "They can have the pendant if they want it."

Kaldarte's face looked sad for the first time since I had met her. "I'm not certain that you can renounce it, Tamsen," she said, her voice tinged with sorrow. "You see, the Elves do not choose who bears the pendant. The pendant

chooses the Elf who holds its power.”

Chapter Two

We left a short time later for the Council. Kaldarte and Ar'ami, as my guardians, and Hyagrem, as my tutor, went with me as we followed Lamec up a venerable oak trunk that twisted as it rose above the glade.

The twins were furious that Lamec did not allow them to go with us. Cetenne argued with her father until he snapped. "The Council will see you and your sister tomorrow! That is enough!"

Cetenne spun on her heel and stalked from the room, followed by a silent and frowning Liliath. Lamec wiped his brow and shot a wry glance at his mother.

"I knew when that child was born she would have your temper, Mother," he said glumly.

"And I knew that she had yours," his mother returned.

Mother and son continued to stare at each other while Ar'ami chuckled behind them. "I knew that the child would inherit none of my unruffled calm. Family traits went against the poor girl, and I am, as always, outnumbered."

Our procession was silent and virtually unnoticed. The Elves of the city had deserted the way to the Council meeting place, whether from design or

accident I could not guess. I walked beside the solemn Hyagrem with my chin raised aggressively.

I could think of no way to escape the dilemma that had fallen upon me. I wasn't frightened, not with the comforting presence of the group around me, but I was as apprehensive as only a young girl can be.

The image of the orchards on that terrible winter's day almost six years earlier thrust, unbidden, into my mind. The snow blew around those shredding pink trees again, bringing unasked the smells of scorched air and flesh. My stomach contracted but I forced the gorge back down my throat and continued to walk with an expressionless face.

The path we took spiraled up and wrapped around the immense trees that formed the foundations of the Elven city. I glimpsed the stars through the thinning canopy overhead. A few clouds scudded across the chilly autumnal sky. The scent of a cold rain brushed my face, temporarily dispelling the remembered smells of my father's orchard.

Small inset lights glowed on either side of the trunk. They cast shadows that slanted across the puckered bark, worn smooth in places from the steady tramp of shod feet. My shadow looked long, playing against the broad sides of the old oaks. Once again, I practiced the calm breathing exercises Hyagrem had drilled into me in an effort to help me control my volatile emotions. As we rounded the last sweeping turn of the tree, I was as calm as I could make myself.

The Council met on a sort of platform of woven branches. Here the floor was planed level from a millennium of use. Softly glowing Elfights flickered in the branches around it. On the platform were many low couches, arranged in a semicircle, and on each couch was an Elf. As we entered the Council, their eyes moved to me as if riveted to the emerald glowing around my neck. I lifted my chin, stung by the stares that all seemed faintly hostile, and kept my back straight

and unbowed.

I would not let them intimidate me. I was a very young woman and an exile dependent upon their mercy, but I would not show them my fear. Instead, they would see the noted pride of my ancestors; the dogged, intransigent dignity that my forebears had used to carve out their lands and nobility. As we stood before the Council, it was not of my mother that I thought. It was of my father.

So there I stood, half-defiantly, looking each old Elf in the eye. Some of them just peered at me. Others remained quiet, even as expressions of disgust flitted across their carved faces. Only a very few watched me with cautious interest, their Elven eyes scanning my face while they maintained their silence.

Eventually, one of them spoke.

“Greetings, Lamec Ka’antira. The Council expresses its gratitude for bearing our message and bringing back those whom we have summoned.”

Lamec bowed slightly, his features inscrutable. “It wasn’t necessary,” he informed them. “My mother already knew and was making ready to start the journey.”

I wanted more than anything to shoot a glance at Kaldarte, to gauge her reaction to Lamec’s calm statement, but her impassivity made me clamp my lips closed. Lamec was a smart man. He had expressed not only obedience, but also a healthy awe for his mother’s abilities. If he thought it was in our best interests to remind the Council of who the Seer was, he’d succeeded admirably. Murmurs rose in the Council at his words.

The Elf who had spoken before turned his gaze to me. I met his eyes as he searched my face. His eyes and face were ageless. The Elves do not mature as we do; no telltale wrinkles or sags told me his age. Nevertheless, when I looked in his eyes I saw centuries of wisdom reflected there and my mouth went dry. I

felt as if he saw past my face and was looking instead at some of the thoughts whirling in my brain. Next to him sat a woman, her cold face stern as she regarded me.

I concentrated on my breathing again, forcing my breaths to come slowly as we exchanged that long, unwavering stare. I felt as if he held me motionless while he searched for something only he could see.

“This is the human, then?” another Elf asked. At the repugnance in his voice, I turned toward the speaker. This man was younger, colder.

Before I could stop myself, I retorted, “I am not ‘the human.’ My name is Tamsen de Asphodel.”

“Indeed?” The Elf’s face grew, if anything, even colder. “Yet, you are also Tamsen Ka’antira, and you have taken great pains to declare yourself so.”

The pendant felt very heavy, the delicate silver chain cutting into the back of my neck. My entire body stiffened but I replied, “I have not declared myself so. Only you have done that.”

My words rang across the platform and a couple of the Elves shifted positions on their couches. Kaldarte came to my side, inclining her head to the old Elf I had noticed earlier.

“You requested us to come and so we have done,” she said. “I have brought my pupil, Tamsen de Asphodel and her tutor Hyagrem before you. The girl was unaware of her situation until today, when you greeted her with such regard, our esteemed Council. I would have thought that you would have tempered such respect with a way to seat honored guests.”

There was no response. Kaldarte seemed calm, save for two darkened spots on her flawless cheeks that I had frequently seen on Cetenne’s face. Ar’ami

took her elbow. Only I saw the tightening of his hand on her arm.

"We are grateful to you, Respected Seer," the first Elf stated. "It has been long seen the Council has seen you, Kaldarte."

"A longer time since the Council heard me," she replied. "If you had listened, this summons would not be necessary."

While she spoke, several younger Elves appeared at our sides, each bearing one side of a couch. Once these were set down, each of us took our seats upon them. I sat erect, my hands folded in my lap as Nurse had taught me: the perfect image of the calm lady.

"Do you know why we have summoned you here, Tamsen de Asphodel?"

I shook my head. "I do not. I was under the belief that this was an invitation, not a command."

"The Council does not command," he replied. "We may only request."

I shrugged. "As you say."

He shifted position, no longer lounging. He swung his feet to the ground, and pierced me with his cobalt stare as he leaned forward. "We 'requested' you to come to us, because we would know what your plans are."

"Plans?" I echoed. "I don't have any plans. The only plans I have are to continue my studies."

"When your studies are completed?" he prompted. "What then?"

Once again, the snow whipped around the apple trees and the face of my uncle came before my eyes. The old Elf leaned back, as if satisfied with an answer I did not give.

“Revenge,” the cold-faced Elven woman at his side stated. “Your plans are to revenge yourself upon your uncle.” Many of the Elves stirred at this statement, glances darting between each other and then back to me. Some of them looked grimly pleased, but others still looked saddened.

“I cannot have revenge,” I replied. “What he took from me was too great.”

Her eyes flicked to the great emerald, lying sullenly against my breast. “He did not take everything from you, did he?”

“Nor will he,” I replied.

Her eyes left my face. The fury and hatred in my voice had been too much for the Elven placidity to bear. Next to her, the Elflord turned back to Kaldarte.

“The Council has decided that we should teach this human here. It is our wish that this child remain here, to learn from our Elders. She will be safer here, I think, than in that human-ridden part of the forest in which you dwell.”

Kaldarte stared at him a minute, then threw back her head and laughed. “You wish her to teach her here?” she asked. “Who will teach her? The Elders cannot. Our methods of teaching have not been successful for Tamsen. Hyagrem and I, together, are barely able to contain her. Tamsen has Elven magic, it is true; however, she is also half human and requires their method of instruction.”

“It is necessary that she spends her time learning of the ways of the Elves,” he responded.

“This she does with us. She also learns the ways of humans, which is just as necessary. You cannot teach her those things here.”

“The humans?” an Elf from the opposite side of the Council snorted. “She doesn’t need to know their murderous ways! That is precisely what we wish to

prevent!"

"She is half human!" Kaldarte's voice rang across the platform. "It is equally as important that she knows of that heritage as well!"

"The Council does not agree," the first Elf said.

"Acheros," she said quietly. "I have seen it. You cannot teach Tamsen here. Her only hope is to learn with practitioners of both magics. This she has with us."

"The entire point is worthless anyhow," I interrupted. "I have no desire to remain here."

"You are of our royal house," Acheros declared. "It is your duty to stay in Leselle."

"Duty?" I repeated incredulously. "What duty? The only duty I have is to preserve the memory of my parents and to resurrect their holdings. I owe nothing to the Elves, save for Kaldarte and Ar'ami. They sheltered me when I was a child, swallowed up in my own grief. If it is my duty to stay now, was it not your duty to take me in then? I don't recall the Council nursing me back to health, or teaching me about a power I didn't know I had and couldn't understand. Do not speak to me of duty! This argument cannot sway me."

Once again, the Elves of the Council stirred, rustling like so many leaves battered by a chill wind. Acheros watched me, his expression curious. I stared at him defiantly and into his old eyes came a glint of something akin to approval.

"So, you will not heed the advice of those who are your Elders?"

"Not to those for whom I feel no allegiance," I retorted. "I understand that the Elves are my people, as much as the humans are. I will not forsake one for the other. I am the heir to my father's estate and my primary duty will lie to

those folk whom Asphodel has protected.”

“Asphodel is no more.”

“It will be again,” I said between clenched teeth. “I have sworn it.”

Acheros looked at Kaldarte. She laughed. “She was that way when I got her. Don’t blame me.”

“She is a great deal like all of the Ka’antira,” Acheros replied.

I stood, my anger ebbing away. The mood of the Council had changed. Kaldarte touched my arm in approval, while Acheros turned to some of the other, older Elves. They spoke quietly for a few minutes before turning back to me.

“Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel,” Acheros announced formally. “By the right of the pendant you bear, daughter of the house of Antir, the Council decrees your coming of age according to Elven law and lore. You are now an adult, with the right to petition this Council, as well as to learn the sacred pathways upon which the Elves walk. We name you among ourselves as Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel. Be welcome and be thou blessed.”

My mouth dropped. This entire ritual, the angry dance of orders and defiance was nothing more than a *coming of age rite*? I glanced at the others, my family, to find them all beaming at me proudly. *They knew*? How grossly unfair! They had known all along that the Council hadn’t summoned me for some sinister reason!

Kaldarte embraced me and whispered, “Well done, lass. Now maybe they’ll leave us alone.”

I smiled in response, but then my eyes met the dark eyes of the Elven scout who had accosted us earlier. They glittered at me coldly across the Council

and the smile ebbed from my face. Here, at least, was one Elf who did not accept me as part of his people. I returned his stare with a small, smug smile until he looked away.

* * * *

The next several days in Leselle were enjoyable. Cetenne and Liliath came of age the following day. This was a bit of a surprise, as to the long-lived Elves they were still children. The twins came through their ritual questioning with aplomb, while we, their family, watched. Later that evening, Kaldarte explained why our rituals had come as they did.

“The Council has been kept informed of your progress,” she began. “They knew how far along on the paths of magic you have come. The Elves do not have a set time for the coming of age ritual; instead, it depends upon the knowledge and maturity of the Elf, which comes to us all at different speeds. You all did very well, my girls, very well indeed.”

When we went out into the city, I still received more than my share of antagonism. Kaldarte, Ar’ami and Hyagrem spent most of their time closeted with members of the Council, so the twins and I were on our own. Cetenne delighted in showing me the city in which her parents had raised her, and Liliath knew all of the quiet, cultivated spots in the city where we could sit and drink in the beauty of Leselle.

We planned to leave on the fifth day after our arrival. The night before we were to leave, another summons came from the Council. We went back up the broad, deserted trunk to their enclave.

They sat on their couches, much as they had before. This time, they brought couches for us promptly. As we settled, I noticed Acheros watching me again. The silver-haired woman sat next to him on his couch, her face once again cold and stern. Several of the other Council members seemed to have others with them.

"The Council greets you all," Acheros intoned formally.

I nodded my head while the others responded and waited.

"We have decided to send an escort with you. They will guard your clearing, and help to protect your dwelling." He motioned and several young Elves stood behind him. There were ten of them, all young Elves with the lean, hardened look of warriors. Although Elves abhorred killing, they had maintained a standing army since the Elf wars and most of the younger Elves served in it.

Ar'ami frowned as he looked at Acheros. "Ten additional Elves in our wood will be difficult to conceal. If the enemy notices them, then it will suggest the presence of something valuable. I protest the wisdom of this decision, Acheros."

"These scouts will help to protect you," the woman next to Acheros spoke up, her voice oddly flat. "The decision was unanimous, Ar'ami. They will fend for themselves in the forest near your home and will not importune you. It will relieve us to know that you have additional protection. These young Elves are some of our best."

Ar'ami frowned, opened his mouth to reply, thought better of it, and subsided back into silence. Acheros accurately took this as acquiescence and a smile crept across his features.

"I will wish you all a good journey, then," he said, getting to his feet. The

remainder of the Council also rose. As one, they all bowed to our party. "I hope to see you all at the next seasonal congress."

* * * *

That night, the dream came to me once more. I awoke, sweating and short of breath, with the unmistakable feeling that I was no longer alone in the orchard.

Chapter Three

I was surly and out-of-sorts the next morning as we prepared to leave. As often as the memory came to me in my dreams, it never failed to wreak havoc on my moods. The day itself was gorgeous; the sky painted with that peculiar shade of bright blue that only comes on the cusp of winter. As we made our way to the foot of the city, I caught sight of the troop of Elven Scouts waiting to accompany us home.

My mood deteriorated further.

Brial Ka'breona regarded me with cool, black eyes. All the Elves are handsome; Brial was beautiful. A full head taller than I (who towered over my daintier cousins) and sleekly muscled, he was sturdily built for an Elf although still slim by human standards. His father, Beron, was commander of the Elven armies and an Elder on the Council. I remembered his unusual bulk and realized that his son took after him in that regard at least.

Judging from his expression, Brial was not particularly pleased about his assignment.

Cetenne caught me looking and nudged me again. I bit back a laugh as I turned to her, only to find her eyes twinkling at me. "Looks like he ate some bitter fruit, doesn't it?"

“Seems like it.”

She leaned in closer. “You know, I think we can have some fun with this one.”

I nodded and we both snickered. A new victim for our pranks, especially one that looked as stuck-up as this particular Elf, would definitely be a lot of fun. Kaldarte sent us a reproving look as we giggled.

Brial said something to his squad and they turned to the forest. Some melted into the trees, two stayed behind our group with arrows notched in their bows, and Brial took a position some twenty paces ahead of us. He stopped, turned, and looked at Ar’ami.

“Revered sir,” he began and the respect in his voice surprised me. “I have ranged my scouts to all sides of us. If I ask you to move to cover, please do so quickly. We would be amiss in our duty if any of you took hurt.”

Ar’ami’s face twitched for a split second, before he sternly repressed it with a, “Er...yes, of course.”

Brial nodded once and moved ahead of us. Cetenne burst into loud laughter. The scout’s only response was a barely noticeable wince, before he squared his shoulders and strode on.

* * * *

Rarely during that day did we glimpse any of the scouts. Brial occasionally dropped back to check on us. Only at midday when we stopped for a quick lunch did they come drifting back into our circle, eating of their travel

bread, and then melting back into the forest on their silent, vigilant watch.

Once that afternoon, Brial returned on one of his checks. He took one look at the old sorcerer, struggling gamely against tough terrain, then turned and screeched out a birdcall to our left. Moments later, one of the scouts ran up to us. Brial gestured at Hyagrem, and the Elf slung his bow over his shoulder and went to help the old man. For a brief moment, I almost liked Brial--until I saw him glare at the mage. My eyes narrowed.

Obviously, this arrogant Elf would have to change his attitude. No one would *ever* insult my teacher like that in my presence. I stewed over it all afternoon. Kaldarte glanced at me with raised brows but did not comment.

That night, we sat around the fire, eating Kaldarte's good, rich lentil soup and saying little. Brial sat opposite me and in the firelight, his eyes glittered like ice over a very deep pool. He was deep in thought, so he didn't glance at me. When Hyagrem was asleep and the older Elves beginning to settle in, I finally spoke.

"Brial."

Startled, his head jerked up. His eyes narrowed as they met mine. I took a deep breath. "You could try to overcome your prejudices."

Liliath was beside me and I sensed her attentions refocus on us. She must have elbowed her sister because Cetenne leaned forward from the other side.

Brial looked at me but did not respond.

"You can hate me all you like," I continued. "Frankly, I don't really care. However, if I *ever* catch you looking at Hyagrem the way you did earlier, you will be sorry for it. He is an old man and ill. He has been a friend of the Elves for most of his life and deserves your respect, not your hatred."

His face didn't change expression; he merely continued to regard me as if I were some sort of bug.

"Of course," I went on, sarcastically, "you must be a very brave Elf to be afraid of such an old man and such a young woman. I'm surprised no one has commented on your bravery before."

"Afraid?" he asked, and the quiet intensity of his voice shocked me. "Yes, I am afraid. I am afraid of all human sorcerers and the things that they do. I have seen them burn the trees with witchcraft, so their troops would have light to slaughter the innocent. I have seen many of my friends, cut down with unnatural magic, screaming in agony as the sorcerers took them. I, who am a 'very brave Elf,' have seen sorcerers older than this human and fairer than you, and so I distrust you both. However, my bravery is such that I will tell you about it, despite what you are. I warn you, however: try any of your magic on my squad and I will kill you before you can get to me."

His expression had never changed. The Elf gave his speech in the same soft, velvety voice he had used with Ar'ami earlier, but his words slapped silence around the fire and left me ashamed. I sighed.

"I was wrong to taunt you so, Brial. Forgive my discourtesy. My teacher is dear to me, and I overreacted. I was out of line."

Those black eyes glittered at me coolly for a moment; then he simply got up, turned his back on us, and melted into the surrounding night. I let out my breath, not even realizing that I had been holding it.

"You shouldn't have baited him, Tamsen," Liliath said. "Brial Ka'breona has a notoriously bad temper and an immense hatred for humans. When we were younger, a human sorcerer destroyed his entire squad. He was injured as he made his escape."

“Well, I’m sorry!” I retorted. “He doesn’t need to hold such a grudge against Hyagrem. He wasn’t there.”

“You still don’t truly understand why so many Elves hate humans, do you?” she asked. “We, who revere life, find repugnant those who destroy it wantonly.”

“Not all humans are like that.”

“Not all Elves are like Brial.”

I glared at her while she sat calmly, tracing a pattern in the dirt with a twig.

“You should be kind to him. This assignment is hard for him, you know.”

I sighed. “I don’t think I’ll ever get the opportunity to be kind to him.”

* * * *

The next morning was grey and cold. Heavy grey cloaks shrouded the scouts. They seemed like shadows in the dimly filtered light of the forest. None of them spoke as we hurriedly broke camp and ate some breakfast. Brial’s face was inscrutable, but lined with weariness. Evidently, he had remained awake all night.

We proceeded as we had the day before. None of us talked, really, as we grew progressively more miserable. A chilly, misty drizzle fell, filming us with a shroud of moisture.

At midday, a sense of foreboding began to nudge against my brain. I stopped abruptly, frowning, my eyes scanning the trees.

Suddenly, Brial dashed into sight, running soundlessly on his soft leather boots. Ar'ami looked around and hissed at us, "Hide!"

The twins and I dove into the cover of the brush. Crouching behind some thickly overgrown barberry bushes, I calmed my breathing. Adrenaline surged into me and I had trouble breathing silently and slowly.

I saw nothing. The mist was so fine it was like a pearly veil, obscuring everything beyond a few feet. The woods were unusually silent: so silent not even the remaining birds made a noise. They, too, felt a predator in the woods, closing upon us.

I sensed movement behind me and whipped my head around. A party of men, crouching as they moved through the trees, had their arrows notched and ready. One of the men was tall and dark-cloaked and I felt a chill tingle in my blood. I recognized the fair hair tied back from his face, and the sharp lines of his profile. *It was my uncle.*

Liliath and I exchanged silent glances. They were heading right for us.

Brial's squad leapt to the ground beside us. Ar'ami was there too. Grabbing my arm, he threw me at Brial. My shoulder popped with a sharp, hot pain.

"Get them away!" he snapped at the astonished Elf. "Protect them, but get them away, now!"

Arrows flew through the air and Ar'ami leapt into the tree overhead. The Elven scouts were half-hidden in the brush, shooting at the humans. I estimated that there were about forty of them: too many for our little group. Hyagrem stripped off his gloves, reaching into his cloak. Some of the scouts jumped down from the trees, drawing swords to delay the attacking men so that we could escape.

We ran. The twins ran in front of us while behind us the battle raged. I heard Hyagrem chanting out a spell and a shrill scream soon after that. A few of the arrows whistled toward us, but Brial hauled us into the thicker part of the forest in a flash.

“We should go back!” I panted. “They need help!”

“You are to flee,” he replied, his voice quiet and urgent. “You would be in the way. If these humans are after you, we will stop them. Until then, it is your duty to escape.”

He wasn’t even breathing hard, damn him.

The wisdom of Ar’ami’s lessons on woodcraft came home to me now. We could run silently over the underbrush without the rustling that would give us away. Brial let go of my arm and dropped behind us.

As I rubbed my sore shoulder, he motioned me to follow the twins and drew the sword from his side. I hadn’t noticed the sword before. It was a long, slender, golden blade, and as he pulled it from its scabbard, the slightest whisper of magic began to tickle the edges of my awareness. In a strange sort of way, the sword’s magic sounded almost like a song. The competence with which Brial handled it suggested that he was familiar with how to use it. He glided into the trees, waiting for signs of pursuit.

Liliath led the way, her surer instincts finding the tiniest game trails. Our run dropped into a swift walk, which enabled us to use our senses more freely. The sounds of the battle faded away.

This part of the wood was still half a day’s journey from our home and a place I had not been. Liliath, however, who had explored the forest with her grandfather, had an idea of where we were. We reached a dense thicket of evergreen trees and crawled into it to rest for a moment. As I stooped to enter

the thicket, I slipped on the still-damp leaves and came down hard on the injured shoulder. A searing sting shot through my shoulder and back. I bit my lip to halt the cry of pain rising to my lips.

“We can’t stay long,” Cetenne breathed, noticing nothing amiss. “We’ll rest for just a minute to decide what to do next.”

“I think I know how to get home,” Liliath said. “It’ll be hard going but we can manage. If we have to, we can take to the trees.”

“What about the others?” I demanded, feeling my shoulder and upper arm and trying not to wince. My fingers were feeling numb and my arm was hanging strangely. I had the terrible suspicion that the shoulder was out of its socket. Removing my belt, I strapped the arm grimly to my side.

“They’ll make their own way,” Liliath replied, looking at me with sympathy. “We will move a lot more quietly if we’re alone.”

I nodded and peered through the prickly branches back the way we had come. A leaden rumble rolled at us through the woods. “Let’s move on,” I urged. “We need to get farther away.”

I wriggled out from the trees first and stuffed my heavy cloak into my satchel. It was the wrong color, too bright and too easily spotted against the grey woods. The chill air bit into my skin as the mist penetrated my clothes. The pain in my injured shoulder flared up again, vicious and hot. Liliath and Cetenne didn’t comment and after a last, anguished look back the way we had come, we moved off into the heart of the forest.

* * * *

For an hour, we moved through the woods; Liliath leading us, Cetenne in the middle, and myself at the back. We left few tracks, but those I noticed I tried to eliminate. Unfortunately, we were going too swiftly to catch them all.

"This isn't working," I finally said. "A blind cow could track us through this."

"I know," Liliath replied. "We can do nothing about it. It will be difficult for humans to find our path, but at least the others will be able to follow us if they need to."

"Those humans were trackers," Cetenne disagreed. "If we're leaving a trail, they'll find us."

"We still can't do anything about it." Liliath retorted.

I stopped, hit by a thought. "Actually, there is."

I closed my eyes, calming my breathing and relaxing my stiffening muscles. The forest was silent, as were the twins, and when I was ready, I opened myself up to the magic. For the first time, I deliberately tried to call the storm.

The skies were moist, spewing their weepy drizzle over the woods. I let my mind enter the grey clouds, probing and testing.

Sense the atmosphere, Tamsen. Find what will work for you. Hyagrem's voice, remembered from our lessons, moved soothingly through my mind. I began to warm the tops of the clouds. The ice droplets that hung there began to melt, sending more water through the clouds.

After the top, come down to the center. There you can make your changes.

The sodden cloud bottoms began to darken as the water collected there. I

reached out to the north, where the mountains met the polar ice caps. Herding a bitter wind down into the clouds, I mixed it with the moisture.

Judge the amount you need. Be careful not to call too much.

I adjusted the levels. It began to snow, a steady, silent snow that would cover the ground in a matter of minutes, but not pile up to unmanageable depths.

Release the elements carefully...slowly...never all at once.

Letting go of my breath, I opened my eyes. Liliath smiled. "When you're ready, we can run for a while. That will help to put distance between us and our tracks."

"Let's run now," I replied.

* * * *

Two hours later, an inch or so of snow lay on the ground, just enough, as Cetenne said, to brush our tracks away without disturbing the shape of the forest floor. She was behind us now, as the drain of the flight and the magic had rendered me almost incapable of keeping up. I was miserably cold, my teeth chattering in my head, and I thought longingly of the cloak. I definitely couldn't wear it now. The rich browns would serve as a beacon against the blinding white of the first snow. The twins took turns, giving me their cloaks for a while against the chill. As the afternoon dragged on, I simply refused them.

It wouldn't be fair for all of us to come down ill.

By mid-afternoon, I was staggering in my effort to keep pace with the

fleet-footed Liliath. We stopped to rest for a moment near a rocky streambed while Liliath climbed a tree to look behind us.

"How much farther is it?" I asked Cetenne.

"I don't know," she answered. "Can you go on?"

She huddled down next to me, flipping her cloak over my shoulders. I attempted the wry grin she appreciated so much.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really."

"Then I suppose I'll have to."

Liliath clambered back to the ground. "I think we can make it in a couple of hours," she reported. She eyed my face, set now with pain, and noted, "If we had some sort of shelter, we could rest until dark and then continue."

"Dark is in less than an hour," I commented, squinting at the sky. "Let's just go on."

We started again and I tried to keep my mind on what my feet were doing, rather than how they were feeling. My toes were numb, which didn't make it any easier, but I soon focused my attention.

Then, without any warning at all, Brial stepped out of the trees.

I gasped, biting back a yell as I jumped back. Liliath whirled around as Cetenne muffled a cry. Brial held his hands up and came closer.

"Good gods, man!" I snapped. "You scared us half to death!"

"My apologies, my lady," he replied. "It was unintentional."

One glance at his face showed me a new strain on it, overlying the

weariness of earlier in the day. I frowned, wondering what it could be. Then it hit me: Brial had killed in order to cover our escape.

“How far are we from your grandparents’ home?”

“Less than two hours, I think,” she replied. “It is a difficult path, and Tamsen is weak. It will be hard.”

“Were you injured?” he asked, eyes roaming over me for signs of hurt. I had draped my mantle over my strapped arm, and had the other beneath it as well in an attempt for greater warmth. Brial didn’t notice my shoulder.

“She called the storm,” Cetenne informed him after a small pause, “and she can’t wear her cloak. The humans would spot it too easily. She is cold and tired and weakened by the magic.”

Loyally, she didn’t tell him the entire truth.

Brial stared at me. “You called the storm?”

I didn’t reply.

He tore off his cloak, wrapping it around me and pulling up the hood. “I will help you. We must get to your grandmother’s house in order to be safe. Men are searching throughout the forest. I caught sight of your grandfather helping the old one with two of my scouts. I did not see the rest. It is imperative that we get there as quickly as possible. Can you do it?”

The wry grin came more easily this time as the cloak, warm from his body, began to heat my chilled flesh. “I suppose I have to, don’t I? Let’s get on with it.”

* * * *

It took us closer to four hours to make it home. Brial, wisely, did not offer to carry or support me. Instead, he took the rear position. I felt comfortable for the first time that our tracks would go unnoticed.

The forest at night after the first snowfall is stark and lovely. The dark grey twisted shapes of branches leave shadows on the flawless skin of snow, which glistens in the reflected light. The snow muffles all sounds and the silence is as chilled and perfect as the ground. Normally, I would have enjoyed the beauty of the forest. Now I barely noticed it.

We traveled without speaking. I tried to give Brial his cloak back after a while, but he frowned so forbiddingly at me that I didn't attempt it again. Even Cetenne seemed miserable now, yet we moved on, flitting from tree to tree like the slim grey shadows that dance across the plains when clouds fly fast and hard overhead.

The little glade where the twins and I loved to go was the first thing I recognized in that entire horrible trip. The brook wasn't bubbling as merrily as usual; the temperatures had dropped and it was beginning to ice. It was a welcome sight. Exhausted as I was, I knew that home was only a few minutes away.

Then we were home. To human eyes, it appeared to be nothing more than a cluster of close-growing trees. Liliath stumbled to the guardians and laid her gloved hand upon them. The trees moved with a rustle and into the dark yet comforting house we went.

The chamber was large, and almost round. The ceiling was low, and tied bunches of dried herbs and flowers hung from the rafters, which looked almost like a woven mat of branches. Braziers nestled along the walls with stones

heaped in them: Elfstones, enchanted to give light and heat. Liliath passed by the nearest one and the stones flared into light. In the center of the smooth dirt floor, another pile of the magical rocks was heaped to form a broad hearth, with a long cooking rack on top of it. Many glowing, woven rugs in bright colors lay upon the floor, and along the far wall were several benches and a long table. On the opposite side of the hearth were a couple of couches and a chair or two. The walls were lime-painted, almost stark, but warmed by the lush hangings that adorned them. There were no doors or windows. It was a strange room, alien to human eyes but welcome to mine.

Cetenne glanced at the cooking pit and the stones fired up immediately into warmth. As the lights danced into brightness, I felt the tension of my muscles ease away. I put up my hand to unfasten Brial's cloak, but my numb fingers would not obey me. I couldn't work the catch. My shoulder screamed at me in protest and I dropped my hand with a gasp.

Brial took two steps to me, unfastened the pin, and donned the cloak himself. His black eyes rested on my shoulder and the arm that was still strapped to my side. "Introduce me to your guardians," he asked Liliath. "I will go to find your family and may need to get them in."

"You can't go yet," I protested. They all spun to look at me. "It won't take Cetenne a minute to warm up some soup. You need something hot to drink before we go back out for them."

His weary eyes softened a little around the edges. "I will take a moment to drink," he replied. "Then I will go out for them and you will stay here."

"But you will need our help!"

Cetenne spooned a thick broth from the pot we always kept in the cold cellar into mugs and was heating them with her power. As she handed the first

to Brial, he said, glancing at my strapped arm, "You will help me best by staying here."

Our eyes met over the rim of his mug as he drained it. I swayed on my feet and sat quickly on a couch so that I wouldn't fall. "I guess there's no way to argue with that."

He hesitated and laid a hand on my uninjured shoulder. "I will bring them home."

* * * *

After Brial left, the three of us sat around the cooking hearth. The events of the day had been swift and savage, not leaving us time to think. The twins were almost as exhausted as I was, but I had worked an immense magic that day and the aftereffects were not pleasant. I was stumbling when I went upstairs to replace my sodden traveling clothes with a warm woolen winter dress and hose. It took me a long time, as my right arm and shoulder were too painful to move, but I finally managed it. I wrapped a thick mantle around myself and returned downstairs.

The twins had also changed. Liliath was chopping herbs and vegetables for the pot that Cetenne was tending over the cooking pit.

"That's a good idea," I commented. "They will be very cold and hungry when they come home."

I went to the dried herbs hanging over Ar'ami's workbench. I selected sprigs for Hyagrem's medicine and then pulled some different ones down for myself. I poured water in the kettle and set it to heat on the stones, wincing as I

stood up.

"When are you going to tell us what is wrong with your arm?" Liliath asked wearily.

"When I figure out what it is," I replied. "I think I may have sprained it."

"Hurts?"

"What do you think?" Irritated, I began to throw some of my herbs into the mortar, grinding them with the pestle.

"What is really wrong, Tamsen?"

"The man in the forest...the one wearing the dark cloak," I began. "He was looking for me. I think he is my uncle."

The twins stared at me. I kept my eyes on the herbs I was grinding.

"He knows I am with the Elves. If anyone was hurt, it's my fault."

"How stupid!" came Cetenne's swift answer.

"I don't think it's stupid!" I snapped. "Our home is no longer a refuge. He can find us, Cetenne. My presence here is a danger to you all."

Cetenne did not reply. I finished mincing the herbs and threw them into a little cheesecloth bag. Tossing the bag into the kettle to steep in the hot water, I went to the chest where Kaldarte stored the linen rolls that she used for bandages. Selecting a roll, I placed it on the worktable near the cooking pit. Then I rummaged for more herbs to poultice my shoulder.

"Here," Liliath said, coming over to me. "I made one while you were upstairs."

She handed me the hot pouch of herbs. As I looked down at the poultice

in my hands, my eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you," I whispered. Liliath gave me a gentle hug and untied the neck of my gown so that she could apply it to my shoulder. Her breath hissed between her teeth.

"What is it?" Cetenne demanded.

"Look at this!" Liliath barked. "This shoulder is black and green and out of its socket! It's dislocated!"

The twins' eyes met mine.

"How long ago did this happen?" Liliath asked, touching the discolored joint with a gentle hand.

"Early," I replied. "I fell outside that thatch of evergreen trees. I knew we didn't have the time to reset it."

"We have to put it back into place now," Cetenne said somberly. "If it swells too much more, we won't be able to do anything with it."

"We could wait for Grandmother," Liliath pointed out.

Cetenne's gaze was steady as she met her sister's eyes. "We can't be certain that Grandmother will come back."

"Best get on with it then," I advised. "The sooner you do it, the sooner it's done."

* * * *

An hour later, my shoulder was back in place and my arm strapped to my

side. The procedure itself was excruciating. Now that the shoulder was back in its socket, the pain had dulled to a constant, throbbing ache. I refused to take anything for the pain, knowing the twins might need me at any moment. I curled against a low-backed couch and waited.

The twins excused themselves, one at a time, and left to take a hot bath. It sounded like a good idea, but I couldn't figure out how I was to get in and out of the tub. Liliath, guessing my dilemma, brought me a basin with a cloth and some of Kaldarte's violet-scented soap. I washed the grime from my skin there in front of the cooking pit and felt much better afterwards.

I have never been good at waiting. That long, bitter night as we sat silently around the warmth of the hearth was the longest night of my young life. Both of the twins looked haggard, or, at least, as haggard as young Elves can look. I did not even want to think of what I looked like.

Hours passed. Finally, Cetenne stood up.

"I can't stand it anymore," she declared. "I'm going out to watch for them."

"Don't leave any tracks," Liliath advised as her sister bundled up.

"We can take turns," I suggested. "That way none of us gets too cold."

"And just how were you planning to climb a tree?" Liliath asked.

I hadn't considered that. I thought about it for a minute and scowled. Liliath smiled smugly at me, as Cetenne fastened her cloak and pulled on her hood.

"I'll be back," she promised with a grin as she nudged aside the trees and slipped into the night.

Liliath and I were silent again. My thoughts swirled in my head. Clearly, remaining with Kaldarte and Ar'ami was out of the question. Just the thought of men coming into the glade made me blanch. If my uncle really was looking for me and had discovered my refuge with the Elves, it would not take long for him to discover us.

Obviously, I had to leave. But where would I go?

Cetenne returned, shivering as she brushed the snow from her shoulders. "They're coming home. I saw them in the forest."

Chapter Four

Kaldarte entered first, her face grim, followed by Brial and Ar'ami who supported Hyagrem between them. The old wizard's face was grey. Six Elven scouts trailed after them through the door. I waited, watching the door hopefully, but that was all. Sighing, I let my gaze drop to my hands. Whatever had happened was probably not good.

Liliath and Cetenne were already ladling the hot soup into mugs. I poured my tutor a cup of his medicine, carrying it to him with my good hand. Hyagrem collapsed into his big chair and wrapped his hands around the warm cup.

Kaldarte's sharp eyes rested on my shoulder. "What happened?"

"I dislocated it. The twins set it for me. I'm fine now."

"I'll check it later," she promised, hanging her cloak on a peg. "Thank you for having a warm welcome for us, girls."

Brial, after he had helped the old wizard to his chair, stood uncertainly near the door. Ar'ami glanced over at him.

"Sit, lad, before you fall," the older Elf advised. "The guardians will alert me if any humans draw near this place."

"I am fine, sir," Brial replied.

"Do me the courtesy of taking that as an order," Ar'ami said curtly.

Brial nodded and staggered as he tried to move to a couch, ending up on the floor instead. Once there, he did not try to move again. Instead, he drew his knees to his chest, laid his head against them, and closed his eyes.

The other Elves didn't seem to be in much better shape. They huddled near the hearth, accepting the soup the twins gave them and with exhaustion on their faces drank from the mugs. Brial did not eat. He stayed in his closed-off position.

"That was good thinking, Tamsen," Ar'ami said as he set his drained cup on the table. "Calling up the storm probably saved us."

I smiled. "You could tell it was me?"

"Usually, the temperature doesn't drop like that. We knew it was you."

I looked down at my hands. "It was all I could think of to do."

Kaldarte looked around. "In the morning, we'll search for the rest of our guard. Right now, we need rest. Liliath, you and Cetenne sleep together. Then we can put others in your room."

"You can use my room, too, Kaldarte," I said. "I doubt I can sleep tonight."

She nodded. "You're right, you probably won't. We'll keep you down here so that I can keep an eye on you." She turned to the scouts. "Go get some sleep in the rooms upstairs."

They nodded, too tired to protest. Ar'ami got to his feet, helping the dozing magician into his room. Kaldarte went to her herbs, pulling sprigs down

from the rafters with a small frown on her face.

"I need to give you something for that shoulder, Tamsen."

"I don't want anything," I lied.

"You need something for the swelling, at least," she said firmly. "Stop trying to be a hero."

The scouts shuffled up the stairs as Ar'ami returned to the room. "It's a wonder Hyagrem is alive. That trip could have killed him."

"He'll be better in the morning," his wife replied. "You should sleep."

"I'm going to speak to the guardians," he said, tying his cloak around him. "Then I'll sleep."

The twins left us, yawning. The room was warm and quiet and I readjusted a cushion under my injured arm. Brial had not moved.

Kaldarte poured two cups of her brew and gave one to me. The other she took to Brial. "Drink this, Brial," she said gently. "You must sleep. We will need your strength in the next few days."

I gulped my tea down without taking a breath. Most of Kaldarte's brews were tasty, but this one I knew from experience was particularly vile. [

Brial looked up at her with haunted eyes. "I failed my men," he muttered.

Kaldarte laid a calming hand on his arm, her amber eyes glowing strangely in the flickering light from the hearth. "You did not fail. You accomplished your primary responsibility and brought the girls to safety. Your men are accustomed to this forest. They will be all right."

He snorted. "I didn't have to help these three." He raised his head to

peer at her, his face wan and bitter. "They made their way through the forest, leaving very few tracks. Your foster-daughter called the storm and took off her cloak so the humans couldn't spot it; the maidens made their way here with her injured, never complaining. I did nothing."

"That is not true, Brial," Kaldarte replied quietly. "You and your scouts protected them. You got the girls on their way and then fell behind to prevent any from finding them. Your actions were honorable, and your task fulfilled."

Our eyes met again. The grief reflected in his speared me. I could feel the lassitude of the potion beginning to wash over me and I let my head fall to one side. Brial took the cup and drained it in one swallow as I had.

"Perhaps when I awake, the rest of my men will be here," he said cynically.

"We will find them all," Kaldarte promised, her eyes distant. "You have not failed your command, young Elf. Sleep now, and let your sorrow heal."

He dropped his head again. Kaldarte pushed him into a prone position on the floor by the hearth and flung a warm blanket over him. Brial did not argue any more. He simply closed his eyes with a sigh. Then she sat by him, stroking his forehead and humming a comforting tune.

Although the medicine made my head swim, distant twinges from my shoulder prevented me from dozing off. Kaldarte sat by Brial until he fell into a deep sleep. She raised her head and saw me still staring at them.

"You should be asleep, Tamsen," she said. Even her rich voice was tired.

"I can't sleep, Kaldarte," I confessed. "I am ashamed and frightened for you all."

"Ashamed, my child?" she asked in genuine astonishment. "What reasons

have you for shame?"

"I taunted him last night," I said, indicating the sleeping Elf with a nod of my head. "I didn't know his reasons for hating humans."

"It is a pastime of the young to do so," she said, her voice dismissing my guilt. "Brial has already forgotten."

"I hope so," I replied fervently.

"And your fear? Why do you fear for us and not for yourself?"

"I saw him," I whispered. "It was my uncle who attacked us. He knows I am with you. My presence here endangers you."

Kaldarte's face became grave. "I wondered if you had recognized him, Tamsen."

"I should leave," I insisted, "only I don't know where to go."

"Close your eyes, child," she ordered. "This, too, we will think about when you have rested. There is much for all of us to decide. We must rest, and you must heal. We still have time for the remainder."

"But what if -?"

"Sleep now," she repeated, and oddly enough, at that moment, I fell into a deep sleep, and dreamed once again of the orchard.

But this dream was different. This time, Brial Ka'breona was with me behind the tree, watching in horror as his friends burned next to the headless corpse of my mother.

* * * *

The next day was long. I awoke early, my shoulder so swollen and painful that I could not find a comfortable position. I had developed a fever overnight as well. Kaldarte took one look at my face as I struggled to sit up and bustled to my side.

“Lie back down, child,” she murmured, placing a cool hand on my forehead. “I have some medicine and juice for you. Let’s get that down you and then I’ll check your shoulder.”

I was too weak to protest, so Kaldarte dosed me with a vile potion and followed it with a cool cup of apple juice to rinse and refresh my mouth. A few minutes later, when the powerful effects of the medicine had begun, she untied the neck of my robe and removed the poultice from the night before.

I could see, by turning my head and peering down my nose, the livid bruising and swelling. Kaldarte gently probed the joint, checking that the shoulder was securely in the socket.

“This is quite serious, Tamsen,” she muttered. “The girls did a good job of replacing it, but it was left too long.”

“We didn’t have any other choice.”

“I’m going to pack it in snow for a while. Let’s see if that brings some of the swelling down. Then this poultice will work better.”

I grimaced. After the long, dreary cold of the day before, the last thing I wanted was to be chilly again. Once she’d wrapped my shoulder in linen and packed it in snow, Kaldarte brought me a cup of broth. The smell of the beef was not appealing; I had lived on an Elven diet for several years. Despite my distaste, Kaldarte sat by me and inexorably made me swallow every drop.

"You are also human," she pointed out. "Your body requires meat from time to time, especially if it is trying to heal itself."

It was then that I noticed Brial was awake. How long he had watched in silence, I could not say. He stretched his long, lean legs and rose. Kaldarte looked up at him and smiled.

"It is still very early, Brial," she commented. "You should rest longer."

"I must find the rest of my squad."

"Ar'ami will be back in a few minutes," Kaldarte informed him. "You must eat before you do anything. Wait for him."

Brial acknowledged this with an inclination of his head, as Kaldarte gave him some porridge. He sat cross-legged by the hearth, eating his breakfast quickly and neatly.

Ar'ami brushed aside the guardians and came into the chamber. Seeing me awake, he came to stand beside my couch, touching my cheek as he had when I was younger. "Not feeling very well, are you lass?"

"I'm all right," I lied, smiling up at my foster father.

Ar'ami turned to Brial, who had stood when the older Elf entered. "Go wake your men, lad. We'll need to get them fed and out. The day is beautiful and none of our enemies are nearby."

"Yes, sir," Brial replied, starting for the stairs. He paused at the foot, turning back to say, "I'll leave two of them here, shall I?"

Ar'ami nodded and Brial continued up the stairs.

"How is the old one?" Ar'ami asked his wife.

“Very ill. He has fluid in his lungs.”

Ar’ami mumbled something under his breath, which I knew was a curse he was too polite to say aloud with me in the room. Kaldarte tightened her mouth as she came to take the snow pack from my very cold shoulder. The snow had helped to numb it. I could not resist a small yelp when the hot poultice replaced the icy pack, but Kaldarte had it secured and my arm bound again quickly. Within a few minutes, the pain was bearable again.

“I’ll do this again later this morning,” she said, more to herself than to me. “You should try to sleep now, child.”

“I’ll be fine. Take care of Hyagrem,” I urged.

“He is sleeping well. It is a risk that elders take when they go into the cold, Tamsen. Hyagrem is sick, but he will be better soon.” Her eyes held mine in reassurance until I nodded in acknowledgment.

The Elven scouts started to come down the stairs, thanking Kaldarte quietly for their beds and breakfasts. They, too, dispatched their meals speedily. Brial selected two of the younger Elves to remain on guard in our clearing and Ar’ami took them outside to introduce them to the guardians. While they were gone, Brial made his way to my side.

I looked up at him curiously. His face, although still austere, had lost that grim mask of blandness. He stared down at me for a moment, his beautiful black eyes quizzical, as if deciding something. I moved restlessly and jarred my shoulder, which reminded me not to move.

“You were very brave yesterday, Tamsen Ka’antira,” he said at last, his velvety voice soft. “I have misjudged you. I am sorry.”

“I didn’t exactly go out of my way to create a good first impression,” I

pointed out.

He grinned and the expression lit his face up with an unexpected charm.
“Neither did I.”

Obviously, I couldn’t agree and be polite, so I merely smiled at him. Brial adjusted the cushion I had tried to move.

“Thank you,” I said.

“If you had told me you were injured, I would not have pushed you so.”

“It was more important to get here.”

“I admire your courage. Your foster family loves and respects you. If I had been more clear-sighted, I would have seen that. I regret my hard words to you. I will try to ‘overcome my prejudices’ in the future.”

I winced at the quotation. He didn’t say anything else, only stood there for a moment longer until Ar’ami reentered the room.

“It’s time,” he announced. “Let’s be off.”

The scouts rose to their feet, picking up their bows and quivers from where they had been left for the night. Brial smiled encouragingly at me once more. Then they were gone.

* * * *

The next few days were busy for everyone except me. Ar’ami and the Elven scouts returned late that afternoon with the missing men, two of them injured. Kaldarte put them both in my room, leaving me in the main chamber at

my request. One had received a sword swipe that glanced off his collarbone, while the other had an arrow broken off in his upper right thigh. Neither was gravely injured, and after Kaldarte's treatments were on their feet again in a few days.

Hyagrem improved. I spent several hours a day trying to entertain the irritable old man, until he finally shooed me from his room with the brusque order, "Go on, now! I don't need you to read for me and am perfectly capable of holding a book for myself!"

"He's getting better," Kaldarte noted with pursed lips, after I complained to her of his attitude. "It's a good sign."

The twins spent a great deal of time helping the ambulatory scouts with their guard duties, showing them the hidden ways through our forest. Every time one of them returned, she came to report to me.

"The troop of men is tracking quite close to here," Cetenne informed me on the third afternoon. "Brial laid down some false trails a couple of leagues away from their location, leading them back into the heart of the wood. We'll know tomorrow if we were successful."

I didn't comment, instead sinking back into the thoughts that had pounded out the same theme since we arrived safely at home: I need to leave. My uncle's men were obviously not going to give up in their search and I felt that my presence was a growing daily danger to the Elves whom I loved.

Perhaps taking its cue from my magically induced snowstorm, the season blasted into winter and a natural blizzard on the fifth day buried much of the forest in drifts to the waist. The scouts had to explore farther every day to track the soldiers and on the eighth day pronounced that they had exited the wood and hurried in the direction of Rantendeux. We all breathed easier at the news

and Brial went with three of his scouts to follow the soldiers and ascertain that they didn't double back on us without our knowledge.

My shoulder was healing, but slowly. The swelling wouldn't recede, so Kaldarte drained some of the fluid from it. The procedure left me weak and shaking and fever set in with redoubled force. It took several days to reduce, and when it finally broke I improved more rapidly.

In the meantime, Brial and his men returned. They spent a couple of days building small shelters up in the trees, where they could watch for intruders. Every day, like clockwork, the guards changed. Ar'ami had coaxed the guardian trees into providing another chamber above our sleeping rooms and there the scouts had their bunkroom. They joined us for meals, and as I grew to know them better I began to appreciate their characteristic serenity.

As soon as I was well enough, I exercised my injured shoulder. The injury had stiffened, both from the severity of the dislocation as well as the onslaught of winter. I began using small objects, such as deadfall or stones, and progressed to heavier pieces as my arm improved.

Finally, four weeks later, everything got better at once. The weather improved, my arm wasn't as painful, I was rapidly regaining strength, and Hyagrem's irritability had driven him from his chamber. During my enforced inactivity, I had spent a great deal of time thinking. It was time to broach my plan to the family.

* * * *

"I have something to tell all of you," I announced one evening after

dinner. "I am leaving soon; I need to see about some things."

A painful silence met my ears. I didn't look around so I couldn't gauge anyone's reactions. After a brief, shocked moment, Kaldarte spoke up. "Why, precisely, would you want to do that?"

"The human patrol tracked us very close to here. It is folly to think that they cannot find their way back. If I remain, I place you all in danger. I can only protect you if I leave."

I risked a straight look at Kaldarte. Her face was carefully blank. "I see," she murmured. "So, you only wish to protect us?"

"Well..." my voice trailed off. "No. Not exactly. I feel I must do things in the world of men. I also have an obligation to Asphodel I must fulfill. It is time for me to begin my work. I must bring my lands back and make them safe for my people."

"If you resurface in Asphodel now, they will come and destroy you," Cetenne argued. "Your best weapon against them is remaining hidden."

"Perhaps you are right," I conceded. "I can at least, however, begin to lay the foundations for my future. I can only do that if I'm out there."

"You seem to have given this great thought," Kaldarte noted. "Where do you intend to go?"

I shifted my position slightly on the couch. "I thought of going to Geochon first. It is the human capital, after all, and there I should be able to pick up information."

"To go to Geochon, you would have to travel quite a distance," Kaldarte said. "The forest would not shelter you for long."

"No, the woods won't protect me for long. But, I have to believe that my departure would lessen the chances of anyone thinking I had anything to do with the Elves."

"How are we supposed to protect you?" Brial asked, his tone belligerent.

I looked at him in amazement. Since our talk a few weeks before, he had not approached me or I him. Our interactions were limited to the friendly conversations all of us had around the hearth, and only then when others led the talk.

"Protect me?" My voice rose. "I think I am skilled enough in the things Ar'ami taught me. I will do very well on an open road."

The other comment I would have made--could have made--hung silently between us: *Besides, I have the power to protect myself from random humans, don't you think?*

"It's not as if I can march into Geochon with a guard of Elves," I continued, trying to maintain a reasonable tone of voice. "My uncle is looking for a young, frightened girl whom he thinks is in this forest, protected by Elves. He won't be looking for me to be alone on a road heading for the capital."

"You don't know that," he said. "You don't really know anything about him."

"I know he killed my parents while I watched," I replied coolly. "I know he is a sorcerer. That is, I think, all I need to know."

My eyes met and held his for a moment. "I intend to track away from here in the forest, using the road for my guide. Once I am on the highway that leads to Geochon, I can blend in with the other travelers. Maybe, if I'm lucky, one of the merchant caravans can take me up from the south. I think that should

hide me adequately.”

“What are you going to do once you reach the capital?” Ar’ami asked.

“We need to find out what is going in the world around us. I remember names from my parents’ time. I’ll check on some of them. One name in particular was in a lot of my father’s correspondence: the Marquis de Beotte. Perhaps I can run into him. I think I will be able to discover what the general plans are for Asphodel and possibly the Elves in a short time. I’ll try to gain access to the Court. If Spesialle has any plans for Asphodel, or the Elves, I should be able to discover them there. I have enough gold to establish myself, at least for a short while.”

“The Marquis de Beotte, did you say?” Hyagrem asked, pursing his lips.

“Yes. I found letters from him in my father’s things.”

“It’s a good idea,” Hyagrem said, his wise old eyes gleaming. “Knowledge of the enemy is a mighty weapon. I know several good men in Geochon; men who hate Gabril de Spesialle and will assist you at my word, Tamsen. In the spring, I’ll join you in the city and we can take up our studies.”

“How is she supposed to get there?” Brial demanded. “Walk? By herself? In the winter when there is an evil wizard searching for her?”

“Of course not,” Hyagrem retorted irritably. “There are farmsteads all along the way she’s going. She can buy a horse, even two if she needs one for her luggage.”

“I disagree with this entire venture,” Brial continued. “We cannot protect the princess if she is off by herself among humans.”

“Hold on just a minute!” I interrupted. “First off, I am not a ‘princess.’ I am a half-Elven orphan who was born into the wrong family. Second, off, I

believe your mandate was to protect this clearing and the people in it. I will not be here, so that doesn't include me. Third, I am quite capable of taking care of myself. I am not wholly unprotected, as I think you will agree. But what is most important: no one will think to look for me there. They will be too busy looking for me here."

Brial was silent, light from the Elfstones flickering over his fine-drawn face. "You endanger yourself needlessly," he said finally. "A bodyguard has always protected the Ka'antira heir."

"Not needlessly," I replied. "Isolated here in the forest, I may be safer, in your opinion, but we are ignorant as to what is going on. It is essential that we know!"

"Know what?"

"I don't know. I just...I feel there are events happening about which we need to know. I can't believe that the destruction of my home and the execution of my parents are accidental. They fit into a purpose, a much larger purpose than we have perceived. Ask yourself this: why would my uncle have been in the forest so near to us, obviously looking for me? How could he have known we were to be there? There are only two answers: first, our blood and magic have attuned him and me so strongly that I cannot hide from him. If that is the case, then I need to be away from here tonight! The second option is very simple, and very sad."

Brial's eyes met mine with that knowledge rising within him.

"The second option is that someone in Leselle told him where you'd be," Liliath finished for me. "An Elf."

"Exactly. In so doing, that Elf will have led humans to the very doors of Leselle," I noted. "If that is the case, then we must be in a position to discover

what their plans may be. The only way to find this knowledge is to go to Geochon."

"We'll send a messenger to Lamec." Kaldarte stared at me with the distant gaze showing her words came from her power as Seer. "You are right, my child: the answer to this mystery lies in the human capital. I think perhaps that your plan will bring about changes in your life and circumstance that are important, more important than you know."

Her eyes rested on me with the quiet certainty of the visionary behind them. Even as we discussed the particulars of my plan, I grew uneasy from her steady regard.

Chapter Five

The trip to Asphodel would take most of one day, leaving me the rest of the day and the night to complete my travel gear. We would have another two days on the small road that led to the main thoroughfare, which was still in the forest, so the Elves would accompany me on that track as well. With any luck, I could come across one of the region's small, obscure farms before the forest ended and so complete my disguise in the security of the woods.

It took little time for me to ready myself for departure. The most important thing was to make it from the woods into Asphodel. By following the road outside the castle, I could speedily make my way to the main road and obscurity. There was only one sticking point: no one would allow me to get to the road by myself. Kaldarte insisted that the Elven scouts accompany me at least that far and as in times past, I lost that argument too.

Hyagrem had given me a letter to one of his trusted friends, who would help to establish me in the city. He would join me in late spring.

One cold morning a month after the ambush in the woods, then, we left Ar'ami's home: half of the scouts, Brial, and me. No one spoke as we made our way through the forest. The mild spell of the last few weeks was over and the air was bitterly cold. We made good time through the forest and arrived at Asphodel close to sunset.

Creeping through the dead, barren orchards reinforced my sense of unease at returning to my old home. Against the purity of the snow, the trees looked like twisted wraiths, guarding the immense blackened tomb of a giant. Huge shadows writhed among the trees. We came through the broken orchard wall and the sight of my ruined home hit me like a blow. I stopped, my breath catching in my throat, and my eyes burning with tears.

The outlines of the castle were blackened peaks against the horizon. The attackers had damaged the western tower. In place of the stairs was a pile of tumbled, sooty stones. The roof of the great hall had collapsed inward, leaving forked prongs reaching to the sky. The east tower seemed intact, although it, too, was black and grim. I remembered my home as a lovely, golden place, with its smooth, worn stone walls and broad courtyard. Now it was a towering, ominous wreck no longer my home, but a ruin.

The grounds had a gloomy atmosphere, with brown, dead-looking stalks sticking up through the snow and branches from the untended orchards making weird shapes on the landscape. Somewhere, a door screeched on a loose hinge, caught by the breeze and lending an eerie rejoinder to my already frayed nerves. Once again, I scanned the area, turning to look in all directions. Everything was silent, lonely in the chilling afternoon.

I purposely avoided the spot on the terrace where I had seen my mother die. Instead, I made for the west tower, the site of my room, those of my parents, as well as the library and kitchens. Although Ar'ami had come to Asphodel and gathered such things as he found untouched, I wanted to look for myself. Perhaps things were yet remaining of my family's, particularly in the library.

My eyes narrowed as the thought entered my head. The library, and my parents' bedchamber, might hold some clues for me in an as yet

unacknowledged search. Perhaps, I could discover things about my birthright that would become important later.

Brial slithered up beside me. "No one is close," he whispered. "We can go on."

I drew in my breath sharply, the familiarity of his presence at my side in this place slamming my dream back into my mind. I didn't reply, not trusting myself. Instead, I nodded and continued through the orchards, into the courtyard garden. The Elves followed me, not even making the tiniest rustle against the frozen snow. We skimmed through the courtyard and into the castle through the kitchen as I had done as a child avoiding the impatient summons of my nurse.

Inside, the castle was even more desolate. The kitchen was dark, cold, and grimy. It showed signs of a struggle of some sort, but I did not take the time to investigate. Apparently, the fire had been extinguished before it reached the rear wing of the house. I breathed a sigh of relief and quickly made my way to the back stairs that led to the upper chambers. It, too, was dark and cluttered with various articles scattered over the steps. I avoided all of them the best I could, and, taking the steps two at a time, ran quickly to the next floor.

Poking my head through the tattered drape that cloaked the arched doorway to the second floor, I stopped and stared in dismay at the sight that greeted my eyes. This hallway had once been broad and gracious, with rich tapestries on the walls, a polished stone floor, and sconces with the heavy, dripping candles my mother made every fall. Now it was stark and shadowed, the tapestries ripped from the walls and dust scuttling across the dingy floors. I took a deep breath, and stepped into the hall. No sounds echoed in the house. I stared at the two doors on my right side and the broad stair that led upstairs past them. I tiptoed to the first door and opened it, Brial just behind me with his

hand upon his sword.

It was my father's little study, where he kept his books and letters. He had spent his late afternoons there, going over estate matters with his reeve and writing letters to friends and business acquaintances at the Court. The closed door had helped to protect the study from the depredations of nature; I couldn't guess why the invaders hadn't searched the room thoroughly. I wound around the desk, and sat in his heavy chair. Stacked neatly in a pile, his papers were unmoved; quills and ink stood where he had always kept them. Several canvas bags stuffed with rolled parchments stood untouched on the shelves. I looked through some of them, finding only receipts of sales and correspondence with friends, yellowing and mildewed. Then I turned my attention to various heavy, lidded boxes I remembered seeing there.

In the first was a bundle of letters tied with string, a heavy ring, and two keys. The ring I recognized as my father's seal, with which he stamped his correspondence. He never wore it to work in the orchards or the fields, so finding it tucked into the coffer with his correspondence was not unusual. It was a heavy, cabochon red stone, set in silver, carved with the long, trumpet-shaped narcissus that grew around our orchards and from which we had taken our name and aspect. As the last of the house of Asphodel, it was now mine, so I slipped it onto my finger. Even though Prosper de Asphodel had not been a large man, the ring was still too big for my finger so I shoved it onto the thumb of my right hand.

The keys I did not recognize, but I thought that they might very well be useful, so I put them in my pouch. I went on to the next box.

In it were two small books. I turned the pages of the first, and recognized the name "Asphodel." I began to read.

"The family of Asphodel, with its family seat in the northern province of

Ansienne, was founded in the year 773 by the man Priapos. This young man, who owned a small orchard, saved the king Leogeney as he was —“

I shut the book, and took one of the canvas bags from the wall. Dumping the parchment rolls from it, I put both books into my pack. Nothing else of value was in the room, and after I finished my search, quietly stepped into the hall. Although all was silent, Brial was wary as we sped through the darkened hallway.

We reached the relative safety of my parents' chamber and two of the scouts went in search of heavy drapes to cover the door and arched broken windows. Once the heavy, moldy fabric covered the apertures, I walked to the fireplace. Placing some of the Elfstones in my pack onto the hearth, I called fire into them. Almost instantly, the chamber warmed.

I glanced around the room. Everything was depressing, the furniture broken, the fabrics rotting. I sighed and sat before the hearth, pulling my knees under my cloak.

Brial had sent his scouts to scour the castle for signs of any other inhabitants. After they left, he dropped the drape before the door, arranging it to hide the light. When he turned, he stood and gazed around the room.

“This was your room?” he questioned, coming to my side. When I did not answer, he removed his cloak, tossing it over the grimy surface of the bench that stood by the hearth. Pulling wine, bread and cheese from his pack, he set them out on his cloak and began to pace the room.

“My parents' chambers,” I corrected, in a faraway voice. “They were very good people. My father, Prosper, was a noble, true, but first he was a farmer. When he inherited Asphodel, he took over the orchards and brought them back to life. We spent many afternoons there, among the trees, and they all seemed to

know him. Everyone loved him, but particularly my mother. She was very beautiful. All of the poor folk from around here would bring their illnesses to her and she would heal them. My parents were very much in love. They also loved me. At night, after dinner, we would all sit in here, around this hearth, and Mother would sing or tell me stories. My father would sit on this bench, with his papers and books on a small table in front of him, and would pretend not to listen. We knew he paid attention to the stories, because he never got any work done. My mother had a big cloth-covered chair, big enough for both of us, and I would cuddle next to her as she spoke. She would brush my hair..."

My voice trailed off, and I came back to myself with a jerk. I tore off a hunk of bread, and slanted a look at Brial. His face was blank, his eyes far-off as if he saw the scene I had described for him. Then he jumped to his feet, hurried to the door, and loosened his sword.

"All is well, Brial," a voice came through the drape. "There is no one else in the castle."

Brial relaxed and two of the scouts reentered the room. Brial's hand loosened from the hilt. "Set up positions along this hall."

The scouts nodded, took bread and cheese for themselves and their comrades, and left again.

I pretended to be busy with my meal. Brial sat next to me, tearing off his own chunk of bread. For a while, we were silent, sharing our meal but not our thoughts. Finally, looking up, my eyes caught his. The expression startled me: it was determined, yet apprehensive. There was also a black sparkle of mischief. A sneaking suspicion darted into my brain. I set down the last piece of cheese.

"What are you thinking?"

Brial did not react. He merely looked up at me and said, "I'm coming

with you.”

“I don’t think so.” I said flatly. “What in the world gave you such a crazy idea?”

“Actually,” he replied, “it was your tutor.”

“Hyagrem? I don’t believe it!”

Brial almost cracked a grin. He handed me a folded note of parchment from his pouch. I opened it, only to read the following:

Tamsen,

Your aunt and I have decided to send you to an old friend of mine in Geochon, Mariol. He frequently has Elves stay with him as his guests, and is high enough in court circles that this goes unremarked. We wish Brial to accompany you, and this is the best way to accomplish that. Don’t lose your temper with him, and don’t go off by yourself. I will see you in late spring.

Hyagrem

P.S. You didn’t really think that we’d let you trek across the kingdom by yourself in the winter, did you? I thought I had taught you better than that.

In my mind’s eye, I could see Hyagrem chuckling as he penned the note. I read it a second time, just to make sure that I had the right to be as angry with them as I was going to be.

Then I looked back up at Brial. His face was its usual inscrutable self, but I caught the corners of his mouth twitching. “Just when, precisely,” I began in my coolest voice, “was this decided?”

“The day after you told us you were leaving,” came the noncommittal

reply.

"I see," I said, rising to my feet. I went to my mother's old dressing table, running my fingers along the smooth-edged top. When my hands came away, they were grimy with thick, oily soot. I wiped my fingers on my cloak.

"I don't want you to go," I said finally. "Not mentioning the fact that it will jeopardize my goals there, Geochon will be very dangerous for you."

"Not exactly," he argued. "According to Hyagrem, this Mariol has a reputation for affinity with the Elves. Hyagrem thinks that we can pull off my presence as coincidental to yours. This way, you will have protection on the road as well as the city. I will remain with you until Hyagrem arrives and possibly longer depending on the circumstances."

He paused, and then added, "Besides, it's not as if you have a choice."

"I can do this more easily on my own," I said stubbornly.

Brial rose from his seated position and came to stand in front of me, and I found myself admiring the lithe grace with which he moved. "It is my duty to protect you, and if I must go into the human capital to do so, I will. The Seer has ordered me to stand as your protector. I will die when it is my time to die, and not before. Nothing will ever sway the grip of Death when it reaches for you. Have some faith in me, Tamsen Ka'antira, and I will return it."

His voice was calm and soothing, not the velvety indifference I was accustomed to hearing from him. I sighed and turned back to the hearth. Briefly, I touched the fire in the Elfstones and the light died in the hearth. Only one of the rocks was glowing with a cold, blue-white light. I bent to pick it up and then reached for the hidden catches that opened the secret room behind the massive stone fireplace.

“Well, then,” I said quietly. “Perhaps you can help me get our things together for our journey.”

* * * *

I had no argument to give him. My obedience to my teachers prevented me from resisting this new turn of events. All that night, I dozed uncomfortably in the musty bed of my parents, trying to think of a way to deny Brial’s company. I knew I couldn’t sneak out early, because he would just track me down and show up (curse him) when I thought I was in the clear. I didn’t have the authority to send him packing, either. Even if I did, he would just ignore me. Just before dawn, I decided that letting him go along would be best.

I had found some of my father’s things tucked away in one of the large trunks in my parents’ chamber. I gave these to Brial with a snide remark about not dressing like an Elf. He took the clothes, refrained from comment, and turned up at daybreak clad in human clothes as if he had always worn them.

We snuck out of the castle in the wintry, grey half-light of the morning, cutting into the woods and keeping along the line of the road. This close to the ruined castle, the road was tiny and convoluted. We followed it surreptitiously for most of the day, camping that night in a secluded clearing about half a mile into the woods. The next day was similar, without sighting anyone else. The few small farms tucked into the woods were dark and empty. Brial sent the scouts back to Ar’ami about midmorning and we came out onto the road.

* * * *

The next afternoon, we intersected the main thoroughfare of the kingdom. Ansienne was one of the larger kingdoms, stretching from sea to mountains. Many people traveled the road to Geochon. The snow was mostly gone from the road, which was paved with flat stones. Brial looked in both directions before we stepped from the cover of the forest. "No one is in sight."

"Best get on the road, then."

We clambered out of the trees and onto the road. Brial pulled his hood further forward on his face, shadowing his face. No one in their right mind would mistake those delicate features as wholly human whether they caught sight of Brial's distinctive ears or not.

"Do I look human?" he asked with a grin in his voice.

I turned and looked him up and down. "No. You look like an Elf trying to look like a human."

He smirked at me and set out on the road, shouldering his pack. "How long until we reach a farm?"

I squinted ahead, shielding my eyes from the glare of sun on snow. "I remember a village not too much farther. We'll stop there for the night, and see about finding horses there."

"Why would we stop in a village?"

"Because that's what humans do when they've been on the road all day," I answered. "They go to an inn, eat dinner, drink beer, gossip with other travelers, and sleep on lumpy mattresses."

He looked chagrined. I laughed, suddenly feeling much better about

having a companion.

* * * *

Imper was the name of the village. It was a prosperous place, situated on the banks of the Ilia River, which was named after an ancient war I'd read about. The village was also a popular stopping place for travelers. We found two inns from which to choose. After one look at Brial's disgusted expression, I decided to go for the more expensive option. It was a spreading brick complex, called 'The Lorraine' and featured a grey tabby cat on its sign.

As we entered, I realized why. Several well-fed cats lazed in the huge common room, some of them occupying chairs near the hearth, others sunning themselves in the warm glow of the late afternoon sun. I tripped over one, an immensely fat black cat with long hair, and Brial grabbed my elbow to keep me from falling.

"What can I do for ye today?" a voice growled. I turned to see a hugely rounded man waddling toward us.

"I - I'm sorry! I didn't see your cat!" I apologized. "We only wanted to rent a room for the night, and perhaps get something hot to eat."

"Ah well, then," he replied, suspicion easing from his plump features. "I can be helpin' ye then! That'll be two denarii for both of you, milady. It's a good room, right by the chimney so it stays nice and warm. Me wife's got a good stew on for dinner and some dried apple pies in the oven."

I dug into the purse at my side and pulled out two silver coins. "Here you go, innkeeper. Perhaps you can help me in another matter. I want to buy a

couple of good horses. My husband and I are on our way to visit relatives in Geochon, and I didn't realize the snows had started already here."

"Aye, 'tis bad weather to be traveling on yer feet. Where're ye headin' from?"

"Our home is south of Beotte," I replied, adding with a grin, "And I don't want to get to the capital with frozen feet."

"A goodly distance, milady," he observed. "Lemme pull up some chairs by the hearth - out, damned cat! - so that ye kin get warm. Me name's Genun, by the way."

Genun stuck out a huge hairy paw for me to shake. I did so with a smile, introducing myself as Elyssia, and Brial as my husband Hyagrem. Brial smiled and shook the innkeeper's hand as well, although I saw his neck redden at his new name.

Brial unfastened his cloak, allowing the innkeeper to hang it by the fire to dry, but kept the jaunty black velvet hat I had given him resolutely down over his ears. He took care to sit in a shadowed spot and spoke very little. Genun hustled back to us with steaming mugs of hot cider.

"Thank you, sir," I said, stripping off my gloves and wrapping my fingers around the cup. "Once we're warm, can I impose on you to direct me to someone who would sell me some horses?"

"As a matter of fact," Genun replied his eyes guilelessly wide, "I happen to have a couple of horses I could stand to get rid of."

"Oh, really?"

"Yep. They're good horses, but I ain't got no need for 'em. They were left with me by a couple of fellers to pay their bill. Thought it was a good idea at the

time, but it costs a lot to feed 'em. I'll take you out to look at 'em later."

"Thank you," I said and Genun bustled back to his work, swiping down the tables in the common room with a rag and extricating cats from prime seats.

"Hyagrem?" Brial asked in a strangled whisper.

"Couldn't think of another name. You could have helped!"

"You were doing well on your own."

* * * *

After we warmed up, I sent Brial up to our room to 'rest.' Genun looked surprised at this. As we walked to the stables, therefore, I told him a story.

"My husband," I sighed in a long-suffering way. "It's an arranged marriage, obviously. He has more gold than wits and I have to do everything. All he has done for the last two days is whine and complain. It's worth it to me to get horses just so I can travel farther away from him."

"Seems fairly useless," was Genun's opinion.

"Oh, he is! You see," I dropped my voice to a confidential whisper. "I'm really hoping that in Geochon he'll do something really stupid so I can divorce him. I'm old enough now to pick out my own husband, and it won't be a dandyish fop like Hyagrem."

"Can't say as I blame you, my lady," Genun replied, sliding the stable door back and gesturing for me to enter first.

The light from the doors fell upon three horses. Three pairs of intelligent

eyes turned to us as we entered. Two pairs belonged to sturdy, tall horses – blood bays, with white blazes on their foreheads. The other set of eyes belonged to a little spotted horse. It whinnied a friendly hello at me as I paused at his stall.

I laughed, held my hand out flat and offered him a piece of apple from my palm. The little horse took it delicately and allowed me to stroke his long, soft nose. “Sweet disposition.”

“Me youngest grandson’s,” Genun replied. “He plumb loves that horse.”

I watched as he led the other two from their stalls, following them into the stable yard. They were closely matched; tall, with broad muscled chests.

“What beauties!” I breathed.

“Them fellers as left ‘em here left the tack and all.”

“Could I saddle one up and try it out?”

“Of course. Hold ‘em for a second and I’ll go get their gear.” Genun handed me the lead ropes and tottered back into the stable. I gave each horse an apple slice and petted him or her while I waited.

After a few minutes’ ride, it was obvious that they were well-trained horses. I dismounted and turned to unbuckle the girth. “Fabulous horse,” I noted with my back to the innkeeper. “How long were your guests in the inn? It’s my guess that these horses are worth a lot more than one night’s lodging.”

“They were here for a bit over a fortnight, milady. I told ‘em at the time that the horses was too much, but they didn’t seem to care any. They’d gone to visit some friends who live hereabouts, and when they got there found their house all burned and no one there. They spent their time tryin’ to track their friends down, and was discouraged like when they left.”

My hands stilled abruptly on the harness buckles. "That's sad. House burned down, you say?"

"Yeah, some nobleman's castle. The manor at Asphodel."

"Asphodel? Never heard of it."

"Be surprised if ye had. Castle burned down—let me think--six years ago now. The lord, name of Prosper, was a well-liked feller round these parts, and most folk say his lady wife was as purty and kind as a story. Some snot-nosed nobleman burned down their home and killed 'em, along with most of their folk." Genun spat on the ground. "'Twas a sad day fer us round here when we heard."

"I see." I kept my voice calm while I tried to hide my shaking hands under the saddle. "So, the men that left these here, were they nobles too?"

"I can't rightly say, milady. They'd brought the horses, ye see, fer any of the family that might've survived. Very nice folk, though."

"Very well then," I switched the subject. "How much for the pair of these and all their tack?"

As we led the horse into the barn, the bargaining began.

* * * *

Brial stayed in our room that night for dinner, which I brought up to him. He was edgy, but strangely excited as well. I could only conclude that he was proud of himself for fooling one elderly human innkeeper into thinking that he was a useless human noble. The food was good and hot, with the apples in a

delicate, flaky crust that disintegrated when you bit into it. I had bought the horses for five gold denarii, which was a fair price for both parties. I slept that night in the comfortable bed, while Brial rolled himself into both our cloaks in front of the door.

The next morning, however, I had a nasty shock.

Chapter Six

“What do you mean, you can’t ride?” I demanded as we walked the horses through the village.

He sent me a disdainful look. “Why should I know how to ride? Are there horses that can climb trees?”

I swore.

“It shouldn’t take long to learn,” he said, a little defensively.

I swore some more.

Brial leaned into his horse’s ear, hiding a grin. He whispered into the horse’s ear. The beast first tossed his head and then stood as if listening.

I sighed. “All right, watch me mount. We’ll have to do this as we go along, so you’ll need to pay attention.”

I put my left foot into the stirrup and swung my right leg over the saddle. Once I settled my feet and the voluminous skirts of my mother’s riding habit, I slid the reins through my gloved fingers and turned to Brial.

“Did you see how to do that?”

Brial grinned again. “Yes.”

He mounted his horse, somehow managing to look competent as he did so. I took a minute to show him how to hold the reins and how to control the horse. Then we set off at an easy walk.

* * * *

The first day, despite Brial's growing enjoyment, I limited our riding time. I remembered the pain of my first long ride and I had not been in the saddle since I'd fled Asphodel. Even so, when we pulled into another village late that afternoon, my thighs were sore and bruised.

Brial, naturally, didn't hurt at all.

I spent the first two stiff, uncomfortable hours trying to decide if I hated him, and only forgave him when he went down for food and brought it to me in our chamber.

The second day, we were more comfortable on our horses. We traveled over flat, snowy plains that rolled down to the sea. There were a few farms and several villages of varying sizes. We occasionally ran into fellow travelers on the road, but apart from a smile and a wave had no contact with them.

Early that afternoon, greyish-white clouds thickened overhead. Brial looked up at the sky, then at me. "Snow," we said simultaneously.

"We'll need to stop for shelter in the next village we come to." I tucked a loose strand of hair back into my hood.

"Any idea on how far that is?"

"No. I haven't been on this road since I was a child."

We picked up our pace, then, nudging the horses into quick trots. I pulled the hood more closely around my head and traded hands on the reins, keeping one inside my cloak to warm. We made good speed, even as the first fluffy white flakes began to spit down from the stormy sky.

Within an hour, it was impossible to see further than twenty feet. I had taken the lead, as I was more familiar with horses. I had pulled my cloak so far forward, however, that I didn't see the men charging at us from the sides of the road.

"Get down!" Brial shouted hoarsely.

As I turned to see what was going on, someone hurled me out of the saddle. I landed on my back with the breath knocked from me.

A large man hovered into my line of sight. He grinned, three blackened, broken teeth hanging precariously from his upper jaw. I lay there, trying to gasp air back into my lungs as he leered at me.

"Gots us a purty gel here boys!" he roared, bending down and picking me up by the front of my cloak. I felt the fabric rip under his dirty fingers and a cold realization surged through me.

My breath came back into my chest with a whoosh and I gulped in fresh air. Then my eyes narrowed. "I am giving you one chance to back away from me," I said, my voice still a bit breathless.

He laughed, throwing back his head, and the teeth teetered in his gums. Behind me, I heard steel on steel and knew that Brial was fighting. The man swept me against him with one blow of his meaty arm. Try as I might, I couldn't free myself. As I closed my eyes and reached for the magic, I felt his ugly face nuzzle into my hair.

Two things happened next. As gorge rose in my throat at the man's touch, an electric charge zipped out from me, blasting the ruffian back with an oath. Then a sword point thrust through the front of his beefy chest. I watched, stunned, as the outlaw slid down the cold steel edge, falling almost in slow motion to puddle at my feet.

My mind flashed back. *Blood on the snow*. Flakes swirling in a howling wind, while the ground stained red with blood. The sickly sweet smells of cooked meat. The flash of a sword against a slender throat--

"Are you all right, Tamsen?" Brial was shaking me, his face white. I pulled back to the present, my eyes meeting his then sliding past him. There were two other bodies lying in the churned snow, already stained by a sluggish crimson flow.

Brial swore. "You don't have time to be faint now. I only drove the others away! They'll be back, Tamsen."

He worked quickly, wiping the sword on the outlaw's jerkin and driving it into its sheath. Turning, he whistled, and the horses trotted up.

"Can you stay on?"

"I'm fine, Brial." I forced out the words from between numb lips. "Let's just ride."

We turned our horses and fled into the teeth of the storm. It was only after we galloped away that I wondered: had I killed the man, or had Brial? I looked down at my hands in a daze. Surely, the shock I had released was only enough to stun the outlaw.

The smell of roasted meat hung in my nostrils until several miles lay between the newly dead men and us. It took us two hours at a hard gallop to

reach the next village.

* * * *

"My wife needs assistance!" Brial bellowed as he helped me into the inn. A middle-aged woman hurried down the stairs, wiping her hands on her apron. Her face was kind, if coarse, and her brows furrowed in a frown as she saw me.

"What happened to the lass?" she demanded, taking in my appearance in a glance.

"We were attacked by a group of men on the road. She fell from her horse," Brial replied tersely.

"I'm fine," I muttered.

"What happened to the men?"

He fixed her with a grim look. "No man touches her and lives."

"Hyagrem," I murmured. "I'm fine. It only winded me."

The woman laughed. "You don't look fine, lass. I'll get you something to drink. Norn!" she called toward the back of the room. An older man limped into the room.

"Outlaws attacked them on the road," she said with a jerk of her head toward us. Without another word, she grabbed two mugs and poured wine into them, adding spices and then thrusting a hot poker from the fire into the drinks.

The man called Norn shook his head. His dark hair was already white at the edge of a seamed scar running down the side of his face. "That gang is bad,"

he said ponderously. "You folks all right?"

"Just shaken up," I assured him.

"He killed 'em," the woman continued, with a nod at Brial.

"Not all of them," Brial corrected her. "Just three."

"Three? By yourself?" Norn asked unbelievably.

Brial didn't answer, merely turned to me and began to unfasten my cloak. The front of my dress underneath was ripped, as well. My teeth chattered as I began to sip the mulled wine.

"We need a room for the night," Brial said tersely.

"Weather's getting bad," Norn agreed. "You have horses?"

"I left them outside."

"I'll put 'em up fer you," Norn stated, throwing a thick fur cape around his shoulders and going out the door.

The woman chafed my cold hands. Brial looked down at her and said stiffly, "My apologies for my manners, madam. You have been very kind, and I was rude."

She laughed again. "You were worried for your wife, good sir. I took no offense. I'll have the girl draw a hot bath for her, and then I'll put her to bed. She's likely bruised up and a bit scared. Sleep will do her wonders."

She got to her feet, calling for the servant. I looked up at Brial, whose face was still set in stern lines. His face softened a bit when I smiled at him and he turned on his heel and went out into the storm after our packs.

"Your man's got a spot of temper," the woman noted as she came back

and helped me to my feet.

"You have no idea," I breathed. My ribs were sore and I winced as she put an arm around me to steady me.

"Don't worry now, lass, you're safe here," she said as she helped me up the steps.

* * * *

After the promised hot bath and a few hours' sleep, I felt much better. I lay in silence for a few minutes after I awoke, watching the shadows that the flickering fire cast on the ceiling. Then I rolled up to look around the room.

Brial sat against the wall by the door, his sword drawn and atop his knees. I slipped from beneath the covers and padded over to him.

"Brial?"

He looked up at me, and I could see how tired he was. "You should get back into bed."

"Not tonight, my friend," I replied. "You need to sleep tonight."

"I can't."

"Yes you can," I retorted. "We are in a village, in an inn, in a room which has a bolted door. No outlaws will come here. We are safe. Get into the bed, Brial. I'll do very well in the chair by the fire."

His face became obstinate. "I will remain here, guarding the door."

"Fine!" I snapped. I went to the bed and dragged the quilts from it. Then

I sat next to him and flipped the quilts over both of us. "If you're going to be that way, then I'll stay right here with you."

"Don't be stupid!"

"Too late! I have as much right to be stupid as you do," I replied with a self-satisfied smile as I snuggled up next to him.

We were silent for a while, only the crackling of the logs in the fireplace making noise. I closed my eyes and huddled into his side with my cheek on the hard curve of his shoulder. Then, softly, his arm moved up and slid around my shoulder. I fell asleep listening to the slow, steady rhythm of his heartbeat with my head pillowed against his chest.

Strangely enough, I slept without dreaming for the first night in weeks.

* * * *

I woke the next morning in the bed. Brial was nowhere to be seen. I hopped to the hearth, where there were only coals left, and arranged the logs and sticks in a convincing pattern. Then I called the fire to my wood and skipped to the window.

The storm had not let up. Snow was striking the windows and falling out of sight. We would not be going anywhere today. I grinned to myself and darted back to the bed. When the room warmed up, I decided, I would dress and get some breakfast.

The door opened and Brial entered, brushing snow from the shoulders of his cloak. He glanced at the bed and saw I was awake. "I went to check on the

horses. They seem to be all right."

"They'll get some rest today. I don't think we can go further."

"I agree," he replied pleasantly. "The rest wouldn't hurt you any either."

"I'm not fragile," I protested. "It was just a long way to fall."

Brial untied the laces of his cloak and hung it on a hook by the fire. "Norn has asked me to go with him and a group of men from the town to where we were ambushed yesterday. We should be back by late afternoon."

"Are you insane?" I asked, appalled.

He looked surprised. "What is the problem?"

"It's going to be very hard to maintain the pretense that you're human, don't you think?"

Brial shrugged, and replied with a grin, "I don't think so. Besides, I can learn how to behave more like a human if I spend the day with a flock of them. It will be all right, Tamsen. Trust me."

I was thunderstruck. Brial stuck his thumbs in the wide leather belt he wore, and rocked back on his heels impudently.

I laughed. "All right, then, fine! Let's see how well you do!"

Brial bowed, chuckling. "Very well then, my lady. I will leave you to get dressed. I do have time for breakfast before we set out, if you'd care to join me?"

I laughed again, and hurled a pillow at him. It just missed him as he scurried out the door.

* * * *

The men returned in early evening with satisfied faces. They had found the bodies of the outlaws, buried them, and treated Brial to an amazing amount of respect on the trip home. Brial was moderately proud of himself, not only from the approbation he had received, but also the fact that none of the men detected anything other than humanity about him.

I considered deflating his ego a little bit, but decided against it. There were still, after all, many days on the road together before we reached Geochon.

That night, as I lay in bed, I considered how things had changed so rapidly. Brial slept, rolled in a blanket near the hearth. Much of his wariness had dropped from him, enough to permit himself the luxury of a good night's sleep.

We were friends, an event I would have laughed at less than a month before. He was overcoming his prejudices and I was losing that hypersensitive touchiness that my trip to Leselle had instilled in me. I was glad of it: Brial was a good friend to have.

Fleetingly, I thought of home. I knew Ar'ami would never allow humans to desecrate the grove of guardians. My adopted family was safe. For a moment, I allowed myself to think about home: the security of being with those I loved and the comfort of my studies. Although I knew that they, along with all of the Elves, would not be secure for long, I consoled myself with the knowledge that leaving home had been right.

For a little while longer, at least, they would be safe.

My mind returned to the ambush in the woods. Two possibilities were frighteningly real. First, it was entirely possible my uncle hunted me. Maybe that would explain how he could have found me the first time I had left the

security of Kaldarte's house.

Second, there had to be a traitor in Leselle, one who had informed him of my presence and the direction of our party. One of the Elves had turned against his own, or at least against me.

That conclusion wasn't hard to reach: most of the Elves I had encountered had not deigned to hide their opinions of me. However, did they realize what they had done? Did this traitor know that he had given my uncle Leselle on a plate?

I sighed, curling my legs up to my chest as I lay on my side. Whatever I discovered in Geochon, I would need to relay it to the Elves quickly. Tears burned against my lids. So much was dependent upon this venture, upon me. Overlapping the desire for revenge that had consumed me for several years was a protective urge for the Elves and their way of life.

The bed sank under a sudden weight. I looked up, vision blurred by unshed tears, to see Brial sitting next to me and looking at me somberly. "Sometimes," he said softly, "I forget exactly how young you really are."

His dark eyes, velvety in the dim light, were compassionate. I did not answer, just ducked my head to hide the tears. He laid a soft hand atop my head, stroking my hair.

"Sleep, Tamsen Ka'antira," he said. "I am here with you. All will be well. Just rest now."

* * * *

That night when I dreamed the inevitable replay of my parents' death in our orchards, something was different. Brial crept to my side and in his hand was a gleaming, glowing golden sword. Before I could ask him anything, he cupped my face with his free hand and my breath rushed out of my chest. Brial jumped up, running to my dead mother's side brandishing his sword.

* * * *

Five days later, we reached Geochon.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. Although the storm had abated, the drifts were high enough that most people extended their stay in inns until the roads were passable. We had braved the weather and left the inn after one day. Brial and I met very few travelers and the ones we did meet bowed against the chill whip of the winter winds.

Geochon sits on the eastern edge of an immense plain. This part of Ansienne has always been a prairie, good for grazing and raising crops. Farms were large and substantial. Centuries earlier, the most prosperous of the farmers became the nobility. In Ansienne, birth is never a burden to advancement.

Geochon is also a port city. In fact, the city was founded initially to ship the bounty of the kingdom's yield to other, less flourishing cities. In time, as the city expanded, it became the capital of the province. Geochon in these days was a sprawling, segregated city.

Entering the capitol wasn't difficult. We stopped at the gates to ask a sulky guardsman the way to the district of Plautos, which is where Hyagrem's friend resided. He pointed us on our way, accepting the denarii I gave him with

a brightening face.

The streets were narrow, crooked, and crowded. I had never seen so many people in my life. Brial was uncomfortable, slouched into his hooded cloak with his hand resting on his sword hilt. This didn't appear unusual in any way to the townsfolk. They obviously assumed he was a retainer set to guard me and no more than two or three looks came our way.

It took the better part of an hour to find Plautos, a feat made simpler by the fact that each district of the city had an arch over the main street proclaiming the name and size of each area.

Plautos was better situated than the earlier districts: the streets were wider and cobbled, unlike the muddy track we had followed. The houses were larger, better built with their faded rose brick solidity facing the central square and small gardens tucked in behind the wrought iron gates. On the streets behind the main square, many of the wealthiest nobles and merchants had built their homes. The elegant facades of the rich were maintained by the equally luxurious houses that presented themselves along the lovely, broad avenues of this part of Geochon.

It was late afternoon, and the street vendors were packing up their wares at the market situated in one corner of the central square. I dismounted, as did Brial, who came forward to take my reins. I approached one of the vendors, a spice merchant from the looks of it, who had huge bunches of herbs and flowers dangling from the edge of a substantial cart. The smells reminded me of Kaldarte, and my tension eased as I took in a huge whiff, automatically identifying the aromas. Rosemary, sage, lavender, ginger roots . . .

"Kin I be helpin' ye, milady?" the man asked.

"Oh yes. I'd like some of the lavender, please."

He smiled at me, and pulled sprigs from his larger dried bouquet. "Ye'll be havin' sweet dreams tonight, lassie, if you sprinkle this inside yer piller."

I laughed and counted out some coins, dropping my voice to say, "I was wondering, good sir, if you could tell me where to find the house of Mariol."

His eyes grew alert. "Mariol, ye say? I can't rightly say I've ever heard of no Mariol."

I smiled again, catching his eyes and holding them with my own. "Are you sure? My master, my tutor, that is, specifically told me that he lived near this square in the district of Plautos in the city of Geochon. I have been traveling for over a week and wish to give him the message my master sent for him."

"And who would your master be, then?" the man asked, his voice no longer sporting the homey accents of the peasantry.

He stared at me as I said the name in a low voice, "Hyagrem de Silenos," I waited calmly.

"And who are you?"

"Just tell Master Mariol that the pupil of Hyagrem de Silenos is in Geochon with a message for him," I replied, ignoring his question. "He will see me."

"Go into the pub there," he said, jerking his head at a building with the sign of an alehouse over the door. "Take a table, order dinner, and wait."

I nodded, taking my lavender bunch with a gay smile and thanked him. Without looking back, I spun on my head and returned to Brial. "Let's go to the tavern," I said. "I think that this man will bring this Mariol to us."

"Why didn't he tell you how to reach him?"

"I don't know," I replied, biting my lower lip. "Perhaps it isn't safe. Let's just wait a while and then make different plans if necessary. We can always stay the night in the tavern if need be."

Brial grimaced, but didn't say another word. We walked the horses to the tavern, where Brial called for a stableman in a loud voice. Asking the grubby boy to feed and rub down our mounts, he pressed a coin into the urchin's hand and watched him lead the tired horses around the back, where the stable was.

The alehouse was dim and noisy, filled with what appeared to be laborers. The fire smoked a bit and the atmosphere was every bit as clandestine as two people who most definitely did not want to be found could wish.

Brial noticed an empty table close to the stairs. Taking my hand, he led me through the maze of drunks, thrust-out benches, and broad trestles. He pushed me into the bench first and took his place, sitting on the aisle and effectively blocking me in. Thus, I had one wall at my back and another to my right and Brial at my left who was just as bad as a wall. I grimaced and removed my gloves.

A barmaid bustled up to our table. "What'll it be, dearies?" she whined at us in an unusually annoying high-pitched soprano. "Drink, eats, or somethin' else?"

She cackled as she said it, trying to peer more closely at Brial's hood-shadowed face as she spoke. I coughed. "Do you have any wine by chance?"

"Yeah, we don't get much call for it, but we got it anyway." She shot an enticing look at Brial from under her extraordinarily long-and darkened-eyelashes.

"My husband and I will each have a mug of it then and perhaps some bread and cheese?"

Irritated, she looked at me. "You got money?"

I took my purse from my belt. Her eyes followed it greedily, so I picked it back up and dropped it into the bodice of my dress.

"Oh, yes," I purred. "We have money, and we're hungry. Is that good enough for you?"

She grinned. "Sure enough, dearie, it's always good enough for me." With that, she bustled away to the cheers of a raucous group of brick-dust streaked masons three tables across from us.

"I'll just bet it is," I muttered, turning to Brial. He had a puzzled look on his face.

"Why was she staring at me? Could she see that I'm an Elf?"

"No, dearie," I mimicked with an evil grin. "She just likes to look at men."

"Why?"

"Well, because..." I floundered. "Um, well, she... uh, see..."

His face was grave under the hood. As my voice trailed off, I looked at him helplessly. Without warning, he smiled. "Well brought-up young ladies aren't supposed to know about such things," he chided humorously.

"Why you – you *ass*!"

"Did you really think I didn't know?"

"How was I to know if you did or not? I thought Elves were too prissy to think about things like that!"

He smiled again, his dark eyes crinkling into the shadows of his face. "If

we were all that prissy, there wouldn't be any more Elves, now would there?"

I was still sputtering when the barmaid returned and the sound of a wicked chuckle from beneath Brial's hood didn't restore my humor. I took a deep drink of my wine, fuming.

The wine was good, with a light, tart taste to it. The food was tasty as well, the bread still warm and fresh and the cheese sharp with a molten texture. For a while, we both concentrated on the food. We hadn't stopped at an inn on the last few legs of our trip, so warm food in a warm room was refreshing to say the least. Brial got over his merriment rather quickly and I could sense him scanning the room from the security of his hood.

It was perhaps an hour later when the herb seller from the market entered. I elbowed Brial as the man came in. He made his way across the room, stopping at tables to joke with customers. There were, I noted, many he seemed to know in the tavern. Brial had obviously noticed the same thing and I felt his hand drop under the table. I heard a metallic hiss as he loosened his hunting knife from its sheath in the top of his boot and laid it across his lap.

Every table was packed with people, except for our own. The herb-seller finally came up to our secluded place and bellowed, "Would ye be mindin' if I set with you folks fer a while? There ain't no other places in here, an' I always like talkin' to strangers."

"Not at all," Brial replied mildly. "Please join us, friend."

At the sound of Brial's voice, the man's eyes jerked to the hood, his eyes narrowed. As he slid onto the opposite bench, he muttered in a voice so low that I had to strain to hear it, "Should have told me he was an Elf, lassie. I can recognize that accent in the dark."

The barmaid rushed back to our table. "Psantis! Ain't seen ye in here for a

while.”

“Busy I’ve been, ye beautiful wench,” Psantis replied lustily, smacking her on her very (very, very) ample backside. “Bring me some ale and some more of whatever ‘tis my new friends is drinkin’!”

She pouted at him and sashayed back to the bar. Psantis looked at me from beneath shaggy brows set in a seamed old face. When she returned with the mugs, he slipped her some coins and whispered something in her ear as she bent down to listen. She straightened, slapped him none too gently on the cheek, and rustled back into the business of the tavern.

“Good lass,” Psantis noted, draining half his mug in one swallow.

“Indeed,” Brial agreed and I heard the wicked chuckle once more. I glared at him and then turned my attention to our new dinner partner.

“I couldn’t see him clearly in the market,” Psantis was saying in a low rush. “If I had, I would never have sent you two in here. It reassures me that you really are looking for Mariol. He is one of the few men in Geochon who doesn’t despise the Elves.”

“I will be grateful for your assistance, Master Psantis,” I replied, amused at the change in his dialect.

“I’ve told him you’re coming,” Psantis continued. “I’ll slip the directions to you under the table in a few minutes. Finish your wine, and then leave as quietly and quickly as you can. Where are your horses?”

“Stabled in the back,” Brial replied.

“That’s good. Leave them there overnight and I will bring them around to you in the morning. I know the head groom and he won’t question me. I’m sorry for the secrecy, milady, but it’s dangerous to be looking for Mariol in these

times and even more dangerous to be with an Elf."

"It's quite all right, Master Psantis," I answered, inclining my head as he slipped a small shred of paper into my hand. "Once again, I am thankful for your help."

He nodded then launched into a loud, bawdy story that involved a bear and twelve maidens in the Virgin Huntress' temple. We sat there listening, starting to fidget occasionally as everyone does when trying to escape the recitation of a stranger's boring story. We listened for a good twenty minutes until Brial rose abruptly. "We thank you, good sir, for the pleasant company," he said, pulling me to my feet by my elbow. "Here, lass, give the good master a couple more ales from us."

With that, he twitched a denarii onto the barmaid's tray. She goggled at it, then flashed a surprisingly lovely smile at him and bobbed a curtsy. Brial and I started for the door.

"Wait a minute!" Psantis bawled from behind us. "Ye ain't heard the punch line yet!"

"Aw, give it a rest, Psantis!" another man yelled. "Everyone's heard that joke, and it ain't even funny! No one blames the feller from runnin' away from ye! Hell, I'd run too if'n my woman was as purty as his!"

"My story *is* funny," Psantis said with drunken dignity, hauling himself to his feet. Grinning, he threw a punch at the mason. Within seconds, a full-fledged bar brawl was underway. The men cheered and jumped into the fray. Tankards, plates, benches, and smaller people flew through the air as the barmaid ran shrieking to duck behind the bar. Unobserved, Brial and I fled through the front door and into the quiet night.

Chapter Seven

Psantis' directions led us to a door three streets from the tavern. These broad streets were opulently paved with expensive brick cobblestones, and were obviously a thoroughfare used by nobles and courtiers judging from the extravagant lampposts. There were still a few people out, moving about their business with little interest in ours.

The house at the address Psantis had given us was large and imposing, with a large iron gate and two armed men in rich livery posted at it. I stepped forward. "We are here to see Master Mariol."

One of the guards removed the bar that secured the gate, while the other one grunted, "He's expectin' ye."

Giving the nearest guard a wary look, we entered the gate and followed the man to a huge, black-painted door. There was a tiny pattern embossed in it, one whose design eluded my eye. I stared at it curiously as we stood on the step. The guard rapped on the door twice.

The door swung inward and a voice said, "You are the people Master Psantis spoke of? Enter."

Brial and I exchanged glances, and then he squared his shoulders and entered. I followed, and the guard closed the door behind us.

* * * *

Not long after, we sat in front of a roaring fire in the study of Master Mariol, wizard of Ansienne, one-time student of Hyagrem and friend of Elves. This last fact surprised me. I hadn't expected there to be knowledge of the Elves here in the capitol of Ansienne.

Mariol was teetering on the far edge of middle-aged, with short-cut salt and pepper hair. He was a sturdy, well-built man with strong features oddly at variance with his cheerful voice.

"So," he said after we had told our story. "That's where the old goat got himself off to after he told King Lian what to do with himself! What a business! Tutoring Tamsen de Asphodel in the forest of the Elves!" He eyed me shrewdly. "You're very young to be studying magic, girl."

I shrugged. "I started early."

"I'll just bet you did, if the stories I've been hearing you tell are true," The humor left his face. "So Hyagrem sent you to me, did he? With an Elven bodyguard as well! This is the first time in all these years that I've felt like he approves of me, you know. He expects me to protect you while you're here, until he arrives. Interesting."

His gaze shot to Brial. "What is your part of the story, Elflord? How do you come to be involved in all of this?"

"It is my duty, laid upon me by the Council, to protect her," Brial replied. He was still stiffly formal. His face was once again impassive, his voice gone to that flat, velvety tone I hated.

Mariol's eyes narrowed. "I see."

Brial returned his look. Behind his back, I rolled my eyes.

Mariol sighed. "Be at peace, Brial Ka'breona. I will do your charge no harm. You are safe in my house, for no one can enter here unless I wish it."

In that one flash, I saw the banked power behind his bright green eyes and felt the tingle of magic hovering above us in the room. I relaxed, not even realizing how tense I had been until that moment. Mariol noticed it and chuckled. As I was to discover, he noticed almost everything that happened around him.

"You've picked a hard time to come to Geochon," the mage went on, more seriously. "There are things afoot in the Court that worry me. There is some secret I cannot discover. The King's armies are preparing for some sort of conflict and the nobles walk around with sober faces and quiet voices."

"You have entree' to the Court?" I asked.

"I am a member of the nobility, as well as the King's Privy Council. I am in the Court daily."

"I believe the Court is where I need to go." I tapped my fingertip against the finely worked metal goblet in my hand. "I think that a threat to the Elves exists. It is in the Court that I would find what I need to learn."

"That's true," he agreed. "It's an easy enough matter to claim you as a relative, my niece, perhaps. My standing at Court is strong enough that few would question that the relationship. There is one who would, however."

"Who?"

"Your uncle, The Duke de Spesialle."

My face froze. "He's here?"

Mariol's expression was grave. "Oh, yes. He is one of King Lufaux's closest advisors. Gabril de Spesialle is a man to fear: an accomplished courtier, a respected soldier, and a secret sorcerer."

"Why would he question you?"

"Gabril questions everything. Fortunately, you don't have the look of your parents, save for the shape of your face. I don't think he will recognize you but he will watch you and be wary of your presence."

"He should be wary," I said quietly. "Very."

"With that attitude, you will accomplish none of your fine goals. If you are here, as you say you are, to discover the Duke's intentions toward the Elves then you have no time for revenge. I will help you, Tamsen, only if you abide by this injunction: I cannot help you to avenge your parents, especially not here, and particularly not when so much is at stake. In this matter, you must follow my lead and do exactly as I say."

I stared at him in amazement. Was this strange old man a mind reader? Maybe I should be a bit more circumspect around him in the future. "Did you think I'd try to burn him to a cinder in the middle of court, then?"

"If you did, you wouldn't be the first." Good humor returned to Mariol's eyes. "Just avoid Gabril as best you can, and keep alert. We'll see about the rest. If you can manage to do as I advise, then I daresay we can be successful."

I sighed. "I agree, Master Mariol. It will be as you say."

"Master? No, no child! Let us begin as we must continue: *Uncle* Mariol, Tamsen. You, my dear, are my niece – what did you say your name was?"

I must have been tired, because I stared at him in blank incomprehension. Mariol laughed.

“Your name, my dear, is Celestis de Beotte, niece of the Marquis de Beotte, who is, after all is said and done, your Uncle Mariol.”

“You’re the Marquis de Beotte?” I asked incredulously.

“Didn’t Hyagrem tell you?” Mariol returned. “My dear niece, you are now a member of the highest nobility. My real niece Celestis, who is a tiresome girl at best, is a nameless acolyte in the Artemicon temple. Her parents are dead and she has no close relatives, other than me, of course. She is unknown in the city, and yet, for those who wish to check, it is simple to find proof of her existence. Now let’s see...”

With that, he charted out an entire history for Celestis, leading me into the character I was to play. Even from a distance, Hyagrem dazzled and impressed me. How craftily he’d sent me to this wizard with a noble name and a flair for dramatics! Sneaky old mage. I inwardly chuckled at the thought of his pleasure in sending me in deliberate ignorance to the one man in Geochon I wanted to meet. The burden on my shoulders eased a bit as I listened to the wily mage concoct my new life.

“What of me?” Brial demanded.

Mariol laughed. “My dears, that’s what makes this all so fabulous! Everyone knows my family not only associates with Elves, but prefers them as companions. No one will think it amiss for the young Lady de Beotte to prefer an Elven guard. Even now, I have two Elven retainers in my home. Watch!”

He called loudly, “Wilden! Morrote! I need you in the study!”

We sat, sipping wine, until the door opened. Two Elves walked into the

room, both of them tall and lean with the gliding gait of the woodland Elves. They were red-haired, like Kaldarte and Cetenne, with the fair complexions and exotic eyes indigenous to the Elves. They saw us and halted in surprise.

“Wilden and Morrote have been with me since I was a boy,” Mariol said. “They are my advisors, my friends, and nine times of ten, my mothers.”

Brial’s face was shocked. He turned, speechless, from one Elf to the other. The brothers, twins at my guess, stared at us in equal amazement.

“Wilden, Morrote: These are my guests, whom Hyagrem ordered me to take into my home. The Elflord is Brial Ka’breona, revered scout leader of Leselle. The young lady is Tamsen de Asphodel, pupil of my old master. You will serve and protect them at all times as if they were I.” Mariol’s voice was gentle, but stern.

Both Elves dropped to their knees. “Tamsen Ka’antira!” one of them said in pleased surprise. With that, he drew his long, flashing sword from his scabbard in a drawn-out steely slither. His brother did the same. With one move, they laid the swords at my feet. “My princess, my blade is yours!” the Elf exclaimed. I stared from one to the other, a sinking feeling entering the pit of my stomach.

Mariol leaned back in his chair, toying with the handle of his goblet. “Well, well, well,” he mused. “You are a Ka’antira, are you? What else is that old goat holding back from me?”

The sinking feeling was now more like vertigo, as if I stood atop a trap door with weak hinges.

“Only this,” Brial replied, amused. “These are the other two sons of Kaldarte and Ar’ami. I wondered where you had gone, my lords.”

And the trap snapped shut around me. "Simply wonderful," I muttered. "I ran away from home to get rid of an overzealous tutor and my protective great-aunt and uncle. Now I come here to find three more uncles and the world's only bad-tempered Elf as my bodyguard, all ready to tell me what to do."

"Isn't life grand?" Mariol asked, swirling his wine in his goblet and chortling.

* * * *

I settled into life at Mariol's very quickly. He had a suite of rooms prepared for me while we were in the study and I was shocked at its luxury. Although I was a daughter of the nobility, I had lived a very simple life with my parents in Asphodel. My rooms were elegant, swathed in rich tapestries and thick dark-green carpets. The furniture was luxurious, with gilded woods carved into elegant designs. The bed was large enough to have a party in and with the thick bed curtains muffling it I'm certain no one would have heard it outside the room.

Also in the suite were a dressing room, a bathing room, a small study, and another bedroom, smaller and less decorated. Brial immediately claimed it as his. The older Elves frowned at him, but he paid no attention and tossed his pack onto the bed.

"I hope you don't have any stupid ideas about sleeping in front of my door with a drawn sword," I told him.

"Of course not," he retorted. "I do want to be within call, however."

So that first night, I snuggled into a warm, fluffy bed under mounds of downy blankets and slept my first long, dreamless sleep in weeks.

A tap on the door awakened me in the morning. As I lifted my head, one of the twins (later I could tell them apart; this one was Wilden) entered with a tray. "Time to break your fast," the Elf announced, kicking the door shut behind him.

On the tray was a lovely spread of fruit, bread, and preserves with a glass of- "Milk?" I asked, coming awake indignantly.

Wilden put the tray on a delicate little table pulled up next to the hearth with a fragile looking chair and looked down at me. "Yes, lass, milk. You are young still."

I muttered something rude under my breath, but threw back the covers and pulled on a dressing gown. "Where is Brial?"

"He was up at dawn. My brother is showing him over the house."

"Wonderful." I said sarcastically. "Has he identified all of the security breaches yet?"

"Not yet," answered Wilden with a grin that reminded me of Cetenne. "Mariol said to tell you that he had to go to Court this morning. He has arranged for a clothier to come to the manor later. She should be here in about an hour."

"A clothier? Whatever for?"

"Did you really expect to go to Court looking like a rustic?"

"Well...no. I suppose not."

"Then I suggest you eat your breakfast and get ready," the Elf advised, his voice so like Ar'ami's that I smiled. "It's likely to be a long day."

* * * *

Wilden was correct. It *was* a long day. The clothier, Myrielle, was a middle-aged woman with a driving ambition of dressing her clients formidably, and nothing else. I was still very young and had the normal interest that girls display in pretty frocks. In my eyes, however, Myrielle carried that fascination to an unholy level.

"Stand up," was her greeting. She snapped her fingers at the two shy looking girls behind her. "Measure her!"

The measuring process took an hour. I was fuming by the end of it. When the assistants finished their measurements, Myrielle pulled out a sheaf of papers from a cunningly designed square leather pack with handles.

"The fashions in the Court this year are simple," she pronounced in a didactic voice. "Lines are slim and elegant, and you have the figure to wear them. Your coloring is unusual, so I think it best that we avoid the pale pastels: they would wash you out. I think the jewel tones: reds, greens, blues, purples would suit you best, as well as whites and blacks. Black isn't really suited to your youth--"

"I like black," I interrupted.

"--however," she continued without a pause and a stern glare, "if you wish to be striking, you must do the unexpected. You will need a gown in which to be presented to His Majesty, and several other formal Court gowns. Also tea gowns, dinner gowns, evening gowns, ball gowns--"

"I won't be going to balls--"

“—as well as a riding habit and all the accessories. Your Presentation Gown—” she paused for emphasis “—should be the most striking. I will have it ready in a week’s time. Until then, I have several pieces already cut in my shop. I will size them to your measurements, so that you have something to begin with, and then we will complete your new wardrobe after your Presentation. Your uncle has already made all the arrangements. Since I took your boot size as well, I will have your shoes made for you. I will return in the morning with some appropriate attire for you to wear.”

After this amazing speech, the little woman sketched an abrupt curtsy and sailed from the room, followed by her bashful little shadows. My mouth open, I sank into a chair. If the *seamstresses* in this city were like this woman, what in the world would the *nobles* be like?

* * * *

“I’ve begun to spread the word of your arrival, niece,” Mariol said that night over dinner. He took a malicious pleasure in using my new identity. “Myrielle sent a messenger earlier to let me know that several of your gowns have already been completed. She will bring them by in the morning. I thought you and I would take a little venture through the city tomorrow afternoon and drop in at a friend’s salon. It is a small enough gathering that you can ease into society. It will also get the word out that I have a very lovely and unmarried niece to certain quarters of the nobility.”

I snorted. “Lovely?”

Mariol’s hand stopped halfway to his mouth with his goblet. “That’s a strange reaction from a pretty girl.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and he laughed again, drinking his wine with gusto.

"So, uncle," I began, sweetly. "How do you know this Myrielle won't gossip about your niece to her other clients?"

Mariol's eyes twinkled as he replied, "She won't. She's been my mistress for twenty years."

"You're joking!"

"Not at all," he assured me. "Myrielle is a bright, ambitious woman. I find her drive to succeed, uh, well, invigorating."

Brial laughed. "Invigorating, is it?"

"Oh, yes, young Elflord. Different men find different attributes invigorating, don't you think?"

"Indeed, sir, I could not agree more," Brial answered, lifting his goblet to his host.

Morrote stared at them. "I hardly think this is an appropriate conversation in front of a child," he said.

"I'm not a child," I replied, stung. "I had my coming of age at Leselle over a month ago."

Morrote turned his glance to me. "I beg your pardon, milady," he apologized, bowing slightly in his chair. "I meant no disrespect."

I inclined my head regally at him, and then ruined the effect by sticking my tongue out at him when he turned his back.

"Brat!" he chided me, grinning as his eyes met mine in the mirror.

"Prissy old Elf!" I flung at him, laughing. I turned back to Mariol. "So what do I need to know about tomorrow, Uncle?"

"The salon is an afternoon gathering of noble guests. They come together to listen to music, to see a play, or to hear poetry read. Well, that is the excuse, anyway. In reality, they come together to gossip about all of their friends. It is just the thing to allow the King to hear of my visiting niece. He will ask me to present you. It is a way that he can show me honor. By the way, one of my old friends is the host to the salon, the Count de Callat. He has several children close to your age, although the girls were all married before they were sixteen. He is well-connected in Geochon and the cream of society attends his salons.

"You will need to be outgoing, charming, and fascinating. Of course, you'll have distinction as the niece and current heir of a Marquis and your Elven bodyguard will set you further apart."

His glance slid to Brial. "You, of course, will attend your lady wherever she goes. Wilden and Morrote always attend me, looking serious and half-disgusted. Many of the nobles take their opinions of the Elves from my bodyguards' behavior. Following their lead might be wise."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Brial observed with a humorous look on his face. "I am serious and half-disgusted."

"Then you should do very well," Mariol replied, pouring himself some wine. "At any rate, Celestis, tomorrow you would do well to concentrate on being accepted as a typical daughter of a great house and leave the ferreting of information until later."

"It will be as you wish, Uncle," I replied demurely.

"The next few weeks will be critical," he noted, dropping back into solemnity. "You must create the illusion of your new identity and have it

believed if you are to succeed in Geochon. Keep sight of your ultimate purpose, niece, and all will be well."

* * * *

That night, I sat in my little study working. Mariol insisted I keep up my studies and assigned me a new book on an old subject: Court etiquette.

"There are definite rules to follow when at Court," he advised me seriously. "You need to familiarize yourself with them."

As I pored over the pages, I was grateful for the ridiculous rules Hyagrem had drilled into me. Many of the ceremonial rituals of the nobles had not changed for centuries. While I muttered over my book, Brial tapped at the door.

When I responded, he came in and sat in the chair opposite mine on the hearth, propping his left foot up on the table. "Studying, I see?" he observed, poking the heavy book with his toe.

"Yes I am, but I'm glad to leave it." I sighed, closed the book and stretched my stiffening neck.

He smiled and turned his head toward the sparking fire. "It seems your tutor sent us to the one man who could help in your venture."

"Yes, it does. Quite convenient, isn't it? Mariol is a wizard, a former student of my teacher, and has Elven ties along with entree' into the court. It becomes more suspicious when you consider that those Elves are part of my family."

"Almost as if it were...planned," he agreed. "Having the Seer in your

family must be inconvenient at times.”

“Evidently,” I laughed. “How are you adjusting, Brial?”

“Fairly well. According to Morrote, all I have to do is draw from the worst tangents of my temper and I will behave just as they do.”

“Are you sorry you came?”

He didn’t answer right away. He simply continued staring into the fireplace. Finally, he replied, “No, I’m not sorry. I am uncomfortable, it is true. This human city is too crowded for an Elf, particularly a scout, who is used to being alone with nature for long spans of time, but I am content and able to focus on my duty. That is sufficient.”

I stared at him. Brial must have felt me staring at him and jerked his head back to face mine with a smile. “I sounded quite pompous there, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes, a bit,” I hedged.

“I am sorry.” He rose to his feet. “I just wanted to—to wish you good night.”

He was nearly at the door when I said, “Brial?”

“Yes?” He turned back to me, his face set back into its bland mask.

“You’ll come and talk to me? Like this? Every night, won’t you? I feel like I’m going to need to talk to a friend often.”

His face relaxed for a moment. “Of course I will, Tamsen Ka’antira. It will be my privilege.”

“Privilege?”

“Pleasure,” he amended, flicking a strange look at me. Then he smiled

and went into his own room.

* * * *

Myrielle arrived soon after lunch the next day with five long bags carried between her two assistants. Each new gown she pulled from them was lovely, cut from richly hued fabrics and decorated with broad strips of embroidery, winking with tiny, faceted, semiprecious gems. The lines were simple, as she had said, with long, tight fitted sleeves and cuffs, cut high under the breasts to fall in a straight, sinuous line to a demure train at the back. The necklines were lower than I would have thought, but Myrielle assured me that I was modest compared with girls of similar age.

She selected a vivid emerald gown for the salon. Although I really liked it, with its peridot-edged points over a lighter-hued undergown, the neck was much lower than I expected.

"This is modest?" I asked in horror, staring down.

"Extremely so, milady," Myrielle replied, walking around me as she scrutinized the hang of the gown. Then she powdered my face, darkened my eyelashes with kohl, and reddened my lips with a stain of crushed berries. She dabbed a little perfume, smelling of violets, behind each ear, in the hollow of my throat, and on my wrists. Finally, she pulled out a long box.

"A gift from your uncle," she said.

When she opened the box, I gasped. A necklace of emeralds winked at me, hung in golden filigree and accompanied by a matching bangle and a fantastically large bejeweled green fan. Myrielle fastened them on and then

drew a long fur cape, green gloves, and a muff from another bag. Motioning to one of her girls, the assistant rushed to place dainty little green leather boots on my feet.

When I turned to the mirror, I gasped again. "I don't look like myself, Myrielle. Thank you! It is lovely!"

The clothier beamed at me. "You are welcome, milady. It is an honor to dress you. Later, when you are wearing things I designed especially for you, I think the result will be even more stunning. But for today, with one day's notice, I think you could do no better."

With this statement, she gathered up girls, accouterments, and various other implements of beauty and torture and swished out my door.

I picked up the cape, gloves and muff and looked one last time into the mirror. I might never be as lovely as my mother, but I knew I looked my best. Mariol was right. There was nothing of my father's earthy handsomeness or my mother's chameleon loveliness in my features. Occasionally, I could catch a glimpse of her in the shape of my face, or of my father in the stubborn point of my chin. I smiled and left my rooms with a light heart.

Mariol waited for me in the study with the twins and Brial. As I entered the room, the young Elf rose to his feet.

"How do I look, uncle?" I asked brightly, pirouetting just inside the door.

"Great gods, girl, you are beautiful!" he exclaimed with a catch in his voice. "Who would have thought—?"

"Thanks."

"You are as lovely as any Elfmaiden I ever saw," Wilden declared, but I appreciated the exaggeration. "You do our family proud today, Tamsen

Ka'antira."

"Thank you, Wilden," I smiled and curtsied.

Then I turned to Brial. He stared at me, and when our eyes met, I felt a strange little quiver in my throat. Wordlessly, he bowed and came to stand before me.

"My lady," he said, "your beauty overwhelms me." He lifted my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss upon it that scorched all the way up my arm.

I stared at him until Mariol said too loudly, "Well then, niece! Shall we be off?"

Chapter Eight

The home of the Count de Callat wasn't far away. The Count was the co-ruler of Ceolliune-Callat, along with the Duke de Ceolliune. The families were sprung from the same tree, yet curiously had never intermarried to consolidate the rule into one house. The current Count, Jeshan, was the patriarch of a huge brood of children, fifteen to be precise, from two wives. He was a wealthy, sly old courtier with many acquaintances and very few friends, of which Mariol was one.

As we pulled into the drive, my fictional uncle looked gravely at Brial and myself. "Remember, my children, the roles you are to play. Do not slip from them at any cost. The success of your venture, Celestis, depends on your ability to play this great game through to the end."

"I won't forget, Mariol," I replied, laying a green-gloved hand upon his arm. "I will remember."

He peered at me, and then nodded as if satisfied.

When Morrote Ka'antira came to the door of the carriage, a bored, sneering expression upon his face, Mariol leapt out and extended his hand to me to help me descend. I followed him and straightened to look up at the house.

The scene was breathtaking. Elegantly uniformed footmen stood at the

door, ushering in richly garbed guests. I laid my hand on the arm Mariol proffered me, then, raising my chin, allowed him to lead me into the house.

We were relieved of our wraps in a large, warm entryway. One of the footmen glanced at Brial, noting the sword strapped over his back. Mariol said, with a wave of his ringed hand, "The Elf attends my niece," and sailed off with me into the large double drawing rooms opposite the front door.

There were about fifty people wandering around the room, all of whom turned to the door when a liveried servant announced in a grand voice, "His Grace, the Marquis of Beotte and his niece, the Lady Celestis de Beotte."

A tall, still-sturdy old man came to greet us. "Mariol, my old friend! Who is this lovely creature?"

The two men bowed to each other, then grasped each other's hand. Mariol gestured to me and I curtsied as he said, "This is my niece, Celestis, only child of my late brother. Celestis, my dear, this is the Count Jeshan de Callat, a notorious lecher, but my very good friend despite it."

"Your Grace," I murmured, rising from my curtsy and grateful for the hours spent studying that insipid etiquette. Without it, I would have been at a loss for what to do. "I am honored to be a guest in your home."

"The honor is all mine, milady," he replied with a bow. "You are entirely too lovely, child, to be the niece of this old reprobate."

"We try to forget about that in the family, Your Grace. However, I decided that the only way I would have any fun was to disappoint my relatives and come to visit Uncle Mariol."

"Indeed!" he laughed. "Well, there you go, Mariol! This apple didn't fall far from your tree did it? I hope you enjoy your time in Geochon, Lady Celestis."

We will all attempt to see that you do. Please excuse me, I see another arrival.” His voice dropped to a malicious whisper. “It’s that visiting heathen from Tartarus, Bernini or some such thing. Dreadful bore, I’m afraid, but we have to make him welcome!”

With that, the Count left us and went to greet an arriving middle-aged couple who looked as if they smelled something particularly nasty. Mariol turned to me, eyes twinkling, and gestured me toward an area full of delicate, gilded chairs. I congratulated myself on my initial success, smoothed my skirts, and began to walk in the direction shown.

The room was full of people, elegantly dressed nobles who conversed languidly with each other. The gowns were beautiful, as were most of the women who wore them. Dozens of fans went up in front of dozens of lovely faces as the noblewomen caught sight of us. A buzz of speculation went around the room and heat rose to my cheeks. Mariol’s face was blandly amused, as if he were aware of the scrutiny and found it humorous. We proceeded at a stately pace across the room to the seats.

Before we got there, however, several young men approached. I stopped in my tracks, a little alarmed, and looked around. Brial was right behind me, a grim expression in his eyes. His face was as cryptic as ever, but I could sense his discomfort. Then, even as I looked, his right eyelid dropped in a fast, yet subtle, wink.

I smiled and turned back to face the crowd, all of whom were importuning my ‘uncle’ for introductions.

* * * *

At the Count de Callat's salon, a young new poet read from his latest work. I think it was that day that my lifelong abhorrence of the poetic arts began. I was dreadfully bored. Even as I sat there with an expression of polite interest on my face, interesting things were going on around me.

Mariol was on my right, eating dainties while whispering sly comments to Count Jeshan, who was at his other side. On my left was a young man to whom Mariol had introduced me, Anner de Ceolliune, heir to the duchy of Ceolliune. He was a tall, golden man with the hardened physique of the warrior and thoughtful grey eyes. His hair was honey-blond, which paired with his golden tanned skin made him look like a god of old. I learned later from Mariol that he was one of the most popular men in the Court, sought after by women due to his unmarried status and his beauty.

His two friends, Mylan of Phoclydies and Glaucon de Pamphyliia, were in front of us. Both of these young men were handsome as well, with Mylan an Earl and Glaucon the heir to a duchy. These three had stood out from the dandyish young men who hung around the court who clustered around us as we had entered.

Anner, Mylan and Glaucon were best friends and comrades, having studied under the same tutors in academia and in warfare. They represented a group of elite courtiers, who were young, beautiful, and unwed. It was something of a coup to have them all paying attention to me at my first social function.

The bombastic poet bored them as well. When he finally finished his reading and bowed with a flourish, we all applauded more in gratitude for his departure than in appreciation of his work.

"We will serve tea in the conservatory," the snobbish chamberlain intoned.

We rose from our chairs.

"May I escort you into tea?" Anner asked, bowing and extending his arm.

I darted a look at Mariol, who nodded. "Go on, niece. Have fun being with your new friends. Brial, attend her please."

Brial took a position behind me. I accepted Anner's arm, and we went into the conservatory flanked by Glaucon and Mylan. They were irrepressibly good-humored, and kept up a running commentary as we went, which I found both informative and amusing.

"See that old bat over there? The one covered in dirty diamonds? She's a cousin of the king, third or fourth I think, and rumor has it her stones are paste," Glaucon whispered in my ear, indicating a supremely ugly old woman in a moldy looking dress and mantle.

"That's not nice," I reproved him with a smile.

"My new boots are nice," Glaucon replied, lifting one elegantly shod foot, "but they get stepped on just the same."

I laughed and rapped him on the arm with my fan. Mylan assumed an offended air, and asked melodramatically, "Will you pay attention to me if I say something vicious about someone?"

"Assuredly," I responded, waving my fan. "But it has to be truly contemptible."

"Very well then, see that old couple next to our host?"

"The Bernini, aren't they?"

"Yes. Have you met them yet?"

"No, I haven't," I answered, looking at that couple over the edge of my fan.

"Well he's having an affair with a barmaid and his wife caught them in bed together. Get this! The bar wench was wearing the lady's jewels!"

I laughed and my fan tapped his arm as well. "Shame on you! That wasn't nice either, Mylan!"

Anner merely smiled at these anecdotes while he selected tiny sandwiches, fruit and cake for my plate. I laughed up at him, smiling. "And you, milord? Did you want to compete with your friends?"

He bowed slightly as he held a chair for me at a table nestled among sweet, heavy flowers. "I beg that you excuse me, milady. I cannot compete with them in vindictiveness."

Glaucon handed me a glass of a bubbly, straw-colored liquid. "Try this, milady. It is a twice-fermented wine from Laton."

I sipped it. "This is quite good. What makes it bubbly?"

"The second fermentation causes the effervescence," Anner replied. "Three types of grapes are blended in this wine, which the vintners ferment as they would normally. Then, they add sugar and yeast, and ferment it again. Coming by it is hard and very expensive."

"How fascinating." I took a second sip.

"Here in Geochon, we use it only to honor very beautiful ladies," Anner added, lifting his glass to me.

"He did it again," Glaucon said, nudging Mylan. "He beat us to the compliment."

"I had time to think about it while you were maligning our fellow guests," Anner stated mock-seriously.

"Odious swine," Mylan muttered, punching Anner in the upper arm.

Behind me, I heard Brial's muffled snicker.

"How long are you to be with us, milady?" Glaucon asked next. "I hope it's long enough for us to address you by your first name. I'd hate to have to travel to Beotte in the winter just to be able to say your name."

"I haven't decided yet," I replied. "My visit, I hope, will extend at least to the spring, if my uncle agrees and I am enjoying myself. It's probably too early for you to address me by my name, unfortunately, and I do not want to defy protocol. That sort of thing gives a girl a bad name."

"Your reputation is safe with us, milady," Anner assured me. "I hope your stay here will be of a more permanent duration."

I smiled at him and selected a tiny marzipan-coated cake to nibble on. The men carried on a conversation for a while, about various parties and functions that were coming up, as well as devising other amusements for my first trip to the city.

Everything was going very well until Mylan asked a stupid question. "Does the Elf go everywhere you go? It could be inconvenient, to say the least, if he does."

I drew myself up, replacing my cake on the plate. "'The Elf' has a name, milord: Brial Ka'breona. My family's friendship with the Elves is one of long standing. Brial and I have known each other for a long time and he is my best friend. I do not associate with anyone who doesn't accept that. He is a noble in his own right."

All four of the young men looked at me, amazed. I winced internally. Had I angered them? My damnable mouth was getting me into trouble again!

Then, an astonishing thing happened. Anner rose from his chair and bowed to Brial. "My apologies, milord, for our disrespect and my friend's discourtesy. We did not understand your presence here. Would you do us the honor of joining us? After Mylan apologizes, of course."

"Naturally, I apologize, Lord Brial," Mylan said heartily. "I spend too much time flapping my mouth and not enough using my brains! It would be an honor for you to sit with us and share our meal."

Brial hesitated, looking at me for help. Finally he smiled, although a little stiffly. "I have taken no offense to your words, good sir. Perhaps in another place I would feel more comfortable in joining you, but I do not feel that here is the place to try. Currently, my place is to guard my lady. Later, perhaps, my place will be to sit with you as comrades."

Mylan and Glaucon exchanged impressed glances. Anner nodded and retook his seat. "We practice our battle skills daily, milord," Anner announced. "I would be honored if you would join us some morning soon and perhaps we can get to know each other better then. My master comes to my home. Some day soon, I will send for you and your lady, so that we can practice together and then have some small entertainment over breakfast."

"It will be my pleasure," Brial responded.

Elated, I smiled at Anner and then turned to Mylan, extending my hand. "I am sorry, milord, for any attitude I displayed toward you. Brial has been such a mainstay in my life that I do not tolerate criticism of him, inferred or otherwise. Please forgive me?"

Mylan took my hand and bowed over it, smiling impishly up at me as he

did so. "I have nothing to forgive from so lovely a lady. Let us be friends again."

The entire rest of the meal, Mylan and Glaucon amused themselves by slipping bits of pastries and fruit to Brial. Brial stood, outwardly expressionless, harvesting his goodies and disposing of them behind well-masked yawns. Anner and I watched and laughed at them. Many people looked at our table, for not only the merriment we displayed, but also the unforeseen circumstance of an unknown young woman attracting and retaining the interest of these influential young men throughout the afternoon. Some glances were appraising, some jealous, and others curious. When Mariol came to fetch me for our departure, I dropped a demure little curtsy and held out my hand to all three of my new friends. Each of them bowed over it, and if Anner held my hand a little longer and with firmer pressure, no one noticed but me. We had agreed to go riding the next afternoon. The following evening, there would be a ball at the Ceolliune manor.

Anner assured my uncle that he would send his herald over very early with my added invitation. Mariol responded favorably, and they stepped back as Mariol handed me into the coach.

* * * *

"Well, you certainly made an impression," Mariol observed over the many cards of invitation that had come with the morning mail the next day. "Your appearance at the Ceolliune ball tonight should clinch your presentation to His Majesty, and all the rest will fall into your lap."

"I am pleased." I spread strawberry preserves on my toast. "Not all of the courtiers are what I thought they would be."

"No, and particularly not the three who singled you out last night. Anner is their leader, while Mylan and Glaucon manage to make enough mischief to

delude any sane person into thinking that they are your run-of-the-mill court dandies. But when one of them gets angry, all three unite into a force that is redoubtable.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Mariol emphasized. “On top of that, your uncle has a strong dislike for them. Gabril particularly despises Anner, who has a reputation for gallantry and courage. They have had words once or twice. Yes, Anner is a fine fellow.” He refilled his mug with hot tea.

“We’re all going riding in a little while,” I mentioned. “Oh, by the way, how long does protocol say that they can’t call me by name?”

“Well that depends,” Mariol replied with a twinkle. “You’re just friends, now. If one of them is courting you seriously, he will not refer to you by name until he decides if you are to be his wife or not. Usually they propose, and then use your name.”

“Oh.” I rose and left the room.

* * * *

Two hours later, clad in my new riding habit, I waited in the stables for the grooms to bring me my horse. Brial was at my side, once again impassive.

“You weren’t really angry with Mylan, were you?” I asked.

“For a moment, until I realized that he spoke in ignorance. I can overlook ignorance, but not disrespect.”

"Well, I'm glad we cleared that up."

"My opinion changed after they apologized."

"You mean after they started giving you sweets," I amended.

"They were good," he protested, his charming, wicked grin breaking through. "Especially the almond paste cakes."

"Yes, they were. I think that if we befriend these three, we might be able to catch some information more quickly than we thought."

"Just be cautious," he warned me. "These are not silly men to toy with. They are all, unless I miss my guess, warriors as well as nobles; young, perhaps, but not stupid."

"Not like your average humans, eh?"

"No." He slipped his hand under my elbow to lead me to the mounting block. "Not at all."

* * * *

In the park surrounding the palace, we spent a delightful few hours. The grounds were meticulously landscaped and stocked with game in the manicured forests, where we found many paths and open runs. It was almost like being outside of the city and I reveled in it. The sun was bright on the snowy trails and the wind blew against my cheeks as we cantered and raced through the park.

"You are an excellent equestrienne, milady." Anner congratulated me as we pulled up to breathe the horses.

"Thank you." I dismounted and gave my horse his head. "I had lots of practice. My father had me on a horse when I was four..."

My voice trailed off and I turned back to my mount. I hid my face behind the horse as I stroked his long nose.

Anner came up behind me. "I didn't wish to upset you, milady. I did not realize the memory would be painful."

"It's nothing." I tried to shrug the memory off with a laugh. "I'm just being sentimental. Thank you for a wonderful ride! I never expected anything like this in the city!"

"We like to show it to all the new girls," Glaucon drawled. "That way Mylan and I can watch as Anner snares her right under our noses."

"It will take a lot more than a gallop through the park to snare me," I replied with a toss of my head.

"Of course it will," Mylan said glumly. "And depend upon it, Anner will find out what it is."

Anner laughed, throwing an arm around each of his friends. "Here now, you two! You're making me sound like a rake, and are giving the lady the wrong impression of me."

"Sure we are, Anner," Glaucon said. "Sure we are."

* * * *

That afternoon, I lay down for a nap at Mariol's suggestion, and fell

immediately asleep. Once again, the recurrent dream began, but the feeling of it had changed.

Brial was there, his hand gentle and warm as he cupped my face, then his hand left my skin as he drew the huge golden sword. He sprang up and ran toward my mother's bloody body.

Anner, Glaucon, and Mylan suddenly joined my dark-cloaked uncle in the courtyard. When Anner saw Brial running at him, he laughed and drew his own sword. Mylan and Glaucon grabbed Anner's arms and I and ran for them. Before I could get there, my uncle had pointed at both of my friends, blasting them from the scene with a flash of lightning and the scent of burning flesh curdled in my nostrils. He laughed, a high, chilling sound in that whipping wind as Brial slid to a stop in front of him.

My uncle turned to Anner, snarling, "Kill the Elf and the girl is yours until I kill her."

Just as I reached the courtyard, Anner and Brial swung their swords simultaneously. Sparks showered to the flagstones —

I woke up shaking; sweat ran through my hair in an eerie trickle, feeling for all the worlds like snakes. I jumped from the bed and ran into Brial's room. "Brial?" I gasped. "Are you here?"

The room was empty, so I darted into my study. I jerked the heavy oaken door open just as Brial put his hand on the latch to open it. At the sight of him, I gasped, threw my arms around him, and burst into tears.

"Tamsen! What is it? What has happened?" he asked, a bit wildly and looking around as if searching for enemies.

"You're all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, puzzled. "You, on the other hand, are not."

Without another word, he lifted me and carried me into my room. Setting me down in front of the fire, he stepped back and watched as I sank to the floor, crying. Not even a minute later, he was beside me on the floor with a glass of wine. "Here now, Tamsen, drink this. Calm down."

I obediently sipped some of the wine, rubbing tears away from my cheeks with the back of my hand. He had an arm around my shoulder, waiting until I calmed down. Then he asked gently, "Can you tell me what has disturbed you so?"

"I made a blunder today while we were out riding. Anner complimented me on my riding and without thinking, I told him that my father had me on a horse when I was four. I thought then that I didn't know enough about Mariol's brother to make that comment. I thought it might alert him that I wasn't who I pretended to be. I—I guess it just put my parents back into my mind, because when I fell asleep I had the dream."

"The dream?"

"I've had the same dream since—since he killed my parents. I'm back in the orchard, and I can feel everything—the cold of the wind, the roughness of the bark on the tree I hid behind, and the smells! Oh gods! I see him kill them again and again every night. But—"

I hesitated, and Brial took the cup gently from my hand. "Go on."

"The dream changed a few days ago. You were there in the orchard with me and you had a big golden sword. You touched my face and ran toward my uncle. Then I'd wake up. But today it changed again. You were there, but so were Anner, Mylan, and Glaucon. When you ran to the courtyard, my uncle killed Glaucon and Mylan, and you and Anner began to fight. I ran to try to stop

you, but I couldn't get there in time!" I wiped my face and tried to smile. "Sorry to get you worried and all for a dream. I'm just being silly."

Brial pushed a strand of hair behind my ear. "No, you're not being silly. You're afraid."

"I shouldn't be. Not of a dream, anyway."

"Dreams are frightening things," he replied. "You come from the family of the Seer, so it would make sense for you to fear your dreams. Still, Tamsen, I am here with you and we are both safe."

"I'm afraid for you, Brial," I whispered.

"I am afraid for you." He drew my head to rest against his shoulder. My face turned in toward his neck as his arms went around me and I closed my eyes and breathed in the fresh smell of him. His long, fair hair felt like a silken pillow beneath my cheek. In his arms, I felt the terror of the dream fade. I slowed my breathing, as Hyagrem had taught me, desperately reaching for the serenity of my training.

"Thank you, Brial," I murmured into his neck, my breath stirring his hair.

He drew in a sharp breath and I opened my eyes. "What is it?" I asked, sitting up.

His face was strained; his huge, black eyes blazing. I was a little afraid at the sudden intensity of his expression. My eyes met his and they trapped me. His arms hardened around me, pulling me closer so that our faces were only an inch or so apart.

I didn't dare to breathe; I just stared up at him for a long moment. His arms dropped, until he grasped my arms hard above the elbows. He trembled, as if a cold wind had run over his skin.

He leaned in toward me across that final, deadly inch. Our lips met and I was lost. His lips were so soft, so gentle! Five seconds, maybe ten seconds later he stiffened and jerked his head away, pushing me away so that I slid back a few inches. His eyes didn't meet mine, just slipped past me, his hands clutched together so tightly that his fingers turned white.

"I'm sorry," I breathed, more shocked by his withdrawal than I had been by his kiss. "Brial, I...it's my fault."

"No." He rose to his feet. "There isn't any fault. There is only...a complication."

With that he quietly, so quietly that it made my eyes sting again, left my room, closing the door behind him.

Chapter Nine

Myrielle came to my room to help me dress for the Ceolliune ball. When she entered, she took one look at my face and sent her little assistant down to the kitchen for a cheesecloth bag full of steeped tea.

"You look like you've been crying your eyes out," she scolded me as she laid tea packs on my eyes. "You leave those on until I've finished your hair. That will reduce the swelling so you don't look totally hideous tonight."

When she finished with me over an hour and a half later, I looked completely different. The bold white over black silk ball gown was trimmed with silver ribbon and crystal beads, hanging like dewdrops from hem, sleeves, and neck. She curled my hair high upon my head and once she had powdered my face, I didn't look like I had been crying.

She smoothed long, white gloves above my elbows and stood back to contemplate me. "You'll do," was the verdict after she had examined me from the top ringlet to the tips of my pristine white slippers. "Your uncle is waiting."

I followed her to Mariol's study. He, too, scrutinized me, except that his appraisal was more admiring than his mistress' had been.

"Perfectly lovely, child," he approved. "Aren't you going to wear any jewelry?"

When I shook my head, he muttered something under his breath and produced a long box from inside his coat. "Try these."

"These" turned out to be a lovely set of garnets for ears, throat and arm. "They're lovely, Mariol!" I exclaimed as Myrielle clipped on the chandelier earrings.

"They're Beotte family jewels," he answered gruffly. "You might as well get some use out of them. Many of the nosy old bats of the Court will recognize them, which will lend credence to our story. Besides, they look better on you than they do in the box."

He held my cloak for me. As I put on the simple black velvet, the door opened and Brial entered the room. I glanced at him, only to find him as imperturbable as ever. Silently, we fell in behind Mariol and went out to the carriage.

The ride was longer to the Ceolliune manor than it had been to the house of Jeshan de Callat. As the carriage rumbled through the darkened city, a small tingle of fear spread through my chest. "My uncle will be there tonight, won't he?"

"Yes, he will, most likely. This is an important social occasion."

I didn't comment further. Looking out the window a chill ran down my spine. Beside me, Brial's profile looked cold against the passing lights of the city. He stared resolutely ahead, drawing that silence the Elves have mastered to himself as a shield.

* * * *

The Ceolliune manor was grander than Mariol's in every way: larger, more elegant, and brilliantly shining among the jewels of the Ansienne nobility. As we left the carriage, I felt the odd thrill again, like magic, coursing just beneath my skin. Mariol helped me up the sweeping marble steps, with Brial and Wilden behind us. Once the servants took our wraps, we ascended another immense marble stairway to the second floor. The chamberlain announced us at the top of the stairs.

Anner looked handsome, standing next to his parents in the reception line required by court protocol. As I extended my hand with a curtsy to him, he bowed over it with a grave smile. When he rose, his eyes burned into mine. "Lady Celestis de Beotte, may I introduce you to my mother?"

The Duchess inclined her head to me, her sharp eyes sweeping across me. I noticed that they were the same lovely grey as her son's eyes. "Your Grace," I murmured.

"Lady de Beotte," Interest warmed her voice. "Welcome to our home. My son has told me all about you. I see he didn't exaggerate."

"Thank you, Your Grace," I replied with another curtsy. "Your son, as you must know, is too kind to those of us who are new to society."

She smiled at me and we moved on to Anner's father, who waited to greet us. Anton, the Duke de Ceolliune, was a noble-looking man with the quiet manner of an intellectual. He acknowledged my introduction kindly and I noticed when he took my hand in his that his palms were callused. A warrior-scholar, then. He, too, searched my face with his intense eyes, before smiling and wishing me joy of the occasion.

Evidently, the men of the house of Ceolliune were more than what they seemed. Mariol escorted me into the ballroom, where Glaucon and Mylan

immediately pounced on us.

“We thought this might be the only way to get a dance in with you,” Glaucou said. “Anner is tied up with that receiving line idiocy and we have introduced no one else to you yet, Celestis.”

I smiled at his use of my name and relaxed. “Well, then, let’s get our dance underway.”

* * * *

Anner found me, as Glaucou said he would, as soon as he had fulfilled his duty as a host. He entered the ballroom, now packed with dancing couples, looked around for a moment, and spotted me in a chair laughing at Mylan. Immediately, he threaded through the crowd to us. He presented himself to me with a smile and a bow. “Would you do me the honor, milady, of the next dance?”

“Naturally.” I held out my hand to him.

He took it and led me out to the dance floor. As he whirled me around the room, we chatted. Anner was an absorbing companion, with a wealth of conversational topics. After our dance, he took me back to my chair.

As he bowed me into it, I looked up and my eyes met Brial’s stare. His face was neutral, but I saw the muscle clenched in his cheek. Unable to stop myself, I gloated over this. *So, I had finally penetrated that damnable shell of his had I? Good. It served him right!*

We were discussing the horrible poetry we’d heard the day before when I

heard the heralds announce, "His Grace, the Duke of Spesialle and Count of Asphodel."

Blood drained from my face. Anner leaned toward me, whispering, "What is wrong? Are you all right?"

Count of Asphodel? How dared he assume my father's title? I had half begun to rise in fury, but Brial laid a hand on my bare back, right between my shoulder blades, bringing me back to caution.

I took in a deep steadying breath and looked up at Anner. "It's just so warm in here. Is there somewhere we can walk that's a little less crowded?"

"Of course," Anner replied, rising to his feet.

I looked back at Brial. "Brial, would you wait here for us?"

He nodded; we both knew that for the moment I did not need to be escorted by an Elf, regardless of Mariol's affiliations with them. I sighed mentally; now it was impossible to gloat over Brial. He had saved me from myself.

Anner tucked my hand into the crook of his arm and we moved through the crowded ballroom. "Hold on," he said. "Spesialle is here. I have to greet him." His voice was chilly with dislike.

"I'll go back to my seat and wait for you," I volunteered.

"You have no need to do that," he replied. "If I am escorting you, I'll have an excuse to be brief without seeming rude."

"It doesn't seem as if you like this man," I ventured with a laugh that sounded hysterical to me.

Anner looked down at me and smiled. Before I knew it, he had stopped in

front of a lean, richly dressed man. "Your Grace," Anner said with a slight bow. "I am deeply regretful that I did not welcome you at the door to my home. I am afraid I was preoccupied with my new friend."

Spesialle turned and I saw him full in the face for the first time. His strongly marked features were hawkish, surrounding a pair of deep-set ice blue eyes. Those eyes were on Anner as my uncle bowed to him and then turned onto me, running over me in an insulting survey. I flushed, mentally repeating to myself Mariol's instructions, as I curtsied to the man who had murdered my parents.

"This is the Lady Celestis, niece of the Marquis de Beotte, who is visiting the Court for the first time." As Anner introduced me, a slow, suggestive smile stretched Spesialle's thin lips. I felt Anner's lean frame stiffen.

I rose from my curtsy to find those penetrating eyes on me. "Your Grace," I murmured.

"Milady," he replied, bowing. He turned back to Anner. "You have a charming and beautiful friend, Lord Anner. I congratulate you on your taste in companions."

Anner reddened a little at the innuendo. "I enjoy milady's company," he said curtly. "As she is my guest, I consider it only proper to treat her with the utmost courtesy while she is beneath my roof."

"Naturally," my uncle answered, noting the veiled threat with a lift of one fair, arched brow. Those cold eyes swept over my body again, but his face remained expressionless. "Perhaps the lady would prefer less fraternal company."

"Actually, Your Grace," I interrupted. "As a young girl without knowledge in the ways of the Court, I appreciate any interest that my friends can

spare for me.”

Those eyes passed from me without recognition. I mentally thanked the gods. “How old are you, milady?”

“Nineteen,” I lied promptly. “I’m old enough to choose my own friends and young enough to follow their guidance.”

His eyes acknowledged the hit. “Well, then, I won’t keep you. Good evening to you, milady. I hope you enjoy your stay at Court. I look forward to seeing more of you. Ceolliune, I thank you for your hospitality. I will see you both later, I trust.” He bowed and moved away.

I was shaking. The proximity of Gabril de Spesialle had affected me strongly. At that moment, I was trembling with the desire to call down my hatred and anger upon his unprotected back.

“Milady, you do not look at all well,” Anner said, leaning over to peer into my face. “Can I get you something?”

“I’m fine,” I replied. “Shall we dance?”

* * * *

I didn’t see my uncle for the rest of the evening. Several hours later, I pleaded a headache and Mariol ordered his carriage for me. He would remain, used as he was to the all-night gatherings of the courtiers in Geochon. Brial left with me and it wasn’t until we had pulled out from the gates that I released the breath I had been holding for hours.

“You did very well,” Brial said. “I thought for a moment there that you

weren't going to be able to contain yourself, but you acted admirably."

"Not entirely," I answered, rubbing the back of my tense neck. "I was unable to resist making a sarcastic comment or two. I'm certain that my dear uncle is used to getting that reaction from people, so I'm not that worried about it."

"Here, let me do that." Brial pushed my hands away, replacing them with his own.

I closed my eyes as the tautness ebbed from my muscles. "I nearly blasted him from the room when they announced him as the Count of Asphodel," I admitted. "I'm of half a mind to go back and do it now."

Brial gave a sharp laugh. "That would indeed be using only half your mind, Tamsen."

We were home. Brial handed me down from the carriage and helped me up the stairs as Morrote, who had remained in Mariol's study working on some secretive project, opened the door.

"I left a pot of tea in your room," Morrote said.

"Thank you," I replied. "That will be most welcome."

Brial followed me into the study.

"Where are you going?" I asked as he opened his door.

"I thought you'd want to be alone," he replied evasively.

"You promised to talk with me every night," I reminded him.

He did not respond. He shut his door and sat in a chair by the fire with a wary expression on his face. I busied myself preparing him a cup of tea and after

handing it to him, kicked off my slippers and made one for myself.

"You said there was a complication. What were you talking about?"

He looked down at his tea, stirring it absently. "Did I say that?"

"Yes."

His spoon clanked against the side of the porcelain cup. I waited, but he didn't say anything. Finally, I spoke again. "Is the complication the fact that we kissed?"

His eyes shot up to meet mine. "Not exactly."

"Then I don't understand."

He set his teacup down on the table with a sigh. "It's better that you don't. I'm going to bed. Good night, Tamsen."

"That's it?" I demanded incredulously, putting my cup down with a rattle as he stood up. "'It's better that I don't understand?' What kind of answer is that?"

His eyes met mine again, with the quiet intensity I had noticed before. "It is the answer I intend to give."

* * * *

Less than a week later, Mariol presented me to the King. Lufaux was an elderly man, but everything about him denied this fact. He was stocky but elegant, and energy still thrilled through his every action.

Although his tenure as ruler was successful, his personal life was far less

so. His beloved wife died after her only successful sojourn in childbirth. Her son lived for only a few years after her. Lufaux had not remarried in order to father an heir. Most men in his position would have, but his love for his dead wife was legendary in the kingdom. He would be the last of his line and was old enough now that the players in the game of succession were already starting to take the field.

Mariol escorted me into the throne room and with a low bow introduced me to the king. I rose from the traditional deep curtsy, the skirts of my sapphire blue gown pooling around my feet, to find his kind old eyes upon me.

“Come, my dear, and sit by an old man,” he invited me.

I smiled and ascended the dais, where a liveried servant placed a small chair by the king’s side.

It was one of the smaller Court functions, an afternoon levee’ of music performed for the King and his favorite courtiers. All through the recital, I sat by Lufaux and made light conversation with him. He was gracious and after the program was over handed me back to Mariol with a smile. “Your niece is lovely, Your Grace,” he commented. “You are a fortunate man to have this sweet creature in your home.”

Mariol bowed at the compliment and the King turned to me. “I thank you, milady, for giving this lonely man a few hours of your time,” he said with a kind smile. “Please come back to Court often. You will be welcome here.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” I curtsied. “The pleasure has been all mine.”

* * * *

Brial's aloofness offset my success at Court. Since the day we kissed, he had treated me with a grave reserve. He didn't respond to my friendly overtures with anything but quiet courtesy. Our friendliness had evaporated without a sound. He escorted me everywhere, his demeanor as stern as the Ka'antira brothers when they attended Mariol, but his taciturnity continued when we reached home.

Anner, on the other hand, was growing considerably – and noticeably – warmer to me. When we met in public, his attentions to me were never marked; he treated all of the young women in the Court with the same gentle good manners that he did me. We were, however, more frequently in each other's presence away from the formality of the Court. Not a week went by that we weren't galloping through the park, trailed by the imperturbable Elf. Our friendship continued to grow.

Anner was an admirable man. Many admired his golden good looks and I must confess I thought him handsome. I found he was possessed of a dry sense of humor that he used to the detriment of Mylan and Glaucon, who were his closest friends. His humor never crossed over the line into cruelty. He was, in all respects, truly good.

He also could snap from polite courtier to austere soldier without batting an eye. I very rarely saw this side of him, but when I did, it never failed to impress me. Upon one occasion, a hapless groom at the stables in the park had neglected to rub down our sweaty mounts when we returned from a ride. Anner's denunciation of the man was short, sharp, and unappeasable. His bearing straightened; he literally towered over the little man as his eyes flashed and his low, quiet voice whipped the man into apologetic submission.

It was a lesson I never forgot: underestimating this man, or any other of his ilk, would be a fatal error.

For some reason, however, I couldn't get past Brial when my thoughts turned in this direction. He was so assiduous in his careful avoidance of me that I became equally determined to get him alone. I laid my plans with great cunning, but no matter how devious my ploy, Brial would courteously, yet firmly, find a way to escape it.

As the winter progressed and I found myself more in Anner's company, I grew increasingly uncomfortable around him. Mylan and Glaucon had become very good friends to me, their ebullience and good humor surrounding me as we laughed, danced, and rode together. But I was very afraid that Anner had grown too fond of me.

Any other young woman in the Court would have been ecstatic at this development. I, on the other hand had become obsessed with my quest for information. So far, my listening had not borne fruit and I grew discouraged. It was no time for thoughts of a man, no matter how pleasant, to distract me. Instead, I forged through the undercurrents of the Court.

When I met the Duke de Spesialle in public, I greeted him distantly, if politely. I would find his eyes upon me at odd times, coldly speculative, and my sense of revulsion would rise into my throat, choking me. I spoke him fair, however, and saved my hatred and fear for the long nights I paced in my room.

All the time, as I waded through the endless surge of parties and dinners, my search for clues grew increasingly desperate. Behind me stood the distantly cool Brial Ka'breona, holding me at arm's length while I struggled against the growing certainty that time was running out.

At night, I thrashed about in the grip of my nightmare, terrified by the new changes to my horrifying dream. For now, as my uncle stood over my mother's corpse laughing, Anner, Mylan, and Glaucon stood waiting at his side as Brial rushed to confront them.

* * * *

The next few weeks were busy. The King's interest in me assured my social success. Anner's obvious involvement with me, fully supported by his two closest friends, had sparked a wave of curiosity about me that caused the scions of the Court to invite me everywhere.

Equally as important to me was my situation with Brial. I didn't tell him how my dreams had changed. If I behaved with a new reserve around him, he took it as normal confusion over the situation between us and didn't confront it.

During the day when we were out in public, we behaved with the distant circumspection that identified the relationship between a retainer and his lord. Brial was always behind me, speaking rarely and only occasionally revealed with a flare of his black velvety eyes that one of the young men who jockeyed for position around me had taken one step too far. That sight alone intimidated many of the immature courtiers from any disrespectful behavior.

At night, however, in the safety of Mariol's house he ignored me.

During the first week of spring, when the snow was melting from the parks and streets of Geochon, I got my only clues as to the intended actions of the Duke de Spesialle.

The first hint came at the traditional seasonal holiday of Tepijovis, a celebration of the death of winter and the birth of the new year. The holiday was sacred to the Virgin Huntress, the unnamed goddess of the woodlands and the moon. I remembered celebrating the holiday as a child in Asphodel, sitting at the high table with my parents while all the retainers of the estate feasted below

us. That afternoon, the first plowing of the fields had taken place, with beribboned oxen pulling the plows through still snowy, churned black soil. The tables were set with the bounty of the previous autumn's gifts and the festivity was an occasion of gift giving, games, and music.

The formal halls of Lufaux's court observed the holiday differently. The day began with a private service for the King at the Artemicon, the Virgin Huntress' temple in the city. When the religious observance was completed, the King presided over the Court celebrations, which were elaborate. In the afternoon, there was a grand tournament where the great lords of the land competed with each other in feats of strength and skill. That evening, a ball would follow a formal banquet. The dance was one of the most ceremonial occasions of the year and much anticipated by the younger ladies of the Court.

The tournament was held in the same royal park where Anner and I had galloped the winter away. Great grandstands accommodated the ladies. Partitions divided the stands into tiny, open-ended rooms, roofed with colorful canopies and heated by discreet braziers tucked into the corners. Due to Mariol's proximity by birth and position to the King, our pavilion was one of the best, affording an unimpeded view of the great field with its armored knights and streaming pennants.

My tight-lipped Elven bodyguard escorted me into the stands behind Mariol. My erstwhile uncle somehow managed to look powerful and intimidating in his scarlet and furs. He bowed me into my chair, his eyes running over my outfit critically.

"What's the matter, uncle? Not stylish enough for you?" I asked sarcastically, feeling confident in my elegantly cut black.

"Not many women can carry off simple fashions," he replied, his eyes twinkling. "You look lovely, niece."

I settled myself into the plump, cushioned chair Mariol's servants had brought to furnish our pavilion and turned my attention to the field, excited to be at my first tournament.

On the opposite side of the great field were the colorful tents of the highest noble lords in the land, each with their coat-of-arms waving on raised standards. Great warhorses, draped in long blankets in their master's colors, snorted billows of white breath into the cold morning air and stamped restlessly while grooms held them at their heads. The combatants were enclosed in great suits of armor. Although I had always known my friends were knights, it wasn't until I saw them in their warlike gear that the fact sank into my brain.

I clapped my hands in excitement and turned to Mariol with a bounce. He smiled at me indulgently and leaned over to say in my ear, "How many of your knights will ask for your favor today?"

"Probably none of them."

"Tell me, my dear," he drawled. "Would you care to make a wager on that?"

I laughed and turned back to the exciting scene before me. Most of the knights were mounting their horses, with the assistance of liveried squires who held the prancing steeds. Trumpets blared and the heralds announced the combatants for the jousts.

I leaned forward as enthusiastically as any of the other bloodthirsty women of the Ansienne nobility when the knights moved out to the lists. The first four sets of knights were unknown to me, so I watched with some degree of equanimity as their battles proceeded. The fifth match featured Glaucon, who won in the first pass. The eighth match took Mylan four rounds to defeat his opponent. It wasn't until the eleventh combat that Anner de Ceolliune took the

field.

I knew he was due and I craned my neck, trying to catch a glimpse of him across the field. Somewhat surprisingly, I could not find him. I spotted his tent easily enough, but I could not find a young knight with the Ceolliune colors. Frowning, I sank back into my seat and was about to turn to Mariol to ask where Anner could be when the light in the pavilion dimmed. I looked up to see Anner in front of me, mounted on his immense grey horse.

Anner lifted his visor with one flick of his wrist and bowed his head to me. "Milady of Beotte, might you grant me the honor of wearing your favor into the lists?"

I stared at him for a second, then, at a not-too-subtle jab in the ribs from Mariol, blurted, "Of course, milord!" I took a long, midnight-black ribbon from my hair as I stood and went to the side of his horse. Two of his squires carried a mounting block over, and lifted me upon it so that I could tie the ribbon around Anner's upper arm.

"Try not to get killed," I warned him in a low voice.

"That's not what you're supposed to say, milady," came his amused reply.

I finished the ritual and hopped down to the ground with a mischievous grin. He raised his sword to his visor in salute, as I curtsied and rejoined Mariol in the stands. As I settled myself back into my chair, I noticed two things. First, Brial's eyes were as black and as flat as I had ever seen them, and second, Mariol was frowning.

Ignoring the silent Elf, I looked at Mariol. "Whatever is the matter with you, Uncle?"

"Do you know that Anner de Ceolliune has never asked a lady for her

favor?"

"No. So?"

"It's slightly significant, niece," he retorted in a pained voice. "Unless I mistake his meaning that was tantamount to a declaration of intent."

"Oh, be realistic!" I scoffed, unable to keep myself from laughing. Mariol did not seem to share my amusement. Instead, he gave me a reproving stare and turned back to the field. My laughter died away in a moment of disconcerted fear. If Mariol was right, and he usually was, my problems had just expanded to near-crisis.

The herald moved into the center of the lists as physicians carted the last unfortunate loser off the field on a board. "Your Majesty, lords and ladies," he announced. "His Grace, Anner de Ceolliune will now take the field against His Grace, Gabril de Spesialle."

I darted a quick glance back at Brial, who had lost his scowl and now leaned forward. I slipped my hand from my muff and slid it into Mariol's gloved fist.

"Steady now, my girl," he murmured. "Don't let Spesialle see your concern. He's watching you to see what your reaction is."

I stared at my uncle's visored face, pointing at our pavilion and cracked a gay smile as I turned back to my uncle. "Why? Does he suspect who I am?"

"I don't think so," Mariol replied, under a hearty laugh. "He's just trying to goad Anner. Stay calm."

The two knights rode to opposite sides of the field and saluted each other before taking the long, padded lances from their squires. Then, as one, they kicked their horses into a run and leveled their weapons at each other.

The horses thundered together, then with an explosion of showering splinters, past each other. Both men remained erect in their saddles. Anner turned at the end of the field, grabbed another lance from the stack of fresh ones at the end of the lists and charged back toward Spesialle. Again, the lances shattered and both men remained seated. The third and fourth passes ended similarly. After the fourth pass, both men rode to the center of the lists and dismounted. Anner turned to me with a salute and I waved at him. Then, to my disgust, Gabril de Spesialle did the same.

Mariol straightened beside me. "Now we come to it! Spesialle is expressing an interest in you as well!"

"What?" I asked in horror.

"He knows it will infuriate Ceolliune, as well as issue a monumental insult to both of you."

"He will die," a cold voice proclaimed behind me. I whirled in my seat to see Brial draw his sword from the sheath at his side. A faint, strange music tugged at the edges of my awareness. I shook it from me and seized Brial's wrist.

"Stop it!" I hissed.

Brial's eyes glittered as he glared down at me. "No man will survive such an insult to you, my lady."

"Brial," I begged, even as Anner's sword met Spesialle with a resounding crash. "You can't disrupt the tournament over an insult! It will distract Anner and put him in danger!"

Brial hesitated, the tendons of his forearms tight under my sweat-slicked palms. Finally, he nodded and eased his sword back into the scabbard.

The duel on the field raged. Both men were matched in size and seemed

equally skilled as well. Neither man faltered as the heavy blows continued to fly. At some indefinable moment, the battle crossed over the line from tournament duel to a real fight.

The pavilion next to ours in the stands was that of the King and through my growing agitation, I heard Lufaux bark a crisp order to someone on the other side of the wall. Immediately, five knights appeared on the field and moved to separate the duelists.

One of them thrust his sword below the combatants, pulling up with a force that knocked both blades up and away. At this, the other men jerked both Anner and Spesialle back, ending the fight. Unable to stop myself, I jumped to my feet. Brial's hand closed around my arm, pulling me behind him. His sword was out again and leveled in front of us. I was about to ask him why, but then saw Spesialle and Anner, both unharmed and breathing heavily, coming across the field to stand before the King.

When the two knights removed their helmets and fell to their knees, Lufaux moved to the front of his pavilion. His face was stern as he stared down at them. "Explain yourselves!" he snapped, discarding his customary courtesy.

"Your Majesty," Anner began in a quiet voice. "The Duke de Spesialle has offered an unforgivable insult to the Lady de Beotte!"

"Not so," my uncle interrupted lazily. "I believed I offered the Lady a great compliment. Not all find the attentions of Spesialle as an insult, Your Majesty."

"Spesialle, you are fully aware of the implications of your gesture, regardless of how you intended them," the King said. "I do not believe the Lady in question has ever looked upon you with favor. It is apparent to me that you attempted to goad Lord Ceolliune to carelessness in your duel."

Spesialle bowed his head and replied, "Should we not ask the Lady de Beotte her opinion, Sire?"

My eyes narrowed in spite of themselves and Brial's hand tightened on my arm. Mariol glared at him and the Elf released me just as the King said, "Very well. Bring the Lady Celestis to me!"

Mariol gave both of us another quelling glower and led us to the King's pavilion. I held my head high and, carefully lifting my skirts above the churned earth, stepped around the cluster of men and sank into a curtsy before the King.

"Milady de Beotte," Lufaux said, raising me to my feet with one gnarled hand. "You know of my dilemma."

"Yes, Your Majesty, I do."

"Well, child?" he asked. "Where stand you on this issue?"

I could sense Mariol pleading with me to be circumspect but I looked straight into the King's tired old eyes and replied, "I do not find favor with the Duke de Spesialle. Anner de Ceolliune is my friend, as everyone knows, but I have never sought friendship or recognition from the Duke. As a matter of fact," I continued, staring at Gabril with a small gleam of challenge, "when I see Gabril de Spesialle, I think of him much as I would an...uncle, perhaps: some elderly relative that I find distasteful."

Spesialle's eyes met mine and narrowed. Brial appeared to be completely relaxed; he stepped around me and stood impassively between Gabril and myself. The echo of my words seemed to linger over us and I smiled before turning my eyes up to the King. Lufaux was peering shrewdly at me, but he said only, "Relax your guard, Elflord. Your mistress will come to no harm in my presence."

Brial bowed and remained stubbornly where he was. Spesialle stretched his lips into a small, cold smile. "Then I apologize for the insult where none was intended," he said.

"I do not accept your apology," Mariol said, his voice icy. "You have made a spectacle of my niece, Spesialle, and a mockery of this sacred day."

"Beotte!" the King snapped. "We do not require your input!"

Mariol bowed and put a hand beneath my elbow. "With your permission, Sire, my niece and I will withdraw to our pavilion."

"No, Mariol," the King replied. "Your lovely niece, her exuberant guard, and you will remain here in my pavilion for the rest of the tournament. I find myself overwhelmed with the desire for your company as well, milord de Ceolliune."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Anner said with a bow. "I will disarm and join you shortly."

"Lord Spesialle, you have our permission to withdraw," Lufaux said coolly. "Perhaps in the future, you will show your admiration for a young lady more carefully."

Gabril de Spesialle bowed. When he rose, his eyes met mine. I returned the stare defiantly until he turned away.

"I am sorry if this episode has caused you grief, milady," the King said, extending his arm to me while he gestured for another set of chairs.

"Not so much grief, Sire, as embarrassment," I replied. "I have done nothing to encourage the Duke de Spesialle; in fact, I have done much to discourage him."

The King smiled, and then looked to Brial's blank-featured face. "You should be careful around the Duke de Spesialle, Lord Ka'breona," he said, surprisingly using Brial's formal, Elven title. "Spesialle has an abiding hatred of your people."

Brial moved to hold the chair for me as I sat.

Lufaux's eyes were distant as he followed suit. "An extreme hatred," he mused, eyeing us thoughtfully. His eyes remained on Brial for some time while the tournament resumed.

Chapter Ten

The next day, Brial and I rode our horses over to Anner's house where he and the three knights were to work with the Ceolliune sword master. Usually, I did not attend these sessions, since every time they dueled with their wooden practice swords that scene from my dream would flash in front of me. On this particular morning, however, Mylan and Glaucon met us there and they managed to keep me diverted with a running exchange criticizing the antagonists.

I was plucking hothouse grapes from their stems and popping them into my mouth as the practice session wound on. I didn't know a lot about swords, but I could see that despite their different styles, the two men were evenly matched in skill. Brial compensated for Anner's greater size with a speed the larger man was unable to counter, while Anner's blows were so heavy as to occasionally stagger the slender Elf when he tried to parry. Being human, young, and a girl, however, I rather thrilled at the sight of watching them fight each other, even if only in practice.

A messenger, liveried in the royal colors of purple and white, entered the gymnasium with a sealed letter. Anner excused himself from his practice to break the seal and scan the letter. He swore under his breath and said curtly to the herald, "I will be there in a few minutes. Tell them to wait for me."

Always courteous, he bowed in an apology to me. "Excuse me, milady, but the King calls me to a special council session at Court."

I pouted, dropping the grapes back onto their tray. "Whatever for this time, milord?"

"Spesialle," Anner replied. "He has some new scheme to propose to the King."

"Really? After what happened yesterday?" I questioned. "What is it, I wonder?"

"He proposes establishing a military fortress at Asphodel."

My blood turned to ice in my veins. The clue I sought had fallen upon me at last and the knowledge left me feeling as if I had taken a hard blow to the ribs.

"Asphodel? Where's that?" Mylan asked.

"It's a county near the Great Forest," Anner replied. "Prosperous, until about five years ago. Spesialle's sister was married to the Count there, but brigands overran the manor and they slaughtered the Count's family."

My hands shook and I tightened them on the arm of my chair.

"Why would we need a fortress down there?" Mylan asked with a laugh. "There is nothing out there but the forest!"

"He needs a base at Asphodel so that he can attack the Elves," Brial said calmly. I looked up at him, surprised, but he stared grimly at the man before him.

Anner shot a look at Brial, and then nodded. "You are right, Brial; there are no other enemies close by, unless you consider the kingdom of Tartarus. It's only a couple of weeks' ride away."

Brial shook his head. "No, my friend. There are other places closer to Tartarus. The only thing close enough to Asphodel is the forest that borders its lands. Believe me: I have seen ruined Asphodel and I find this tale of brigands difficult to believe. Sorcery brought down Asphodel. The traces of magical fire are everywhere on the fallen castle."

Glaucou whistled. "That puts a new complexion on things, doesn't it?"

Anner agreed. "Yes, it does. I must prepare for the Council. Forgive me, milady."

With a perfunctory bow, lacking in its normal exquisite courtesy, Anner slapped the open letter against his leather-clad thigh and hurried off into toward the private apartments of his home. Mylan and Glaucou exchanged wordless glances, most of their customary ebullience gone as well. "Think we should go with him?" Mylan asked.

"Probably," Glaucou replied, jumping to his feet. "Celestis, please excuse us."

"By all means, gentlemen," I answered. "I think I should go home anyway. My uncle should know of this and I doubt Spesialle would send him word of the Council."

"Why is that?" Glaucou asked.

"Because of his friendship for the Elves," I replied.

"Well, we are friends of the Elves as well, by the gods!" Mylan swore. "Hurry on home, then, and send Lord Mariol to the Court! We'll need him there if we are to fight this thing!"

He turned to Brial, who looked tight-lipped and grave. "Brial, I want you to take my carriage. I will have my man deliver you safely to Mariol's door. If

this is true, you do not need to be on the streets of the city. Leave your mounts here; we'll see they arrive at Mariol's home later today."

Brial nodded. I looked from Mylan to Glaucon in astonishment. Could this be true? Were they really so loyal to their friends that they were capable of defying Spesialle for us? Both of them wore stern expressions on their faces as Mylan ordered a servant to bring his carriage around to the door. They looked older, I thought sadly, and like the warriors I knew they were but had never seen. Their youthful good nature was gone and in its place, a stern resolve had settled upon them like a blanket. I remembered uneasily that, although they were my friends, these men were also knights and possessed all of that renowned discipline and bearing.

As well as their prejudices, which included dishonesty.

My game with these men was over and only their discernment would retain them in my circle of friends.

"Lufaux is old," Glaucon was saying. "He may not have the stomach for this. Ansienne has never been aggressive toward the Elves, at least not since the Elf wars."

"The King listens too much to that bitch-whelp Spesialle!" Mylan threw at him as he helped me into my cloak. "Spesialle is the one with the stomach for war, not Lufaux."

"Celestis, you need to go straight home," Glaucon instructed me. "Do not stop for anything and keep yourselves well hidden. Draw the curtains in the carriage. My family crest should keep the curious from looking within."

I nodded and we sped along the corridors to the front doors. Brial, cloaked and hooded, went first. Mylan handed me into the carriage.

"We'll come to your uncle's house as soon as we can," he said. "Then we can make plans to get you and Brial out of town."

"We will make plans, certainly," I replied. "I do not think, however, that we'll make the plans you think."

He looked at me, then at Brial, then back at me. Mylan swore under his breath as he closed the carriage door. "Why do I get the feeling that you are about to cause us a lot of trouble?"

I smiled sweetly at him, as the driver chucked to the horses and we pulled away.

* * * *

"Mariol!" I shouted as soon as Wilden had admitted us. "Mariol! I need you!"

I turned to the disapproving Wilden who was behind me. "Where is Mariol?"

"Matters of business occupy him at the moment, milady."

"This is an emergency, Wilden!" I snarled. "Get him down here now and send Myrielle to my rooms. I'll need her later!"

Wilden hurried away and Brial asked in a mild voice, "And just why will you need Myrielle, Tamsen?"

"I am the Countess of Asphodel," I reminded him. "Spesialle cannot use it as a fortress without my permission and I will never allow my home to be a

staging area against the Elves. Kaldarte and Ar'ami are less than a day's march from Asphodel, and Leselle less than three. I can't allow this to happen!"

Mariol ran down the stairs, Morrote and Wilden on his heels, looking displeased. "Well?" he snapped. "What is the emergency?"

"The King summoned Anner to an emergency meeting of the Court Council," I informed him. "Spesialle is proposing to use Asphodel as a military fortress!"

"Asphodel? If he garrisons soldiers there, he must be —"

"—after the Elves," Morrote finished.

Mariol swore viciously, turned, and flew back up the stairs, shouting, "Morrote, the carriage! Wilden, help me dress, quickly!"

"He shouldn't take the Ka'antira with him," Brial noted.

"He won't," I replied. "He'll take one of the footmen with him."

I walked into the study, removing my gloves and cloak with a sigh. My mind was whirling. If we could not avert this crisis, I would have to take steps. Those steps would be premature and would eliminate the rest of my purpose in coming to Glaucon in the first place. On the other hand, if I didn't do something to prevent Spesialle from putting his plan into action, then my beloved home would be a rallying point for the humans to destroy the Elves.

Brial brought me a glass of wine. "Drink this," he ordered me. "Let us wait until we see what your friends can accomplish. Worrying now will only make the wait harder."

His hand gripped my shoulder as he spoke again. "I will make things ready for us to leave," he went on. "If there is no way to prevent this, then we

will have to warn our people.”

“You’re right, of course,” I admitted. “We have, however, one final alternative before we reach that point.”

Mariol came into the study, taking long, angry strides. He looked at me seriously. “Tamsen, this could take most of the day. Stay here in the house, and don’t make any decisions while I am away. At the very least, I can drag these deliberations out until tomorrow. That will give us tonight to plan for a different strategy.”

“Anner, Mylan, and Glaucon will be visiting after they leave Court,” I told him. “We can all talk then.”

“They know? They are against it as well?” Mariol nodded in approval. “That’s good to know! It gives us an advantage Gabril won’t know we have.” He turned to the Ka’antira. “Stay in the house. Prepare it for defense. Help Brial protect Tamsen. I don’t expect trouble, but it’s best to be prepared.”

He paused and shot another piercing look at me. “Are you prepared to go to the king?”

“If I must,” I said quietly. “It seems that we may have no choice.”

Mariol nodded once more and said only, “Be sure you guard Tamsen while I am gone. Admit no one to see her.”

The brothers nodded and Mariol bustled into his cloak, yelling for Yretos, his favorite human footman (who was big enough to be a guardsman) to accompany him. Within seconds, the house had fallen still again and the four of us stared at each other in dismay.

“It has come too quickly,” I said. “I didn’t expect my uncle to show his hand so early.”

“Neither did Mariol,” Wilden concurred.

A discreet cough sounded at the door. We turned to see Myrielle standing there, with a pitying look on her face. “I am sorry, milady, for the news you have received today. Your, err, uncle explained it to me as he dressed.”

“Thank you, Myrielle,” I replied with an inclination of my head.

“Mariol seems to think that you have it in your mind to go to the King,” she continued.

“If I must,” I replied. “Asphodel is mine, and I have rights as to how it is used.”

“Then come with me, Tamsen. Any woman must plan for these types of appearances and with my help we can create the image you want before you even speak a word.”

I nodded, and set my glass down on the table. As I stood, Wilden said quietly to Brial, “That is good. It will enable the three of us to prepare for the worst, if it comes.”

Brial’s eyes met mine. Then he gave a brief nod and I followed Myrielle up the stairs.

* * * *

It was nearly dark before Mariol returned home. I had ordered a formal dinner from the kitchens, aware that we would have guests. All that long day, while Myrielle and I plotted, cut, and assembled my suppliant’s gown, the Elves had prepared everything for a long journey as well as the defense of the house.

About an hour before our normal dinnertime, I was alone, pacing in the study when the front door opened and Mariol stepped in.

I rubbed my hands together nervously, but poured a glass of wine and greeted Mariol with it as he entered the room.

"Your friends are on the way," he informed me. "They'll be arriving in a less open manner than they usually would."

"It didn't go well." I made it a statement of fact.

"No, it didn't," he agreed gravely. "I did manage to postpone the vote until tomorrow, but the majority of the advisors seemed to think a fortress at Asphodel was a sound idea. The family is extinct, or so they think, and the county is in a strategic location."

I looked down at my father's great ring, the signet with our crest that I had put on again for the first time that day. I twisted it around my finger, my fingertips sliding over the carved narcissus.

"You know what I have to do, don't you Mariol?"

"I'm afraid I do, Tamsen," he replied with a sigh, all of the Celestis game gone. "You realize that you might gain Asphodel, but you will lose the rest of the information you might have gathered?"

"I know, but I don't see what choice I really have!" I replied, pouring another glass of wine for myself and refilling his goblet. "I cannot allow Spesialle to establish an army that close to the forest! They would slaughter the Elves!"

"I know, child, I know." Mariol twisted the stem of his goblet between two fingers. "I just wish we could find another way."

"I do too, Mariol."

* * * *

The three men arrived separately, ducking through a side door I didn't even know existed. I greeted them all with wine and we went to the dining room. None of us was in the mood to be social.

Over dinner, we kept the conversation on a light level. That was easier to do than I thought it would be, for Glaucon and Mylan were fascinated to find Wilden and Morrote sitting at the table with us. The four of them kept up a running conversation, which enabled the rest of us to observe and eat in silence.

After dinner, we gathered in Mariol's opulent study with several bottles of wine and orders not to be disturbed. The taciturn Morrote stood watch at the door, while Wilden joined us for our discussion.

"I don't think that we can find any way to avert this," Anner began, shaking his head. "The Court doesn't seem to want to deny Spesialle anything. Only two or three others were with us today. We may have delayed the vote, but I am very much afraid it is already lost."

"Spesialle will lead the garrison, of course," Mylan noted.

"That is his intention," Mariol affirmed. "I think, however, that he may discover a stumbling block in his path of which he is unaware."

"Really?" Anner questioned. "And what would that be?"

Mariol looked at me, and I sighed. "Me."

"You? How is that possible?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Because Asphodel is not his. Asphodel is mine." I took a deep, bracing breath and went on, "I am Tamsen, Countess of Asphodel since my father died, and niece to Spesialle."

Anner regarded me, his face reminding me of Brial's wooden implacability. He turned to Mariol and asked in a quiet voice, "Is this true, Your Grace?"

"Yes," Mariol replied. "Her tutor, who was also mine, sent Tamsen to me in the hopes that she might learn something of the threat to the Elves. I gave her my name, my house, and my protection. The deceit lies upon me. Tamsen did as I instructed her to do."

Three pairs of eyes rested on me and I squirmed a little in the chair I was sitting. Brial closed quickly to my side while Wilden stirred from his position against the wall.

"I was going to tell you all," I began, "when I was certain it was safe."

"Safe?" Glaucon echoed. "Why wouldn't it be safe?"

My eyes met his squarely. "Because when I was twelve, my uncle Gabriel de Spesialle came to Asphodel and murdered my parents before my eyes. Since then, he has been searching for me, to kill me and consolidate his claim on Asphodel. That's why I say it isn't safe, Glaucon. Association with me is not safe for anyone."

Anner was the first to recover. "You honor us with your confidence, milady."

"I should have 'honored' you before, but I didn't like to think that I was putting you in any danger."

“What exactly do you plan to do?”

“I will go to the Privy Council tomorrow morning and petition the King on Asphodel’s behalf.” I said in a rush, staring at my fingers, which twisted around the stem of my goblet.

“Will Spesialle be able to contest your claim?” Mylan asked.

“Highly unlikely,” I replied, showing the Asphodel crest on my hand. “Besides, I have ‘uncle’ to vouch for me.”

“True. Nevertheless, what do you hope to accomplish?” Glaucon asked.

“I think the best we can hope for is delay,” I responded. “It is obvious to me that Spesialle intends to attack the Elves regardless of the Court’s support. If I can scotch his use of Asphodel as a staging area, I can delay him for months, maybe even a year. It will take time to find or build a new garrison. In that time, I really hope that...well, that I can kill him.”

“Kill Spesialle? You? How do you propose to do that, milady?” Mylan demanded.

“Like this,” I said, setting down the glass and holding out my hand. On my palm, I called the flames to me. The room lost its warmth and light in a matter of seconds, and yet all around my hand, tiny flames flickered and danced. I let them absorb this feat, and then, I sent the flames back to their original places and the chamber warmed back up.

“You are a mage,” Anner stated flatly. “As is your uncle. You intend to challenge him and destroy him, don’t you?”

I flicked my eyes at him, and then dropped them to my now quiet hands now clasped in my lap.

Mariol spoke up. "That is neither here nor there. We have put our lives in your hands this day and must determine our course of action."

"It will be as you say, Your Grace," Anner replied. In the morning, we will all escort you to Court, milady. You will plead your case with the three of us at your back and no matter what the King's response is you will leave the Court safely."

He turned to his two comrades. "We are agreed, then?"

"Agreed," they both replied.

Then Brial stepped to my side. He looked at Anner and said, "I cannot be with my lady to protect her on the morrow. Leaving her fate in hands other than my own is hard for me."

"I will bring your lady back to you, my friend," Anner swore, his grey eyes glinting strangely. "You have my oath on it."

Anner got to his feet, crossing the room in three languid strides to stand before me. He lifted my hand from my lap, bent over, and kissed it. "Milady, Tamsen, I give you my honor and my sword. Where you go after this, I will come. I will present myself for your protection an hour after dawn."

"Thank you, milord Anner," I answered formally. "You honor me."

Mylan and Glaucon came and swore similar oaths, both of them kissing my hand in the ages-old chivalric code, and saluted Brial as an equal and comrade before bowing to the Marquis and leaving the house.

After the door closed behind them, Mariol exhaled a long, gusty sigh and sank back into his comfortable chair. He suddenly looked old. "Those young men shame me," he muttered. "Not a question or demur from any of them. They will be great men...if they survive."

I dropped my head into my hands, spots swirling through the forced darkness.

“Wilden,” Mariol began. “In the last hours of night, take Brial and your brother to the outskirts of the city. Leave the city as soon as the gates open. Follow the road toward Pamphylia. We will meet you in that first little village, at the Icarus inn tomorrow night. If we do not appear, do not wait. Immediately ride to Leselle and warn them of what is to come. Gather up your parents at their home and take them with you.”

“Yes, Mariol,” the Elf replied.

“Tonight I will need your help to seal my laboratory further and remove some of my artifacts.” He shot a glance at Brial and me. “As for you two, try not to be up all night. Get some sleep.”

With a grin that was a mere ghost compared with his normal wicked smile, he left the room, trailed by the faithful Wilden.

* * * *

That night was long. I tossed in my bed, burdened with worry for the men who knew my secret and would risk everything they had or held dear the following morning. Finally, about three hours before dawn, I gave it up. Getting out of bed, I padded to the fire and sank into one of the comfortable chairs.

“You should be sleeping,” Brial’s deep, soft voice said from the doorway. I looked up to see him lounging there, his sword at his side, and realized that he must have stayed awake all night, defending my door while I slept.

"I can't," I said, rubbing my aching forehead with the back of my hand. "I'm too worried. What if something goes wrong? What if someone gets hurt? I have too much on my mind just now to sleep, Brial."

"I cannot sleep either," he admitted, still leaning against the doorframe. "I am concerned for your safety."

I regarded him as he hovered in the doorway. "Come in, Brial," I said finally. "You and I have a lot to discuss."

The tall Elflord sidled into the room and folded himself into a chair. His eyes met mine warily, I thought, so I plowed ahead. "We don't have time to be keeping secrets from each other right now, Brial," I began. "We need to clear the air between us."

"There is nothing to clear."

"Oh, I think there is," I retorted, my temper rising. "You've stalked around here for over a month, barely speaking to me. At first, I thought it was just some odd Elven moodiness. However, lately I've been doing a lot of thinking and I have concluded that this situation cannot be ignored any more. I think that you have a problem with me personally and I wish we could resolve it."

"If I have given you that impression, I am sorry, my lady," he said, his voice definitely gone cool. "I have been performing my duties, and my concern is for them."

"Your duties?" I snorted. "I don't think so, Brial. I think you've been too concerned with staying away from me to think overmuch about your duties!"

He rose to his feet and something about his movement reminded me of a long, lean predatory cat. I shifted my position in the chair, uneasy. When he

spoke next, there was a note of warning in his voice. "It is late, Tamsen, and you have much to do in the morning. I'll leave you now," he said and moved for the door.

"I think I deserve an answer from you, Brial," I said, a note of sadness in my voice. "I thought I warranted better than this."

He stopped in his tracks. "Leave it alone, my lady," Brial ordered me, his back still to me. "You do not wish to travel this path."

I jumped to my feet and grabbed his arm without thinking. In a single movement, he spun on his heel, pulled me to his chest and kissed me again. No gentleness lay in this kiss, only a savage fervency that left me breathless against him. When he pulled away, the conflict in his face staggered me.

"Does that answer help you any, Tamsen?" he grated. "Is that what you wanted to know? Gods, you are so young you frighten me sometimes!"

He pushed himself away from me and whirled to the fireplace, his breath coming in deep, ragged rhythms. "You are placing yourself in a dangerous position, Tamsen. This isn't a game that you're playing with courtiers; not here, not with me. You don't understand the consequences this could have!"

I laughed. "You were the one who said Elves weren't prissy!"

"Forget about that!" he snarled. "Go to bed!"

"You can't tell me to do that!" I snapped, my temper unraveling. "I thought we were past you telling me what to do!"

"You aren't thinking at all!"

A sudden thought hit me like a brick. "'If we were all that prissy there wouldn't be any more Elves,'" I quoted. I paused, then said icily, "There

wouldn't be any more *half-Elves* either, would there, Brial?"

He turned back to me so quickly that I staggered. Those slender, strong hands wrapped themselves around my forearms.

We stood there, locked in that confrontational embrace for a few seconds before I broke away. "I thought your prejudices were passing," I said with a quiver in my voice. "Obviously, you can't overlook my birth long enough to see the person I really am. Despite all of your fine words to me over the past few months, you're still bogged down by the insufferable attitudes you had to begin with!"

"It's not that," he replied in a low, intense voice, his hands gripping a chair back until the knuckles turned white.

I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him. Before he could decide whether to accept the kiss, I pushed him violently and backed several paces away. "You told me that there was no fault to be placed on me," I said, not caring if I hurt him with my words. "Well, there you go, Brial! You can blame *that* on me! Now you have every right to be angry, unforgiving, and prejudicial! Maybe that will help with your 'complication.'"

My words fell like daggers, sharp and cutting through the silence in the room. For the first time, we confronted each other without the formality of our former relationship. I stared at him, hurt and angry, as he struggled to maintain his calm. I felt a quick exultation at the fact that I had finally penetrated that rigid wall he had built around himself.

"You don't understand what I am saying to you," he finally muttered through clenched teeth.

"What you are saying to me is nothing, Brial! Nothing at all! Well, go on then! You were so anxious to escape a minute ago!" I cried. "You've done

nothing but belittle me and congratulate yourself on your innate superiority since we met! Don't you realize how that makes me feel?"

The fury drained out of me as rapidly as it had rushed in. My legs trembled and I leaned against the wall, closing my eyes. More than anything, I wanted this interminable day to end.

A gentle hand touched my cheek, cupping it as Brial had done in my dream. I opened my eyes to see him standing in front of me, his eyes drawn with weariness and a new gleam of something I could not identify.

"I am sorry," he said softly. "Sorry that I hurt you, sorry that I made you angry, and sorry that I cannot express to you how I am feeling right now. This is a complication because it will interfere with how I do my duty; that is all. I could protect you as your friend. When I saw you square your shoulders and walk to meet the man who destroyed your world, I felt rage. We Elves do not feel strong emotions like that very often. In that moment, I wanted to throw our entire purpose for coming here away and go to rescue you from your situation. This is...difficult for me. You are very young; you are a princess of our people, and a sorceress. All three are very good reasons why I shouldn't rebel against the instinct that tells me this situation, *our* situation is a danger to you. I cannot afford to have my emotions outweighing my instincts right now, Tamsen. It will make it harder for me to protect you."

His hand slid down my face, curved around the back of my neck and pulled me to him. I relaxed against his chest as his arms enfolded me. He rested his chin against my hair, and heaved a torturous sigh. "But the gods help me, I don't know if I can fight this," he finished in a voice so low I could barely hear it.

"I have been struggling with myself now for weeks. When I first discovered how your mind works, pushing through everything to find the answers you sought, I called it admiration. When I saw how you fought every

day to contain and mask your rage and meet your uncle without letting him guess at your identity, I called it affinity. When you broke through the shell of your isolation and childhood, and emerged as a beautiful young woman, I called it lust. Yet now, holding you like this and seeing how I have hurt you, I must call it something more. I cannot help myself; I have fallen into the very trap I sought to avoid beyond all others. If we acknowledge this, we run great risks. Everything in me tells me to fight this new emotion that has taken control of my life, but I can't find the way to do that."

"It's too late," I whispered, the surety of my Seer's blood running through my veins. "We've already lost this battle, Brial."

"I know, *cariad*," he murmured, wrapping one of my curls around his hand as he slipped into the ancient Elven tongue.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means beloved," he replied, tugging on my hair to make me look up. He smiled down at me sweetly and my heart twitched.

"*Cariad*," I breathed as he leaned in to kiss me again.

Chapter Eleven

My hands clutched at Brial as he sped from me in the orchard. The knights stood next to my uncle. When Spezialle saw Brial running toward him, he turned to Anner and snarled, "The girl is yours, until I kill her, if you kill the Elf!"

Glaucou and Mylan tried to grab Anner's arm when he moved for his sword, but my uncle pointed at them. As with my father, lightning forked from the sky and they fell, smoking to the flagstones. The sickly-sweet smell of burned flesh drifted into my nostrils as I followed Brial, running toward the bloody courtyard. Before I reached them, Brial and Anner's swords met in a ring of steel, showering sparks around them.

My uncle turned then, and spoke to me in a cold, amused voice. "It is always the curse of women in your family to love men who die in their defense," he sneered. "All of those men broke in the end. I wonder, niece, how well will you fare?"

I awoke with a gasp, tears coming to my eyes. As I sat up, Brial started and leaned over from the chair he had placed at my bedside. I grasped his hand and came back to myself.

"Sleep now, *cariad*," he murmured. "All is well, and I am here."

"My dream," I said, pressing my shaking hand to my forehead. "It keeps changing. I'm afraid, Brial; afraid of what this will lead us to."

Brial's face was serious and I noticed that his eyes were weary. "Don't let this dream control you," he warned. "There is no way to know if it is true."

"I'm nervous about the morning," I confessed. "So much can go wrong: the King could be angry with me for lying to him, or reject me despite my petition. I'm worried that Spesialle will kill our friends and I won't be able to stop him."

"I know. You must be brave, Tamsen. Everything depends upon it. Maybe if I accompanied you —"

"Brial, you know you can't go with me!"

"I know," he sighed. "That doesn't prevent me from wishing I could. Nevertheless, we'll reunite tomorrow night, and we'll go on together from there."

"I just want you to hold me. There is nothing wrong with that is there?"

"No, there isn't." He held out his hand for me. I took it, following him to the space before the hearth, and sank to the floor in front of him. He pulled me to his chest, so that my back rested against him, and closed his arms around me. The position was comforting but not conducive to misinterpretation.

We did not talk the remainder of the night. Brial held me while I leaned my head back against his shoulder, stared into the fire, and worried. When Brial heard the first quiet stirring in the house, he loosened his hold.

"I must go," he murmured against my hair.

"I know," I answered softly. "Gods go with you, Brial. I will see you tonight."

"Take care at Court. I would trust Anner with my life, but I do not feel he

will guard you as I would.”

He kissed me twice more; hard, possessive kisses, cupped my face and strode across the room to the door. Then he was gone and I started to prepare for the confrontation to come.

* * * *

The gown Myrielle made for me was a stark, unrelieved black of a light velvet. Myrielle had cut the skirt to disguise the split necessary for swift riding, with a paneled overdress that was more like a long coat. No embroidery, no gems or ribbons, the dress was plain, high cut, and formal. I replaced the Ka’antira emerald around my neck and added the seal of Asphodel to my black-gloved right hand. I twisted my hair into a tight, high crown of braids, and wore sturdy riding boots. Save for the burning pallor of my face, I seemed to reflect my mourning in every aspect about my person.

Myrielle was a genius.

Brial had taken my pack with him: my books, jewels, and extra clothes were already gone to safety. Without him, I felt vulnerable. I checked my appearance a final time, and then picked up my black hooded cloak. It was time to take my first victory from Gabril de Spesialle.

I hoped.

I went down the stairs to find Mariol pacing his study once more. He, too, wore mourning black, presumably at Myrielle’s insistence. Mariol had sent her with the Elves that morning, and his greyish face reflected their parting. “They should be here soon, Tamsen. Are you ready?”

"Yes, Mariol," I replied in a neutral tone.

"Remember, child, I will be there with you. If Spesialle tries to use sorcery, I'll contain him."

"Does the king know Spesialle is a wizard?"

"I wouldn't count on it. The only reason I do is that I caught him in the middle of a spell once and diverted it. He was furious for months."

A footman opened the door. "His Grace, Lord Anner de Ceolliune," he announced.

We turned to the door, and I gaped, stunned speechless by the sight. Anner, heir to the Duchy of Ceolliune, was in full armor, not the lighter armor used for tournaments. Knights attended any governmental function that dealt with war in their hereditary armor and each family's traditional design was different. Anner was of the build to look splendid in his gleaming plate, a crimson cape fastened around his broad steel-covered shoulders and his red-crested helm under his arm. "You are fearsome, Sir Knight," I curtsied. "You do this house honor."

"The honor is mine, milady," he replied in the accepted chivalric response. "I but serve your commands."

I poured the ceremonial glass of wine, drank from it, and turned the cup so that he could drink from the same spot I had. This duty he did soberly and precisely. When first Glaucon, then Mylan entered, I performed the same little ceremony with each of them.

Mariol watched from his spot near the large glass window that overlooked his garden. "After this is over," he said quietly, "we must get out of the city as quickly as possible. Tamsen, I have your horse and my hunter hitched

to the carriage. After we go into the palace, my man will unhitch them and saddle them."

"Very well," I replied, pulling my cloak around my shoulders. "Shall we go then, gentlemen?"

* * *

Many of the townsfolk stopped and stared at us as we made our way to the castle. It was unheard of for three knights in full armor, helms closed, to escort a noble carriage with the coat of arms of a marquis on its door. Inside the carriage, Mariol and I sat without speaking. I twisted the large ring around my finger incessantly.

Finally, we arrived. The knights dismounted first, handing their reins to a groom whom they told to walk the horses near the door. Then Mylan opened the carriage door. Removing his gauntlet, he held out a hand. I put my ringed hand upon his and descended from the carriage. Mylan bowed and stepped back to join his comrades. Mariol was out of the carriage by this time and extended his arm to me. Without a word, we sailed into the palace.

Members of the Court looked at us with shocked disbelief as my escorts paced with us; Anner in front, the others behind. They had removed their helms upon entering the palace, so people recognized them. Whispers followed us down the corridor.

A chamberlain stood in front of the door where the Privy Council met. Called the Star Chamber, it served as the royal assembly and the royal court. The chamberlain twitched into attention and made as if to bar the door. "Sir

Knights! Milords! You cannot enter the presence of the King under arms!" he squeaked.

"I am Lord Anner de Ceolliune, and the King has summoned me into his presence as a member of the Privy Council. I escort this Lady under arms to protect her. Move from my way, man, before I remove you myself!" Anner's quiet voice was authoritative, laden with the command of a lifetime's training.

The chamberlain scurried away. Mariol patted my arm as Anner pushed the doors open with one great crash of his gauntleted fist.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded an imperious voice. Gabril de Spesialle clutched a parchment in one hand and was obviously in the middle of a speech. His gaze shot from Anner to me still on Mariol's arm. The carved cabochon ruby from the signet ring on my third finger winked. Spesialle's eyes lingered on the narcissus, then widened as he jerked his eyes to my face.

"Your Majesty," Anner declared, as Mylan and Glaucon strode to his sides. "Forgive this intrusion and the matter of being armed in your presence."

They all sank to one knee, drawing their swords and laying them crosswise on the floor before them. Glaucon spoke then, his voice unnaturally stern. "We swear unto you, Your Majesty, that we are your true and loyal knights unto death. Dishonor, however, is something we cannot accept and so we beg you to grant us this boon."

In bewilderment, King Lufaux looked from the kneeling knights to my pale, set face. "I know well your loyalty, milords," the King said, frowning. "I grant your request."

"We protect this Lady under arms, Your Majesty, because events have convinced us of the justice of her claim as well as danger to her person. Will you hear her in full Court? We are sworn to her cause."

"Celestis de Beotte," Lufaux murmured. "Step forward, milady, and speak."

The knights picked up their swords and rose to their feet as one. They did not sheathe their weapons. Instead, they ranged themselves in a triangle around Mariol and me, swords at the ready.

I took two steps forward and sank onto my knees as well. "Your Majesty," I began in a steady voice. "I throw myself upon your mercy and grace. I must confess a deception to you, but I beseech you to listen to my reasons."

"You have our permission to go on, milady."

"Sire, my name is not Celestis de Beotte. I came to your court disguised, in fear for my safety. One man here seeks to kill me, as he has already destroyed my family."

"Whom do you accuse, lady?"

I lifted my head and looked straight at Gabril de Spesialle. "The Duke de Spesialle, sire, who is also my uncle."

"Uncle?" the King questioned, frowning more. "How is this possible?"

"I am Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel, Your Majesty, and my uncle, the Duke, murdered my parents Prosper and Solange de Asphodel while I watched. I just discovered that he wishes to establish a military garrison in my ruined castle at Asphodel. I have come to plead for my lands and my people."

The King looked at my uncle, who had paled but remained standing as proudly as ever under the rising murmur that swept through the Star Chamber. He regarded me with a malevolent stare before he turned back to the King.

"She lies, Your Majesty," he stated. "She has no proof of her identity. My

late sister did not have a child."

"Not true, uncle," I said coldly. "I bear the seal of Asphodel and the Ka'antira pendant that only the heirs of Asphodel may wear. I remember the day you killed my parents. I heard you order the massacre of my people and the destruction of my home and lands. I know you want Asphodel to use as a staging point for war against the Elves. Tell me, uncle, do you remember this? My mother before she died prophesied this: 'You will kill me at the order of the usurper and you will not find the child. The child will find you. You will lead this kingdom into war, and your name will be death. You will always be a man who fears many things: betrayal, revelation, and usurpation. Nevertheless, in the end it will be your name you fear the most, for it will mean all three.'"

I laughed as recognition came over his avian features. Mariol stepped forward to address his King. "Sire, I can vouch for this lady as Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel. She is the rightful heir to Asphodel. The sight of the ruined manor at Asphodel proves her accusations against Spesialle. I was a friend of her father for many years. I journeyed there two years ago and saw the remains of magic myself. In light of this information, I submit to Your Majesty's grace that since Asphodel has a surviving heir of the blood, we should abandon any plans for the county."

Lufaux looked from me to my uncle and back. Finally, he said, "Rise, Lady Tamsen de Asphodel."

Anner stepped forward with an assisting hand and I got to my feet. I felt the scorching heat of my uncle's stare on the side of my face and Mariol's sudden tension as the tingle of magic swirled in the air around us.

The King regarded me for a moment; his eyes weren't unkind, but they were wary. He held out one gnarled hand to me. "Come forward, milady, and show me the seal you bear."

I took the seal from my finger and handed it to the king. He peered at the stone and turned it over in his hand. "When my family first ascended the throne of Ansienne, we lived in a time of great conflict among our people," he began. "Rivals contended for several of the demesnes, and it grew difficult to establish the rightful heirs. My ancestor, Legoney, devised a method through which he could establish the rightful heir to each county. A powerful wizard enchanted the seals of each house. When the King wished to discover the rightful lord of each district, he spoke a word of power and the ring would respond. If the bearer were legitimately the heir, both the lesser seal and the seal of the King would glow. If the person had claimed the county without a legitimate claim, the ring would consume the bearer with fire from within." He handed the ring back to me. "Place this seal upon the third finger of your right hand, milady. We can resolve this issue at once."

I curtsied and replaced my father's ring without hesitation.

"Judicio," the King murmured.

I looked down at my hand. A thrum resonated from the ring upon my right hand and the heavy gold signet upon the king's hand responded. Lufaux watched intently as a small beam of blue light shot from his ring to the center of the carved stone in my ring.

The entire ring glowed blue. The onlookers gasped and Lufaux smiled grimly. "Milady the Countess Tamsen de Asphodel," he said formally. "We have heard your charge and we grant your request. Asphodel is yours, to heal and rebuild. Let it be written and proclaimed this very day."

Spesialle's face darkened into a purplish hue. "Sorcery!" he spat. "You are too much like my bastard half-breed sister, niece!"

He raised his hands and the three knights dropped their helms with a

crash and raised their swords. Mariol's face turned grim and he, too, lifted his hands and began to mutter under his breath. Several of the courtiers ran for the doors, while the King remained upon his throne watching the scene.

"Do not threaten me, uncle," I warned, my own magic starting to hum across my skin. "I have many scores to settle with you yet."

"You will have more still," he promised. "Have you been enjoying the dreams I have sent to you, niece? It will not be long before I stand above you with your blood at my feet, just as I did with your mother!"

With that final snarled remark, he unexpectedly leapt at the King. Anner roared and jumped for him but he was too late. The Duke de Spesialle pulled out a dagger and severed the large artery at the side of the King's neck with it. There was a sudden, strange watery movement in the air around him. A light flashed, I glimpsed something that looked like long, black wings and shouted a warning. Then, before we knew what happened, he had disappeared.

"The King!" Anner bellowed. "To the King!"

I ran onto the throne dais, lifting the King who was slumped against the gilded side of his seat with a stunned look on his face. "Sire! Hold on, sire, don't move!" I begged, wadding a corner of my cloak to the side of his throat where blood spurted in great, throbbing rushes. "Oh no! Please don't die, milord! Please stay with me!" I begged him, tears running down my face. I knew instantly that his wound was fatal and there was nothing I could do. In my helplessness, I could only hold the dying King and offer him what small comfort I could.

He tried to speak, but only made a gurgling sound like a bubbling pot of stew. Blood now ran freely down his chest and from his mouth. With a final burst of strength, he laid his gnarled hand upon my head in blessing and died in

my arms. The light in his eyes dimmed and a look of such joy altered his features that my tears ceased to flow.

Lufaux, last of the line of Leogeney, was no more. Ansienne had no king, for Lufaux joined his lost wife at last.

* * * *

Shouts rang throughout the palace, heavy footsteps pounding on the marble floors. I laid the King down gently, a hard knot of grief caught in my throat. Somewhere, a horn rang and then I heard the unmistakable ring of swords on steel.

"Tamsen!" Anner shouted. "We must flee! Battle is starting in the corridors! Your uncle must have planned against this!"

A shaken herald crouched near the dais, along with several courtiers. I rose to my feet and stared down at them. "Remember this day," I instructed them in a grim voice, more terrible for its quietness. "Remember the day that Asphodel came to claim its own and the King was struck down by a traitor and sorcerer. Let no one deny the regicide committed by Gabril de Spesialle! I swear to you on the honor of my house that I will avenge this horrible crime against our land! I, Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel, swear it to you on my King's blood!"

"Milady, I will remember and proclaim this," the herald promised, his voice shaking. "All praise to Asphodel today, with her noble allies. We vouchsafe your honor, milady. We will not forget! This, to you I swear!"

I turned to the four tense men behind me. "Can we make it?" I asked, striding toward them.

"We'll go first," Anner snapped out. "We will force a path to the outdoors. Keep your magic at the ready, we might need it. Once on the palace grounds, ride hard to the gates. If we make good time we should be able to get through the gates before they bar them."

"If Spesialle arranged this, it'll be hard to fight our way through." Mylan pointed out.

"It's our only chance," Anner replied. "Let's go."

With that, he dropped his visor and plunged through the doors into the hall. Only a little fighting impeded us at first, but as we went on the battle grew fiercer. The corridors were full of men in the Spesialle livery, killing any of the royal retainers who crossed their paths. The knights, armored as they were, waded through the throngs of combatants, knocking them from our path as they swung the flats of their swords around them with their heavy steel-covered arms. Mariol gripped me tightly by the upper arm, whispering words of magic to be ready to let fly at any moment.

"There they are!" came the shout behind us. I whirled around, drawing on the elements. With a swift gesture, I built a wall of flame behind it just as Mariol threw a shield around us. Our pursuers, thinking it was illusion such as most human magicians cast, ignored it and plowed straight into it. Screams and howls filled the hall behind me and echoed in my ears as I picked up my skirts and ran after the others.

Anner and Mylan had reached the doors. They were battling their way through the bloodthirsty crowd on the steps down to the drive. Glaucon waited, his sword ready and dripping blood onto his steel-shod boots, to guard our backs as we bolted for our mounts. They tossed their heads nervously, sidestepping from the little groom who was trying to restrain them.

I built another wall of fire across the main corridor right behind us. The magic left me in a rush and my knees buckled. Glaucon caught my arm in a hard grasp and shouted. "No time for that, Tamsen! Get to your mount! Run! Now!"

I obeyed, fleeing through the open path between Anner and Mylan, who were fighting fiercely against a group of my uncle's guardsmen. I threw myself into the saddle and reined in the terrified horse. Mariol mounted beside me and Glaucon was in the process of mounting his own horse. Anner and Mylan came more slowly behind us, still fighting.

"Anner! Mylan!" I screamed. "Forget it! Let's go!"

Mylan instantly turned and ran for his horse, one hand beneath his breastplate and pressed to his side. Anner delayed just long enough to cut down two more men, and then hurled himself up and over the saddle horn. We turned our horses' head for the city gates and kicked them into a gallop.

The city was in pandemonium. Small, feverish battles raged in the streets, with panicked civilians fleeing into locked and barred houses. The men formed a tight circle around my horse and we galloped headlong through the panic toward the western gate.

The murder of the king had been the last thing I expected. I became aware of a wet warmth and looking down saw the king's blood staining my right arm and side. A slick, red shine adhered to the carved narcissus of my ring and I tried to wipe it clean on a dry part of my skirt. The omen was not lost on me. There would be blood spilled over Asphodel, brought on by regicide and treason. This good man's blood would not be the last upon my hands.

I saw the gates ahead of us, mercifully still open. The streets were quieter here, mostly deserted, and the guards had abandoned their posts, no doubt drawn to the fierce battle continuing on the palace grounds. We thundered

through them and were free of the walls, fleeing into the grasslands.

* * * *

Two hours later, Anner reined in his mount. "They need to rest," he said in a clipped voice. "So do we if we intend to make it."

Sliding to the ground, he removed his cloak and rubbed down his horse with it. Glaucon and Mariol followed suit quickly. My head drooped as I tried to will my stiff legs to dismount.

Mylan fell from his horse with a crash.

"Mylan!" Glaucon yelled, running to his friend's side. He ripped off Mylan's helm quickly.

"Bastard got me under my arm," Mylan said in a low voice.

Sure enough, blood was seeping from beneath his breastplate.

"Get this off of him!" I snapped.

The men, working together quickly, removed Mylan's armor and mail shirt. The wound wasn't horribly deep, but it was long and produced a steady, thick stream of blood.

"He's lost a lot of blood." I tore long strips from my petticoat. "Mariol, I know you snuck some brandy into your pack. Bring it to me. We need to rinse out the wound and bind it."

Mariol handed me a flask. I poured some of the liquor over the gaping wound and began to tie the makeshift bandage around his broad chest, pulling

tightly to try to hold the cut together.

"Mylan, you are a stupid man. I should have seen to this long before now," I said to him in disgust. "When we get to the village, I'll stitch this up; until then we need to keep him on a horse." I lifted Mylan's head and poured some of the brandy down his throat. "I wish I had some herbs with me and could make him something that would help."

"I'll keep him on his horse," Anner announced. "I'll take off my armor, and he'll ride with me."

Glaucon rubbed down my horse and Mariol gave the beasts judicious drinks of water from the puddles scattered along the side of the road. I helped Mylan to a sitting position as Anner unbuckled the straps holding his breastplate together.

"Will he be able to go on?" Anner asked.

"I hope so," I replied. "The wound isn't fatal, but he's lost a lot of blood and is very weak."

Anner bent over and lifted his friend from the ground. He carried Mylan to his charger and arranged him against the pommel.

"I can ride," Mylan protested weakly.

"Sure you can," Anner replied with bleak humor. "And I can make the tides go backwards."

The tall knight looked down at me, his honey-blond hair ruffling in the wind. "Are you all right, milady?"

"I am fine," I declared.

Anner peered at my face doubtfully, and then smiled. "You are a brave

woman, Tamsen.”

“I’m not brave, Anner. I just do what needs to be done.”

“As do we all, Tamsen. Let’s ride. We can eat in the saddle.”

Our pace was slower now, in consideration of the wounded knight and the horse burdened with two suits of plate armor. I think that may also have been in consideration of my apparent weakness as well. Mariol rode behind now, his eyes unfocussed as he concentrated on finding signs of pursuit magically.

We were fortunate, I suppose. Gabril was too busy consolidating his hold on the capital city to search for us, either magically or physically. Chilly raindrops fell in the late afternoon, and I grew increasingly miserable. Anner kept Mylan in the saddle.

As it grew dark, I had them pull up for a few minutes so that I could check Mylan’s wound and we could rest the horses. The wound was still bleeding, but not dangerously, so I cleaned it again. The first marigolds poked up in the meadow where we stopped and I shredded the leaves, ground them into a paste, adding water and a little brandy. Then I forced heat into the concoction until it congealed into a thick paste.

Wearily, I packed the wound with the paste and bandaged it again. Mylan didn’t stir during the procedure, which concerned me, but there was nothing else I could do.

“We’re about ten miles from the village,” Glaucon observed, squinting up at the sky once our horses were breathing steadily again. “Let’s go.”

* * * *

It was still raining when we finally rode into the quiet, darkened village. I had sagged in the saddle in exhaustion over the last hour. The sound of our horses' hooves struck a never-ending beat in my brain as we slowly pulled into the inn yard. That noise was the only thing I was conscious of as Anner called a halt and dismounted. A light flashed from an open door and Brial ran into the courtyard.

"Catch her!" was the last thing I heard, before I collapsed from my mount into darkness.

Chapter Twelve

I awoke the next day at noon. The sun shone through a small glass window as I opened my eyes. The room was unfamiliar, with only the quilted bed and a small chair. I stretched and, rewarded with the sibilant pain of taxed muscles, winced as I sat up.

"Wait," came the low command and I turned my head to see Brial. He sat beside me on the bed and slid a strong arm behind my back, easing me carefully into a sitting position. My head swam and my vision went black before my eyes for a second. I must have swayed because Brial pulled me abruptly back to rest against his chest.

"I'm a little dizzy."

"When your head clears a little bit, I'll give you some broth to drink. That should help."

"Mylan!" I gasped, my eyes flying open. "His wound, it needs to be stitched!"

"Wilden and Morrote took care of that last night," Brial said. "And if you move like that again I'll spank you."

"Is he all right?"

"Much better than you are this morning. A good meal and a night's sleep put a lot of the strength back in him." Brial's voice was amused again.

"What is so funny?"

"I was just thinking of all the times I wouldn't go into your room and comparing them to now."

I immediately realized that I only wore a shift under the quilt. I felt a blush burn up from the base of my neck, until my entire face felt on fire. "Oh," I said, pulling the quilt up to my chin.

Brial laughed aloud.

My temper flared. "Just who undressed me and put me to bed, I'd like to know?"

"Myrielle, of course," Brial responded. "Who else?"

"Oh." Now I felt stupid.

He chuckled again, and then pressed a gentle kiss into my hair. "Are you ready for something to eat now, *cariad*?"

"In a minute, after I get dressed," I retorted. "I must say, Brial, if you wanted to see me undressed so badly you could have just asked."

"I know. It was just more fun this way," he replied with a pointed look at my flushed neck, his wicked black eyes sparkling with that strange intensity again. "It was worth the wait."

* * * *

Two hours later, feeling better after a bath, breakfast and fresh clothes, I descended the stairs of the inn. All of the men were lingering over a hearty lunch and were talking soberly among themselves. Myrielle sat next to Mariol, her slender fingers resting in his. I was startled at this sudden demonstration of affection between them, but then chided myself for hypocrisy. Quite a few of our friends would be shocked at the secret I kept as well.

Anner saw me first and rose to his feet with his usual courteous bow. Brial leapt up and hurried across the room to my side. His hand went beneath my elbow, his slender fingers pressing it surreptitiously. I smiled up at him and we made our way to the table.

"Feeling better?" Mariol asked, a cup in one hand and Myrielle's hand in the other.

"Much better," I replied. "Mylan? How are you? Brial tells me you feel better but I still want to check your wound in a few minutes."

"We sewed him up last night," Wilden volunteered. "The innkeeper's wife has a well-stocked storeroom, so we dosed him with willow bark and comfrey. Today I made a poultice and he's done well from it."

"I'll still want to check it," I said with a smile for the older Elf. "I'll watch it closely for the next several days."

"You probably picked up more of my mother's herb lore than I did," Wilden admitted.

"We were just deciding the best plan of action, Tamsen," Anner said. "We cannot linger here much longer."

"I think we should make for Asphodel," I replied. "We can base ourselves in the castle and maintain close communications with your cities to the south and

east. Parts of it are still inhabitable. I think someone should go to the Council at Leselle as well. The Elves must be warned of the danger and prepare their defenses. Perhaps the Elders can help us come up with some answers."

"Asphodel will be doubly dangerous right now," Glaucon objected. "Spesialle knows you're probably headed there."

"Even if he already has a standing army, it'll take him time to bring Geochon under control and organize his plans," Mariol pointed out. "If nothing else, at least we accomplished unwanted haste on his part."

"We only have a guess as to what his plans are," Anner concurred. "If our guess is accurate, we should start thinking about how to defend against them."

"The most important thing is to leave this vicinity as soon as possible," I said firmly. "Asphodel is a reachable goal. Once there, we can go in any direction we like. Beotte and Pamphylia are within a few days' ride, as is Leselle. My uncle will not wait too long in following his plans. We don't have time to spare right now."

I turned to Mylan. "Can you ride?"

"Can you?"

"I can stay in my saddle as long as you can," I assured him.

"Then let's leave today."

* * * *

The trip to Asphodel wasn't as long or as difficult as our winter journey to

Geochon had been. We pulled into the castle courtyard on a lovely spring afternoon, the first of the truly warm days. Wilden left his horse with us and immediately ran into the forest. He was going to fetch his family and bring them back to Asphodel.

We busied ourselves cleaning chambers for our use and gathering what useable furniture there was in the castle. Glaucon constructed a makeshift stable for our tired horses picketed in the orchards and grazing on new grass.

Overall, it was a busy, yet productive day. I had the great bed removed from my parents' room and we designated it as our common room. The kitchen would be usable after more than five years of debris was cleared from it, so that night we ate of the traveling food Mariol had thoughtfully included in our supplies and some fresh fish caught by Mylan in the river which ran merrily on the edge of the orchards.

That night, after setting up a guard rotation, everyone went to bed early. I had moved back into my old nursery, after removing the cradle and other childish things. My parents' big bed had gone into this room, stuffed full of last year's sweet-smelling hay from the fields. I was standing at the window, looking down at the devastated grounds of the castle, when Brial silently came up behind me.

"You look troubled," he said, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind me.

"I was just remembering how different this view was," I replied dreamily. "I was a child standing at this window, watching the harvest of the orchards, or the midsummer festivals in the courtyard. I would watch from here in the mornings when my mother set out to visit a sick child with her herb pouch slung over her shoulder and a basket of food on her arm. I would watch from here in the late afternoons when my father would come in from the orchards with the

last workers laughing and joking with them. I haven't stood at this window in a long time and still the sights of the past slip before my eyes."

His arms tightened. "Good memories can happen here again, Tamsen. Not all is lost. In fact, you have gained much since last you stood here. We can rebuild Asphodel and your people will come to you again as they did your father and his father before him."

I sighed, letting his words wash over me. "You're right. It does me no good to stand here and grieve for what is in the past."

I released myself from his arms, wandering moodily to the hearth. "We haven't had our talks at night for an unbearably long time, it seems to me." I sighed again and finished with a little quiver in my voice. "I didn't realize how much I had missed them."

"Things are changing again, *cariad*. It will be more difficult now." Brial pointed out, folding himself into one of the low chairs on the hearth. "Your family will arrive tomorrow and we won't have the opportunities we once had."

He stared into the fire, his face thoughtful. I went to sit on the floor by his chair, leaning my face against his knee. His hand stroked my hair as he continued to watch the fire. His features were saturnine in the dying light, lips compressed and eyes hooded.

"You're worried about what Kaldarte and Ar'ami will say, aren't you?" I asked, comprehending at last. "You shouldn't be, you know. They admire and respect you a lot."

"Admiration and respect will not compensate for the folly I have shown," Brial responded with a slight smile. "They would not wish you to be entangled as we go farther into this troubled time."

"Why would you say that?"

"You have a great deal to bear at a very early age, Tamsen. I think this will displease them, for the additional burden we have created for ourselves."

"I don't consider it a burden," I argued. "It is a source of strength for me."

I reached up and curled my fingers into his hand, reveling in the strength of it, caressing the thick calluses left by sword and bow. His fingers were warm as they wrapped themselves around my hand.

"Your hands are so small," he murmured, raising it to his lips.

I warned him even as I smiled against his knee. "Don't even think about trying some self-sacrificial gesture and ridding yourself of me."

"I couldn't," he replied almost wistfully. "You were right. This was a battle I lost when I first saw you as you entered Leselle."

"So early?" I asked, surprised. "That's odd. I didn't really like you all that much until the day we fled through the forest."

Brial actually laughed and lifted me from the floor to cuddle in his lap. He kissed me, hard, and then the laughter faded from his eyes as he looked at me. "Perhaps you are right, *cariad*. Maybe we are stronger for each other. Gods grant it that I may never be separated from you again."

"Even when we are apart, you are with me," I whispered, lifting my face to kiss him again.

There was a low knock at the door, which burst open without warning. Brial rolled me from his lap, rising with sword half-drawn to glare at Morrote who stood silhouetted in the aperture.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Outriders are approaching the castle from the road," my uncle reported. "It looks like a troop of twenty or more."

Brial swore. I rose to my feet and asked, "Can they have seen that we are here?"

"Easily," he replied, frowning at me. "We have made no effort to hide the smoke from our fires."

"Then I'll go greet them," I said in a matter-of-fact voice. "If they wish to see the Countess of Asphodel, they will."

"No!" Brial said. "You will not risk yourself like that again!"

I looked up at him and laid an appeasing hand upon his arm. "Yes, I will, Brial, and you know it. Only this time I feel much safer with you by my side."

He stared down at me for a long minute, searching my face. Finally, he nodded.

I threw my cloak over my shoulders, leaving my long braid to cable down my back. Walking to the door, I said irritably, "Well, Morrote, are you going to move or do I have to wait until they are entering this room to find out what they want?"

Morrote shifted out of the way, but not before I saw the look on his face as Brial walked past him with his bow in his hand.

* * * *

Down at the entrance to the castle, Anner and Glaucon waited, once again armored. I strode between them and peered down the road. "Where's Mylan?"

"Above," Anner showed with a jerk of his head. "He's still too sore to put armor on, so he took a bow and is watching from there. Mariol is with him."

"Morrote, why don't you join them? Twenty humans with torches should be easy targets in the dark."

The older Elf bobbed his head and ran off on soundless feet.

"Any ideas?" I asked, looking at the two knights and Brial.

"We don't know their intent," Anner pointed out.

"None save for I have been to this castle in years," I reminded him. "I doubt very seriously that they're expecting to find someone already here. If they did see our smoke, they are probably more inclined to think a family of gypsies has taken up residence. I think they might be rather shocked to find the lady of the house at home. Let's see what my presence can prevent before we massacre them without warning."

"Only," Brial interjected, "if they stay well back from you. If they get too close, you endanger yourself. We can create a perimeter around the doors with arrows."

"Good idea," Anner approved. "Then if they get past us, you can take your lady and flee to the forest."

"How are you going to create a perimeter with arrows?" I asked.

"Like this," Brial said. He took one of his arrows and wrapped it in an oily cloth he stored in a separate pouch on the side of his quiver. Then, he held the arrow to the tip of the torch Glaucon held. The rag began to burn. Brial notched it to his bowstring and released it. The blazing arrow arced across the courtyard to embed itself into the ground fifty yards in front of us.

Glaucon dropped his torch and stamped it out as we heard the rumble of the approaching hooves. I stepped in front of the knights, with Brial right behind me, and waited for the first sight of them around the bend.

We did not have long to wait. Less than a minute later, I saw the bobbing of torches through the trees. Thirty seconds after that, they thundered around the bend. The leader pulled up when he saw the flaming arrow burning merrily in front of him. Over my head, bowstrings sang as Mylan and Morrote fired two more flaming arrows to land near the first.

The leader's horse reared and the man had all he could do to control it. I watched in cold silence while he struggled with his mount. Once the horse was calmed, I called out in a clear voice. "You have entered Asphodel without my permission, stranger. What is your name and affiliation?"

"Who in the hell are you?"

"I am Tamsen, Countess of Asphodel," I retorted. "You did not answer my question, commander! The light is in your eyes, not mine, and I can see your uniforms and insignia."

"Lord Spezialle ordered me to prepare this castle for occupation."

"Spezialle has no claim to Asphodel," I said with an amused note in my voice. "His claim is forfeit, as is due a regicide and traitor."

A low murmur broke out among the troops, but the commander ignored it. "How do I know that what you say is true?"

"You don't," I said pleasantly. "However, I should inform you that I have a company of Elven archers behind my walls that are itching to use you for target practice."

"I don't believe the lies of any squatting peasant wench," the commander

growled. "My orders are to take this – aarrgh!"

Before I knew what was happening, Brial had notched and fired an arrow that pierced the man's leg in the half-inch gap between the bottom of his mail shirt and the top of his high, thick leather boot. "I should warn you that if you speak one more word about my lady the next arrow will be through your throat!" he called in a clear, cold voice. "Any man that moves in this direction will die. Make your decision quickly. We want to have enough time to burn your corpses and get a good night's sleep."

The commander grimaced in agony as he removed the arrow from his leg. He examined the distinctive Elven fletching, and then said something low to the men at his back.

As he began to turn his horse's head, I called out, "Take this message back to your master, dog: Asphodel is once again held by the heir of the house, and will remain so. Be sure you tell my uncle that on the day that he enters my lands, I will kill him with my own hand. There is no succor in Asphodel for the man who killed our King!"

He looked at me silently, his face twisted with hatred. Then, his troop turned their horses and sped into the night.

"Good shot," Glaucon noted with dispassionate approval.

"Easy shot," Brial shrugged even as his voice grew tighter. "Even after Tamsen warned them, they kept their torches burning."

"You should return to the castle, milady," Anner suggested. I could just see his grey eyes glint in the moonlight. "They may try to double back. Glaucon and I will keep watch."

Before I could respond, Brial gripped my arm and steered me back into

the castle. Grimly, he marched me up the steps and into my room. Once there, he tossed his bow in a corner and glared at me.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Why did you do that?” he grated. “What plausible excuse for such idiocy can you possibly have?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“The only reason this castle could be safe for you is if your uncle doesn’t know for certain that you are here!” Brial shouted. “Now he not only knows where you are, but you make matters worse by sending him a message that no man in his position would ever ignore!”

“It doesn’t matter if he knows for certain or not!” I retorted, my own temper rising. “He’ll come here regardless, Brial! He needs Asphodel to act against the Elves!”

“You don’t know that,” Brial enunciated carefully. “You are only guessing.”

“I know it. I don’t know how I know, but I do. Spezialle will be here within six months, Brial, and he will not come alone. He will bring his army.”

Brial opened his mouth and then shut it abruptly. We glared at each other for a minute and then the breath left him in a loud exhalation. “If you ever do anything like that again, I swear to the Gods I will throw you into the first room with a stout door and lock you in,” he said in a slow and carefully controlled voice. “Don’t fight me on this, Tamsen! If you will not behave in such a way as to protect yourself, I will not allow you to endanger yourself further. If I must, I will force you to listen to me.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

"Try me."

"Well then you'd better hope that the door consists of something other than wood," I retorted spitefully. "If it isn't, I'll burn my way out."

He grabbed my arms and shook me. "I meant what I said, Tamsen."

He kissed me again, his fingers digging painfully into my arms. When he pulled back, he looked at my shocked face and laughed, not humorously, but with an ugly, ragged laughter. "I told you not to let yourself get involved with me," he spat. "I told you that it would interfere with my ability to protect you! You don't listen to anyone, Tamsen, and your pride will be your undoing! You are not omnipotent, my lady."

His tone was so furious I actually winced. "If you will not attempt to protect yourself, then I will do it for you," he said flatly. "You will not like my methods, but you won't have any choice. I will not stand by and watch you get yourself killed, and by the Gods, Tamsen you *will* obey me!" He punctuated each word with a shake. "I love you, Tamsen, but at this moment I could break your beautiful neck!"

He kissed me again, and then pushed me away. "By the way, don't go on thinking that you are the only one here who has magic," he purred. "The Ka'breona element is metal; I can build a door that all your magic will not break!"

He turned to leave and spotted Morrote standing grimly in the door, his nostrils flaring. For one long, tense second the two Elves stared each other down. "Get out of my way, Ka'antira," Brial said in a low voice. "I will take your watch tonight and you can remain here to guard her."

"From whom?" Morrote growled.

"From me, Elflord!" Brial snarled at him. "Most particularly, from me!"

Without a look back, Brial stalked by the stunned Elf and disappeared into the blackness of the outer corridor. I exhaled slowly and sank into one of the chairs by the fire.

Morrote looked after the vanished Brial with an odd expression on his face. Then he snorted a short bark of laughter and stepped into the room.

"I'd really rather be alone, uncle," I said sadly.

"I don't think that'll ever be an option for you, Tamsen," the Elf said with a twinkle in his eye. "You two were meant for each other."

Chapter Thirteen

Awakening the next day in a foul mood, I dressed halfheartedly and dragged myself down the hall to see if there was anything for breakfast. No one else was awake, except Glaucon on guard duty, who watched from the central tower. I called the flames to life in the fireplace, cut off a slice of bread, and toasted it.

I expected Kaldarte and Ar'ami sometime later in the day. Once they were here, with the twins and Hyagrem, my situation would be easier. Older, wiser heads than mine could be put to the task of planning against the battle that was surely coming. I would have a little time to put my thoughts in order, and regain my lost serenity.

"Damn him, anyway," I muttered, turning my toast so that it wouldn't burn. The night before, I had expected Brial to turn up with an apology. However, long hours had passed and no penitent Elf had crossed my threshold. Irritated, I jerked my meal from the fire, scowling at the meager fare

We needed supplies desperately. Flour, wine and ale, cheeses: all things that Elves and humans could both eat. The proximity of the woods and river guaranteed fresh meat for the men.

Perhaps one of the knights could take a trip to Beotte and Pamphyliia and

raise some men to bring to Asphodel. We needed soldiers to hold the castle against the army my uncle would have.

But before Spesialle marched on Asphodel, he would want to eliminate the Elves as my allies and my kin. Within weeks, unless I missed my guess, he would march on Leselle. Someone would have to report to the Elven council immediately. Maybe the twins would want to make this trip, accompanied by their grandfather and (with any luck) one extremely bad-tempered Elf.

Two months, possibly three. That was all the time we had to carry out our plans. In that time, I needed fortifications, supplies, and men. A daunting task, hampered further by the devastation of the castle, which we had to repair in order to provide shelter. I needed to round up some laborers to help with the reconstruction of Asphodel. I wanted the manor self-sufficient in a year, but it would have to be defensible long before that. We had no time for anything else.

I chewed my dry toast. We had no butter or preserves; I was hoping that Kaldarte would bring some when she arrived. Magic certainly had its shortcomings. I could call down a storm or send fire into the enchanted Elfstones, but I could not provide anything useful for myself.

Like food.

I wandered to the window and looked out on the orchards. A thick mist drifted between the trees, already thinning as the sun rose. The trees had begun to bud; hard, round protuberances interrupted the smooth lines of each tree. Soon, the trees in the orchard would flower again. I imagined a greasy curl of smoke twining through the blossoms while overhead an unnatural blizzard brewed and bile rose into my throat.

I averted my gaze swiftly and walked back to the hearth. I picked up my cloak and pulled on a pair of gloves. Then I left the room, silently gliding down

the corridor, down the steps and out the door into the kitchen garden. A definite chill lingered in the moist air. I shivered, fastened the cloak more snugly around my neck and set out to walk around the castle. Perhaps there were other salvageable sections in the ruins.

Everything in Asphodel reminded of my parents—and their deaths. I had not really considered before the death of my home. I wanted to see it all for myself, to know, firsthand, what sort of vengeance my uncle had taken out on Asphodel when I'd slipped through his fingers.

My boots didn't make a noise on the flagstones as I walked. I stopped in dismay when I got close enough to see the destruction of the great hall. The huge, blackened timbers that once supported the roof had collapsed into an intimidating pile of rubble. I could just make out the curve of the stairs if I craned my neck. The tower we were staying in was the only habitable part of the castle as far as I could tell.

The other tower was charred black, as if stone could burn, and the steps had tumbled in upon each other. I sighed. It would all have to be cleared before any rebuilding could be done. This mental note filed away, I continued my walk.

I wasn't thinking of anything in particular as I went on. I was enjoying the solitude when I felt a tingle creep up my spine. I stopped dead in my tracks, spinning to scan the area around me for intruders.

Empty orchards and fields greeted my eyes. A quick visual sweep of the courtyard showed me I was completely alone, but the feeling persisted. I turned on my heel, intending to return to the castle when my eyes fell on the flagstones right in front of me.

A large, black stain had corroded the stones. I did not need to double

check where I stood; this was where my mother had died. I knelt down beside the discoloration, lightly running my gloved fingertips over the rough rock. It was strangely fitting, I thought, that her life's blood had seeped into the very stones that she had loved so dearly. Asphodel and its people had been in her blood. Now her blood was the foundation upon which I would rebuild.

I was absently exploring the flagstones with my fingers. She had given her life for me on this spot. I peered into the orchard and found the tree behind which I had crouched. A new shudder went through my body. *It was so easy to spot from here! How had Spesialle not seen me?* The memory replayed in my head.

Then, I understood. My mother had angled herself on a slight slant. Spesialle, in facing her, had put the broadest part of the tree between himself and me in his line of sight. She had known exactly where I was and contrived to hide me through the entire ordeal. She had chosen her position very carefully and the audacity of the approach she'd taken made me want to weep.

"What are you doing prowling around out here by yourself?"

I looked up to see Brial, pale and still angry, confronting me. "I'd like to be alone."

"You know you shouldn't be," he retorted. "Tamsen, how many times..."

His voice trailed off as his eyes fell on the spot by my knees. I laid my right palm flat against the flagstones, feeling the energy that poured from the spot. The sense of magic was very strong there. The tingle that had stopped me as I walked was the memory of magic. Only the most powerful magics would leave a residue for such a long time. I frowned as I considered this. *What could she, or even my uncle, have done to so mark this spot?*

Her blood became a talisman to me. It was a symbol of my readiness to die defending those things and people I loved best. I sighed.

Brushing my hand across my eyes, I got to my feet. Brial stood there watching me; the blank mask I thought I'd banished firmly secured over his beautiful features.

"I'm sorry I came out here. I didn't think it through very clearly. I'll go back inside now," I said wearily.

"It's not necessary," came the reply. "You're not alone now."

His voice was softer, as was his face. The anger he had carried since last night seemed to have drained from him. I knew that most of his ire was, in reality, fear for me. I understood why that anger was gone now. Brial knew what the spot must be and was now empathetic.

"No, Brial, I am alone."

I brushed past him, my body numb. I felt his eyes following me all the way across the terrace back into the castle. He didn't come after me, and I didn't want him to try. I was truly alone again, at least for a while.

* * * * *

I spent the morning removing things from the hidden room to my chambers. I didn't ask for assistance and nobody offered any. I assumed Brial had warned them away. Anner and Mylan had ridden to the little village south of the castle, primarily to see if it was still there. Myrielle had dragged a loudly complaining Mariol to the kitchens with her and ordered him to get to work. Glaucon went hunting, and Morotte was foraging in the forest for edible berries or plants.

It took me the better part of an hour to hollow out a new hiding place for the money my father had stockpiled in the secret storeroom. I pried up a long, flat stone from the hearth, digging out a respectable sized trench. After I deposited the coins into the hole, I packed the rest of the hollow space with wadded up old blankets to eliminate any differentiation in sound. Triumphantly, I dragged one of the heavy, lidded trunks atop the stone.

I turned my attention to cleaning the room. I cleaned the old ashes from the hearth. Then I found a pail, filled it with clean water, and set about scrubbing the floor.

A loud thumping noise drew my attention to the courtyard and when I peeked out the window, I saw Mariol, looking disgusted, beating the dirt from several old wall hangings Myrielle had found the night before. The sight of the irascible Marquis of Beotte, cursing and fuming as he struck the heavy fabric hangings with a broom brought my sense of humor back to me.

Myrielle bustled into the room, carrying a pile of linens. "Tamsen, this room looks a lot better! Here are some linens for your bed and some curtains."

She ran the curtains onto the long rods that held them, then stopped and asked, "What is the matter with you today, anyway? Your mind has been hundreds of miles away."

I started. "Oh, nothing, really. I'm just woolgathering, I suppose. Thank you for these, Myrielle."

Myrielle sat down on the bed. "So, had a fight with Brial, did you?"

I considered lying, but I decided against it. "Yes."

"I wondered how long it would be before you two butted heads." She put a tentative hand on my shoulder, as if she weren't certain how the gesture would

be accepted.

"We've been 'butting heads' for months," I retorted sourly.

"I don't know much about Elves, Tamsen, but I do know a lot about men. It's hard for a man to accept a woman in charge. Most men don't have the ability to deal with it. Some, like my Mariol, pretend not to accept it because it's the accepted thing for them to do. A man like yours, however, well, he has a true dilemma on his hands. Intellectually, he knows he has to accept it but it is hard for him to step back. He's worried about you and has to find an outlet for it. It's an easy jump to anger from there."

I gaped at her, astonished. *Myrielle could talk about something other than clothes!*

She smiled at my shock and continued. "He's a proud man and his priority is to protect you. You've given him a difficult path to follow. You can never count on anyone else to do the right thing, so it's up to you to make it work."

"How did you arrive at that conclusion?" I asked, amazed.

"It's not hard if you're separated from it. Besides, neither of you is very subtle when you lose your temper."

I flushed uncomfortably.

Myrielle got to her feet and made her way to the door. When she was there, she turned back. "I'm not one to give unsolicited advice, but I think maybe you should give some more consideration to the way he feels. You're a woman grown and if you're going to play with fire, you need to figure out how to keep it in the hearth and not shooting sparks up your chimney. It is a difficult thing to love in these times, when fate can take everything from you in an instant. We

don't have time for pride. We can only trust in ourselves and each other to survive."

An unmistakable shadow appeared on her face as she said this. Her expression did not change as she left, murmuring, "Just think about it, dear."

* * * *

After this astonishing conversation, the day sped up quickly. Anner and Mylan had returned with some supplies, as well as the welcome information that several large families would be making their way to Asphodel to work. Morotte brought a basket of dried berries and some tubers he had dug up. Glaucon proudly displayed several stringy rabbits, still lean from their winter's diet. He cleaned them and brought them to Myrielle, who was humming as she kneaded dough for bread. Soon, a savory odor of stew issued from the newly scrubbed kitchens.

Asphodel was alive again.

I found myself in the kitchen garden eventually, where I occupied myself with pulling dead weeds from the soil. This year, with someone to maintain it, the kitchen garden would be green and flourishing again.

Brial paced around the corner of the house. I dusted my hands against my thighs and called him over. He approached, his face wary, and stood several feet away from me.

I held out my hand to him. "I am sorry that I was rude to you. I didn't understand why you were so angry with me. I see now that I was wrong. Please forgive me?"

The corners of his eyes softened. He closed the distance between us and took my hand, bowing low as he pressed a kiss on it. "My temper got the best of me. I'll try not to let it happen again."

"Try not to make promises that you can't keep," I advised laughing.

He grinned unrepentantly. "I did say 'try', Tamsen, not 'won't.'"

"Just as I'll 'try' to listen to you a bit more carefully from now on," I agreed demurely, standing on tiptoe to give him a chaste little kiss.

He smiled, but it was a worried smile.

"Brial, I can only admit this to you," I began, the levity leaving me in a rush. "I don't know what we should do next."

"For now, we wait for your family to arrive," he replied. "Then, we will decide on our next move. The only thing that I know for certain is that we must alert Leselle."

"I'm worried about going to Leselle. I don't know which, if any, of us the Council will believe."

He looked down at our linked hands and toyed with my fingers for a moment. "The Seer will know. Your uncle and my father are both on the council; they will help us as well."

"You really want to go home, don't you?"

"I miss the forest," he admitted with a sigh. "But where you go, my lady, I will go as well. At least here the forest is close enough that I can reach it quickly when I need solace."

For the first time, the differences between us came home to me. I had not considered his attachment to the woods as anything other than a familiar

preference. In my ignorance, I neglected to remember he was an Elf, custodian of the Virgin Huntress' forests. The call that drew him to the forest was an endless, unceasing demand; his denial of his nature was the result of the extraordinary discipline he applied to his life. Even as I watched, a warm breeze wafted the scent of the tall oaks on the fringes of the woods to us and he inhaled it with the same expression Mariol used when tasting the wine before dinner.

We stood there for a moment, quietly holding hands when a strident voice shattered our reverie and demanded, "What in the name of all the gods is going on here?"

I whipped around to see the twins standing at the edge of the garden, with identical expressions of dismay on their faces.

* * * *

Ar'ami had organized his little party with astounding speed and attention to detail. Everyone had brought a huge pack with them, stashed with the supplies saved by the family from the winter. Two of the Elven scouts carried a large, lidded crate between them on poles in which Kaldarte had packed most of her rugs and wall hangings, along with a goodly supply of household linens and necessities.

We greeted each other and my sense of belonging to this family intensified. I introduced the knights and Myrielle. Mariol embraced his old teacher, and then dragged him off to my father's study.

The next few hours were busy, settling everyone in and getting a dinner together that would feed both human and Elf. Thanks to Kaldarte's

contributions, we sat to eat a meal that seemed more like a feast. Kaldarte joined Myrielle in the kitchen, and from the steady hum of conversation, they were getting along famously.

It wasn't until dinner that night that we told our story, from the journey to Geochon to our escape. Everyone listened soberly. "It's obvious we need men," I finished. "We need them not only for battle, but also to bring this estate back to a condition in which we can defend it. We also need to inform the Elven Council of this situation as quickly as possible. Apparently, they have a traitor within Leselle."

"I think you're right," Kaldarte said, her eyes distant.

"Mylan and I are riding for our warriors," Glaucon announced. "We need men, and we need them now. I can have my men here in less than a fortnight."

"If you stop in Beotte, I'll write an order to my war chief," Mariol agreed. "They can meet you on the road and you'll travel back together."

"That's a good idea," Anner mused. "I can send a runner to my father as well."

"What about the Council?" Cetenne asked.

"I thought that you two could go," I replied.

"No." Kaldarte said flatly. "You need to go."

"Why me?"

"The story is yours," she replied with a shrug. "Only you can tell it."

"That's ridiculous, Kaldarte. Any one of us could repeat this story! Asphodel needs me here. We have a lot to do and only a short span of time."

"Others can work on Asphodel," Kaldarte said. "Only you can convince the Council. I cannot see the days ahead very clearly but I do see you in Leselle. It is necessary that you are the one to inform them. More than that I cannot say."

I chewed over this for a minute, looking around the table. The Elves and Hyagrem all looked thoughtful. The humans, on the other hand, were confused.

"Kaldarte is the Seer of the Elves," Hyagrem said quietly. Everyone turned to look at him. "When she says Tamsen needs to go to the Council, it is not something to take lightly."

"Forgive my ignorance," Anner interjected. "It seems to me, however, that remaining here in Asphodel would be safer for her."

"Not so," Ar'ami argued. "She knows the ways of the forest better than any human alive. She has a greater chance of remaining undetected there than she does here."

"It's entirely possible that if she's not here, Spesialle will ignore Asphodel," Mariol concurred. "That will enable us to fortify and reinforce our position."

"All right, then," I said finally. "I'll go to Leselle. I'm not convinced the Council will listen to me, but if all agree to this I have little choice."

"Lamec will help you," Kaldarte informed me. "He is a leading voice on the Council and respected by many."

"Our primary goal in Leselle will be to inform the Council of Spesialle's plans," I mused. "But we have to keep in mind that there's still a traitor hidden within the city. How do we go about finding him?"

"That would best be left to the Council," Ar'ami said after a moment's pause.

"Very well," I acceded. "Is there anything else to discuss? I peered around the room. The decisions made that evening were monumental, but everyone appeared to be of the same mind. I sighed and asked that Kaldarte, Ar'ami, Mariol, and Hyagrem remain behind while the others went on their various errands. Brial left with a puzzled glance, closing the door behind him.

"I have another issue I need to discuss with you," I began. Taking a deep breath, I told them about my dream. When I had finished, all of them looked grave and thoughtful. "So, this is my question: is it possible that Spesialle is sending me this dream? He says he is but I question his ability to do that; I've been having them since I came to live with the Ka'antira in the forest. Since the forest is cloaked from human magic, would it be possible for this type of magic to penetrate it?"

"No," Kaldarte said firmly. "If he had broken through our magical defenses that easily, he could have come to take you at any time over the last six years. Besides, if that were the case then he would have known you were in Geochon. He obviously can't use the dreams to pinpoint your location."

"All right, then," I replied. "What other explanations can we come up with for this?"

"I can think of only one," Hyagrem said. "They come from within the forest."

"An *Elf*?"

"Your traitor, perhaps."

Ar'ami frowned. "That would mean that the traitor is on the Elven Council. Before our visit there, the councilors were the only ones who knew we had Tamsen with us."

"There is another explanation," Kaldarte interrupted. "The dreams may be visions. Tamsen is of my blood. It is possible that some fragment of the seeing talent is in her as well."

I blanched as the blood ran cold in my veins. "Visions? But that would mean..." I couldn't complete the sentence.

"Not necessarily," Kaldarte interjected. "Visions are just possibilities. When the sight comes to me, it doesn't mean the path is set. It simply indicates a possible conclusion to the series of events that are happening."

"So it's changing because the circumstances around me are changing," I said thoughtfully. "Every new path I take alters the possible resolution of the event I see."

"Precisely. The sight serves as a warning, not a prediction. If this is the case, you can use your dream as a measurement of the choices you make."

"Then how would my uncle know about the dreams? How would he claim to send them?"

"It's possible that once you left the forest, he was able to sense them," Hyagrem said. "He wouldn't see what you do in your dreams, but he would be able to pick up your distress over them. We know he's been searching for you all this time. It's likely that he felt your emotional response to your dreams and putting two and two together puzzled out that these dreams upset you."

"So now I have to figure out how to mask myself when I'm asleep?" I asked. "That could prove inconvenient. It's hard enough trying to protect myself when I'm awake."

"I will think on this," Kaldarte said. "Perhaps I can come to a solution."

"There's something else I want to ask," I continued. "This morning, as I

walked on the terrace, I felt something strange. Whenever someone is using magic, I feel it. It's hard to describe. Today, I found myself by the spot where my mother died and I felt the same thing. There was no one around me, but the sense of magic was very strong."

"Sometimes an extremely powerful magical event will leave a residue of itself in the place where it took place," Hyagrem told me. "More than likely, that's what you felt."

"My mother didn't use any magic, really. I never saw anything to indicate that she even knew how."

"Solange knew how to perform magic," Kaldarte said.

I turned to her, surprised. "How do you know?"

"I taught her."

"She probably shielded you, Tamsen," Mariol said gently. "A mother would throw all of her power into a shield to protect her child. She spent her magic in hiding you."

"I felt the shield you put up in the palace, Mariol," I said, frowning. "I can form visible shields, but not the invisible one you used."

"Shielding is difficult. It takes a great deal of energy to construct something entirely out of magic to absorb the force of an attack. In most of our wars, battle mages accompany the armies. Even the greatest of our mages cannot maintain a shield for long. When you return from Leselle, I will teach you."

"Elves have always used our elemental bond to form a magical barrier," Kaldarte added. "Those who are bonded with the earth or water can perform such a task. The Elven mages seem to hold such a shield for longer, since we take energy from our elements. Eventually, however, it exhausts whoever is

holding the spell.”

“Tactically it’s an advantage,” Hyagrem said. “Nevertheless, it’s an advantage that lasts for a short duration and usually renders the mage who holds the shield useless for days.”

“If I can find a way to blend Elven and human magic, I might be able to hold it longer.”

“We’ll experiment when you return,” my teacher promised. “Mariol and I will research it while you are gone.”

An hour later, after everyone had left, I still sat staring moodily at the glowing Elfstones in the fireplace. If my dream was actually a vision, I stood to lose much of what I held dear. If there was anything I had learned in the house of the Seer, it was that I could not avoid fate.

This thought kept me awake most of the night. The last thing I wanted to do was dream.

* * * *

The families that had agreed to come to Asphodel arrived early the next morning and to my joy, I recognized several faces from my parents’ tenure on the estate, including my old nurse. She wept for joy when she saw me. Tears of my own flowed down my cheeks as her trembling old arms clutched me. Brial wisely made himself scarce as she followed me into my old nursery. It was from her that I heard the story of the fall of Asphodel at last.

It had not taken the people of Asphodel long to deduce that the man who

led his men to our castle was a sorcerer. After seeing my father fall in the fields, those who witnessed his murder quickly alerted the rest. The women and children fled immediately and so escaped the Duke de Spesialle's wrath.

The men, however, resisted my uncle's soldiers. Although Prosper de Asphodel was a peaceful man, he was no fool. My father trained our retainers to fight as well as to tend our fields and orchards. The Duke's men did not find it easy to subdue the soldiers of Asphodel that day. Most died, deserted by their leader who had stalked into the orchards and then on into the forest, presumably searching for me. His peremptory search of the castle had not produced me, so in a fury he called additional, magical flames down upon it.

The fires that engulfed the castle were impossible to contain on all fronts, so my father's men put their energy into preserving the tower in which we lived. Helplessly, they watched the great hall crumble, even as they fought the blaze throughout that long night.

The next day, they had buried my parents. My nurse didn't give me many details, saying only that they were laid to rest in the same unmarked grave, by the orchards they had loved so well. Then, they had searched for me. In the unexpected snowstorm, they stood no chance of finding my trail. Yet, they continued to scour the area for several weeks, never losing hope that I had managed to escape and would eventually return home.

Eventually, they returned to Tizand, where their families awaited them. Some moved on to other estates, but most stayed in the tiny village, scratching out a living from the small fields they were able to carve out for themselves with the kindly agreement of the Earl who ruled there.

She wiped her eyes again as she finished. I embraced her, my eyes dry. My relief was boundless and exhausting. Asphodel would come back to life, and with familiar and well-loved hands guiding the plows.

Nurse returned to Tizand. She tended a little boy for a well-to-do merchant in the village. She just had to come, she said, to see me for herself. “You’re a woman grown now, Tamsen,” she told me proudly. “When you have your children, call on me and I will come to them.”

Her wise old eyes lingered on Brial and I couldn’t prevent myself from smiling. When I was little, I had never committed even the tiniest infraction without her finding out about it. Her instincts today were as sure as ever. It confirmed my belief in the constancy of life.

The twins and I spent some time together that afternoon. They never mentioned the scene with Brial, and neither did I, so we had slipped easily into our old, companionable ways. We spent our time in the garden, plotting, weeding, and planting. Cetenne had brought some acaule flowers, which the Elves revered as sacred to the Virgin Huntress, and we transplanted them into one corner of the garden.

When Anner offered that night to accompany us on our trip, my foster mother vetoed his suggestion, much to my surprise. “They have proven that they can travel undetected,” Kaldarte said placidly. “It is essential that they go swiftly and secretly through the forest. More people would only hinder them.”

I shot a suspicious look at her, but she didn’t acknowledge it in the slightest. So, Brial and I prepared for our trip and departed the castle a little after noon, just as the sun had warmed the leaves enough to emit the aromas of the new spring.

* * * *

Brial came back to himself in the forest. He inhaled, smiling to himself at the scents associated with spring. As soon as we were far enough away that the thinning of the trees was no longer noticeable, he turned to me with a rueful smile. "I should be more wary, but I'm so happy to be home that I can't contain it."

"There is time enough to be careful later. "For now, we're just a young couple taking a walk in the woods in the spring."

Within the hour, of course, the comfortable, happy feeling subsided and we set a much harder pace. We needed to reach Leselle. Through that long afternoon, we progressed quickly, stopping only for brief rests. We continued well into the night.

Brial's expertise in wood lore was evident as we made camp. One of the ancient outposts of the Elves served as our base. Several old trees grew so tightly in a circle that they seemed to be part of the same whole. A guardian tree masked the entrance to a clearing in the center of the circle. Open to the sky, the scout station was ideal for a night hidden in the forest.

As I prepared hot tea for our meal of traveling bread and cheese, Brial leaned back against one of the trees. I couldn't tell if he was speaking to the guardian or just asleep until he opened his eyes. He accepted the cup of chamomile tea I gave him and looked at me with hooded eyes.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked with a smile.

"I was just thinking of tomorrow," he replied with a sigh. "The path before us will not be an easy one, *cariad*."

"Probably not. It will be hard for the Council to believe they have a traitor in their midst."

"I think your uncle will help us. I think we also need to bring my father in on this plan as well."

"I see no problem in that," I answered. "The more the merrier."

He laughed and sipped from his cup.

Contentment filled me at the sight, and I was happy for this one night of privacy and freedom from intrigue. The coming days in Leselle would be hard; it was only fair that tonight we could be forgetful of our errand.

I slept well, curled into my blankets. We rose the next morning before dawn. The second day we didn't press as hard as we had the day before. We needed to time our entry into the city correctly; it would be better for our mission that there were not too many who saw us come to Leselle.

Chapter Fourteen

We reached Leselle just as the sun had reddened and sank behind the trees. I pulled my hood over my head as we approached. Two scouts appeared in front of us, just as before. “Brial Ka’breona, we welcome you to Leselle,” one said in the ritual greeting.

Brial nodded his head. “We must get to Acheros’ house immediately. I have urgent news for the Elder. It is in our best interests that this visit not be well-known.”

The scout nodded. The other scout saluted Brial and stepped aside to allow us to pass.

Acheros’ house was very close to the top of the city, resulting from his pre-eminent status as Elder of the Elven Council. His family, the Ka’charona, was named for his father, the first and the greatest of the Elven battle mages

Brial and I slipped through the scarcely populated streets and found ourselves at Acheros’ doorstep in good time. The bark in front of his door shimmered and then slid to one side as the Elder said, “Enter!”

Brial gestured for me to precede him so I entered first, pushing back my hood as I did so.

“Tamsen Ka’antira!” the old Elf said with a note of surprised interest.
“What do you do in Leselle?”

“Honored Elder.” I bowed my head. “I come with grave news. There is treachery afoot here in Leselle.”

“Treachery?”

“You heard of the attack upon our party last autumn?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “An unfortunate occurrence.”

“No. My uncle, the Duke de Spesialle, led the human soldiers. He could not have found me save by two means: first, through his magic, which is impossible in the Elven forest as you know, or second, because someone in Leselle told him we were leaving and what route we took.”

“Perhaps it was just coincidence,” Acheros said with a frown.

“When have the scouts ever allowed humans to penetrate this close to Leselle?” Brial demanded. “Their proximity to the city should raise your suspicions at least.”

Acheros’ eyes narrowed. “It did, Brial Ka’breona. The Council investigated and found no cause for alarm. Why should that make this trip to Leselle necessary?”

“Because, honored Elder, the King of Ansienne was murdered by the Duke de Spesialle, who has usurped the throne. He is going to send an army against the Elves. His purpose is to destroy the Elves and their forest. He could not have turned his thoughts to Leselle so precipitously if there were not a traitor within the city. We came to warn you.”

I let my pack drop with a loud bang and slid onto a nearby couch. “We

have traveled from Asphodel in great haste. Forgive me, but I am tired."

"My apologies," Acheros said hastily. "I should have seen to it at once. Leither!"

The cold-faced Elven woman I had seen only briefly at the Elven Council entered the room. Brial bowed and I rose from the couch with a hasty curtsy of my own.

She inclined her head, took one look at us with her strangely flat eyes, and said, "I will bring something to refresh you. Please, be seated." Then she moved away into a chamber behind the main room.

"This tale you tell is extraordinary," Acheros commented. "Brial Ka'breona, is there anything more you would add?"

"The human Spesialle is very powerful, it seems. When Tamsen exposed him in front of the King and the full court, he was able to carry out a plan on the instant, and the forces of his coup were in the streets almost immediately. We had to fight our way out of the city." Brial paused, and then added, "The Seer told us to come to Leselle. She is at Asphodel, with her family, the human magician, and some who escaped Geochon with us. The three knights are calling for armies from their holdings, as is the Marquis of Beotte, the human magician who is an Elffriend. The other Ka'antira brothers serve him."

"The humans are raising armies?" Acheros asked in alarm. "This is serious, indeed."

"Our *friends* are raising armies," I reminded him, "to protect Leselle and the forest on my word."

Leither reentered with a tray. "I have sent the servants out for the night," she reported to her husband. "What is the urgency behind this visit?"

Acheros filled her in while she handed glasses of wine to Brial and me. After he had finished, Acheros took one and handed another to his wife. Brial remained standing behind me and I had to fight the urge to lean back against him for strength.

"If what they say is true, then we are in danger." Leither began in a disparaging tone. "I find it hard to believe."

"My lady speaks the truth," Brial interrupted with a warning flash of his black eyes. "We are here to warn you and the Council of the plans set against you."

Leither skewered him with a glance. "It is a very easy thing to say, is it not?"

"The Seer sent us, Honored Elder," I replied, forestalling Brial's response. "It is on her orders we are here. As I recollect, previously there have been several occasions that the Council ignored her sight, to their cost. I leave it to your judgment whether to repeat your folly or not."

My words fell like a bomb into the room. Leither met my eyes and I returned her searching, hostile stare with an emotionless glare of my own. Brial moved suddenly, sitting on the couch beside me and breaking my eye contact with the Elf.

"My lady of Asphodel has thrown her lands open —"

"Do not use that human title here!" Leither snapped.

"Why not? I am also human, and take pride in my heritage; both of my heritages, in fact." I threw in, my temper rising.

"Tamsen has opened her lands to the Elves," Brial repeated stubbornly. "We can evacuate families there, or, if you prefer, we can send the Elven army

there to protect the forest at Spesialle's planned point of attack. She has risked herself to travel here to warn you, at a pace it would be difficult for any Elven scout to match, against my expressed wishes and all upon the word of the Seer. I would think, Honored Elder you would rise above your prejudices on this juncture at least, and do her the courtesy of listening to what she says!"

I stared at Brial in shock, my eyebrows raised and my mouth open. Leither narrowed her eyes, opened her mouth to speak, and then, to my surprise, burst into laughter. "No one has told me off so well since I was before age."

I couldn't help but notice that Leither feigned her humor. Something was definitely going on with Acheros' lady. I opened my senses and was surprised to detect the faintest residue of magic hovering in the air. Someone was influencing our conversation. My eyes narrowed. With a thought, I gently dampened the magical trace, subduing it to nonexistence.

"Thank you, Honored Elder," Brial was saying with an inclination of his head. "I know that you and Acheros like to bounce situations off each other, one in support and the other against, but I felt we didn't have time for that today. I apologize for my rudeness."

As he spoke, I watched Leither. Her face went pale and I saw the convulsive grip of her hands on the arm of the chair.

"This will have to go before Council," Acheros decided. "We must all concur on a plan."

"The traitor must be in the Council," I pointed out, gazing at Leither. "You would be exposing your plans."

Acheros' old eyes gleamed in the light. "Oh, I don't think so, Tamsen Ka'antira. If a traitor is among us, we have ways of discovering him. Leither is the most proficient of all the Elves in sensing hostile magic. She can pick this

traitor's thoughts from his head instantly."

I had always known the Elves to be peaceful, gentle people, who shied away from killing and continued their existence blissfully unconcerned with worldly matters. Yet, in that moment I saw a side of the Elves I never expected, a ruthless, pitiless ferocity that no human could have matched. My mouth went dry.

If the Elves became resolved to war, what would be the effect upon the humans in the area? Would they be capable of distinguishing between the two factions of humans?

"We will accommodate you in a guest home, Tamsen Ka'antira," Acheros said courteously. "Brial, you will go to your family, I presume?"

"No, Honored Elder, I remain to protect my lady."

"In Leselle?" Leither scoffed. "She will be well-protected here."

My eyes met hers. I smiled slightly as she watched, sensing her confusion.

"As long as a traitor is loose in the city, I will remain at my duty," Brial replied. "I will stay at Tamsen Ka'antira's side."

"I see," was Leither's reply, and her eyes shone sharply as her gaze jerked from me. We rose to go, and her face stayed riveted in impassive lines. Then, I saw it fall into speculation. Her eyes moved to Brial and then back to me with a faint smile.

* * * *

"She knows," I told Brial bluntly an hour later.

They had assigned us a luxurious guest home, not far away from Acheros' own. It was beautifully decorated and full of the comfort that the Elves adored. I had changed into a clean, comfortable loose gown, such as the noble women of Geochon wore when entertaining intimate friends at home, and reclined upon a couch with a fragile glass goblet of wine.

"Knows what?" Brial asked, more interested in a letter he was writing.

"She knows about us," I retorted, trying to get his attention. "Not only that, but she was tampering with our conversation magically. I think she uses her power to sway decisions within the Council."

He stared at me, his attention snagged. "What makes you say that?"

"When you insisted on staying with me, I caught the look on her face. She knows that our relationship is more than just duty, Brial. Earlier, I sensed magic being used in the room. I snuffed it out and she was the one who reacted to that power."

"I didn't like the way she tried to isolate you," he agreed after a moment's thought. "It probably was obvious from my response how I feel about you. As for the other, I take it you think we have found our traitor?"

"Leither didn't appear terribly surprised to hear there was a traitor on the Council, did she?"

"No, *cariad*, she did not."

"If she is as proficient at mental magic as Acheros claims, it would be a simple matter for her to disguise what she was doing."

He finished writing, dribbled sand over the letter, and blew it dry. I

looked at him curiously. "Wait a second! I didn't think Elves knew how to write!"

"Most consider it beneath them, but my family has found it a useful skill. We are all warriors and a written message is easier to send in the field."

"Is that to whom you're writing?"

"Yes." He stood and crossed the room to the door. I heard him say something in a low voice to one of the sentries posted, and then he closed the door behind him. I glared at him until he continued, "I think it best that my father, at least, knows about this before the Council. He also is an Elder, but a soldier first."

"You think that Acheros and Leither might try to suppress this?"

"I think it a definite possibility," he confessed. "I sent for my father to come here. The guards at the door are friends, and will not betray me. I want this meeting to be secret."

Brial's father! There wasn't any way I could get up and go to change my clothes without Brial noticing and making fun of me. I remained in my seat, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible.

Ten minutes later, the door slid aside. Brial's sword whistled from its sheath as he whirled to the door, but he dropped it with a glad cry as he went to his knees.

"*Patris*," Brial said, joy thrumming through his voice. "I implore your blessing and greeting, my father."

The older Elf laid his hand upon his son's brow. "Son of Beron, I greet you and bless you. Your return is a joy in my life, and your actions are a credit to the Ka'breona. Rise and greet me."

Beron lifted his son to his feet, kissed him formally on each cheek, and then pulled him into an affectionate embrace. I saw Beron's eyes close briefly, as if grateful, before he released Brial from his arms.

Brial sheepishly picked up his dropped sword, sheathing it with a grin. Beron's eyes twinkled, but all he said was, "Superb reflexes, my son."

The older Elf's gaze fell upon me and without preamble, he left Brial and came to stand before me. The Elf dropped to one knee and said formally, "Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel, I greet you in the name of the house of the Ka'breona."

"It is my honor, Lord Beron."

Beron put one hand behind his back and drew a massive sword from a sheath that hung crossways between his shoulder blades. I stared, transfixed, as the sword left its casing.

It was the sword Brial carried in my dreams. My blood ran cold at the sight of it. Every glimmering detail of it, every gilded inch, every intricately traced sprawl of ivy and flowers I knew, down to the cross braided leather on the hilt. The sword slithered over Beron's shoulder and he placed it on the floor at my feet. I stared at it with a mingling of horror and recognition. Something about it called to me. I heard the faintest whisper of a song hovering around the keen edge of the blade.

"My sword is yours to command, Ka'antira. The house of Breon will follow and sustain your cause and we will protect you unto death."

"I thank you, Lord Beron," I replied, completing the ritual, my throat tightened with presentiment.

The Elf looked at me quizzically but replaced his sword without comment.

He rose to his feet and clasped his son's arm. "I was relieved, my son, to hear you were in Leselle. We have been worried, I confess."

"Father." Brial poured his sire a glass of wine. "We have a great deal to tell you, and not much time."

Beron's face solidified, as if it reflected the transformation between doting father and stern soldier. He darted a glance at me before he accepted the wine and sat down on the opposite couch. "Tell me."

* * * *

An hour later, we had related our entire tale. Beron hadn't commented during it, save to ask pertinent questions. I let Brial do all the talking, only joining in when asked. Brial finished with our arrival in Leselle and our treatment at the hands of Leither.

"That's why I sent for you, Father," Brial concluded. "I am worried for my lady's safety. I didn't like something between Acheros and Leither."

"They have been at odds for some time," his father confirmed. "I find it hard to believe that either is the traitor."

"I don't," I said. We told Beron then about the magical interference I had felt in the home of Acheros and I watched as the older Elf's face grew stern.

"I can trust no one in Leselle save my family," Brial said. "Until we have ferreted the traitor out, I must suspect everyone if I am to fulfill my duty."

"Understandable," Beron replied, darting another glance at me. "I think your instincts may be correct, Tamsen Ka'antira. If Leither is the betrayer, we

must move against her with caution." He hesitated, glancing at his son questioningly, and then asked quietly, "Did Leither discover that you are *vialigatis*?"

Unaccountably, Brial flushed. I looked from father to son in some surprise. *Vialigatis*, I knew, was ancient Elven, but I had no idea what it meant.

"I think she guessed, Father," Brial said slowly.

"That would complicate things," his father said with a sigh. "Leither was ever against that sort of thing."

"Would you two like me to leave the room so you can have your private conversation outside of my presence?" I demanded. "I'd hate for one of you to say something I understood by accident."

"Many pardons," Beron murmured, bowing to hide a smile. "I'll let Brial tell you later." He turned back to his son. "I will send someone to watch this house. If anything untoward does happen, I will know of it in seconds. Tomorrow night, invite people for a dinner. You know whom to invite. If I know Leither and your suspicions are correct, the Council will not decide on this matter for weeks. She will drag it out to annoy Acheros if nothing else. If she is the traitor, we will have a hard time in proving it. We may be forced to have a council of our own." Beron paused and added, "I will bring the *ponturos* with me. Nothing must be left to chance."

Brial nodded briefly. "I agree, my father."

Beron rose to his feet and leaned to take my hand in his. I was amazed at the resemblance Brial had to his sire, but Beron was massive for an Elflord. "Good night, daughter of the Ka'antira. On the morrow, we will discuss much. For now, sleep; you are safe here."

"Thank you, my lord," I replied quietly.

Beron patted my hand and after clasping his son's shoulder in approbation, left without saying a word.

I waited for a full half-minute before I demanded, "And what was all that about?"

Brial turned to look at me and hesitated, as if judging his next words carefully. He picked up an empty glass, twirled it thoughtfully, and then refilled it before he joined me on the couch. I managed to restrain a sigh of impatience.

Finally, Brial swallowed the wine with one gulp and set the glass on the table. His face was serious, eyes shining softly in the dim light.

"My father has adopted your cause, Tamsen. He commands the Elven army, and, if it came to it, he could lead them without Council approval. It has always been so in our society, since warriors do not make good councilors and vice versa. Normally, they rely upon each other to make decisions, but it does not necessarily have to be that way."

I chewed this over. "Interesting. Your father must make a huge decision."

"If anyone can force the Council to act, it would be my father threatening to lead the army out despite the Council. That's why he wants us to invite people to this house tomorrow night. There are decisions to make within the army first and he believes we can do it more comfortably here. Many of the officers are good friends of mine. Perhaps the Council will overlook our 'dinner party' as anything important."

"That makes sense. Let's try it."

Brial took my hand, toying with my fingers. "Now for the rest."

I looked at him in apprehension, never having seen him in this sort of mood before. His eyes locked upon mine. “*Vialigatis* means lifebound,” he said abruptly. “Among our people, the *vialigatis* is rare. Elves do not feel strong emotions as easily as humans do. Leither may have sensed our tie tonight. My father definitely did. If we are lifebound, it places you in a dangerous position.”

“Why?” I was disturbed more by his tone than his words.

“A priest must recognize the *vialigatis* if your position among the Elves is to remain secure. It is not a marriage, such as humans have, but the recognition of a force that we cannot withstand. It makes all our decisions regarding ourselves supersede the wishes of the Council and gives our relationship new status within it. The Council can order me to leave your service at any time. Only a formal declaration of life-binding will render that order impossible. If we formalize the *vialigatis*, we will be hand fast for a year, similar to a human betrothal. In all respects, our people will treat our relationship like a marriage, yet we will have options that marriage would not provide.”

“Why didn’t you tell me of this sooner?” I asked incredulously. “You must have known it was a danger for you to accompany me here.”

“I knew it. I would have defied the Council if they had ordered it.”

He kissed my hand and got to his feet. “I cannot dream that you will wish this ceremony, Tamsen; I do not deserve you or your love. Still, in my mind and heart, I wish nothing else but that you allow me the honor of your hand. Tonight, I will let you consider this,” he said quietly. “It is not a decision to take lightly, and solitude is best for a life turning such as this.”

“But, I—”

“Think about it,” he ordered. Brial didn’t look at me again, just stalked to the door and disappeared into the night.

* * * *

The next morning, I rose early in an empty house and prepared myself to visit Lamec. The decision-making process Brial insisted I undertake was complete. I knew Brial was right; we were lifebound, despite our best efforts not to become so. I knew I would never again live my life free of my irritable Elf and that he was my present and future mate. We lived in a dangerous time and might not survive. The Elven ceremony would make our relationship official and might bring us comfort in the dark times ahead.

Besides, I loved him.

Once again, I donned soft Elven clothing, lifted my hood to mask my face, and then went to the door that separated me from the outdoors. The guardians slid open and I stepped out. The sentry, who was very young, jumped back a step with a muffled exclamation.

"I go to visit my uncle Lamec," I said quietly. "Can you find Lord Brial?"

"I am here, my lady," came the reply from above me. I looked up to see Brial lounging in the branches above my door. "I will accompany you."

"Thank you, Brial," I said, trying to maintain an impersonal facade.

Brial jumped down next to me, slinging his bow over his shoulder. I nodded to the sentry, while Brial ordered, "Stay here as if my lady were still within. I will guard the Ka'antira."

The sentry promptly agreed and Brial and I were on our way.

"Please tell me you didn't stay up all night," I implored.

"No," he replied. "I dozed off and on. There was a guard, but I camped out to keep an eye on things."

The morning was particularly beautiful, with the fresh scents of spring washing through the dewy sunlight filtering onto the city. The season was at its peak beauty, and tinged Leselle with a faint green light. As we walked, I let the loveliness of the Elven city penetrate my troubled soul. It gave me a sense of well-being, although I knew that sense was only temporary. Nevertheless, for the moment, I walked with a spring in my step and delight in the glory of the day.

I would remember the beauty of Leselle on that morning for the rest of my life. I caught Brial looking at me sideways, his slanted black eyes curious. Without a word, I reached for his hand and continued to walk along the street, not even bothering to blush for my forwardness. There was no need to speak; the gesture was answer enough.

We reached our destination in short order and I asked his guardians to move aside. They obeyed and I stepped into Lamec's house.

"By the gods!"

As my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, I saw Lamec's stunned face opposite that of his equally shocked wife on either side of their breakfast table.

"My apologies, Lamec Ka'antira," I said. "I greet you in the name of the Ka'antira and ask your blessing. Your mother sent me. Forgive this intrusion, but I have many things to tell you and this isn't exactly a public visit."

"Is everyone all right?" he demanded, abandoning ritual as he rose.

"Quite well," I replied. I turned to Ardenne. "Please forgive me, Ardenne. It grieves me to have invaded your home and interrupted your meal."

She rose as well. "You are welcome, Tamsen Ka'antira. Let me pour you some juice to break your fast."

I nodded my head and we took the chairs Lamec had brought for us.

He looked at me quizzically as I sat. "Where are the others?"

"At Asphodel," I replied. "You knew of the ambush when we left Leselle last autumn?"

"I heard of it," he replied guardedly. "The runner you sent, Brial Ka'breona, was not very specific, but all the Council was told."

"When last I was here in Leselle, someone gave that information to my uncle, the Duke of Spesialle. We have just returned from Geochon, where Spesialle murdered the King and took control of the city. It is our belief that he intends to march against the Elves. He planned to use Asphodel as his base, but didn't count on me to reclaim the property. Kaldarte sent me to warn the Council of his plans." I hesitated, and then added, "I believe that Elder Leither may be the traitor whom we seek. I sensed her trying to redirect our conversation with Acheros magically last night. If I am correct, we must move swiftly. She will know I have guessed her secret and will not wait long to move against me."

Lamec looked wildly between us for a moment, but then calmed. "How much time do we have?"

"A few weeks, I think. Logically, he would attack at the height of summer."

"Does your father know?" he asked Brial.

"Yes, Lord Lamec," Brial responded. "I told him last night. He is committed to the Ka'antira cause. He will fight for it in Council, if necessary. If

necessary, I think he will lead the army out with its sanction or no.”

Lamec looked back at me. “What do you intend to do, Tamsen?”

“We need more time to gather sufficient forces to withstand his armies. He has been preparing for a long time – years, perhaps. At the moment, we hope to convince the Council to evacuate the city and fight to prevent him from entering the forest. I don’t see any other alternative.”

“We have allies who helped us to escape Geochon,” Brial put in. “They are riding for their retainers now.”

“So humans and Elves will fight side by side against this army?” Ardenne asked.

“We hope,” I said. “Tonight, Lamec, we are holding a dinner for some of Brial’s friends at his father’s advice. I think it might help our case if you and Ardenne were there as well.”

Lamec nodded and exchanged a wordless glance with his wife. She nodded. “Have it here. It will cause less suspicion. What could be more natural than for a doting uncle to greet his niece with a gathering of good friends? I take it, then, your father doesn’t think much of the chances of the Council tackling this issue?”

“Not much,” Brial agreed. “He is convinced that Leither will drag the issue out for as long as she can.”

“Beron never takes much time to make a decision,” Lamec noted.

Brial nodded, hesitated, and then spoke firmly. “We have one other thing to discuss, Lamec Ka’antira. You should know that there is a *complication*.” Brial had a humorous quirk of his lips as that fatal word tumbled from them. “Your niece and I are lifebound and we plan to formalize the *vialigatis* tonight, if we

have your blessing."

"Lifebound, are you?" Lamec asked bluntly. "Then why only go through the *vialigatis*? Why not go ahead and marry?"

"Doing so in the face of battle would not be reasonable," Brial replied, his face bland. "I would leave her other options open, if I can."

"What other options?" I demanded. Brial ignored me.

"And you, Tamsen? What do you think?" Lamec prompted, and I turned my attention to him.

"I don't understand the custom, but I agree to it. I'll confess I don't see why we can't get married, but I will accept the *vialigatis*."

Lamec looked thoughtfully at Brial and an odd look passed between them; Lamec's compassionate glance meeting Brial's resolute eyes. I wondered what they were saying to each other, until my aunt dragged me back to the conversation.

"Are you truly lifebound to him, child?"

"I am," I replied without hesitation. "I would continue as we are, but I realize what can happen if someone betrays us to the Council. We think Leither has guessed and Beron hinted last night that it is better not to leave anything to chance. I will not have Brial defy the Council and forced into exile."

"You seem to have thought this through," Lamec said. "What will my mother say?"

"Probably nothing. I intended to send the twins here, but she forced us to come by ourselves."

Lamec stood up and bowed to Brial. "Brial Ka'breona, I agree to the

vialigatis. I ask that the ceremony occur here, in my home, as it is the traditional family home for my niece Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel. You are welcomed to our family and our home."

Brial smiled at Lamec, who then dropped all formality. "And if you upset her for any reason, I'll take a whip to you. You'd better be right about the Seer, Tamsen. I haven't been on my mother's bad side for years, and I would really hate to start now."

Chapter Fifteen

We didn't do much after that. Ardenne took over all aspects of the dinner planning, and, after learning the list of people Brial wanted to invite, added a list of close political allies to her husband. I was grateful for this as the intricate etiquette of the Elves still intimidated me. Lamec left after breakfast, intending to speak with some of his cronies beforehand, dropping Brial off at his familial home on the way.

I, on the other hand, performed an elaborate ritual required of all Elfmaidens in our family before they married or declared themselves lifebound. Acting upon Ardenne's instructions, I set out, alone, to the sanctuary of Daphnis.

Daphnis was a revered figure in the Elven history, an Elfmaiden who had gone into the wildness rather than lose her honor. When pursued by the lustful priests of the human sun god, Daphnis fled into the forest. Uttering a prayer to the Virgin Huntress, whose handmaiden she was, she wept for her virtue and begged for salvation. The goddess responded by turning the maiden into a laurel tree.

Legend had it that when Antir Ka'antira was preparing the city for attack, he had discovered a hollow in the trunk of one of the giant oaks. Entering, he found a lovely Elfmaiden laying flowers upon an altar. She spoke with the general for a time, and then said, "Send to me the children of your house, on the

day of their greatest decision, and I will advise your descendants through them.” She became our hereditary protectress, as well as a figure of reverence to the rest of the Elves. Any member of my house, upon the selecting of their mate, visited her solitary shrine and offered up prayer. Some of us she visited; some she did not.

The hollow that was Daphnis’ sanctuary was garlanded with those laurel branches, now growing thickly around the entrance. I stopped at the entrance and, bowing my head, plucked several of the leaves from the closest branch. I continued in a moment later.

The inside was dark and surprisingly large. Flickering Elfstones cast light in the chamber, which, I could see now, was not entirely hollow. Massive columns of wood stood in a triangular pattern in the very center of the living tree and between those columns was an altar, polished so that it gleamed in the faint light.

The sacred tripod stood before the altar. I sat on the tripod and put the laurel leaves in my mouth, chewing them until they were ground finely. When I swallowed them, I closed my eyes and whispered the ritual prayer.

“Gentle Daphnis, protectress of my house, I am Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel, and I come to you for your blessing upon my *vialigatis*.”

I was about to rise and go on to the altar when a soft voice said, “Daughter of Ka’antira, approach the sanctuary.”

I opened my eyes and passed to the front of the altar. It was laden with small offerings, flowers, or honeycombs, giving off a delicate aroma. Behind the tree that hid her initially from my sight was the only truly ancient Elf I had even seen. Sharp blue eyes peered out from her sagging lids. Even in age, however, she retained the great beauty of the Elves in her features, her thick, silvery hair,

and her slender, still graceful form.

I knelt before the altar and murmured, "Today, I acknowledge the *vialigatis* and I have come for the blessing of Daphnis, whose grace shines upon my house."

"Do you know what it is that you do, my daughter?" the ancient Elf asked softly. "The *vialigatis* is not a bond to be made and then broken lightly. This is not the bond of marriage, which most Elfmaidens enter without thought."

"I love him and that bonds me to him without any ceremonies," I replied.

"Slowly, my daughter, be not so swift to anger," she chided me. "I do not doubt your feelings; I question your motive."

"I don't understand."

"The Elf whom you love can bring you the army that you need," she explained. "Does that not enter your thought, my daughter?"

"It does not," I replied, strangely unaffected by her knowledge of our plans. "We bonded before the need arose."

"It is a rare woman who bonds without thought of worldly gain," she said, her voice sad again. "Even among the Elves, we make alliances through marriage. If you formalize the *vialigatis*, a powerful new element will be born within the Elven nation."

She sighed and her hand caressed the altar. I remained silent, watching her closely. There was a strange glow on her face, as if she had been blessed with the love of the goddess that Daphnis had revered and served.

Finally she spoke. "I cannot deny the truth of your feelings for your chosen mate, my daughter. He loves you well, and you he. The lifebond is there

whether you formalize it or not. I may not gainsay it."

"He is my mate," I responded. "Even beyond death, Brial is my destiny."

"Then I leave you with a warning, my daughter," she said.

I gasped. The elderly Elf no longer stood before me. In her place was a glowing, beautiful woman with a cold face and distant eyes. All around her, a strange silvery light pulsed. She regarded me sternly and I realized that I stood in the presence of something otherworldly. I no longer knelt in accordance with ritual; I knelt in homage to the vision before my eyes.

Her voice, when she spoke next, was many-layered, rich with the timbres of a thousand priestesses gone before her. "Rise and stand before me, Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel. Listen to the words the Virgin Huntress has given me to tell you and take heed: You stand between two worlds and two nations. One is falling, the other will fall. You can do nothing to save Leselle. War already approaches her, helped from within. The Elves must flee if they wish to protect their race. Your mate will be a great leader of armies, both human and Elf, and all honor will come to his house. His sword-magic will dance around you both and the legacy of the Ka'breona will join with that of the Ka'antira. The magic of humans will blend with the magic of Elves. As you forge your bond with your mate, the magic forges you as well. You will serve a power greater than you can imagine and it will mark you for its own. For every path you take, another path has a destiny that dies. Your choices will determine the outcome and the gnarled hands of Fate weave no destiny for you. In the end, you must decide if you are to control the magic, or if the magic will control you. Only then, will the outcome be decided."

She raised her hands over my head and my neck bent automatically. "Be thou blessed, my daughter. In you lies the future of our people. You are on the threshold of our destiny and in recognition of this, I grant you this boon: when

your turmoil is at its greatest and all seems lost, return here to me, my daughter. I will show you your path.” Her eyes were almost sad for a moment and she added, “Your sacrifices, my daughter, will be great. You should always try to remember that for every blessing the gods give, there is a reckoning. Thus do the gods test us, judging our ability to bear the chalice of decision that will, in the end, determine our fates. I promise you, my daughter, that for every grief you bear, they will allow you greater joy.”

Great warmth spread down my body and I raised my head once more. She smiled at me, her beauty so perfect that my throat closed at the sight of it. Her eyes, however, retained the wisdom of age, or perhaps divinity. Before I could move, she had vanished and the chamber was empty.

* * * *

The knowledge she had given me rode high in my throat as I stumbled back down the trees of Leselle. Our unknown traitor had doomed the Elven city and nothing I could do would save her. My mission failed before it ever began.

As if to mock me, the perfect beauty of the day hadn’t changed and Leselle was lovelier than ever in the warm spring sunshine. My thoughts reeling, I made my way back to the house of Lamec and Ardenne.

As I entered, Ardenne looked up and smiled. “A message came for you, Tamsen.” She indicated a scroll on the table.

I broke the seal and read:

Beloved,

Remain in the house until I return. I have sent my brother to retrieve our packs. Berond will bring them to you at your uncle's house. He will guard you as I would.

My heart is yours,

Brial.

I rolled the scroll up with a sigh.

Ardenne came to my side with a delicately fashioned cup. "You seem sad, my niece. Should you not be overjoyed at your *vialigatis*?"

"Is there a priestess in the sanctuary of Daphnis?"

"No, there is not. They say that Daphnis will appear and speak to the Ka'antira, but only in times of great upheaval and danger. Why?"

"She spoke to me and told me a great many things. Now I am afraid in my heart."

Ardenne guided me to a couch and sat beside me. "You are the Ka'antira of your people. Although you are half-Elven, the fates have bound your destiny to us. If Daphnis came to you, she has blessed you on the path you follow. Follow the dictates of your conscience; believe in yourself and in Brial to protect you. You must be strong and let your family support you."

"It is hard." My breath caught in my throat.

"Knowing the future is always difficult."

She put arms around me, drawing me to her chest. I closed my eyes, and, for a little while relaxed in her maternal embrace. Ardenne was probably right, I thought. Nevertheless, I would remember Daphnis' words. Perhaps later, I

would be able to decipher them.

* * * *

Brial's brother, Berond, was almost his twin. When he knocked on the door of Lamec's house and entered, for a split second I thought he *was* Brial. He had the same black eyes, but where Brial's were serious and soft as velvet, his brother's eyes snapped with merriment. The Elfmaidens, who had been a little afraid of Brial, flocked around Berond in droves, much to his chagrin and the amusement of his family.

He looked at me and cracked a huge grin. "So, you're the little half-Elf that snared my brother!" He bowed, his only concession to the excessive formality of the Elves. "Welcome to our family, Ka'antira. I am Berond Ka'breona."

I followed the ritual of greeting and felt a laugh bubble up at the answering gleam of humor in Berond's eyes.

He grinned again and I gave up and laughed aloud. "I'm glad to see you have a sense of humor, Tamsen. I hope you can knock some of the starch from my brother's stockings."

I laughed again. "The gods know I've tried, Berond. I think he starches them when I'm not looking."

He roared with appreciative laughter as he slapped his knee. "You must lead my brother a merry chase, kin-sister! I look forward to watching him squirm!"

"If he does squirm, let me know. I've not seen it yet."

Berond took me captive with a jovial heart.

Once I was cloaked, he led me to a small, lovingly tended garden that was nearby. The youngest Ka'breona son, Balon, joined us there. He was the scholar of the three sons and bid fair to secure his own place on the Council as he matured. He greeted me quietly, but a little while later his spirits cracked and rose as he watched the antics of Berond. It made him seem much younger, closer to my own age, and when he smiled his face grew into the extraordinary beauty of his brother

So, we spent an amusing afternoon. Berond and Balon escorted me back to my uncle's house as the sun was beginning to set, bowed to me soberly, and left as I entered.

Lamec greeted me as I came in. "Your aunt is waiting upstairs for you, Tamsen, to go through all of that primping and flouncing women seem to feel is necessary on this occasion."

I grimaced as I laid my cloak aside. "A moment first, Lamec. Something strange has happened since we last spoke."

His face fell into serious lines. "In what way?"

"I went to the Sanctuary of Daphnis after you left and Daphnis spoke to me."

"I wondered if she would," he murmured.

"She told me Leselle is already doomed."

His face drained of color. "Then our options are more limited. We must prepare not only to flee but also to defend that flight."

"So it would seem."

He came back to himself and laid a hand upon my shoulder. "Go to your aunt, child. We will have time enough for this later, when our friends have gathered and we can all decide what to do."

I nodded and was halfway across the room when Lamec commented, "Brial Ka'breona is a fierce warrior, an excellent leader, and a kind man. He will be very good to you. He has the strength to endure and I feel that is a necessity for your life. I will give your *vialigatis* my blessing."

"I would formalize the lifebond without your blessing, uncle," I replied, turning back slightly. "I thank you for it regardless."

Ardenne, it turned out, held the traditional bridal gear of the Ka'antira for her daughters. Kaldarte had only borne sons and my branch of the family tree had spent its time in the human world. Now, however, I could wear the bride dress and mantle, the lovely, delicate fabrics edged in tiny gems that flickered in answer to the Elfstones lighting my room. After the ceremonial bath, Ardenne brushed my hair until it shone in a long cloak down my back, and helped me into my clothes.

"None have seen this since Kaldarte married Ar'ami," she commented with satisfaction. "They will not recognize it, I think; it has been many years since it was worn. Kaldarte was the last. You look lovely, Tamsen."

"Thank you, Ardenne," I replied, wishing I had a mirror. "I appreciate your attention. I feel as if my mother was here beside me and that is more important than I can say."

"When you and Brial marry, then the rest of the outfit will be used," she continued matter-of-factly. "The veil, the jewels, and the cloak."

I looked down at my gown, soft with the lovely muted heather tones of the moors that surrounded the forest to the north. The mantle was green, complimenting the tone of the gown.

“The Ka’antira came from the moors,” she told me. “In the days before we came to our forest, the Elves lived openly in the world. The Ka’antira were the keepers of the moors and the first to befriend the wild horses that live upon the plains, taming them with love and friendship. Finally, a horse consented to allow his friend Antir upon his back and the two rode everywhere together. When the war came, Antir taught his kinsmen how to befriend the horses and all rode together in that last terrible battle against the sorcerers.”

Her voice trailed off and she brought herself back from the distant past with a jerk. “I am not your mother, Tamsen, but tonight I stand as your closest female relative. Go with love and may the gods bless your *vialigatis*.”

* * * *

Elves lounged on the couches or stood near the windows talking in small groups in the full room. Lamec urgently spoke at the center of one cluster. The atmosphere was tense.

Lamec caught sight of us and rose. “My niece, Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel.” His voice was quiet but it carried and the formality-ridden Elves immediately ceased their conversations in order to bow to me. It wasn’t really until that moment that I comprehended my exact rank among the Elves. The High Council could, and did, cast aspersions on my right to bear the name of my line, but here, every Elf in the room unhesitatingly did me honor as an Elf and as a royal one at that.

"Uncle," I replied, coming to his side. I glanced around the room, looking for Brial. Lamec caught my eye and smiled. "Later, Tamsen," he advised me with a twinkle in his eye. "The house of Ka'breona will come together, in the traditional matter."

He handed me a goblet of light, spicy wine. "Relax, Tamsen Ka'antira."

I smiled at him and accepted the wine, taking a small sip. Lamec introduced me to the group he had been speaking to previously. Several of the Elves I recognized from the council. Neither Acheros nor Leither was there. I nodded and spoke politely to each, aware of the fact that I wore the Ka'antira colors. I observed Lamec and Ardenne also wore the muted mauve and greens. The Ka'antira showed a unified front to their guests. Ardenne spoke to one of the servitors and everyone made their way to long, low couches arranged in a large semicircular space in the center of the room.

"Expecting more company, Lamec?" an elderly council member asked. "That's a lot of room left over."

"Perhaps later," my uncle replied. "I think Ardenne has provided those small tarts you like so well, Stygad."

Lamec seated me first, taking the place to my left. The seats to my right remained empty. This, in Elven etiquette, suggested that other, more important guests were yet to arrive. I saw several of the guests exchange puzzled glances.

In the distance came the sounds of music. I looked at Lamec, puzzled. He appeared unsurprised, taking a sip from his goblet with a wink at me. The music grew louder now, a sprightly, marching air with pipes and strings blending into an obscure harmony. I had never heard music like it before. The pipes were wailing in a high melody, summoning your attention, stirring the blood.

"The Ka'breona!" one Elf said, his face surprised. "House Ka'breona

marches in Leselle this night.”

The music grew louder still and Lamec gestured me to my feet. We stood as the door to the house flew open. Brial, flanked by his father and brothers, walked into the room with his head held high, the pipes swirling behind him. Other members of his house, cousins and retainers, swarmed around him into the room, laden with the first, fragrant blossoms from the gardens of Leselle.

Beron stepped to his son’s side, bowing to Lamec and me. All of the Ka’breona were dressed in the black and blue colors of their old mountain clan. “Revered friends,” he said formally. “Lamec Ka’antira, son of Kaldarte and Ar’ami, the house of Ka’breona comes on behalf of my son, who wishes to formalize the *vialigatis* with Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel, daughter of your house. They will pledge their lifebond here, before these witnesses. Do you so permit?”

“Beron, patriarch of Ka’breona,” Lamec responded courteously. “It is in accordance with the wishes of the Ka’antira, and of our daughter, Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel, that we solemnize their *vialigatis* here in my home. Let them join hands and speak their pledges, in this, the house of her ancestors, before these witnesses. Is there a priest here to hear their vows?”

And with that, Lamec turned to gaze at Stygad, who stood with a pastry halfway to his mouth and a rueful expression on his face, as if he’d been caught in a serious error of judgment.

“There is,” Stygad said regretfully. “I, Stygad, priest of Actaeos, god of the Elven woods, stand here to hear the *vialigatis* and proclaim it to the Council.” Then added in a resentful undertone only Lamec and I heard, “No thanks to you, my old friend, Leither will have my ears on a sandwich in the morning!”

The Ka’breona cheered and the young Elfmaidens among them ran

forward to tuck their blossoms into my hair or the sash of my mantle. Some of the girls simply touched me with their flowers and retained the blooms. I discovered later that the Elfmaidens did this when they were interested in a particular young man.

I stood, flushing, in the center of them, while my beloved only had eyes for me. His brothers laughing at either side of him, Brial shone with a beauty that eclipsed them.

“Brial Ka’breona, are you prepared to swear the *vialigatis*?”

“I am,” Brial answered, his voice rising in a joyous timbre that carried despite its quietness.

“Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel, princess of Leselle and her people –” A low murmur accompanied this introduction, silencing the laughter, “ – are you prepared to swear the *vialigatis*?”

“I am,” I said quietly.

“Brial Ka’breona, join hands with your lifebound mate, and prepare to receive the blessing of the gods,” Stygad said, his voice still resentful.

Brial’s eyes snapped to mine. Handsome and joyful, he came forward through the crowd. My breath caught at the sight of him. He took my hand in his and we sank to our knees, hands clasped.

Stygad lifted his arms to the ceiling and chanted. “Oh ye gods of Leselle, gaze upon this couple who kneel before you to swear the *vialigatis*! They are lifebound and wish to declare this intention to you and to your people. Hear, oh ye gods, their vows and bless their union.”

“I, Brial Ka’breona, do claim Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel as my lifebound mate. Her honor is my honor and I will protect her beyond death. I

beseech of you the blessing of the *vialigatis*, so that our love may give honor to her grace and our people,” Brial announced formally.

It was my turn. “I, Tamsen Ka’antira de Asphodel, do claim Brial Ka’breona as my lifebound mate. His love is my life and I will honor him beyond death. I beseech of you the blessing of the *vialigatis*, so that our people will honor the vows we have made to each other.”

Stygad took a ribbon from the shoulder of my gown and murmuring a prayer, wrapped it three times around our clasped hand, twining it in and round our wrists. Taking a ribbon from Brial’s formal tunic, he repeated the procedure, winding the ribbons in the opposite direction. Then he turned to Lamec, who handed him a goblet of wine.

“As they are bound, with the ties of their houses, so let them drink from the same cup. May their ties hold true through their lives, whether they drink bitter wine or joyful. This is proclaimed in the sight of Actaeos, great god of the forests.”

Although our hands were bound, we were each able to take a sip from the cup. Stygad took it from us, and asked quietly, “Where are the tokens of this *vialigatis* to be blessed and exchanged?”

Beron stepped forward, as did Lamec; each handed the priest a ring. He dipped them into the chalice of wine and lifted them into the air above his head. “Their *vialigatis* is heard and witnessed, oh God of the woods, and the binding symbolized by these tokens I hold for your blessing. For as long as the *vialigatis* endures, let these rings remind them of the duty they owe to each other and to the gods. Let no man question their attachment. They are joined together in the sight of these witnesses and before you, oh Lord of the Forests. This swearing is accepted and established with the blessings of the gods. With the donning of these rings, let them now be hand fast in the eyes of their people!” Stygad

thundered.

I turned to Brial, looked up at his beautiful, glowing face and felt a moment of ecstatic relief. He placed his ring upon the third finger of my left hand: a slender, silver ring with ivy scrollwork surrounding small sapphires in lacy filigree. I looked at the ring I placed on his hand: a broader silver band with an etched laurel wreath around it. In the eyes of the Elves, we were as good as married. Brial smiled down at me and leaned in to kiss me in the ritually proscribed manner.

Naturally, our kiss did not stay ritually proscribed for long. We broke apart, to the shouts of the Elves gathered around us. Flowers flew into the air, and for a moment, every Elf in the room laughed in jubilation.

All save two, to be precise, expressed their joy unreservedly. One was the priest Stygad, who looked as if he had eaten a very sour apple. The other was Leither, who stood with livid fury in the doorframe.

Chapter Sixteen

“Who gave you permission for this?” Leither asked from the door.

The sounds of the celebration died, stuttering into a silence so profound that Lamec drew himself up and in a voice I had never heard from him said, “The Ka’antira require no permission from the Council for anything they do, Leither, as you well know and regret to this day. The *vialigatis* is complete and not even you may dare forswear it.”

“House Ka’breona, however, does require it,” she went on as if she hadn’t heard him.

Lamec interrupted again, his voice even icier. “Ka’breona petitioned Ka’antira, as is legally required in houses seeking to join. As you may remember, according to our law it is only necessary for the royal house to sanction this ceremony.” Brial loosened the ties from around our wrists, his fingers fumbling at the ribbons in his haste.

Lamec’s voice inflected ‘royal house’ only slightly, but the inference was pointed. “It is a matter of supreme indifference to me if you feel slighted, Leither. The fact of the matter is that this *vialigatis* was legally and formally pronounced by a priest and witnessed by a significant number of the Elven council.” His eyes flickered over the room. “By my count, there are exactly

fourteen Council members here as my invited guests and sixteen including Beron Ka'breona and myself. The count rises to seventeen if we include you, who are uninvited. As fifteen is the number required for a quorum, I venture to suggest that your complaint is invalid on the grounds you suggest as well."

He paused and his voice rose as he glared at her with a sudden shining power that I recognized as his legacy from the Seer. "Never should any Elf forget what the Ka'antira are among our people! If it becomes necessary, the Ka'antira will demand its rightful allegiance from the Council and the people. If that day should come, we will disband the Council, Leither. My niece stands as heir not only to the Ka'antira leadership, but also to our vacant throne. Do you dare offend your future Queen? I must warn you not to proceed with your complaint. I try to keep from humiliating a guest in my home in such a fashion, even uninvited ones."

Leither stared at him, her eyes narrowed in rage. She took three steps further into the room and Brial got to his feet, the discarded ribbons of the ceremony falling at his feet. He stood in front of me, bowed formally, and lifted me to my feet, laying a hand on his sword hilt. Berond growled at the back of his throat and was silenced by his father, who watched Brial curiously.

"Do not think to come too close to my lady," Brial warned her. In the silence that darkened the room, his voice carried quite clearly. "Honored Elder, you should consider the actions you take here in front of so many of your peers. I will not allow you to continue any further and no one will condone it if you do."

She turned her attention to him and sneered. "You may be wrong, young Elf. I will contest this *vialigatis* in the Council!"

At my side, Brial shifted until he stood just behind me. I looked sadly upon Leither, who was pale in her anger. "No, Leither, you will not. I am

lifebound to Brial Ka'breona, and I have greater things amiss than your evil temper and interference. Leselle has too much to concern it to grieve overmuch for the biliousness of one Elder Elf. I do not wish to take the authority of the Ka'antira upon me, but if I choose to do so, it will be in response to your actions. Heed this warning well, for warning it is. We intend to call for and convene a Council for first light tomorrow. We have much to discuss."

"You are...you! Ordering me to convene a council? You are a human!" she sputtered.

Those ill-fated words finally snapped my tenuous control over my temper. "I am Tamsen Ka'antira, the heir of Antir! The Council will convene at first light! Berond Ka'breona, inform the Council of my wishes tonight, upon the direction of the Ka'antira. Any Elf who wishes to witness it may do so. I will permit – and encourage – any Elf to attend this meeting. We all have a right to know the fate in store for us."

Her mouth closed abruptly and her posture changed. She looked at Berond, who had bowed in swift acknowledgment of my command and then back at us. "They will not attend."

"I think you may be mistaken," Beron stated. "They will come from curiosity, but they will come."

"Be careful, Leither," I said. "I know that there is a traitor in Leselle who has given the city to the magicians. It is not a difficult jump for any of us, judging from your behavior, to point that accusing finger at you."

Her eyes met mine and I saw the fear in them. Then they changed, growing so malevolent that Brial took two steps forward, his hand clenching on the hilt of his sword.

I felt her bond with her elements, as did every other Elf in the room. Her

magical force rushed up around her, as the Elves closest to her backed away. I sensed simultaneous tingles of magic in other parts of the room, and knew the Elven magic-users were bonding with their elements as well.

Her magic felt different from any I had felt before. It was an insidious, serpent-like magic, coiling around her and beginning to slither through the room. I touched it briefly with my own magic and then let the power build inside me. Something in my head told me how to render her magic useless and I felt my power changing in response.

"That will not work against me, Leither," I said gently. "Do not make me destroy you."

She laughed, her head thrown back in an insane gesture of triumph. I sighed and my own magic surged up into me. As she raised her hands to throw her magic at my head, I closed my eyes.

Swiftly, the magic left me, searching through her body for the very core of her power. The earthen shield that Hyagrem taught me to forge I sent into her, wrapping it firmly around the source of power that was sending its tentacles to wrap around my mind. She gagged and fell to the floor writhing. I let her suffer a moment longer, and then called the power back to myself. For a long minute, we watched her struggle to regain her breath as she lay on the floor.

"Leither, former Elder of the High Council," Lamec said. "We have here stripped you of your privileges and do so banish you from Leselle. The mercy of the Ka'antira allows you to live. If you linger, you will die by our command and execution."

Every Elf in the room nodded and as one turned their backs on Leither who was crouched in the center of the room. I felt her reach for her power and her stunned surprise at not finding it.

"You won't be able to cast a spell for a while," I informed her. "Consider that a punishment for treason against your people."

"What treason?" Stygad asked, still stunned by the fast pace of events.

I looked at Brial, who saw the mute appeal in my eyes. "Treachery!" he said, "done by this Elder, in giving our city to the human mage Spesialle. Spesialle, who murdered his king and took his kingdom, marches on you now with the knowledge to find you! She has doomed our city!"

"Impossible!" one of the older Council members scoffed.

"Possible," Lamec disagreed, "if not probable. My mother foresaw this years ago."

Everyone turned to Lamec and several of the older Elves nodded in agreement. "Kaldarte made a prophecy of this long ago," one of them began. "After the great wars, when her brother had been lifebound to the human Elyssia de Asphodel, she said that Leselle would be breached from within, betrayed by a woman, saved by a woman. Lost for an Elf, preserved through a human."

"Through grief and death the Elves will march and look for hope to a human with the gifts of the Elves," another chimed in, reciting from memory.

Beron spoke. "Berond, take this woman," he gestured at Leither, "to her husband. Explain to Acheros what we discovered here and inform him of our decision. If he wishes to go with her, he can. If not, we expect to see him at the council in the morning. Then, take her to the city entrance and cast her from Leselle."

Berond nodded and grabbed Leither by her upper arm, dragging her to her feet. Without ceremony, he pulled her, unresisting, from the room. Silence fell across the room. I looked up at Brial, who smiled wryly.

"I always knew there was something different about you, *cariad*," he said. "Do you think that when we get married, we might try to pull it off without all the hysteria, assassination attempts, and old prophecies?"

I laughed, the joy returning to my heart. "We can certainly try," I informed my beloved sweetly. "Only think how dull that would be!"

Our Elven guests broke into our laughter with laughter of their own, and Lamec shouted, "Come, House Ka'breona! Join us in our joy at the new branch grafted onto the trees of our houses! Sit with us and share our wine, as you share our joy!"

The pipes and the strings merrily thrilled around us as the Ka'breona joined in the feast. For most of the Elves, drinking and singing, the celebration temporarily abated the unpleasantness.

Brial and I shared a much graver cup that night. We alone knew, of all who were there, the severity of the Elves' situation. I knew even more. I needed to tell my beloved of the words of Daphnis. I would have to interrupt his joy, to break these new tidings to him. However, I smiled into his face and kissed him. He laughed and settled his arm around me, embracing me before our guests.

It was then that the Elven side of me won a small battle. *Just for tonight*, I thought to myself. *Let us be free of this burden, just for tonight.*

* * * *

That night, we returned to the Ka'breona home, which they had vacated for our use. Elven custom required the promised couple to sleep in the man's family home, just as the *vialigatis* was held in the woman's home. It signified the

acceptance of both families to the match. The Ka'breona accompanied us, the music of the pipes serenading us on our way through the dimly lit streets of the city. At the door of the Ka'breona home, all of the frivolity ceased. Formally, the Elves bowed to us and began to melt into the night.

So hand in hand, we ducked past the guardians and into a softly lit chamber that smelled sweetly of dried roses. There was a bottle of the best Elven wine, a small table laid for two with the first berries and small cakes, and my throat ached with the simplicity and love behind it all.

I turned to my beloved with joyful eyes. "I love you, Brial."

"And I you," he murmured, kissing me until I was dizzy.

"All of this is wonderful." I gestured at the room. "I didn't expect it."

"It is my family's welcome to you, *cariad*. Although the Ka'breona have a warlike nature, we also have the souls of poets when we are in love. My brothers and cousins did this as a mark of their approval and to bless our union in the home of our fathers."

"How lovely!" I exclaimed, smiling.

"And practical," he said ruefully. "You are going to eat something, and then you are going to sleep."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "Sleep?"

"Sleep," he repeated. "Tomorrow will be a very hard day, as will the days following. You must convince the Council, organize an evacuation, and be prepared to march on a moment's notice. This will be the last time you get to sleep well for some time."

"Surely, you're joking."

"Not at all, *cariad*. Although, I must admit that my idea is harder to execute than I originally thought it would be," he replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "Still, we must think of what is best for us both."

I stifled my indignation behind a laugh. "Of course, beloved. You are right, of course. Come, sit and eat with me."

I shot him a demurely innocent glance. He kissed my hand and readily enough settled himself on the cushions at the little table. I poured him a glass of wine and then one for me. A moment later, I was sinking down to join him, a secretive smile tugging at the corners of my lips.

Brial took a sip, then lowered his glass and stared at me in dawning comprehension. "You have no intention of sleeping, do you?"

"Not really, Brial."

"So, the entire burden of doing what is best is upon me!" he said indignantly, setting down his glass, hard.

"Exactly, my beloved. It will be entirely upon your conscience, Brial. I am incapable of making decisions for both of us and you are good at it, obviously. I'm sure you can see your way through to helping me from this quandary." I purred, grinning at him. "Since you are so good at deciding things for me, I mean."

"That's not fair," he grumbled.

"No, it isn't," I agreed pleasantly.

"I cannot trust myself around you right now, Tamsen," he warned me. "There are consequences to consider as well."

"The Seer raised me. I know well enough to what consequence you refer

and how to prevent it.”

He lifted his wine glass again, draining it. I smiled to myself and offered him the plate of food. “Some fruit, beloved?”

I saw his hands clench around the glass. He was watching me, like a hawk watches a rabbit at play on the ground below him.

“You have absolutely no reason to behave this way.” I scolded. “I was just offering you, err, something sweet. It’s been a long day.”

He pounced without warning. Laughing, I rolled him onto his back and grinned. “Something seems to be wrong with your temper, beloved. Whatever in the name of the gods is wrong?”

Suddenly, he flipped me over and landed on top of me. “You have some complaint with my temper?” he asked, his voice deceptively mild, his black eyes glittering with a fire banked carefully behind them.

“Um, no, not really,” I replied, all of my bravado vanishing.

He laughed and it was like a growl deep in his throat. “I don’t think you’ll have any complaints after this night, *cariad*.”

His eyes rapidly changed, shining down at me with joy and a fierce intensity. As he bent his head to kiss me, I heard his whisper, “No, you won’t have any complaints, beloved. None at all.”

* * * *

We rose early the next morning, with all of our playfulness evaporated. I

felt an odd sense of hurry weighing down upon me as I bathed and dressed. Brial, although he smiled at me reassuringly, checked his weapons as he donned them. The message was not lost on me.

Beron came for us in the chill greyness before dawn. He greeted us, dignified in his general's armor. He kissed me on the forehead, paternally, and embraced his son. Then he led us to the crossroads, where Lamec, Ardenne and the rest of the Ka'breona waited. As he gestured us to proceed before him, the pipers of his house began to play.

Their song was different from the music of the night before, eerie in the half-light just before dawn. The bodhrain boomed and the smaller drums beat a regular, martial rhythm. Beron Ka'breona was calling the Elves to war.

Words of the *vialigatis* and its events had spread, and as we progressed through Leselle, most of the adults fell in behind us. The tread of hundreds enhanced the pipes' plaintive, martial song of feet, marching to the Council at the dawn of war. I held my head high, the great Ka'antira pendant heavy at my throat, with my affianced husband's hand strong under my elbow. In such a manner had many of the Ka'antira reluctantly gone to inform the Council of grave news.

I saw my aunt Ardenne at Lamec's side and she, too, marched on, her bearing proud. Ardenne was paler than usual but smiled at me sweetly. We entered the Council to find all of them there save Leither.

"Tamsen Ka'antira," Acheros greeted me. "What has brought you to summon the Council?"

The inference was not lost on an Elf present. The Council had bowed to the greater authority of the hereditary royal family. My lifebond to an Elven lord had increased my stature, as Beron foresaw. The exposure, defeat, and exile of

the traitor Leither, Acheros' wife, had likewise solidified my claims. I glanced briefly and with compassion at Acheros' somber face, new lines drawn across his features. He had not taken the treachery of his wife well, it seemed.

I stepped forward. "Honored Lords of the Elven Council, I, Tamsen Ka'antira, bring you terrible news. The traitor Leither has given Leselle to the human mage, Gabril de Spesialle. Even now, human armies are marching to your city to feast on the gifts of the Elves. The time has come, honored Elders, to ready the Elven people for war."

A murmur rose around the Council chamber, which Acheros stalled with a lift of his hand. "How do you come to know this?"

"The Duke de Spesialle killed the human King Lufaux in Geochon less than a month ago," I replied. "He sent warriors into the streets. We were in the city and had to fight our way through to escape. Before this happened, we discovered his plans. He planned to use Asphodel as a base from which to attack and eventually destroy the Elves."

"Why isn't he now?" someone called from the back.

A chilled smile stretched across my features. "Because Asphodel is mine. He will show the same lack of mercy to Leselle that he showed to Asphodel when he destroyed my home. I have taken back what is mine by right and I am come to help you preserve what is yours, if you will listen to my words."

"What do you wish us to do?" Acheros asked.

"You must prepare yourselves to flee," I said. "Leselle is no longer safe. You must leave the forest. I have retaken Asphodel and should be able to provide protection until we find a new home for the Elven people. My friends, who rode with us from Geochon, have gone to raise their armies to protect Asphodel, the forest, and all who lay claim to both. The Elven army will be

under the command of the Lord Beron Ka'breona. He will determine its role."

The patriarch of the Ka'breona stepped forth, hugely impressive compared with the Elves outside of his family. "It would be best," he rumbled, "to evacuate the city. As we leave the forest, I will divide our army into smaller factions. If the enemy is in the wood and attempts to attack the civilians, our smaller segments can engage and harass their troops from many directions at little risk to us. We Elves know how to fight in the forests. We should use that experience against them!

"This is no more than a delaying tactic, however. If their numbers are as great as they seem to be, a full-out assault would insure them the victory. It is time, my brothers and sisters, to leave Leselle. I cannot defend her and we cannot risk the attempt. If we can get our people free from danger, then I can coordinate our tactics with those of the human armies Tamsen Ka'antira has raised to aid us in our struggle."

"Leave Leselle?" one Elder shouted incredulously. "Leave the city of our fathers, and the forest of our birth? If you are the commander of the army, Ka'breona, you should put your energies into saving us!"

"I cannot save both the city and our people!" Beron declared. "It is one or the other, brother, and frankly I will choose our people in that instance!"

"The traitor Leither made the decision for you, honored Elders. You can either bow in submission to Spesialle when he comes or you can flee to preserve the Elven people." Lamec said in a carrying voice. "I can guarantee more safety in Asphodel than here. Leaving now is best, before he knows. Spesialle is a mage of evil reputation. He will not let us live if we stay. Those who can will join with our army and try to stop this infection before it takes hold!"

"The Ka'breona have agreed with the Ka'antira!" Beron shouted, drawing

his sword. Once again, I heard the faintly whispered sound of magic hovering around the huge sword.

Many of the Elves who had joined on our march joined in, with shouted house names and martial cries. I observed this in silence, grieved by the choice the Council must make.

“And you, Tamsen Ka’antira?” Acheros asked. “What say you in this matter?”

“Daphnis came to me when I went to her sanctuary yesterday,” I began in a quiet voice. The Elves behind me hushed as they tried to hear my words. “I sought her blessing on my *vialigatis*, which she gave. However, she also said this: ‘you stand between two worlds, and two nations. One is already falling; the other will fall. You cannot save Leselle. War already approaches her, helped from within. The Elves must flee her, if they are to preserve their race.’ We have no time to bicker. You must decide today. I will lead any who choose to follow me to Asphodel. Ka’breona and the army will provide protection, and, if need be, distract the humans from seeing what it is we do. When our people are safe, then I will ride to meet Spesialle and confront him in battle and we will see what befalls him then!”

A great shout swelled up behind me, rushing forward to shake the Councilors from their seats. Many of them joined the accolade. Only a few, older, sadder Elves, the ones who remembered and had survived the Elf wars, remained in their seats. Acheros looked at me dully. He nodded and the Council rose as one.

“Lead us to safety, Tamsen Ka’antira; we will prepare to depart Leselle, and begin our journey in a week’s time,” Acheros said heavily. “Those who cannot fight will go on to Asphodel. The others will join our army. The Council has spoken. We accede to the commands of the Ka’antira. However, we shall

not leave Leselle standing for human hands to despoil. May the gods help our people in this time of trial."

The sad old Elf left his position and walked directly to me. He laid his hand upon my arm, nodded to my uncle and my father-in-law, and turned to Brial. "It is you, Brial Ka'breona, who has brought the power of the Ka'antira back to us when the Elves needed her the most. I do you great honor, milord, but not so much as you have done yourself. Keep your lady safe and we will follow her."

Brial bowed and curved his hand around my forearm. "She is my lady and will be my wife. I will keep her from harm, despite herself if I need to do so. Together, honored Elder, the Elves have a purpose again, and a reason to fight."

"Destroyed by a woman, saved by a woman, betrayed by an Elf, rescued by a human," the old Elf recited. Acheros' eyes were tired as he stared at me. "Kaldarte said it would be so and she has never been wrong. The Ka'charona will follow you."

Acheros made his tired way down the path and the now-silent Elves stepped aside to let him pass. I looked up at Brial and surprised a grim, calculating expression on his face. He cleared it quickly, but not before I began to wonder what he had on his mind.

Beneath us, criers ran through the streets of the city of Leselle announcing the Council's order to evacuate. As the dawn rose over the beautiful grove of oaks, the Elves began the long, sad business of choosing what to carry away. I leaned against Brial, also wondering what I would take with me from this, the last days of the loveliest city in the world.

* * * *

A week later, another dawn rose upon Leselle, an orange-red sun shining angrily on the golden boughs of the city. Elven families started the long, slow descent in small groups, huddled around the wagons and carts they had assembled in the days before. These carts were piled high with heirlooms, treasures, and the old or infirm. Children dashed around the clearing, laughing. To them it was some great adventure, a chance to see the world their society forbade them to enter.

The army came together more rigidly, grim-faced warriors side by side with the youths whom we had hastily given their coming of age ceremonies the night before. All of them had the long, slender bows of the Elven warrior slung across their backs and wore the hard, leather armor unseen since the cessation of the Elf wars.

More revealing, most of them wore swords at their sides. Only in war did these swords appear. The army trained with swords, Brial had informed me, but did not include them with their gear. Unless the Elves were at war, the hated blades remained stored away.

Beron organized the soldiers, his armor glowing in the morning sun. Unlike the rest of the army, the Ka'breona men wore shining armor, similar to that of the knights. It was lighter than human plate armor, but the sight was striking in the early morning light.

They came while we watched, and the stream of Elves coalescing in the lower parts of the glade grew thick and black. Brial was with his father and brothers, bow slung over his armored shoulder and I longed to join them.

My place, however, was to direct the shocked families of Elves who looked to me for guidance. Lamec glanced at me now and again as I stood,

wrapped in an authority I hadn't wished to assume, quietly watching the events taking place before me.

We ran one last sweep through the deserted city, checking for stragglers and rousting a few out. Lamec came to me, his face grave, when the Elves were gathered. "We have decided to release the guardians," he said. "Then we will be ready to leave."

So I watched, from the edges of the forest where I had positioned myself at the front of the evacuation, as fifty or so Elven Elders positioned themselves at the base of the gigantic trees. They laid their hands upon the broad trunks.

The trees gave an immense shudder, as if one of the swift, swirling storms that plagued the southern part of the continent had hit them. The Elven mages at the base of the grove turned and ran. For some time, the city trembled, the smaller branches whipping as if in a great wind. A sound rumbled over us.

Then, Leselle literally ripped itself apart.

The interwoven branches that formed the larger platforms shredded from the trunks, which tumbled to the earth with a huge crash. The immense roots that were the system of streets disentangled themselves to plunge, writhing, back into the earth. I watched, stunned, as the tops of the great trees swayed and then imploded, crumbling straight down to the ground, crushing the beautiful homes of Leselle systematically as they fell. As the structure of the city disintegrated, an immense cloud of dust billowed from the bases of the trees. The force of its collapse blasted over us like a great wind. Then, the falling colossal oak trees shuddered once more and wrenched themselves apart with a violence that knocked most of us to the ground.

Leselle was no more.

The Elves did not weep. They watched the destruction of their only haven

and then turned to me as they hoisted their packs and picked up the yokes of their carts. I forced back my tears and entered the forest.

Groups of scouts ranged around us, searching the forest relentlessly for signs of the enemy. I stayed at the head of the oddly silent column. Even the smallest of the children knew how to keep quiet in the forest. As we traveled, I felt a wild, proud joy in them. Heads held high, their faces solemn in their beauty; the Elves departed their homelands without a cry of regret. A lone Ka'breona piper began to trill a solemn, delicate tune and the Elves sang a paean to the gods of the forest. It was beautiful, and heartbreaking, but many of the Elves lifted their feet with a greater will after the hymn began to soar through the limbs of ruined Leselle.

It was on that long, sad march with the whole of the Elven nation at my heels that I first felt the tug of my Elven heritage upon my heart. When we had traveled to Leselle, I was a human trying to help the Elves in a war they did not know had started. After the destruction of Leselle, I was an Elf who led her people from their sanctuary of centuries into the world ranged against them.

* * * *

The green-cloaked Elven column followed me through the forest for two days and one night. Brial returned to me within an hour of our departure, walking at my side. The scouts encountered no one in the forest and established outposts at regular intervals. They intended to protect their woods and keep them inviolate. We came into the orchards of Asphodel on the evening of the second day. My orchards were lovely, scented blossoms billowed from the gently blowing branches. I inhaled their scent and the sweet perfume made my

head spin.

The runner we had sent to Kaldarte and Ar'ami had obviously made it. They stood, waiting to greet us at the foot of the castle, with the twins, the Ka'antira brothers, the magicians, and Anner at their side. When I saw him, I felt a twinge of some emotion I didn't understand. It was neither guilt nor sympathy, but hovering somewhere between the two.

Kaldarte's face glowed, as her glance fell upon Brial and me. She embraced both of us. Ar'ami was also pleased and his welcome was just as affectionate.

"We've been able to restore much of the west wing of the castle so that it can shelter people," Kaldarte said. "We can lodge some of these families there for a time. The families who came to serve Asphodel number close to sixty humans, and they have been very busy with the fortifications and the restoration. I expect they'll be able to begin on the great hall next week."

"I don't care! I'm just so happy to be home!" I replied and threw myself into her arms.

"Be strong, Tamsen. They all look to you now," she murmured in my ear. "Later, when you are alone with your lifebound mate is the time for tears."

"You knew?" I gasped.

Kaldarte laughed. "My dear child, I don't have to be a seer to see across the field."

I laughed and turned to greet the others, just in time to see Anner turn and walk slowly back into the castle. It was at that moment that I knew, with absolute certainty, that I had miscalculated his attachment to me.

Badly.

Chapter Seventeen

"We need to establish a safe haven for the Elves," Anner said that night as we met in council. "Spesialle will know they came here when he goes after Leselle. These families need a haven unthreatened by this danger. Are there any other places where we can send them? Is there some refuge, perhaps, known to the Elves?"

Anner had changed. No longer was he concerned with the delicacies of courtesy. Instead, he was a soldier again, in his element. He was shocked, I think, to discover exactly how many Elves there were. Whether he thought there were more or less, I never knew. The twelve hundred or so non-combatants who had fled to Asphodel, however, were a problem he could sink his teeth into. He had also managed to find a way to do that without once looking at me.

Silence ruled at the huge table the twins had found and dragged to our council room, once my parents' bedchamber. As we pondered Anner's words, I looked at the faces around me.

The Ka'antira were there in force, with Kaldarte and Ar'ami seated and their sons and granddaughters present. Hyagrem and Mariol sat next to the Ka'breona and his two younger sons, Berond and Balon, who were youthfully fascinated with the human wizards next to them. Several of the Elven councilors were there, including Acheros whose face was grey. The Elves had

found no sign of Leither.

Glaucou had successfully reached Pamphylia, after leaving Mariol's orders in Beotte. The courier he had sent had arrived that morning, saying that both armies were en route and expecting to arrive within four days. He also mentioned that Glaucou was intending to travel to Ceolliune first, raising Anner's retainers and then continuing up to Phoclydies for his own men. The soldiers under Mylan's command numbered eight hundred and seventy, with at least that much more expected from Glaucou. The Elven army was nine hundred strong, but groups of them hid in the forests. At the most, I deduced, we could expect about twenty five hundred men in our force.

Berond spoke up. "It is true our people would be more comfortable in the forests, but I do not see how to make that happen. There are no other Elven lands."

"Tamsen, is there a map here?" Hyagrem asked.

"Yes, I think so. Check those scrolls under the window." I replied.

The old wizard rummaged through the scrolls while we continued our discussion. A few minutes later, he announced, "I've got it!"

He hurried to the table, spreading out the map and tacking down the edges with an old book and a pot of ink. "Look!" He pointed a gnarled finger at the map. "Let's say we move the Elves to Lake Onros. Across the lake is an immense forest, which I believe is largely uninhabited. If we get the Elves there, they should be safe from Spesialle at least for a time. We could get them to Pamphylia and ferry them across."

"How would we get them across the lake?" Berond asked.

"Glaucou is the Earl of Pamphylia," I replied. "Pamphylia relies on the

fishing industry for its wealth. Almost everyone in the city has a boat. In need, Glaucon can commandeer those boats for a day. He could meet the Elves here..." I pointed to a spot some twenty miles north of the city, "...and take them across Lake Onros during the night. This forest is in Laton and that kingdom is no friend to anyone. They are a clannish, standoffish sort of folk. Who rules Laton now?"

"I don't know who rules in Pixantil now," Mariol replied with a frown. "Our relations with that country have been sketchy at best. Lufaux had a treaty with them regarding trade rights and such, but more than that I couldn't say."

"It's a sound plan," Lamec stated, staring at the map and tapping his teeth with a fingernail as he always did in times of turmoil. "We could leave the youngest Elves to guard the population. It will give them practical military experience as well as keeping them from the worst of the action here."

"It would also get some of the more useless Councilors out of our hair," Berond said with a dry smile. "That alone would be worth it."

"We can take part of the army to protect the Elves on their march," I suggested, "leaving the rest here to draw Spesialle's attention away from them and the forest."

"It could very well work," Brial agreed. "It might be the solution to all our problems!"

"I can ride to meet Glaucon," Anner said. "He'll be traveling on the road that goes through Tizand. I'll assume command of the army and he can go back to Pamphylia. If we start the Elves tomorrow afternoon, they should reach the rendezvous in four days. Glaucon can meet them there and we can have the Elves settled in less than a week."

"Revered Seer," said Acheros, turning to Kaldarte. "Is this plan a good

one?"

"I haven't seen anything about it," she admitted. "I do not see the Elves remaining here and this is the most logical solution at which we've arrived. I think we could not do better than to follow through with this plan."

"It's best, then, that we act swiftly," Acheros said. "Before the families get too settled in. The thought of being back in a forest and safe from human magicians will speed their feet. I will accompany them to our new forest."

Anner rose. "I will depart immediately," he announced with a perfunctory bow. "The quicker I find Glaucon, the safer the Elves will be."

Without looking back, he strode from the room. I watched him go uneasily. He had changed so much. Brial was frowning as well and Kaldarte, who missed nothing, looked grave. Although he had said nothing beyond the formal congratulations he had extended, we knew that Anner had not taken the news of the *vialigatis* well.

I got to my feet. "There are some things I need Anner to pass on to Glaucon. I'll be back in a moment."

Brial looked up at me inquiringly, then nodded and turned back to the planning session.

I ran down the stairs and followed Anner, who was on his way to the newly repaired stables. Catching up with him, I touched his arm and gasped, "Anner! Wait!"

He turned immediately with a courteous bow. "Yes, milady?"

"I just wanted to know...I mean, err, is something wrong?" I looked into his stern face. "You're my friend, and I am concerned for you."

The grim lines of his expression softened. "I am well, milady. Thank you for your concern."

"We are friends, aren't we Anner?"

"I would like to think so," he replied, taking my hand in his. "I have ever thought of you as such." He paused, looking down at my hand. "My felicitations again on your betrothal to Brial, Tamsen. I wish you both long lives and great happiness."

The words sounded rote to my ears and I understood what had happened. I was so consumed by my own happiness that I had spared no thought for Anner. His love for me, which I should have seen sooner, was in his eyes; those grey eyes were now shadowed as they fell upon me. Inwardly I cringed, cursing my stupidity. The intuition that I had when still in Geochon had come to fruition and before me was a man I had hurt with my thoughtlessness.

"I am sorry to have grieved you, my friend," I said gently. "I would have spared you this if I could. I didn't know or understand until now. I am sorry, Anner."

He laughed harshly and raised my hand to his lips. "It is of no moment," he replied. "The standards of chivalry dictate that a true knight's lady is unattainable...out of reach. I swore you my sword once, milady. I will continue to serve you, as your knight, until death breaks my vow."

He held my hand for a moment longer, then dropped it abruptly and turned from me. I stared after his retreating back as it disappeared into the stable, saddened and wiser now than I had been only a few minutes before. In those moments, I had glimpsed the beauty and true strength of his character. It shamed me.

"It is a terrible thing, *cariad*, to find that someone whom you only consider

as a brother loves you truly," Brial said behind me, his voice gentle.

"I didn't know," I said quietly. "I didn't realize I was hurting him."

"I know that and so does he," Brial replied, his brow furrowed as he looked after our friend. "Do not fear for Anner. He will be true to his word."

Into my mind flashed my dream, in which Anner and Brial confronted each other with such hatred in this very courtyard. I wasn't so certain. Anner emerged from the stable, mounted on his huge grey horse. We lifted our hands to him in farewell and he returned the salute before whipping his horse into a fast canter.

* * * *

The Elves started out again in the morning, led by the Ka'antira brothers and Berond, with Acheros striding at the front of the column. The people were silent, their faces drawn, but the prideful solemnity they displayed as they fell into line and drifted from Asphodel impressed me.

Beron concluded that the majority of the army should accompany his people, since the human forces would arrive any day. So the Elves departed, protected by their own kind, and I stood on top of the highest castellation and watched them leave.

* * * *

Anner arrived with the armies of Beotte and Pamphylia on the third day. Mariol went to talk to his commanders with a tight smile on his face, while Anner supervised the building and fortification of an army camp in the fields to our east. His rigid military training enabled him to accomplish this quickly.

Soon, they had laid the camp in precise lines, with a command tent at its center, a somewhat larger tent that served as an officers' mess, and long straight rows of smaller tents to accommodate the army. The soldiers had brought their supplies with them and the proximity of the forest and river provided them with fresh meat.

The next morning, they rose and began to dig long trenches around their camp, piling the soil up to form a rampart on the edges, and setting long sharpened spikes at an angle in the bottom of the ditch. By the end of the second day, the camp was a solidly established reality in Asphodel.

The warriors of Leselle returned on the fifth day. Their trip was successful, and Glaucon was waiting with the ships of his people to ferry an entire race to a new homeland. The warriors told us of the courage they displayed, filing onto the waiting ships. Once they reached the forest of Laton, however, the tired faces lightened and they stepped from their ships with new hope. The Elven warriors stayed long enough to help the Elves into the heart of the forest, stationing newly recruited troops around their selected dwelling site, and returned to us with the favorable reports of their mission. There would never again be a Leselle to dazzle the mind with its beauty and its legends, but for now, the Elves were safe.

The Elven army camped in the orchards, sleeping under the trees in good weather and retreating to the extra tents the human soldiers had brought in bad. During the day, Beron and Anner worked together to train the separate armies to fight together. I frequently joined them in the training area, which was below the

terrace and before the orchards.

Much to my surprise, there were women with both armies. The Elven women, beautiful and graceful, were interspersed with the archers and I had been told they were highly efficient. The human women were scattered among the infantry and cavalry, where their fellow soldiers treated them with great respect. The road to acceptance in the army was hard, and any woman who completed it was worthy of their esteem.

Inevitably, I decided to train with the soldiers. I had several good reasons for my decision. First, as a line of last defense, what could be better for me than to have a sword and to use it competently? Second, it would help me to establish a kinship with an army wrought from two nations who viewed each other with grave mistrust. Finally, how could one lead an army without understanding the trials they faced?

Armed thus with brilliant logic, I broached the idea to my lifemate as a matter of course.

Naturally, Brial did not consider any of these reasons good enough. "Are you out of your mind?" he demanded, pacing in front of the hearth in our room.

"I wasn't the last time I checked. Your father seemed to think it was a good idea!"

"I wouldn't object to you training with the archers," Brial retorted. "I do not want you to be in a position, however, where you even *think* about needing to use a sword!"

"This is war. It would be far worse for me to need a sword and not know how to use one."

He was unmoved by my logic. That night we had a spectacular fight.

Brial stomped out to the stables and I slammed the door after him.

The next morning I went to the training area early. Brial avoided me for three days. By the end of that third day, my palms were blistered and bleeding from the hilt of my sword. I was preparing to soak them in a bowl of warm, salty water, when Brial entered our room.

He looked down at me and said, "You were right, Tamsen. Learning to defend yourself is a good idea. I will teach you myself."

"That sounds reasonable." I winced as I immersed my hands in the briny brew.

"How bad are your hands?"

I laughed. "They are in beautiful shape if you like the looks of a slab of liver."

His mood lightened, and we spent the rest of our night happily. When I had time to think about it, I wondered about this argumentative side of our natures. Would we ever grow into the mellow domesticity that marked so many of the relationships we saw around us?

At times that I doubted we would, and in spite of myself, I smirked. Life with Brial would never be dull.

True to his word, Brial accompanied me to the practice yard the next morning, correcting the grip of my lacerated hands upon the hilt of the sword and running me through the exercises that young Elves did when first learning the ways of the sword. By the time that first training session with my lifebound mate was over, I was ready to renounce the sword. I probably would have, too, if I weren't determined to show myself a worthy leader. Besides, I would never willingly let Brial know that he was right.

Glaucon returned with more than a thousand soldiers under his command from Phoclydies and Ceolliune. We welcomed him back to Asphodel and he, too, settled into the ways of the commanders of our army. Beron and Anner had created a firm friendship over the intricacies of strategic warfare.

Exhausted, I lay in my bed at night, exhilarated at the speed of our progress.

About a fortnight later, Beron wandered into the practice yard when I was going through my exercises and watched me for an hour. Balon joined him, hanging on the fence, but ran speedily away after a low word from his father. He returned a few minutes later with an oilcloth wrapped bundle. When I next stopped, to rest my aching arms, he entered the field.

"My daughter," he greeted me.

"*Patris*," I replied in the ancient Elven tongue.

Beron smiled and turned to his son. "Brial, why do you have your lady swinging this coarse, iron sword? It is too heavy for her."

"It is all we have available to train her with, my father," Brial replied. "The smiths are busy forging armor. When she improves, I will have a new sword made for her."

"May I offer an alternative?" Beron asked, handing me the package with a bow.

I removed the oilcloth, revealing a slim, shining silver sword, along with a belt and a sheath that glowed with the delicate tracery of the Elven silversmith's finest decorative working. I looked up at my father-in-law in surprise.

Shutters fell across the faces of all of the Ka'breona men as Beron said in a low voice, "This was my wife's sword and belt, Tamsen. She was one of the

finest warriors of our people and when the call last went out for war, she died defending our sons. She would want Brial's lifemate to have this."

Brial nodded as I thanked Beron. He shook his head and left us with a grieved smile.

"This sword is much lighter than the one you have been using, *cariad*," Brial said abruptly. "It will change your stance and swing."

I looked at my betrothed husband, whose face had dropped into the blank mask I hadn't seen for so long. I nodded, accepting his need to proceed onto matters that were more mundane. It also explained his desire to keep me from the battlefield. Now that the reason was clear, I understood and loved him more for it.

From that day forward, I worked with the bride-sword of Ka'breona and soon began to improve as if the spirit of the woman for whom this sword was made somehow imbued her skill into my toughening hands.

I also spent a portion of each day working with Hyagrem and Mariol. True to his promise, my teacher instructed me in the construction of an invisible barrier, as well as other strategies employed by battle mages. Cetenne came to these sessions as well, occasionally accompanied by her twin, and we made steady progress.

Brial's natural reticence slowly relaxed, and my innate assertiveness mellowed as I grew to understand his moods. During that brief period before the struggles of war overcame us, my betrothed and I discovered more about each other than most couples learned in years.

* * * *

Six weeks was all the time we had. Six weeks in which Asphodel turned golden as the grain developed in her unoccupied fields and the fruit began to grow on the laden branches in the orchards. Six weeks, as our soldiers accustomed themselves to each other and the unusual demands of our army. Six weeks while my retainers cleared away the broken bones of the Asphodel they had known. Six weeks, while the love Brial and I shared grew more intense and consuming. Six weeks, until the first runner came in, breathless, from an Elven outpost in the forest to gasp out that a human army was on the move and headed to the deserted ruins of Leselle.

In less than three hours, our army entered the forest. The Elves, with such humans who could practice woodcraft competently, moved through the thick density of the woods. The cavalry and the remainder of the infantry circled around the forest to Spesialle's point of entry, following in the wide swath of destruction his army had left behind them. A smaller contingent of human soldiers remained at Asphodel, to protect the castle.

Brial and I went with the Elves in the forest. Beron was in charge of this part of the army and under his guidance, we made excellent time. Ar'ami was with us, as were the twins and their Ka'antira uncles. I went along with them in my new, light Elven battle tunic and trousers with the Ka'breona sword belted at my side. Brial had told me I was reasonably competent, and seemed to be, if not pleased, then grudgingly impressed with my progress.

Spesialle's army had entered the forest north of the village of Imper, crossing the Ilia River and moving through the woods. Beron laid a track that would take us to the Leselle ruins and set a pace that was staggering to all but the most hardened Elves. I kept up, grimly proud that I could, and that night I walked through the small, fireless campsites of our human soldiers, Brial at my

side and praised them for their ability to keep up with the Elves. They took our congratulations to heart and not a single man complained when we rose before dawn and started out again.

Our runners moved freely between our column and the second, more heavily armored battalion to the north. On the second day, we were less than an hour apart, and slightly more than that from Spesialle's soldiers.

Beron called a halt. "What do you think? Should we continue on our path to intersect them today, or delay and camp tonight in order to hit them tomorrow?" He asked the question of us generally, but looked to me.

"Today," I said promptly. "The vision of the Elves is a benefit to us as dark falls, and our troops are fresh enough to rise to battle. We can keep on at a more regular pace, and slow as we approach. That should give us the advantage."

"That, and the longer they are in the area, the greater familiarity they will have with the terrain," Brial pointed out. "I don't think we want to come across any defenses stretching around the Leselle glade."

"I agree," Beron said and sent a runner back to Anner with the plan.

The day grew hotter as we crept closer to Leselle. Except for the occasional rattle of a sword belt, near-silence reigned. Finally, Beron motioned for a halt with an upraised arm and our warriors sank onto their bellies in the underbrush. He looked at Brial, his eyes giving a silent order and Brial dropped bow, quiver, and sword belt before he took to the trees.

I watched him go, my heart pounding. A trickle of sweat ran through my hair, down the back of my neck, and pooled in the space between my shoulder blades. He was gone for several minutes, and I jumped when he dropped to the ground beside us. I had been watching for him and hadn't seen him return. One

of my major, secret worries eased a little.

“Quarter mile,” Brial reported in a breath. “There are eight hundred nervous humans and one very angry sorcerer sending lightning bolts at the trees.”

“And Anner?” Beron asked in a hushed whisper.

“An eighth of a mile beyond, with the cavalry at the rear.”

Beron sighed and looked at me. “Let’s go, then,” I said, drawing my sword and rising to a low crouch.

* * * *

We crept to the edge of the Leselle glade. The human army was uncomfortable as the infuriated mage in a long hooded cloak singed off branches with a blistering torrent of words. Brial cupped my face silently, and prowled up to join his father, like some lethal, predatory cat.

Beron, on the other hand, had directed me to stay well back of the fighting. A guard of Elven scouts was to protect me and get me from the forest if all should go wrong. I argued with Brial the night before, until Beron looked at me and said, “In this matter, Tamsen Ka’antira, you must obey the orders that I give you. We cannot afford your disobedience.”

There was a practical purpose for this as well. If the sorcerer decided to take part in the battle, the twins, Mariol (who was with Anner’s army), and I must be ready to forestall him. This lessened the sense of shame I felt in staying out of trouble.

If it were the Duke of Spesialle in that forest, they would need me. My peril would be as great as anyone's in our army would. Resigned to my place, I closed my eyes and prayed for the safety of my men and my lover as the silent, swarming mass of our half human, half Elven army began its relentless progress to the enemy. My guard rustled around me, including the twins, and we followed at a distance.

Suddenly, in the woods to our left came a defiant bellow of horns. The clarion call of the Ka'breona pipes answered it, shrilling the Elven call to war. My army rose as one from the brush and fell upon the startled soldiers who stood gaping in the center of the glade.

"Come, we need to get closer," I said to the others and they fell in behind me. I slid down the small slope I remembered from earlier, happier days to observe as the sounds of battle swelled in the glade. Liliath and Cetenne came to my side, searching the confusion of battle for the wizard.

"Do you see him, Tamsen?" Cetenne hissed.

"No."

I continued to strain my eyes, searching for the enemy I knew was there. I felt the warning tingle of magic begin, a strong pressure on my temples, and I gasped in horror.

"He's behind us!" I hissed, spinning to scan the woods. As the Elven guard drew their swords, I closed my eyes and let the magic take me. As always, when it came it spoke to me in a calm voice. It was no longer the remembered voice of my teacher. Now when the magic spoke to me, it spoke in the voice of my mother.

Easy now, Tamsen. What direction is he in?

Behind us, I think. I can sense him pulling his magic in now.

What element do you sense?

I don't.

I considered that for a second as the warning tingle grew. Then, without warning, I threw up a wall of earth around the stunned guards and myself.

An explosion hit the other side, the concussion throwing us to the ground, stunned. I gasped for breath but the wall held.

"He's after us," Cetenne said, her face streaked with the mud that had flown into our faces as we fell. She and her sister drew in their magic as well and from across the woods I sensed Mariol trying to do the same. The men in the battle had no time to spare for us. We were on our own.

I sent my thoughts out, searching the dense underbrush. Then, without warning, I found him. He was pulling in the magic again, ready for another blow.

"Scatter!" I hissed and they hastened to obey me. I left the protective wall of earth standing as a decoy, while we ran quickly in different directions.

I decided my heading with ease. As a second blast rocked against my wall, two or three trees close to me shattered into splinters. I came up from a roll and headed stealthily toward the sorcerer's hiding place.

Pausing, I glanced around for any of my guard, and then called the magic to me once more. I felt the mage's startled recognition of the magic and his scramble to defend against it.

I instantly knew that this was not Gabril de Spesiale.

I reached for his mind and blocked the little electrical charges that ran

through his brain. He went to sleep, fighting against the pull that invaded his mind. I took a deep breath, ready to call for the guard, when a sudden crash brought me to my feet, sword in hand.

“‘Ere’s one of them elf-wimmin,” a burly human soldier said to his companion. “Afore we’s get out of here, whadya say we’s has us a little fun?”

“Just kill her,” the other man ordered. “We haven’t got time for all of that.”

The giant grinned and stepped for me. Without thinking, I blasted him from his feet with a swift rush of air.

The smaller man’s eyes narrowed. “We have us a witch.” He waved his sword point low. “I wonder if you could be the one the Duke wants so bad?”

“It doesn’t matter if I am,” I replied. “You won’t live to tell him.”

Without preamble, I filled his lungs and throat with dirt and stood over him as I watched him die. His huge friend was unconscious and probably would stay that way permanently, judging from the size of the hole his head left by a tree trunk. I left them there and went in search of our wizard.

He lay on his back, eyes shut and a look of terror on his face. On his cloak was the heraldic emblem of Spesialle. I woke him up, taking care to stand over him with my sword at his throat.

“Who are you?” I demanded in a low growl.

He did not answer, his eyes bulging at the sight of the sword.

“You have exactly ten seconds to answer me before I run my sword through your throat,” I advised him coolly.

“I am a wizard in the employ of the Duke de Spesialle,” he muttered.

"The Duke?" I laughed. "Shouldn't he be terming himself the King of Ansienne?"

"You mean you don't know?" he asked with a sneer. "Spesialle didn't assume the throne. Jeshan de Callat did, on the last full moon."

I stared at him, my mind whirling. *De Callat? Was he the puppet master jerking Spesialle's strings?* The magician shifted at my feet and I brought myself back to attention. "Don't even think of trying to get to your magic, friend," I warned him. "You won't like the results."

Two of my Elven guards rushed up then, staring at the magician and then at me. I reached out and put the mage back to sleep, then gestured to the scouts. "Bring him and come."

They followed as I strode back to the site of the battle deep in thought. The fight seemed to be nearly over, with small groups of the enemy surrendering their swords. My eyes scanned the piled dead, lighting on Brial and his father standing very close to where I was supposed to be.

"Damn!" I breathed under my breath, sheathing my sword.

The twins arrived at nearly the same time I did, both of them mud-streaked and exuberant.

"Did you find him, Tamsen?" Liliath asked, eyeing my sleeping hostage.

"Yes," I said shortly, "and a couple of others besides. Tell the sweep detail that I left a body back in the woods, alongside a giant man who's knocked himself cold."

One of the scouts nodded and they dropped the sorcerer at my feet and retraced my steps through the woods. One glance at Brial's face was enough to make me hold up a restraining hand.

"No, *cariad*. The sorcerer attacked us, so we had to scatter. There were too many of us to protect," I interjected as the first wave of exhaustion from the magic swept through my body. "I did not disobey you on purpose; it was purely self-preservation that made me leave."

Beron's lips twitched as he turned to regard his son. Brial took a deep breath, and then managed to say steadily, "Are you all right, my lady?"

"Perfectly well," I replied. "But, there is more afoot than we thought." I sighed, knowing there was no way to break it to them gently. "Spesialle did not take the throne. We have more enemies than we guessed. This magician is my hostage. He will not awaken until I choose him to do so. We need to find Anner and the others, and discuss this —"

My voice trailed off as a sudden weakness washed over me. I staggered sideways, throwing my arm out blindly. The world spun around me and I reeled. Someone grasped my arm and I heard Cetenne shouting for Mariol.

"The magic!" I gasped. "Who is pulling in all the magic?"

I felt myself falling to the ground. Once there, I placed my hands on either side of my head.

"Run!" I cried, strangling. "Quickly! Flee!"

A deafening roar thundered over the glade. I bent over, my eyes screwed shut against the pain pounding in my head. I was alone and —

I saw Spesialle. He stood alone in a darkened room, peering into a glowing shimmer: a vision, on a chalice of water. He sensed me and pulled back, startled. The vision slanted sideways as I struggled to hold onto it. For a second, I stared straight into his eyes. Then the vision jerked away from me. I cried out in anguish and my magic rushed back into me. I pulled a shield around myself

and fell back as magic burst over me.

Chapter Eighteen

I awoke to darkness. I stirred, in an effort to pull myself upright, but a gentle hand pushed me back into a reclining position. "No, cousin, stay where you are."

"Liliath?" My head was still reeling from the effort to sit up. "What? Why is it so dark in here?"

"Your eyes are bound, Tamsen," she replied. "I want to protect them from light until we can get to my grandmother."

"What is wrong with them?" I asked.

Liliath hesitated, obviously trying to determine my condition. Finally, she said, "I don't know. The magic that hit you affected your eyes first, so I covered them as a precaution."

"Liliath," I said as calmly as I could, rattled by the mention of the word 'first'. "Some obscure connection with my uncle dragged me into a vision. That is the only effect upon my eyes. My...sight, for lack of a better term, was somewhere else. I have no pain in my eyes at all. Take the bandages off, please; I have a great deal to do."

"I don't think it's a good idea."

My temper started to churn. Strangely enough, it made me feel better.
“Are you going to take these off or do I have to burn them off?”

“I thought I heard the gentle sounds of your waking, Tamsen,” an amused voice interjected.

“Mariol!” I gasped. “Thank the gods! Will you tell her to take these off of my eyes, please?”

“No,” he replied. “What your cousin didn’t tell you, Tamsen, is that we saw what happened to you. If you will calm yourself enough to listen, then you and I will go through the series of events and try to deduce what happened. Is that fair enough?”

“I suppose,” I answered grumpily. “If I don’t like your story, I’ll burn them off anyway.”

“So you still...feel your magic?”

The question startled me. I reached for it and found the magic where it always was. “Yes, Mariol. It’s unchanged.”

That wasn’t precisely true. The magic felt different to me somehow. I didn’t have time to consider this because I thought I heard him expel a long breath.

“Good. Let’s put this together, shall we? You had brought the mage back as your hostage, right?”

“Right. I said I could wake him up when I needed to and then I felt very sick and weak and everything went black.”

“Every ounce of color drained out of your face, Tamsen,” Liliath reported.
“You fell to the ground shouting something...”

"Someone was taking all the magic," I remembered. "I felt the magic being pulled in all around us."

"That's when I came upon the scene," Mariol continued. "You shouted at us all to run, which we did except for that excessively stupid Elf of yours, and —"

"Brial! Is he well?"

"Of course he is," Mariol snapped. "Although, I would venture to guess, he is now thoroughly aware of the need to run when a sorcerer tells him to do so. What happened then?"

"I saw Spesialle. He was looking into a bowl of water. Then everything sort of...slipped, I guess, and we looked dead at each other. He was as shocked to see me as I was to see him. Then I felt myself jerked backwards and I threw up a shield before I blacked out."

"It was quite a shield," Mariol said dryly. "It took me the better part of an hour to disassemble it. I daresay that if you had been awake I wouldn't have been able to touch it."

I was silent, my heart pounding harder. "How long ago was this?" I asked, aware of a rhythmic, swaying motion

Mariol sighed. "It is the third day since the battle. You have been unconscious all this time. We will be at Asphodel in an hour."

My body slumped in defeat. "Oh, gods! Three days? Mariol! You knew how to wake me up!"

"I was afraid to wake you, Tamsen," he replied. "I know nothing about this magic. You will remain as you are until Kaldarte can see to you. Don't use your magic, whatever you do. Just stay calm. It's not much farther."

"You need to be aware of something, Mariol," I insisted. "Jeshan took the throne of Ansienne, not Spesialle! We must make plans for this! We've got to —"

"Quiet, child!" Mariol snapped. "Your young Elf is pelting back here and you don't need to worry him more than he already is. Yes, yes, I'll tell them and we'll analyze it later. Just rest, now. Please?"

It was the entreaty in his voice that calmed me more than anything. I subsided, frustrated and stubborn, only to be jarred a half second later. Liliath spoke sharply, but Brial ignored her. "*Cariad?* Tamsen?"

"Yes, beloved, I am awake," I said soothingly, as Brial gathered me up in his arms with a cry. "It's all right now, Brial. Hush, my love, I am fine."

* * * *

Kaldarte, whom an Elven runner had informed of my illness, was curt in her directions to the men who carried my pallet. I would have smiled at it, but to tell the truth, I was afraid of her. She sounded angry; I had never heard that tone in her voice before. Once we were upstairs and Brial had lifted me to the large bed, she sat beside me. "Tamsen, do you have any pain?"

"No. Nothing hurts, except my stomach because I'm hungry. My eyes feel fine. Can I take these off now?"

Mariol related my story to her, while Brial helped me drink a cup of water. Finally, Kaldarte said, "I don't think her eyes are in any danger. We should be able to remove the bandages without fear. Tamsen, child, this is very important. I'll remove this gauze one layer at a time. If your eyes begin to burn or hurt sharply, tell me and I will stop. All right?"

"Fine." I said. As she got to the last layers of gauze, she told me to shut my eyes. I did as she instructed and the bandages were finally removed from my face.

A few seconds later, I opened my eyes. I blinked hurriedly several times, feeling as if I had sand in my eyes. Then, the room gradually came into focus. "What are all of you looking at so strangely? Is my nose sideways or something?"

"No, child," Kaldarte said, "but you have changed drastically."

"Changed drastically?" My blood turned to ice. "What do you mean?"

Kaldarte wordlessly handed me a mirror, which I grasped with a shaking hand. My mouth fell open, as did the reflection's. I stared at myself in utter astonishment.

Some unknown agency had bleached my hair. It was almost colorless as it lay snarled around my shoulders in a silvery-pale mass. It was the exact shade of my eyes, which hung like argent orbs in my peaked face.

"How did this happen?" I demanded, my voice rising in horror. I felt physically ill, repulsed by the ashen tinge of my features.

"Uh oh," Mariol muttered. "If she's going to have a tantrum I'm leaving."

Brial put an arm around me and hugged me tightly. "After you fell and shielded yourself, *cariad*, something exploded in the glade. Whatever it was, it must have been immensely powerful, since it knocked about ten acres of forest and fifteen hundred men over. I was fortunate; when you shielded yourself, you somehow included me. Not quite as fortunately, I couldn't get out until Mariol broke your shield.

"You were so pale, lying there; I thought you were dead. Then, right after

Mariol released us, you sat straight up and opened your eyes. Your eyes were glowing, *cariad*. We couldn't look at them; they were too bright.

"Then you shouted, 'I agree!' and slumped back over in a dead faint. We bandaged your eyes because we were afraid they'd been burned out of your skull. Then we built a cart and carried you home to Kaldarte. As we traveled, every day something leached more color from your hair. By this morning, it was like this."

I stared at him in silence. Then I said, "Please leave me. I'd like to be alone."

Kaldarte nodded and left the room with Liliath and Mariol right behind her. Brial stayed where he was.

"Brial —"

"How can I leave you now?" he asked with his black eyes as soft as his voice. "I am your lifebound mate, *cariad*. I will not leave you."

"I need to bathe, and to think," I tried. "I just want to be alone."

"To lock me out," he replied knowingly. "I told you once before not to test my magic, Tamsen. Let's not chance it. I'll stay here with you. I won't talk to you if that is your wish, but I am not leaving."

I gave up. "What do you think has happened to me, Brial?" I asked, despair lacing my voice.

"I don't know, beloved. It will not defeat us, nor will it tear us apart. Whatever it is, you and I will handle it together."

I threw my arms around his neck, burying my face in his shoulder. When next he spoke, his voice was far away. "Together, we can defeat anything, *cariad*."

If we work together and grow stronger in our love, nothing on earth can destroy us."

* * * *

An hour later, after a hot bath and a light meal, I felt much better. Brial had insisted I remain in bed for the rest of the day and no argument I put forward would dissuade him. He would simply say, "No." After a while, I grew amused by how many different inflections Brial put in that one tiny word.

"Brial, I really should go and talk with Kaldarte."

"No." Flat and precise.

"Well then, don't you think I should at least call our council for tonight? We have a lot to discuss."

"No." Rising at the end of the word.

"You know, I really should check on the twins."

"No." Curt and swift.

"Could I at least go out and sit on the terrace?"

"No." Higher pitch and chopped off at the end.

"I'd really love to see how the orchards and fields are growing," I said wistfully.

"No!" Final.

I settled in for a long pout. Brial, on the other hand, seemed almost

amused as he bent over his weapons and armor, all of which he meticulously checked for damage.

Silence fell in our chambers, as the dusk lengthened into twilight. The grasshoppers began their round of songs with the frogs in the marshy lands next to the river, and my sulkiness dissolved under their spell. I absently picked up my comb and began to pull through the snarls in my half-dried hair.

I looked down at the strange, silver stuff. Before when I had done this, my hair was jet black, rich and shining. Now, it looked to me like the hair of an old woman...but then, not quite. I picked up one long lock of hair and brought it closer to my eyes.

It was silver, but with glints of color in it. I turned it from side to side, and the Elflights in the room bounced and refracted from it. "Brial, look at this!"

He put down his sword and joined me, sitting on the side of the bed. "What?"

"My hair. Look at it closely," I urged, not wanting to give him any clues.

Brial took the long curl from me and scrutinized it. "It reminds me of an opal."

"Me too," I said, taking the curl away from him thoughtfully. After all, it wouldn't do to forgive him too quickly.

He frowned. "What do you think it means, Tamsen?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it."

Then, swiftly, I knew my words to be a lie. I *had* seen hair like this before, framing the stern face of Daphnis as she spoke to me in her sanctuary. I thought about this as I combed my hair out again. It was alive that night, crackling with

static from the comb and drifting in midair along with it. Brial smiled and took the comb from me.

"Let me do that, *cariad*," he murmured, burying his face in my hair. "I love the way your hair smells after you wash it."

"You could do with a bath yourself." I tugged one of his long, fair locks.

He began to comb my hair, working through the tangles, and we slipped into a quiet, thoughtful mood. After a while, I just leaned back against him, while his arms went around me.

"I'd love to —"

"No."

"Dammit, Brial, you don't know what I was going to say!" I protested.

His voice was stern. "Whatever it is, whatever you want to do, Tamsen the answer is *no*."

"Well, all right," I said with a mock sigh. "Good night then."

I lay down, laughing until Brial joined me, and I discovered his injunctions against activity were not foolproof.

* * * *

The next morning, I felt much stronger when I rose. Brial still slept in the bed and I left him there to get some rest. After all, I reasoned self-righteously, he must be tired after the week he'd had, poor dear.

I grinned as I slipped into one of the long tunic and trousers I wore to the

practice yard and those sturdy riding boots I had worn from Geochon. My hair was now a matter of supreme unimportance to me, so I braided it tightly and wrapped the strand around my head in a thick coiled mass. I snuck a glance at my betrothed husband, who lay asleep on his stomach, and crept from the room with a delicious feeling of disobedience.

“What in the name of all the gods are you doing out and about?” The harsh question came from behind me as soon as I closed the door and began to sneak down the hall.

I whirled to look innocently at Mylan and Glaucon, who had both abandoned their usual jovial attitudes and stood staring at me in extreme disapproval. “I’m just going to get some breakfast,” I said, trying not to sound defensive.

“Her illness must have addled her wits,” Glaucon observed to his friend.

“Must have if she thinks that breakfast is down those stairs. I mean, after all, they only lead outside, don’t they Tamsen?” Mylan asked maliciously.

“That’s right, they do,” I said in a confused little voice. “I’ll just go the other way...oh, drat! Now you’ve done it!” I hissed angrily as I heard Brial fumble at the lock.

The door opened, and Brial stood there fully, if hastily, dressed. He slitted his eyes as he glared from me to the knights.

“We caught her for you, Brial, so there is no need to have a go at us,” Mylan informed him, warily observing the quiet fury on my betrothed’s face.

“Thank you, gentlemen.” He reserved his glare for me.

“I can’t believe you’re siding with him. After all, I was your friend first.”

"That was before we noticed this appalling lack of sense in you, which fortunately Brial compensates for," Glaucon drawled with a bow. "In matters like this, my dear Tamsen, we will always be on his side."

"Traitors."

They laughed, nodded to Brial, and continued down the corridor and out down the stairs. I looked up rebelliously at Brial. "Well?"

"You wanted breakfast, I believe?" His eyes still glittered. "Good. That's just where I was going."

I knew then, for a certainty, that I wasn't going to be left alone again for a very long time. When I looked up at Brial, his smug eyes and carefully expressionless face confirmed it for me.

I will be stuck to your side like glue, they informed me. Get used to it.

* * * *

The army had come through its first battle well. The few casualties had been brought back to Asphodel. Kaldarte and the twins had been caring for the injured and I promised myself to go down to our makeshift infirmary off the kitchens to help later.

Word of my recovery had spread for all of our leaders began to trickle into the council room. They all greeted me, expressed grave surprise at me being out of bed so quickly, and settled around the table. I hid my laughter as I noticed Brial's expression growing grimmer and grimmer as each one filed in. Finally, Beron and his other two sons entered.

Beron took one look at his glowering eldest and burst into loud laughter. "You didn't really think she'd stay in bed, did you?"

"I had hopes," Brial replied plaintively. "At least for one day, at any rate."

Beron looked at his grinning sons, who nodded and left without a word.

I puzzled over this as I applied myself to my breakfast. Truth to tell, I wasn't against going back to bed for a while. The exertions of this morning had already tired me out and my head was beginning to pound ruthlessly. I looked down at the half-eaten bowl of porridge and pushed it away, unable to eat any more.

"Here we are then," Berond announced with a mischievous smile as he and Balon carried in a comfortable lounge that I remembered vaguely from one of the guest rooms in the opposite wing of the castle.

"You can't be serious."

The Elves plopped it down next to the hearth and before I knew what was happening Brial had me out of my chair and tucked up on it. Right on cue, Kaldarte entered the room with a steaming mug that I felt, correctly, probably contained some particularly nasty concoction of hers.

"I must say, Tamsen, I am very proud of you," she purred with a twinkle in her eye. "I thought you might try to do something stupid and try to go about your business as usual today. I'm glad to see that for once, you displayed some common sense."

I glared at her.

"Well, at least Brial shows some sense, if you don't." With that, she unbuckled my sword belt and laid it on the floor by my lounge. "Don't get up again, today, Tamsen. You don't recover from things like this overnight."

"This is a conspiracy." I took the cup from her. "You should all be ashamed of yourselves."

"Not in this least," Brial replied. "Two minutes ago your face went ashen. Just listen to us for a few days, *cariad*, and you'll get better more quickly."

I turned away from him, rewarded by his low chuckle as he slid to the floor beside me.

"Careful there, mate," Glaucon warned. "That drink looks quite hot from here."

"It'll help warm me since I am currently sitting in the coldest spot in the room," he drawled in reply.

Anner strode through the doorway then, immediately catching sight of me as I pouted next to the hearth. He bowed and murmured, "I am glad to see you out, milady. You feel better, I trust?"

"A little overprotected, but otherwise much better, Anner."

Everyone laughed at my pained tone and I took a drink from my cup, made a face, and quickly drained the rest of it. Brial took the empty cup from me and I leaned back against the cushions with a sigh.

Abruptly, I remembered something important. "Whatever happened to the wizard I captured?"

There was a brief silence, and then Beron said, "Whatever it was that exploded in the Leselle glade didn't leave enough of him to put into a tinder box."

I swore violently, to the amazement of the knights. "It's going to be much harder to discover what has happened in Geochon without him." I was angry

with myself. "I wasn't thinking; I should have released him immediately. It's my fault."

"Not entirely, Tamsen," a voice interjected and Hyagrem entered the room. He approached my side and laid one gnarled, ancient hand upon my brow. "I believe that the spell was directed at him. Your spell was merciful, for the mage died without knowing the fear or the pain. You have nothing for which to blame yourself."

"Master!" Joy filled me at seeing the old man.

Surprisingly, he then lifted one loose curl of my hair and peered at it, murmuring, "Extraordinary! This color is so unusual. What sort of magic would have this effect?"

"Her eyes are different as well," Anner noted. "There is no blue in them anymore, just that bright, sharp silver."

His words fell into the room like stones into a well. Everyone was silent for one startled moment, and then they all began to speak at once. I ducked my head, staring at the blanket Brial had laid over me.

Anner's comment was too intuitive, betraying his emotional attachment to me. It made me uneasy. As he had done once before, Brial slid his hand under the cover of the blanket and wrapped his hard, warm hand around my chilled fingers. I choked back my feelings and lifted my head again.

I was not alone. Brial was with me and he understood.

"What can you tell us about this strange magic, Hyagrem?" Brial's question jerked me back to the people in the room.

My tutor frowned. "I don't know exactly what could have caused this, Brial. It sounds to me as if the power that exploded around the enemy mage

somehow managed to drain energy from Tamsen as well. That would explain her collapse.”

“And what of the rest?” Kaldarte asked, indicating my altered appearance with a nod.

Hyagrem’s eyes were distant as he answered, “I don’t know. I’m not aware of any spell that could do such a thing.”

“I’ve only seen hair like that once,” my foster mother murmured. Our eyes met across the room. “The last time I did, I stood in the presence of one who’d been marked by the gods.”

“Daphnis,” I murmured.

Brial’s mouth tightened slightly. “Nothing good comes from the attention of the gods,” he muttered.

“Not so, my son,” Beron interjected. “We stand on the cusp of a great battle for our people. Tamsen is the heir to our throne. If Daphnis has marked your betrothed, it can only be because the Virgin Huntress has taken an interest in her.”

Beron’s expression did not change. “It can’t be bad.”

* * * *

We hashed over our brief campaign for most of the morning, identifying high points and low. The information that Jeshan de Callat had assumed the throne troubled everyone greatly, but none more thoroughly than Mariol, who shook his head. “Can’t think what got into the old goat. Never would have

guessed."

"We have to assume an alliance between Spesialle and Callat," Anner said, his face troubled. "My presence here will lead to great discord in our city. Did you not hear of this when you were there, Glaucon?"

"Not a word," the knight said. "Then again, I just took your note to your father and he issued the necessary orders."

"Smart move, that," Mariol interjected. "The Duke your father can claim ignorance of the entire sordid affair, and keep the peace in the city."

"My father is an astute ruler, sir," Anner agreed. "I think I'll have to send him a runner to warn him. Strategically, you realize, we are in an enviable position. We control three counties in a broad triangle between Geochon and Ceolliune-Callat." He indicated the area on our map, pointing to Asphodel, Beotte, and Pamphylia. "That's a lot of territory gone between the usurper and his base of power."

"We don't have enough men to protect it," Glaucon pointed out. "Our situation is not as fortuitous as that."

"His base may be very well divided straight down the middle by this time," Mylan concurred. "I can't see the Duke de Ceolliune reacting well to this sort of thing. Once word reaches him, he could easily decide to remove the city from Jeshan's power base entirely."

"Then it's a civil war we are talking about," I pointed out. "You're speaking of a war that will throw the entire southern half of the kingdom into rebellion, with Asphodel at the northern fringe."

"Spesialle's urgent desire for Asphodel is explained more clearly now," Anner mused. "He wants it not only as a staging area against the Elves, but

against the cities he knew would not submit tamely to Jeshan's assumption of authority." His clear blue eyes met mine squarely, as he finished in a voice full of conviction, "Spesialle's army must be on its way to Asphodel now."

"You're right," I rejoined. "We lost three precious days of preparation because I was unconscious and everyone was afraid to wake me up!"

"No, *cariad*," Brial said. "They suffered a mighty defeat in the Elven woods, and the loss of many of their men. It will take them time to recover."

"Don't you see, Brial? *He knew!* That's why my uncle attacked me as he did! He was watching the battle; he knew the results before the magic even knocked me out! That's why I remained unconscious for so long. They used my illness to blind us all to their plans!"

I looked at the faces around me, some awed, some stunned, some grim. "We must act now! We don't have time to sit here and debate their intentions. Their intention is twofold: to prevent a rebellion by razing Asphodel, and all within her walls, to the ground, and to find a way to eliminate their strongest opponents: Beotte, Pamphylia, Phoclydies, Ceolliune, Asphodel and the Elven military leaders."

"That's a broad interpretation," Mylan interrupted slowly. He looked at the faces gathered around the table and his expression changed. "You all think she's right, don't you?"

"I think she's absolutely correct," Berond replied. "We need information! We need to know his movements, and the position of his troops."

Self-condemnation burned hot in my mouth. "All the things we could have had if I had released his wizard just a few minutes earlier."

All of the men rose, the training of the military minds present leading

them to the same conclusion. "We must make ready to defend Asphodel," Anner said. "I will go to my men. We are experienced with the building of rapid fortifications. This castle will be secure by nightfall."

"The workers and their families must go to a place of safety," Glaucon said. "One of my ships is hidden two bends down the river. We'll send them off to join the Elves until it is safe for them to return. Then I'll stop in my city and bring every man to join the army and I'll blockade the river on both ends with every ship in our fleet. If they think to come by water, they'll have a nasty surprise."

Beron looked to his sons. "Send the scouts in all directions, but concentrate on the north and the northeast. Call the scouts in the outposts here immediately. Set the remainder to making arrows."

Beron looked at Brial, who turned to face his sire. "Brial, my son, you know what you must do," he said quietly.

Brial nodded, while a twinge of sorrow crossed his face. I looked from one to the other, my fears growing. "What are you two planning?"

Brial, my handfasted husband, turned to me, his face bland. He fell to his knees, bowing his head to me formally, and lifted my hand to his lips. "My Queen," he murmured, his black eyes velvety over so that I could not see the intent behind them. "You must go to our people in safety. You cannot remain here. I will see you onto the Earl of Pamphylia's ship before sunset this day. Prepare yourself for departure."

"If you really think that I'll go skulking off to the other side of the continent because you order me to go, you've got another think coming!" I yelled, jumping to my feet and then wishing I had not. My hand caught at the back of the couch as I tried to remain on my feet.

His eyes were no longer velvet-soft, but hard, glittering like black ice against the pallor of his face. "You will obey me in this, Tamsen, without question. You will not bring shame to the Ka'breona through your death or capture! I have given you freedom before now, my Queen, and you endangered yourself against my express command. Today, you have no choices. You *will* depart at sunset."

His quiet voice, his harsh words were those of a stranger. I stared at his hard eyes again and my anger gave way to a quiet fury, a deadlier emotion in my repertoire.

He met my glare, unmoved, then turned, bowing next to my stunned cousins. "As will you, daughters of the Ka'antira. We must preserve our royal house against this tide of war."

Brial turned back to me and as coldly as I had ever heard him speak, said, "I warned you not to test me on this, my Queen. I merely repeat the warning to you here. Milord Pamphylia, I place my Queen's life in your hands. I entrust you to get her to Laton within the next day's light."

"I will, Brial," Glaucon replied, his face lit with the kind of fervent glow I had only seen on the faces of fanatics or idiots. "I swear it upon my sword."

"You see, *cariad*," Brial said pleasantly. "If you decide otherwise, and leave his protection, he will owe me his sword and I will take it, friend or no. Get packed, Tamsen. You leave in a few hours' time."

He bowed to me once more and turned to follow his father from the room. I looked at his squared shoulders and called out, "You know that I will never forgive you for this!"

He turned back to me in the door. "I knew that before you said it, *cariad*. I love you, but I have a responsibility to you and to our people. If you are alive, I

will learn to bear your hatred. I love you too well to give in to you. You must leave *cariad*. Let me at least have the peace of your safety."

He turned, stiffened his spine, and stalked out the door.

I stared, stunned, at the empty aperture with his words ringing in my ears.

Kaldarte, with one pitying glance, murmured tactfully, "I'll go see to your things," and followed him from the room.

"They don't know us very well, do they?" Liliath's amused voice broke through my reverie.

"No, they don't," Cetenne replied.

I turned to look at them, and was shocked anew to see the same diabolical expressions on their faces. In that second, an unspoken rebellion was born between us. I hesitantly grinned back.

"Glaucou will be very angry," I noted.

"Don't worry about him," Cetenne replied sweetly. "I think I can guarantee he won't notice too much of what you two do."

This new information settled into my brain, sifting through the rest of the day's discoveries to spark the beginnings of a plan. I let my face fall into an artful display of submissive sweetness and got to my feet. "I think I'll visit the injured in the infirmary," I announced casually. "Then, maybe I'll be able to convince my husband to speak to me. See you on the ship."

Chapter Nineteen

Pulling off my new demure obedience the remainder of the day was not hard. Using my weakness as an excuse, I returned to my rooms after my visit to the infirmary. I took a faint pride in my actions as I sat at the bedsides of men and women who had given their health and comfort for the sake of my cause. Most of them never knew what they fought for, but still rose to the defense of the Elven forests when their lords called them to service. I felt keenly my responsibility in this place of suffering. By the time I left, the pain I had witnessed chastened me.

There was no way I could leave Asphodel now, not after talking with these brave men who were injured in the name of my cause. My doubts dissolved and a new resolve hardened in my breast.

I entered our bedchamber and found Kaldarte placidly tying the strings of my pack. "I've packed everything you will need on your journey, my dear. There is no need for you to do anything but rest."

"Thank you." I winced as a sore muscle in my neck screamed at me. Easing into a chair by the hearth, I looked at my foster-mother and tutor. "Kaldarte, do you think they are in the right to send me from Asphodel?"

"It matters not what I think. It only matters what you do. You have

several options to consider, Tamsen. First, you must consider the obedience due to Brial, as your lifebound mate. Brial is your sworn protector and your betrothed. You might consider you owe him this loyalty and leave him to fight with a comforted heart. You know that your presence here would distract him and diversions can be deadly in battle."

"That's true," I admitted thoughtfully. "I hadn't considered it that way before."

"Then, of course," she continued, "you may consider it to be more important to remain here with your army and your people. Brial called you a queen, Tamsen, but you are not a queen. Not yet. With royal titles come royal responsibilities. The greatest of these is the loyalty and love you show to your nation. You might think that only standing shoulder to shoulder with the lowest of your people may gain this respect."

My eyes narrowed as Kaldarte went on. "Then, of course, you have your final option. That is to feign obedience to your betrothed, leaving the city upon his orders, and then traipsing back in the middle of the night with your cousins to join the fight despite what Brial orders. This choice will bring you the renown of the great ruler, but may cost you the security of your lifebond. Any choice you make along this path will be born from deceit, which is impossible for a lifemate to forgive once known. This decision I would make very carefully, for it can gain you everything, or lose it for you."

"How did you know? I can't slip anything past you."

"You've slipped a lot past me," she confessed, with a rueful grimace. "Actually, I picked that up from Cetenne, who isn't as skilled as you are at hiding your thoughts."

"What am I to do?" I wailed. "I feel I should be here! It doesn't feel right

to leave Asphodel now!"

She stroked the side of my face, in a familiar, loving gesture she and Ar'ami had always used to great effect upon me since I first came to their home. "Tamsen, it is not a decision I envy you. Each decision will lead you down a different path. Which is correct, I cannot say. Whatever decision you make, however, you must live with your conscience afterwards."

"Cannot or will not?" I demanded.

"Cannot; I am always bound not to tell the subject of my visions," she replied with a small sigh.

I echoed her sigh and stared moodily out my window.

She went to the door, hesitated, then said, "But, just in case you've made your decision, I did pack only your armor and woodland clothes in your pack. Just try not to give yourself away, Tamsen, if you decide upon deceit."

* * * *

About an hour before sunset, I heard Brial's angry footsteps bounce up the stairs. I closed my eyes, arranging my limbs to look vulnerable and loosened in sleep before he stalked through the door. His steps paused as he came beside me.

I had taken a great deal of trouble to look pale and fragile, which I fancied was much simpler by the magic-borne change to my coloring. His hand gently brushed my hair, and the sweet tenderness of the caress was almost more than I could bear.

"*Cariad*," he said softly, stooping at the side of my chair. "You must awaken. We must leave soon."

I let my eyes flutter open and looked up at him from beneath my lashes. He was staring at me, the alien hardness gone from his black eyes as his gaze searched my face. Behind his dark glance, I saw the deep worry that he tried valiantly to conceal. Any plans I'd had to deceive him evaporated. Despite the grimness of my decision, I was fundamentally incapable of lying to Brial.

"Brial," I said quietly. "Beloved, let me stay. My place is with my people, and my home. I cannot bear to leave you, *cariad*! I will remain out of the way, and I will flee in mid-battle if you tell me to do so, Brial, but I know in my heart this isn't right!"

"You know I cannot, Tamsen," he replied. "You must know that our chances of keeping Asphodel intact are slim at best. Although the defenses are good, they are of a temporary nature. We cannot defend the castle properly. We have too few men!"

"Brial," I said, my voice wavering. "I know this isn't going to be easy for anyone. However, I am a Ka'antira and my duty compels me to stay. Even if it isn't that, something in my mind is telling me I must not leave! You told me once that the Seer's blood that runs in my veins should make me fear my dreams. That same blood is now urging me to stay at your side."

He hesitated, his fists clenched at his side. Turning away from me, he said quietly, "I would have you far away from this place by dawn, *cariad*."

"I know. I tell you I will not go. I had thought to double back behind Glaucon after he left us, but I cannot deceive you, Brial. I will not lie to you. Besides, there is another consideration."

I rose to my feet and went to the pack, lying ready on the bed. "Kaldarte

packed this for me," I informed him, undid the straps and let the contents roll to the floor. The armor and sword fell with a clang as he stared at it in disbelief.

"She sees me here," I told him gently. "She packed it thinking I would escape Glaucon and return. Such was my plan, until you entered the room. I heard you coming, and when you looked into my eyes I knew I would never be able to lie to you about anything."

His face looked grey in the ruddy light streaming through the window. I crossed back to stand before him, looking up at his beloved face. "I know that you are thinking only of my own good. I know that you and your father think this is the only option for me. It isn't. You will need me here, beloved, if my uncle comes with his army. You may not have enough men to defend the castle, but your defenses against magic are far weaker. The Elven mages are of no use against human sorcery. There have only been four battle mages in the history of our people, and they are all dead. Hyagrem and Mariol will not be enough."

"I should force you to go," he grated.

"Then I would have no choice but to return. I promise you that. I will not deceive you in my intentions."

His hand came hard around my neck, pulling me to him for a fierce kiss that had as much frustration in it as love. When he released me, I clung to him, dizzy for a moment as I pressed the back of my hand to my lips. When I could look at him again, I saw chagrin and, strangely, faint pride mingled in his eyes.

"If I tell you to flee, you will do so, with no questions?"

"Yes, beloved, I will."

"You will avoid the battle?"

"If I can."

“Do you realize what may happen if they take you captive?” he asked his eyes not meeting mine.

I knew. I saw those images in my eyes every time I saw the blackened ribs of the castle looming above me. I took a deep breath. “I will never allow my uncle to take me alive.”

“How do you manage to do this?” he wondered aloud, pulling me against his chest, his strong arms tight around me. “How do you convince me to let you do these insane things?”

“I am a Ka’antira,” I replied gravely. “I take my responsibilities as seriously as do any of the Ka’breona. Today, I visited the injured in the infirmary, Brial. As I talked with each of them, I didn’t see man or woman, human or Elf. I saw people who had left their homes and all they held dear at my call. They suffered for it. Others died. Ultimately, it’s my fault they have come to fight in our army. Ultimately, it is my duty to see that their sacrifices are not in vain. I couldn’t do that if I fled. I would never be able to look any of them in the eye again. You called me a Queen earlier, beloved. You would not have me behave as anything less.”

His chin rested against my hair and I felt him sigh. “I am undone,” he said tiredly. “I leave it to you, *cariad*. Gods help us both when my father finds out.”

I shut my eyes as relief blossomed in my chest. I couldn’t tell Brial why I really had to stay. I could not unburden myself to him about the dream that lingered in my mind. I could not tell him that the dream made me fear to leave him.

* * * *

"What do you mean, you're not leaving?" Beron asked bluntly a quarter-hour later.

"Exactly that," I replied. "My place is with my people and my home. I will not leave."

Beron shot a disgusted look at Brial, who lifted his hands. "She has the Ka'antira way with words, *patris*," he defended himself. "See if you can resist her! I will watch your attempt with great interest."

Brial threw himself into a chair and crossed his arms with the air of a man preparing to wait for hours. Beron snorted, looking for help from the other men in the room. I adopted my most reasonable expression.

"The fact remains, Beron Ka'breona, that it is my duty to remain here. I owe a debt to those who rode to war on my word and an obligation to my people and my house. I will not forsake these things because you, or your son, think you need to protect me. I am a Ka'antira, and I will not flee like a terrified child into the night. Asphodel will rise or fall on my shoulders and my shoulders alone."

"She does sound a lot like Lamec," Berond noted clinically to Brial as their father scowled.

"The danger you will place yourself into is beyond imagination, my Queen," Beron replied. "It is not in the best interests of the Elven nation to allow you to stay here."

"You have a dilemma, my lord," I retorted. "I don't consider myself as your Queen. At the moment, I am simply the Countess of Asphodel, who happens to be lifebound to your son. I am of the Ka'antira family, it is true, but I

have the ability to renounce my claim to the throne at any time for any of my esteemed cousins or uncles, for which, I assure you, none of them would thank me. On the other hand, if I am your Queen, then you owe me allegiance and obedience. I tell you that I will remain at Asphodel!"

Beron seemed taken aback by my arguments and once again looked for a savior somewhere in the chamber. All he got for his pains was a ridiculous staggered effect as they all looked away. He turned back to me incredulously. "Men will follow you anywhere with speeches like that," he said ruefully as he conceded.

"It's a nice gift, is it not?" I asked mischievously.

He finally laughed, although sourly. "Very well, but only on these conditions."

"Conditions?"

He held up his hand, sending another steely glance at his eldest son. "I assure you that I, at least, have no compunction in taking you bodily to the ship and throwing you in, and none too gently, I might add."

"You could try it, my father," I replied, my voice amused. "I haven't got much of a conscience, however, and feel it only fair to warn you that it probably wouldn't work."

"One: you will remain out of the fight. Two: you will be prepared to leave at a moment's notice. Three: you will avoid detection by your uncle." He recited, counting them off on his fingers.

"We already covered all of this in our fight," I complained, pointing my thumb at Brial. "Why don't you just admit that you can't handle Brial's mate any better than he can and get on with it?"

Glaucon choked on his mug of ale, and Anner, grinning broadly, had to slap him on the back as he gasped for air. Mylan winked at me and said to Beron, "She made comments like that to us in Geochon. Here, we all thought she was a sweet little thing up from the country, and she'd turn around and say something to shock us all."

Glaucon, regaining his breath, added quietly, "We swore ourselves to Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel before we knew what that meant. We know what it means now."

"Besides," Mylan said wickedly. "She has a horrible temper. We're too afraid of her to leave."

* * * *

The sun set in a fiery display, purplish hued clouds tinged with red moving swiftly across the sky. I watched them from the terrace. I spent many of my thinking hours there, feeling a strange comfort that I attributed to my mother. I had not again ventured to the spot where she had died, however. The memory was still too sharp and the magic hovering in the air over her blood was uncomfortable for me.

Behind me, a footstep cracked.

"You are troubled, milady," Anner's voice said quietly.

"I am worried, my friend. Things are not what I thought they would be. I never thought to see blood spilled on my lands, but all is blood around me and I cannot escape it." I darted a quick look at him. "I feel my responsibility very keenly this night."

"There is still time for you to leave," he pointed out. "You can be far away from here when the battle comes."

"That is not possible. I am destined to be here, to live or die as does my land. That doesn't make my decision any easier."

"Does your betrothed know how hard it was for you?"

"I hope not," I said crisply. "Brial has enough on his mind this night. I will wrestle with my doubts alone for a while."

"Milady," he began, and then stopped. "Tamsen," he said firmly. "You do not need to do this alone. If you will not worry your betrothed, then talk to me, or your aunt. Even your cousins would help you bear this burden."

"You don't understand, Anner. I am of the Seer's blood, and although it runs diluted in my veins, still it speaks to me. I have dreamed, for many years now, of a battle at Asphodel, here upon this very spot. My mother died here, you know; died to protect me. In my dreams, however, she is not alone here at the end. In my dreams, I see you and Brial duel, while my uncle kills Glaucon and Mylan and laughs. I run to stop you, and my dream ends."

I sighed, my throat tight. "In my dreams I am not here, but come from a distance to stop the fight. When a battle comes to Asphodel, therefore, I cannot take the risk of being away. If I am here, perhaps I can prevent it. I must stay, or risk my dream becoming reality."

We stood there in silence for a time, as the violently colored skies darkened to night blue, and then to black. Finally, Anner said, "I will never raise my sword against Brial, Tamsen. You must know that."

"I don't think it's a question of will," I replied in a hoarse voice. "There is something else, another piece of the puzzle I don't have yet."

"When we were in the king's audience chamber," he said slowly, "I remember your uncle asking you how you liked the dreams he sent you. I had forgotten it until now. You must take into consideration, Tamsen, that it may be a trick to keep you here and within his reach."

"I've thought of that. I started having these dreams years before, after Ar'ami brought me to Kaldarte's house. My uncle would not have been able to pierce the guardians of their home with his magic. If it is a trick, then you and Brial will be safe, as will Glaucon and Mylan. If it is not, then I must remain here. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he replied heavily. "I do understand."

"He tells me in my dream that it is the curse of women in my line to watch the men who love them die for their sakes," I murmured in a haunted voice. "Of everything he says, I fear that comment is the only truth."

Anner put a gentle, callused hand upon my shoulder. "If I were to die tomorrow, I would die with your name upon my lips and your face in my heart. It would be enough for me to know that you loved me in some small way at least."

The hand fell away, and Anner retreated as quietly as he had come, leaving me to stare bitterly into the night as the stars popped out one by one in the sky. Their blue-white fire offered me no comfort. Even the stars seemed to glow with some sinister purpose I could not yet fathom.

I pulled my cloak closely around me, more for comfort than against any chill, for the night was warm and shimmering. The silence was overwhelming. Even the camp was still on this night, a night of strained resolve. I thought about Anner's statement for a time, and the feeling of depression grew stronger within me.

It was indeed my fate, I thought with hatred, to hurt the men who loved me.

My own stupidity was unpardonable. I had used Anner as a means to an end, and I had made him love me for it. Now I had condemned this good, quiet man, with the bearing of a warrior and the heart of a priest to love me...and to watch as I loved another man through it all. The dream had its claws in my soul, whether I wished it or not.

“It is the curse of the women in your line to watch the men who love them die on their behalf. They all broke in the end...I wonder how you will fare, niece?” His sneering voice seemed to hover at my side.

I walked to the far edge of the terrace. Here, I could look out over the dark fields to the river that flowed beside my lands. I had little hope for our chances; Brial and Beron had convinced me of the minute possibility for our success. I had the strong belief that their agreement to my continued presence at Asphodel was more in the nature of a last gift. They would find a reason to send me on my way quickly. They would not want me here to watch them die. Even less would they want me here to die with them.

We all knew the probable outcome. Our time here was short, and our actions desperate. None would survive the feeble attempt to deny Spesialle his ambitions.

Especially not me.

The night was heavy, lightly scented with the aroma of unripe fruits in the orchards. Asphodel was alone, isolated here in this dark valley between forest and river. I felt lonely and the familiar comfort of my home could not help me. Regardless of how I looked at it, this would all end, either with my death or after it. Asphodel, soon to be no more than a warning note in a chivalrous epic that

failed, was at its greatest beauty on this, the longest, saddest night.

Then I heard something.

The sound was in the distance, but moving closer at a steady pace. I reached for the sound, frustrated when it slipped through my fingers, evading my ability to test it. Then, clearly, it rang out over the quiet valley beyond the river.

“Brial!” I shouted hoarsely. “Brial! To me!”

The sound rose ever higher, voices blending in a harmony amplified by thousands of voices singing strongly, defiantly against the malevolence of the night. An army, singing a chant of glory and victory. An army, singing as they marched to war.

Brial rushed to my side, sword in hand. “What in the name of the gods is that? Are they here already?” he gasped when his ears caught the refrain of the song, chanting about glory in the eyes of their lord, countless deep voices ringing in the valley of the river bottom.

Running footsteps behind us caught my ear. I turned as Anner stopped, rocking, at our side. His face was alight with a joy and a shining hope, and he turned to me grabbing my arms in his excitement. “It is my father!” he yelled triumphantly. “Ceolliune has marched to war!”

“Your father?” Brial demanded. “How can you tell?”

Anner replied, his exuberance overwhelming us. “This song is our call to war, and to destiny! My father has brought *all* of our armies to fight for the glory of our people!”

He hugged me ecstatically, and then turned to embrace my scowling fiancé with the same fervor. Beron, observing this from a short distance back,

cleared his throat.

"We must prepare to greet His Grace, the Duke of Ceolliune," the Elven commander said soberly. "We must also prepare to thank him on bended knees for his assistance...and his army."

I gripped Brial's hand, smiling up at him in the dark night. "Never give up hope, *cariad*," he said, letting me know my turmoil had not been entirely hidden. "There is always hope to be found in this world."

I closed my eyes against the wild happiness his words brought to me. Even in the happiness of our unexpected reprieve, a dark doubt remained in my mind. I could hope, for a while.

In the end, I knew the dreams would take me.

* * * *

That night, after the Duke de Ceolliune joined the other war leaders in the council chamber, I excused myself and went to bed, pleading my exhaustion as the cause.

The dream came back. The dream that had changed abruptly three nights earlier returned to me, and my waking dread turned to nightmare.

Brial cupped my face; drew his sword; ran for the terrace as Glaucon and Mylan burned where they stood. His sword flew up, catching Anner's in mid-strike, and I bolted from my hiding place, ran to the terrace, my heart racing in my chest.

"It is the curse of women in your line to watch the men they love die for

their sakes," my uncle noted coldly. "They broke in the end...I wonder how you will fare, niece?"

I felt the magic pouring into me as I glared at him defiantly. "I will fare better than most, uncle," I replied with a cold smile.

And I stepped between their swords as they closed for the killing strikes. I felt the blades bite into my flesh. As I fell, I felt strangely triumphant. My dream's vision faded as my blood rushed to pool on the golden flagstones of the terrace.

The dream, once my foe, was now my salvation. I could save them; I could save Brial, but only with my life.

My dream blood running hot and sticky down my arms, I lifted my head and let the magic go, speeding swiftly at my horrified uncle as my life seeped ceaselessly away.

Chapter Twenty

My hopes rose further when I glanced from our window at dawn and saw the five thousand men from Ceolliune camped alongside our smaller forces and beginning to fortify their position. I stood there, muttering a grateful prayer, until Brial came to pull me back against his bare, warm chest.

“You didn’t sleep well last night, *cariad*.”

“I had a lot on my mind. I’m sorry if I kept you awake.”

“I am glad, now, that I couldn’t send you away,” he murmured.

“I will not leave your side,” I said softly, knowing it for a vow. In my mind, I repeated it like a chant. *I will not leave your side*.

* * * *

“What information do you have?” Anton, the Duke de Ceolliune asked the question quietly, his eyes searching the faces of the men around him. I remembered him from the ball in his home and my visits to Court. He was a lean, graceful man with a scholarly demeanor and a swordsman’s toughened

hands.

"Our scouts who searched northeast of Imper did not return," Beron said. "One scout who ran due east caught sight of the army. Unless Spesialle's men run all night, they should be here in the early morning. He estimates their numbers at something close to ten thousand."

I felt the breath leave my lungs as abruptly as if I had fallen flat on my back.

The Duke only nodded. "I thought as much," he said. "There wasn't a single able-bodied man left among Jeshan's retainers when I left. It made it ridiculously easy to take the city, however, so I suppose I must be grateful."

He peered again at the map. "I assume they will wait to cross the river early in the morning." He tapped a finger against the northeast border of Asphodel's county. "I would expect their attack to come with full force in this quadrant."

"I agree," Beron said thoughtfully. The two older men had taken a grave, if restrained, liking to each other the night before. "If I place my scouts at some of these vantage points, they can harass his army as they try to cross. It might delay them."

"It wouldn't hurt them too much, unfortunately. Jeshan and Spesialle have a few thousand men to spare. We can't spare even one of your archers."

He turned to me. "Will you permit me, milady, to ride and view this potential landing area for myself? I will take a few dozen men to pull down any conveniently placed bridges. We will, naturally, rebuild them after the battle."

If we are able, his grave eyes added to me silently.

I nodded my agreement and the Duke left, accompanied by the others.

When they had gone, I poured myself a goblet of wine. Filled with indignation at Jeshan's usurpation of the throne, the Duke of Ceolliune had come to our rescue. He had driven his men hard to reach his son, who was in Asphodel at my behest. Without his help, our defeat would be swift and brutal. Even with his army swelling the ranks of our defenders, victory was a long shot at best.

Everyone in the castle and the camps was busy with some task, save for me. Pulling a light cloak about my shoulders, I left the room. Not having a destination, I let my steps take me down the stairs and out to the courtyard.

The day had dawned as violently hued as it had departed the night before. It was as if the heavens, sensing the blood that would shortly spill, reflected the knowledge of coming death with its gory tints. As the morning matured into afternoon, the skies clouded over in a mourning grey that cast a gloom over Asphodel. The castle walls did not glow in the summer light. Instead, my home was cloaked with the same silver-grey tinge that had fallen upon me. I wandered to the spot I had stood the night before.

The Ceolliune sergeants were organizing a new line of breastworks half a mile from the current fortifications. Even the Elves had not bemoaned the loss of the trees it took to build them. Instead they spaced themselves with each group of men who were harvesting them, whispering prayers of apology to each tree as it fell. I assumed they took pains not to fell a guardian tree.

The troops were oddly jovial, laughing as they told jokes while they worked. I was experienced enough to know that this ritual was expected between men on the eve of a great battle. Unknown to each other one day and comrades in life or death the next, they settled their nerves with humor. This knowledge and their ungrudging acceptance of their mortality made me feel small and ashamed.

I could not greet Death with a smile on my lips and a love of glory. I would greet Death grudgingly, with all of my anger foremost. I did not have the comfort these folk had, of laughing in the teeth of disaster. The thought made my eyes ache.

The flowers we had planted not so very long before bloomed in the kitchen garden, their bright colors and frail tenacity an incongruous interruption to the cheerlessness of the day. I sat on the low wall that bordered them, my hand stroking the satiny acaule stems. They had flourished in the soil of my garden, delicately peeping from beneath the lavender, chamomile, and marigolds I had planted around them. Ladies' slippers, Myrielle had called them when she first saw them.

She had left the night before, sent by Mariol who showed none of his customary apathy when he had escorted her to the pier and Glaucon's ship. She had wept no tears, but kissed him gravely and mounted the boarding plank with her back as straight as an arrow. Mariol had watched the ship slip its moors and float down the swift-moving river, his face unnaturally serious.

Once it disappeared around the bend, he had returned to the castle and the magic he was working with Hyagrem. None of us knew the nature of their work, but it consumed both men long past hours that should have seen them in their beds.

Kaldarte and Liliath had sent the wounded from the previous battle onto the ship. The Elves in Laton would look after them until they recovered. Cetenne was nowhere to be seen. I assumed she was pursuing Glaucon, who was displaying a cautious interest in her as well. The twins had refused to leave Leselle after I had done so. They would remain at my side.

For the first time, I was glad I was alone. My thoughts were too grim, too scattered to share with anyone else. Although all of us bore some responsibility

for the impending war, I felt like mine was the greatest. Now that battle was imminent, the feeling of guilt intensified. I didn't want to display this uneasiness around the others; I preferred to agonize over it in private.

The heat of the day began to take its toll. I removed my cloak, lifting the damp mass of my hair above my neck and twisting it up to let the tiny breeze cool my skin.

"Excuse me, milady," a voice said politely. I turned, to see the Duke of Ceolliune coming toward me.

"Your Grace," I murmured, rising to curtsy as the older man joined me.

"This is a lovely spot," he said, inhaling the fragrance of my flowers with a kind smile.

"Thank you, Your Grace. This garden was once my mother's."

"Solange de Spesialle," he said. "She was a lovely girl. Her beauty and kindness enchanted me with her myself, but," he spread his hands wide, as if helpless, "once she saw Prosper de Asphodel my day was done. You have the look of her now, more than you did when we met before."

"You have just given me the highest compliment I could ever have received."

"My son tells me that you refuse to leave before the battle, amid other tales of your gallantry and bravery," he began, his voice changing to businesslike alacrity. "He has asked me to come to you, to convince you of how vital your safety is."

"Anner is a dear friend to me, milord, but I will not leave my lands or my people."

The Duke sat on the wall I had just vacated, watching me. "You would rather stay, I think, for the sake of the many than to leave for the comfort of a few?"

I laughed, without much humor. "Not precisely, Your Grace. I stay because I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I left."

"Quite right," he said approvingly. "I think my son's faith in you is well-deserved."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he forestalled me with an imperious gesture, his eyes saddened. "Believe me, milady, I know my son. I know what he feels but does not tell me. I know as well it is not your doing. Anner is young; he will recover in time, just as I did. Still, that is not the matter at hand. I have come to you with another mission in my mind."

His eyes grew distant, as he peered south toward his beloved city. "If things go ill, I know that your betrothed will whisk you from here with all speed, as he should. You are a rallying point, Tamsen de Asphodel; one I do not think my old friend Jeshan de Callat ever expected. The people of Ansienne will flock to your call, as they are already doing. There may come a time that you think yourself bereft of allies, but as long as you live, Jeshan will not sit easily upon his stolen throne. I need your oath to continue this war regardless of what happens here. You must unite our people to fight against the tyranny of those who threaten them."

"These are somber words on the eve of battle." I looked up at his earnest, grave face and promised, "I swear to you that I will never forget our people, or cease to struggle for their freedom from oppression."

"Thank you." He rose to his feet and took my hand between his. I looked down at them. The fingers were slender and long, made for the quill and the

harp, but I felt the strong calluses beneath the skin of his palms and knew him for a great leader. He had the ability, denied to most, to balance his dual nature. It was one of the things that made him a great leader.

“Your bravery is an inspiration, my dear. Will you do this old warrior the honor of swearing his allegiance to you?”

I looked into his piercing emerald eyes and remembered another Ceolliune man who had spoken nearly the same words to me. Where Anner’s grey eyes had glowed with fervor, his father’s were tempered with kindness and a tinge of pity. My vision blurred as he went to his knees and recited the ancient chivalric formula. When he finished, he rose and brought my unresisting hand to his lips. “My son is right to love you, Tamsen de Asphodel. This gift, of inspiring great love, is not an easy one to bear, I think. It brings with it the ability to inspire great hatred as well. You are a credit to your family, my dear. I wish...”

His voice broke off abruptly. He smiled at me once more, and turning, left the garden.

The tears that had threatened all day rolled down my cheeks at last. I fell to my knees, leaned against the low, stone wall of the garden and wept. I spent the remainder of the day there, contemplating the words of the Duke and my own tumultuous thoughts. When I left, the clouds were dark on the horizon, but my own paths were clear.

I was done with grieving. The time for action was upon us.

Even as the thought crossed my mind, I heard a sullen rumble of thunder roll across the forest to our west. The storm was about to break.

* * * *

Brial and I decided to have our evening meal alone in our room. Clad in a soft linen robe, which Brial had mentioned that he liked once, I kept up a steady pace of conversation, deliberately keeping the tone light. Brial matched me and for a time we were able to pretend all was well.

Inevitably, of course, the pleasant fiction ebbed and we stared at each other with all of our fears written upon our faces. He took my hand, bringing it swiftly to his lips.

"Don't, Brial," I said. "Let's just make this a day like any other day. Let's forget, just for tonight."

"It will do us no good, *cariad*. Our future is too near."

"I am afraid. I am afraid of making the wrong decisions, of taking us down the wrong paths. I am afraid of losing you, before we have a chance to build our lives together. I am afraid I have doomed the Elves, and my people, to death and destruction. The fear is eating me up inside, Brial, and the taste of it is bitter!"

"The fear is natural, *alanna*," he replied, settling himself beside me while still clasping my hand lightly. His fingers, roughened from the bowstring, traced a light design on my palm.

"What does *alanna* mean?"

"Cherished one," he answered absently. "Every person in this house, every warrior huddled in their tents outside, is afraid on this night. It is how you deal with your fear that marks the man—or woman—in the eyes of the gods and the men around them."

"I will be strong."

"You are the strongest woman I know."

"Brial? Why did we only have the *vialigatis*? Why didn't we go that extra step, when we knew we were lifebound?"

My abrupt question surprised him. He hesitated. "Among the Elves, once you marry you cannot remarry if your mate dies without releasing you from your vows. I did not think it fair to you. You have to be free to choose, if I should fall."

I stared at him in horror.

He smiled, tucking a strand of that strange silvery hair behind my ear and cupping my face. "It is no reflection upon you, *cariad*, or the honor you do me as my lifemate. You are royal among the Elves and noble among the humans. You eventually must have heirs to follow you. It is my gift to you if you should ever need it."

My eyes closed against the pain. Brial gathered me close, whispering into my ear, "Do not be afraid for me, *alanna*. I do not intend to fall before my time. When we can rest for a while and learn to love each other in peace as well as war, I will take my gift away from you. We will be married and you will be mine forever. One day, when we are very old and are watching our great-grandchildren play on the streets of Leselle restored, you will look at me and laugh at my folly."

"Then be sure you stay alive, Brial Ka'breona," I said fiercely, looking up at him. "You had better marry me, before we have quite destroyed my honor in the eyes of our human allies."

"I will not fail you, *cariad*."

Suddenly, he crushed me to him. I stared at nothing over his shoulder,

praying he was right, and I felt him doing the same over mine. We remained that way for a long time, until Brial said softly, "You should sleep."

I didn't answer him, pulling his head to mine instead. We sought solace for our fears in other ways that night, and when I did sleep, I did not dream at all.

* * * *

Morning. Dawn was the slightest wisp of light edging up the horizon, when I heard Brial moving quietly in our room. I raised myself on one elbow, calling the flames into the fireplace. In the suddenly brighter light, Brial jumped.

"Having a lifemate who can do that is very inconvenient," he growled, staring appreciatively at the curve of my bare shoulders over the quilt I clutched to my chest.

"You lecherous pig." I reached for my robe.

He smiled approvingly at my tone.

The dawn had come upon a terrible day but our mood defied that horrifying fact. I came to the bench by the hearth and reached for my brush. While Brial checked his armor, I brushed and braided my long hair into a tight coronet about my head.

"Your hair looks like a crown," Brial noted. "You have a crown no other Queen is fit to wear."

I laughed, splashed water on my face, donned a linen undershirt, and over that buckled the light Elven armor I'd received from Beron. I was in the

Asphodel colors, the crimson and silver of my house.

I glanced across to Brial. He didn't wear the light armor usually favored by the Elves. Instead, he donned the plate armor of the Ka'breona. Fashioned during the Elf wars, the armor was the emblem of his house's military history. He grimly tested each strap and buckle of his breastplate before he put it on. I helped him adjust the heavy plated armor after he had lifted it over his head to his shoulders. I pulled the straps, buckling them when they had reached their limit. He turned and lifted his sheathed sword crosswise on his palms.

"My lady, will you arm me for battle?"

I took the sword from him and kissed the sheath. Then I knelt and wrapped the belt around his waist twice, adjusting the belt so the sword hung at his side. Surprisingly, the same rustling song of magic was beginning to emanate from this blade as did his father's.

He helped me to my feet and I walked to the large table that was near the hearth. I poured a goblet of wine for him. Standing before him, I lifted the cup with both hands. "Drink from this cup, my lord, and come home to me."

He drank some of the wine and handed me the cup. I drank as well, placing my lips on the same part of the rim where he had drunk.

Then Brial knelt in front of me, lifting first one hand then the other to his lips, kissing them swiftly. My courage left me, but when he looked up at me, I lifted my chin. This was our parting then, our private farewell outside of ritual and the eyes of strangers.

"You will come back to me," I said, making a statement rather than a plea, willing my eyes to remain dry as I clutched his hands.

"I will come back to you, *cariad*," he said soberly. "I will never leave your

side.”

The words jarred in my brain and with them a faint stirring of hope. I stared down at Brial, until he rose and kissed me. I forced myself not to cling to him and he put his finger under my chin, raising my head to look into my eyes.

“If the battle goes ill, I will come to you to get you to safety. If I cannot come, you must rely on my brothers. They swore to protect you and to help you make your escape. Do not delay. I will come to you when I can, *cariad*. Do you agree?”

With dry eyes and my face composed, I stared at him. “Yes, my beloved. I agree.”

He kissed me again.

After he pulled away, I stood transfixed as he picked up his helm. Then I ran to him and kissed him again, hard. His kiss was just as savage as my own. Each kiss, I thought after we broke apart, reflected aspects of our relationship: part tender and loving, part fierce and demanding.

I looked down at my hands, clenched around each other, and the silver ring Brial had given me winked in the growing light. Unconsciously, I straightened my spine and went to fetch the rest of my things. I fastened my sword belt around my hips, pulling on the light gloves I wore when I trained. I put the Ka’antira emerald around my neck, and placed the seal of Asphodel on my gloved right hand.

Brial bowed to me and waited until I had preceded him through the door to follow.

* * * *

We joined the high command on the terrace. In the camps below us, the troops were getting ready with surprisingly little sound. The dawn was still only a faint blue light. Beron greeted us gravely. The black and blue plaid cloth that billowed from his shoulders also adorned his sons' cloaks.

"Their troops are already on the move, sir!" gasped a Scout, who burst in upon us from the darkness. "The first battalion is crossing the river now!"

"Very good," Beron replied. "Send runners to the archer units to make ready."

The scout saluted and sped back into the blackness of the dawn. The Duke de Ceolliune held the reins of his warhorse while he relayed orders to his captains. Anner, walking his horse, came into view, flanked by his companions in arms. All of them wore the elaborate, full armor I had first seen in Geochon. They handed their reins to a guard, and came to stand before me, dropping to their knees.

"Sir Knights, go with the grace of the gods," I said quietly. "You not only honor my house on this day, but your own as well."

"The honor is ours, milady," Anner replied. "We live—and die—at your command."

With one movement, as they had done before, they drew their swords and lay them crosswise on the ground at my feet. I looked down at the pledges of their loyalty, and sank to my knees as well. Lifting each sword reverently, I kissed the sheath and returned it to its owner. "You do me great honor this day, my friends. Asphodel is not without honor itself."

So saying, I drew my own sword and laid it on the ground before their

stunned faces. "Know that when the need arises, Asphodel will answer your call, as you have answered mine. I will never forsake our cause while I live."

They each kissed my sword and Glaucon handed it back to me. All three of them rose smoothly to their feet and Anner stretched out a hand to help me to rise. He lifted my fingers to his lips. Our eyes met for a split-second. He released my hand with a half-smile and turned to his friends. Then they were gone, disappearing into the now visible mass of humans and Elves who writhed against the tide of the day.

"A lovely gesture," the Duke commented, his wise eyes following the path of his only son. "I spoke truly when I told you men would follow you unto death, milady."

"It is not death I wish to lead them to, Your Grace." I stared after my friends. "I would rather lead your son, and all of these sons, into life."

He bowed, smiling at my answer. "You are wise as well, then, milady." He kissed my hand, as his son had, and went to mount his horse.

He paused for a brief word with Anner, a final private moment between father and son.

The Ka'antira had arrived in force. Kaldarte and her three tall sons flanked by Ar'ami and followed by her granddaughters strode through a mist that hovered close to the ground. The Elfwars had decimated our house. We were all that remained.

Brial talked with his brothers quietly not too far away.

"We must take our positions," Beron announced, his voice deep and calm. "Milord, will you join your son in the cavalry?"

"I had thought to," the Duke replied.

"Then we must set out!"

Beron laid a gloved hand on my shoulder, saying gruffly, "Do not forget, my Queen, your promises. Be well, my daughter."

"And you, my father." I stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

The Ka'breona and the Ka'antira men said goodbye to us briefly, turning to the battlefields. Brial joined me a last time, cupping my face in the reverent gesture that thrilled and horrified me at the same time. "Farewell, *cariad*. Keep yourself from harm. I will return to you. I have sworn it."

"Go with the gods, beloved. I expect you to keep your oath to me, Brial."

He looked at me for a long moment. Without another word, he smiled and turned after his father and brothers to join the battle.

I watched them until they disappeared into the morass of troops. As I did so, dawn slid over the top of the horizon, staining the fields of Asphodel with light the color of blood.

Chapter Twenty-one

As the morning grew lighter, I strained my eyes to the northeast for the first signs of the enemy's approach. I squinted up at the sullen clouds, hanging low and heavy over the valley, and then turned back to where our troops began to deploy.

"Tamsen!"

I looked behind me. Hyagrem and Mariol had joined us. Both men were clad in the trimmed-down attire of the war mage. Long, hooded robes shadowed their faces and each clasped a long, intricately carved staff. Around their necks hung ornate pendants; pendants, I learned later, that were the particular honor given to battle mages after their first victory.

"Master," I said, bowing to Hyagrem. "Lord Beotte." This salutation I gave to Mariol. "Asphodel greets you on this day."

"Tamsen, we need you to come with us. Cetenne, we need you as well," Mariol stated calmly. He turned to Liliath. "I am sorry, milady, but your magic cannot help us in what we do. You will be better and more busily occupied helping Kaldarte with the injured."

"I agree, milord," Liliath replied. "I cannot do what you are about to attempt."

The two mages set off across the terrace, with Cetenne and me following them. A change seemed to have taken place in my old tutor. Hyagrem moved easily, with more fluidity in his motions than I had ever witnessed. His hands, however, were still old; gnarled, fragile hands, wrapped around his war staff.

“What is it that we do, Master?”

“There are many different types of warfare, Tamsen,” he answered. “We go to wage our own particular type of battle.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I swore to Brial and Beron that I wouldn’t get close to the action,” I said ruefully.

“You won’t be near the action, Tamsen,” Mariol replied, his face stern under his hood. “Trust me.”

In the distance, the warning clarion calls of the Ka’breona pipers shrieked into life, shattering the unnatural silence that had held this day in its grip. The song soared through the valley, and a giant rustle spread through the army as each warrior hefted his sword or his bow. The pipes, as they screamed defiantly at our enemy, were calling our army lovingly to war.

* * * *

Hyagrem led the way up a broken stair in the west wing of the castle. Making our way carefully past the charred rubble and crushed steps, we climbed to the top of the farthest tower in the castle. An intricate spellcasting circle was burned into the stones, and several low tables held components for human magic.

"So this is what you two have been working on," I commented as I stepped onto the battlements. The tingle of their magical residue assaulted my senses and I felt my magic rise in response.

"Today we will attempt to accomplish with four mages, what in years past took twenty," Hyagrem said, his face grave. "From here we can see the entire plain of battle. We can help our troops from a high vantage point. Our enemy will not have the same advantage."

"What do we do?" Cetenne asked.

"We shield, we destroy, we fight," Mariol said simply. "No more, no less."

I turned to the northeast once more, and as I watched the first wave of the enemy poured over the rim of the river valley. Our vanguard rose to meet them, and within seconds the screams of the injured and dying reached my ears. The battle for Asphodel had begun.

* * * *

Magic seared the insides of my fingers as I watched. Our warriors halted the initial strike for a while, and the swords rose and fell dully in the clouded light. A group of cavalry swept into the enemy from our right, the armored knights slicing against the sea of infantry. For a moment, the enemy line faltered, then regrouped and pushed on, wading through the dead and dying with remorseless progress.

I heard the captains shouting in the fields below me. I changed my perspective and saw a column of the Spesiale infantry broken through our

vanguard and sprinting toward the Ceolliune fortifications.

Hyagrem held up his staff, rapping it twice on the dusty stones at our feet, and pointed it just in front of the invading troop. A bolt of lightning flew from the carved wooden end, blasting a trench perhaps a hundred yards long. The men closest to the bolt died instantly. Those men right behind them fell into the trench, crushed by their comrades as they, too, fell, unable to stop their rush in time.

Hyagrem sent another bolt right after the first, decimating the remainder of the hostile force.

Nevertheless, our line was breaking. The pipes sounded once more, their chorus thinned, and our men ran for the specious safety of the Ceolliune fortifications. I watched as the gap widened between our men and theirs, and then called the magic to me.

Do you know what you are going to do, Tamsen?

The same wall of fire I used in Geochon.

Remember, Tamsen, release your power slowly.

I concentrated on a spot some thirty yards behind the slowest of the runners and released the flames from my magic. They jumped up merrily, burning in a neat line between our soldiers and theirs. The pursuit faltered to a halt.

Sweat formed on my brow as I held the flames rigidly in their line. "Someone get ready to take over," I hissed.

Cettenne closed her eyes. Within seconds, another wall fell in behind mine. I let my line drop. The enemy troops had stalled. They were prevented from moving forward by the flames that spat and sizzled before them. Elven

archers in the fortifications let loose their first flight of arrows, scything through the front ranks of the pursuit with grisly accuracy.

Mariol muttered to himself. His attention centered on a small pocket of men, encircled by the enemy, who were fighting desperately behind Cetenne's wall of fire. Without warning, a perimeter was forcing itself around them. They turned and ran for it.

Suddenly, Cetenne's wall fell. She staggered back, caught by Mariol. "Someone doused it!" she gasped.

I scanned the hordes of the invading mass. My senses confirmed the fear the dream had instilled in me. Destiny rushed up to slap my face. My uncle was here.

* * * *

For hours, the army of Spesialle bashed itself into pieces against the Ceolliune fortifications. The dead were piling up against the sharpened stakes. From our high tower, I could look in every direction and a little past midday my heart sank. They had surrounded us. Only a section to the direct west was still untested. We watched, taking turns as we sent our magic out to change the outcome of lesser fights within the whole. Hyagrem's thought was that countering our moves on a smaller scale would be more difficult for the enemy mages, so we confined our magics so that they would stay hidden.

When I was not deep in the throes of the magic, I searched the battlefield for those whom I loved. At this height, spotting someone in particular was difficult, but I caught flashes of the Ka'breona plaid, or the standard of Ceolliune.

Once, I saw the three Ka'antira brothers fighting back to back in a triangle of flashing swords.

"I need to check with the command," I said worriedly. "They will know where they will most need our efforts."

"Go on," Hyagrem said, his voice tired. "We must rest for a while now anyway."

I nodded and leapt down the stairs three at a time. As I ran across the terrace, I saw one section of the fortifications flare up. Flames rose over the green wood, sending spirals of smoke into the sky. Without thinking, I smothered the fire with a magical drop of dirt upon its heart. However, it was too late. They breached the first line of our defense.

I picked up my pace, sprinting for the command station, even as the first of the enemies trickled through the collapsed, smoking ruin of the stake-spitted wall.

I reached the place in the courtyard where the command staff was supposed to meet and skidded to a stop. There was no one there. *Where was everybody?*

Then it hit me: our leaders were on the field, fighting to contain the break in our defenses. Without thinking, I turned back to the battle. More of Spesialle's warriors jumped through the hole in the wall. I closed my eyes and called more earth to the spot. High walls of dirt suddenly filled the breach, rising sharply on a steep plane. The enemy who had penetrated the wall found themselves cut off from their fellows. Methodically, our soldiers began to butcher them.

"Tamsen!" I whirled as Balon dashed up the steps. "Brial wishes you to go! The battle is lost! We cannot prevail! We must leave!"

"Stand back!" I said sharply. "I've got so much magic built up right now that you shouldn't touch me!"

He stopped.

"Where is the battle going the worst?" I demanded.

"To the south," he answered. "A mage destroyed our wall and their men are pouring in through it."

"Take me."

* * * *

The carnage was appalling. An Elven unit fought valiantly, trying to stop the flow of men who were jumping through the wall. A horn sounded from my left and a troop of Ceolliune cavalry charged into the melee, swinging their swords rapidly as they cut down the infantry units as if they were reaping wheat. As I watched, an Elven scout who was pelting arrows into the rush of attackers, jerked backwards. A grinning man in the de Callat colors pulled his sword from the Elf's back, and twisted to meet the blade of a Pamphylian soldier.

Anner emerged from the charging cavalry, laying about him with a viciously swift blade. The invaders fell back from his fury. I felt something, like a ripple on a pond brushing against the edges of my consciousness.

"Guard me from anything that approaches," I ordered Balon quietly. "I have found the magician and will eliminate him. Do not touch me. If they overrun us, flee. When they touch me, they will die. Do you understand?"

He nodded as I closed my eyes, sending my power to search through the

ranks of the enemy. It raced through the invaders, seeking the source of the magic I felt pulsing somewhere to the back of their line. I sent my thoughts in that direction, dropping the intensity of the probe to the barest tickle.

I found him as he called his magic down to break more of the walls. I poured my energy into the elements and filled his lungs with water. I felt his sudden withdrawal as he brought his magic back to himself. He struggled against my control, unable to focus enough either to fight it off or to find me. I held my power on him, grimly, for another minute. Finally, his presence disappeared from my senses and I knew I had killed him.

I opened my eyes and staggered. Balon made as if to help me, and then jerked himself backward.

"It's all right, Balon," I said. "The magician is dead."

I sent out one more bit of magic, to repair the gaping hole in the fortifications, and then gasped, "Get me back to the command center."

* * * *

My body, still not recovered from the magical malady of a few days prior, was irritatingly weak. I hung onto Balon's arm as we hurried around the castle to the back terrace. When I let go of him, I slumped to the ground in exhaustion.

"On the top of the west tower," I began. "Cetenne, Mariol and Hyagrem are there. Bring them here. We're going to have to get involved on a larger level."

"I shouldn't leave you milady," Balon said stubbornly. "We should leave

as quickly as we can."

"The quicker you go, the quicker you'll be back!" I snapped. "Hurry, Balon!"

"Brial is going to kill me," he said in disgust. He took to his heels and I rapidly assessed our situation. The ring of our men was denser now, as they fell back systematically. Valiant as they were, the numbers of Spesialle's army was too great.

We needed to try something drastic.

As I slouched against the flagstones, the sound of horse's hooves intruded on my weary contemplation of the battle. I turned, pulling in my magic and releasing it in a rush.

"Anner!" I gasped.

"Tamsen! What are you doing here?" he asked me sharply, frowning as he looked around. "You should be gone from here, milady! We cannot hold them for much longer!"

"I must continue to do what I can," I replied. "Balon has gone to fetch the other mages. I have an idea."

"Your ideas usually end up hurting you," he said, his eyes roving over the encroaching army. "Tamsen, you must leave! We cannot protect you here for long!"

I ignored him, closing my eyes. A strange tickle was burning in the back of my mind. The magic was stirring inside of me. "Brial?"

"He lives," Anner answered shortly.

The battle goes ill.

Balon returned with the others.

"Are you insane, Tamsen?" Mariol bellowed at me. "The battle is lost! You must escape."

Do not despair, Tamsen. I will help you.

I turned to Hyagrem. "My master, can we not do something to turn the tide of this battle?"

He stared at me sadly. "I do not think so, Tamsen."

There is a way, Tamsen, if you are prepared to risk all. You must trust me.

Before I had a chance to respond to this cryptic comment, an image thrust into my mind: swirling winds, black clouds, and blood.

"I can," I replied. "The voice of my mother is speaking to me. I know what I must do."

I got to my feet, swaying unsteadily until the world stopped spinning. "Send out your magic," I instructed them. "Search for the magicians on the other side. When you find them, kill them. It will cause confusion in the rear ranks of their army. Balon," I said, turning my head slowly so I wouldn't stagger. "Get to your father or whoever is leading the battle in the center of the field. Tell them to retreat as quickly as they can to the castle. Do not let them argue with you! Get our troops out of the field!"

Balon took off without another word. Cetenne peered at me and I saw that her face was ashen. "What are you going to do, Tamsen?"

"I am going to show them why they do not wish to hold my land," I replied softly. "And everyone who is in the path of my lesson will learn it brutally."

* * * *

The old mages had followed my directions. Eyes closed, their magic prowled through the armies, searching for the familiar electric sizzle that identified the magicians. I rested silently, while Cetenne continued to ignite her blazes all over the battle.

I had no idea how much longer we could continue. Sooner, rather than later, we would begin to fall, drained of all energy. This is the curse of those who wield magic. The power that we crave gives us advantages beyond those of other mortals, but it saps our strength when we need it the most.

I got to my feet. Anner dismounted from his horse, following me with his sword drawn. Some hidden reserve of strength kept me going as I made my unsteady way to the spot where my mother had died. The bloodstain was a deep, mottled black two feet in circumference, its edges ragged where her blood had pooled in the crevices the mortar left. I stepped into the spot, and looked out to the center of the battle.

Balon must have reached them. As I looked on, detached and solitary, all of our warriors spun and fled, leaving the last fortifications before the castle deserted. As the enemy swarmed over the final ridgepoles into our defenses, I closed my eyes.

"Do not touch me, Anner," I warned him. "Guard my back, but whatever happens, do not interfere."

"It shall be as you say, milady," he responded quietly, and then his voice and the sounds of everything else vanished before the voice that spoke only in

my mind.

The voice that sounded eerily like my mother's.

First, a barrier. Invisible air, hardened and inflexible, to keep them from progressing. Not too high, just enough. Then, bring down the ice from the tops of those low clouds. Cool the air in the barrier; make it like ice.

I sensed the impact when they hit my wall, soldiers slamming into it, crushed by the masses that plowed into them unknowingly. Somewhere, in the distance, some enemy wizard began to pull in his magic, and I sensed Hyagrem's thought flitting past to meet it.

Now, heat the clouds above. Bring the warmth of the soil to the tops of the clouds. Watch it stream to the heavens, and warm it further still with fire. Call the winds, to swirl the two columns of air together. Stop for a moment. Let the energy build.

My barrier, now ice cold and mounding bodies against its far side, began to quiver, as if hit with an invisible force. I tightened my hold on it, forcing it to follow the path I had laid for it. I felt the mages at my back falter, and then each one's magic disappeared with a pop: first Cetenne, then Mariol, and finally Hyagrem. I held the only magic remaining on our side.

The cold air rose, while the hot air fell. I felt a sudden chilled gust of wind smash against my body, and my eyes flew open. In the outskirts of my consciousness, a tiny voice was warning me, "This is forbidden! This is forbidden!"

I ignored it, and watched the storm build.

It is enough? Let the storm grow on its own. If you need to add more energy you can, but try to conserve some in case you need it.

The clouds were roiling, first to a deep, ominous black, then to a sickly

green color, edged with the purplish-black I remembered from my dreams. I felt the power building in the center of the storm and the clouds swirled as if caught in a whirlpool. My eyes burned as I coldly watched the storm intensify.

Add just a little more magic. Increase it just enough to put the storm's energy over the top.

Inexorably, I channeled more magic into the storm. My eyes felt as if they were searing in their sockets and then I could see nothing but light, a light so immense that it blinded me to everything else. I poured all the magic I could muster into the clouds. Then the voice changed; it was no longer the voice of my long-dead mother, but a voice resonant with power and age that rang jubilantly in my head.

You will only see now with the eyes of magic, the eyes I gave to you. Exult in the magic! Free your energy, so that the magic can feed into the storm!

I saw the funnel cloud dip from the heavens in my head. Its long, swirling dark column reached for the ground, pulled up, and then connected with the earth. The wind was roaring over the panic-stricken army. The immitigable force of the tornado reached for the terrified men and I heard their screams choke off, as if the men who shouted were suddenly gone. Great clouds of dust, armor, and weapons flew around the base of the funnel and many of those weapons struck, killing whomever they touched.

The cyclone was a weapon, a great and powerful tool I wielded, and it shredded the enemies of Asphodel with a relentless and terrible fury. I nudged the twisting column of air to the northeast, trusting to nature to finish what I had begun. I could see again as the unconstrained storm began its terrible path through the bulk of Spesialle's army. Our warriors watched in horror, stopped dead in their tracks at the sight. Corpses and body parts were strewn in the wake of the storm; hundreds lay dead, having had no chance to flee.

I sank to my knees on the flagstones stained with my mother's blood. The storm continued to the river, where it sputtered and lost its grip on the earth. The roiling finger lifted from the ground, rising back into the boiling clouds that bore it, and a deadly silence fell once more on the battlefield. Then, with a huge cry, my army roared its defiance with one voice and pursued the remaining fragments of their opponents.

With my few, fading shreds of magic, I shouted, "The vengeance of Asphodel is swift and without mercy! Let this be a lesson to those who seek to take what is mine!"

My magically supported voice rang over the battle, my defiance thrown into my uncle's teeth. I could sense his fury, and his fear. I knew what was going through his mind.

The words drifted up soundlessly from the stones beneath my knees. *"You will not find the child. The child will find you."*

I felt his shocked recoil as the words penetrated into his very soul. Then something strange happened. I felt the world tilt, as it had once before, and I dug my fingers into the stones until the tips bled. Anner shouted and I opened my eyes. When my eyesight focused, I saw a pair of boots on the edge of my range of vision.

Without raising my head, I said, "Your welcome to Asphodel is not what you expected, is it uncle?"

* * * *

I raised my head and looked Gabril de Spesialle full in the face. His

features were cold, outlined harshly against the still black sky. Behind him, Anner struggled against a shield, beating at the invisible barrier with his sword. I jerked my focus back to Spesialle and my blood turned to ice in my veins. I did not have the strength to fight him.

“So, niece, you are at my feet in the courtyard of your home,” he said malevolently. “I found myself here with a half-Elven sorceress once before.”

“I remember,” I replied. “Things did not work out as you had planned on that occasion either.”

“Your powers have grown,” he noted. “You impress me, milady of Asphodel, or, are you the Lady of Beotte still? I find it hard to track your identities, they change so often.”

“I am as I always was,” I retorted. “If you lacked the ability to see, it is not my fault.”

I struggled to keep my senses alert. At this moment, I was at a disadvantage. My powers were close to drained, and my body dangerously weak. I had to keep him talking.

“It surprised me that you allowed Jeshan to take the throne,” I said scornfully, adding, “or, did he take it from you?”

His eyes narrowed, becoming ice blue slits in his predatory face. “Jeshan can play at being king if he wishes. I have my eyes on a much greater prize.”

“Try not to spread yourself too thin,” I advised him. “It’s very hard to replace soldiers, particularly when you lose so many at once.”

I felt him gathering his magic. “Replacing mine will be easier than it will be for you to replace yours, Tamsen de Asphodel. Of course, it will be impossible for your allies to replace you.”

My fingers found the hilt of my sword and began to work it from its sheath. It was my last line of defense. How ironic that my feeble excuse had become my reality! I had sworn to Brial and Beron that my uncle would never take me alive.

And then, Brial was there.

Shouting defiantly, he leapt over the wall of the terrace and placed himself between us. He drew his sword and I thought that it was Beron's: the great, gleaming golden sword of my dream. Through and around the weapon buzzed an unmistakable thread of magic. The sword sang shrilly, imbued with a strange power. With my enhanced senses, I felt the fury and the power of it. The sword literally thirsted for blood. It was animate, and sentient, and Brial's energy empowered it.

"No," I murmured, my head swimming. "No, my beloved."

"Sorcerer," Brial began, his voice low with a dangerous edge to it. "You will not harm my wife."

"Your wife?" Spesialle noted in surprise. "An interesting development."

He looked down at me with a sinister laugh. "Allow me to console you on your bereavement, my dear."

He turned to Anner, and with a gesture dropped the barrier. Even as I watched, Anner's face went blank and he moved toward us jerkily. I heard Mylan shout from my right and without thinking, I slammed up a shield that guarded us from the rest of the world.

My uncle would not have all of his victims within reach.

Anner came to Spesialle's side, his huge sword rising to the ready. My uncle looked down at me, and those fatal words fell from his lips. "It is the curse

of women of your line to watch as the men they love die on their behalf," he purred. "They all broke in the end...I wonder how you will fare, niece?"

And with a gesture, magic poured into Anner. Spesialle said gloatingly, "Kill the Elf, and the girl is yours until I kill her!"

The knight snarled and swung a crashing blow at Brial's stunned face. My beloved recovered quickly, parrying the blow and stepping from its path. Anner thrust at him again. Brial countered, deflecting the huge blade to skid along the flagstones. The Ka'breona blade screamed through the air, its magical thirst amplified by the duel.

My uncle stood there, watching it all with an amused look on his face, while I stared in horror. This was the moment of my dream! All of it had happened! My beloved was fighting for his life against our best friend, and my uncle pulled the strings that determined their fate.

Anner swung a mighty blow at Brial. Brial parried it, barely, but the force of the swing forced his arm back. I saw the bone break in his forearm and the golden sword fell to the flagstones with a clatter. For a horrified moment, I was powerless; I could not think or act to prevent the tragedy happening before my very eyes.

And suddenly, my confusion stopped. At the edge of my vision, I saw Glaucon run his sword through the throat of the traitorous Elven Elder Leither, and with her death, her magical grip on my mind eased. Strength surged into my limbs and I leapt between Brial and Anner with a shout.

"Stop it! Both of you! If you love me, you will stop!" I bowed my head; eyes closed, I prayed that it was enough.

Stunned, the two warriors stepped out of range of each other and my undefended body. I opened my eyes and everything was different. My eyes

filmed over with a silver haze, as I raised them to gaze upon my uncle.

"I do not submit to the fate you decree, uncle," I said quietly. My hand worked my sword from its sheath.

"It is just as easy for me to kill you myself," he replied.

"Tamsen! Watch out!" Brial shouted, as a massive blow struck me on the side of the face. I fell to the ground, ears ringing. Dizzily, I lifted myself from the flagstones and looked up at Gabril de Spesialle.

He was laughing. "I suppose I'll just have to kill you the same way I killed your mother," he said. "Irony, isn't it?"

Without hesitation, I freed my sword and swung it at Spesialle's legs. I felt it slice cleanly through skin and muscle, whistling through sinew into bone. He howled as his leg collapsed beneath him.

I pulled myself to my feet. "I am not so easy to kill."

As I raised my sword for a final blow, an arrow whistled past me and sank itself into my uncle's back. With a curse and a flash of light, my uncle vanished. Once again, everything spun wildly and this time I lost my balance. The sword dropped from my nerveless fingers, clattering to the bloodstained flagstones. New blood pooled there, dripping into the mortar. I crashed down, prone upon the terrace. My cheek lay against my mother's blood.

The cries from the battlefield grew fainter and I heard footsteps rushing toward me. Brial lifted me from the ground, his uninjured arm trembling as he cradled me to his chest. Darkness fell before my eyes, and I knew no more.

All that remained was the smallest whisper of a well-loved voice, murmuring in my ears. *Rest now, my daughter. I am with you. You are not alone.*

This time it was my mother's voice, drifting up lovingly from the stones beneath me.

Chapter Twenty-two

I heard later about the end of the battle. Brial shot the arrow that wounded Spesialle, forcing him to flee. After ascertaining I was all right, he left me in the care of Kaldarte, who also tended the two other mages and her exhausted granddaughter. We had, all of us, overtaxed our strength during the fight.

After the tornado raked through the lines of Spesialle's army, most of his remaining men fled. Tried to flee, I should say, since the ones who hid in the woods were flushed out by the Elves and those who fled to the river found Mylan's ships waiting for them.

It was a victory, but a costly one.

The Duke de Ceolliune had fallen just before the storm hit. Leading a charge of the cavalry into the bowels of the enemy, they caught him from behind with a sword to the back. He died before they could get him to a healer. My Ka'antira uncle Morrote had fallen as well, pierced by an arrow while he fought at his twin's back. Wilden had carried him, grief-stricken, to the castle, left Morrote's body with Kaldarte, and returned to the fray where he had fought like a man possessed.

Mylan, pushing himself to overcome his injury, slowed enough to take

another wound, this time to the leg. Anner lifted his friend to his horse and sent him out of the battle. Lamec, standing with the scouts of his people, had been too close to the magical bursts from the sorcerer I had killed. His charred body was found later that night, and Kaldarte grieved for the second of her sons to fall on that terrible day.

My cousin Liliath was still tending the injured when they brought her father in. She took one look and returned to her duties with tears standing in her eyes. Cetenne, mercifully, was still unconscious. Time enough for her to know when she awoke.

Brial's arm was broken just above the wrist. He had strapped it with his belt, taken up his bow, and rejoined the fight.

Berond lay in a bed near my little garden. His beautiful face would bring no more joy to Elfmaidens. A war axe had sliced through his right cheek, crushing the bone. The healers had sedated him heavily. He slept now, oblivious to the pain and grief around him.

Continuing his work as commander of the army, Beron led the companies of Elven archers, until the unacknowledged sword-cut to his side finally brought him to collapse as the enemy breached the south wall. The wound, although serious, wasn't mortal. Beron would stand to fight another day.

Over half of our forces, however, would not.

A terrible victory, indeed.

When Brial returned to my bedside, Kaldarte chided him for neglecting his wounded arm. She bound it and motioned for two of her helpers to carry me to our chamber. "Sleep is all she needs right now. I will go up later and tend to her properly, when I can be spared here."

So when I awoke a few hours later, it was to find her at my side. Her face was as lovely as ever, but drawn with weariness and grief. I closed my eyes again, fearing the news she brought. "The battle?" I whispered.

"Over, and a victory," she replied, her voice anything but victorious.

"I must go to the field," I said hurriedly, hoping to escape the terrible news I saw in her eyes.

"Tamsen, you cannot. Rest now."

* * * *

I took a bath, wanting to rid myself of the gore and muck. Once I was clean, I felt better, although still horribly weak. I put on the mourning dress Myrielle had made for me, cleaned and repaired now, and made my way into the hall and down the stairs. The sight that greeted my eyes was a horrible reminder of the terrible price of war. My Asphodel was scarred, as was all that rested upon her.

Prisoners worked on corpse detail. The Elves took the bodies of their own people. They would lay their dead to rest in the solitary loveliness of their deserted forest. Ar'ami, tears running down his otherwise impassive face, arranged for that. His sons would not return to their beloved forest home. They were prepared for the pyre at Asphodel, leading our lifeless soldiers into death one final time. The rest of the dead slept upon our destroyed fortifications.

We treated the enemy soldiers as our own. We do not dishonor the dead. It was disconcerting, however, to find that not a single leader of the enemy force was numbered among the captured or the dead. They still lived and roamed

free, able to resume this war against both of the worlds I loved.

The fires in once-lovely meadows would burn proudly that night. The trees in the orchards were stripped bare, whether from the battle or the cyclone I couldn't tell. Everywhere I looked, destruction met my tired eyes. I took a deep, tremulous breath, and began to wobble to where our commanders were to meet.

It was a sadly diminished group: Anner, his face drawn with his bereavement, Balon, Glaucon, Mylan, his leg bandaged and propped up on a stool, Wilden, his face stunned with pain at the loss of his brothers, and Brial, calm amid the turmoil. He looked up, saw me, and hurried to my side.

"*Cariad!*" he exclaimed, his good arm strong as he crushed me to him.

"Brial!" I replied, a sob in my voice, as I threw my arms around his neck.

"The gods know I am not worthy of you, *alanna*," he murmured, burying his face in my still damp hair.

I kissed him and he responded, savage in his relief. When he pulled away, he stared down at me proudly. "I thought I told you to leave when I sent word," he said, shaking me on each word.

"I thought you understood that I would never leave while you remained," I replied in a whisper.

"Come." His uninjured arm supported me as I progressed to the small group of men who watched our approach. Once there, he set me into a chair.

Wilden shook himself from his apathy and came to stand behind me, one callused hand trembling on my shoulder. He was the last male of the Ka'antira line and his duty would now be to me. I accepted this gift, as wordlessly we agreed on the exchange.

I looked at the somber-faced men standing around me, took a breath, and began. "Milords, I have heard of your sorrows. Asphodel can never replace the sacrifices you have made for her. I can only say..." I choked, took a moment to collect myself, and eventually continued, "...that we mourn your losses with you."

"It gladdens my heart to see you whole, Tamsen," Anner said quietly. "My father would be proud of you, your actions, and your words."

"Your father was a great man, my friend," I replied. "The victory is wholly his. Without Ceolliune, there would be no chance of safety for Ansienne."

My head swam, but I managed to steady myself. "The Ka'antira have paid a heavy price in my name, as have all of your families and retainers. My gratitude is not enough. Yet, my friends, I thank the gods that you were spared to me!"

I reached for Brial blindly, grasping for the warm comfort of his hand. I looked up to find him watching me, his eyes grave and wise. "I will take you to our chamber, *cariad*," he said softly. "You must rest before the ceremonies tonight."

"Leave these details to us, Tamsen," Glaucon urged, his voice thick with exhaustion.

I dashed the tears from my face with my other hand. "I could not rest, there is too much to do. Asphodel will take her share of the burden, as long as she and I exist."

* * * *

We gathered a quarter-hour before midnight on the terrace, our remaining warriors who could stand lined in long rows around the funeral pyres. Many of our dead lay together, shoulders touching in a parody of sleep. Our leaders, and family members, lay on smaller pyres by themselves: the Duke de Ceolliune, Lamec, and Morrote. The remaining Ka'antira had elected to send them with Ceolliune, as a mark of honor.

Dressed in black, hood shadowing my face, I stood between Wilden and my betrothed. Somewhere beyond the pyres, a lone Ka'breona piper wailed a doleful lament. Brial's hand beneath my elbow supported me and I stepped forward. "Warriors, we stand tonight, free, because of your courage. Our victory today is yours!"

A roar of shouts answered my claim, deafening me until I held up a hand.

"Tonight, we also gather to honor our dead. Their gallantry and courage led us through the darkness of this day. Never forget their names! Sing their stories to your children as they grow, and tell them of the glory these, our brothers and sisters, found to their credit at Asphodel this day!

"Tomorrow, our worries will fall upon us again. We have defeated our enemy, but not beaten them. A usurper and a king-slayer hold our homeland. It is our duty, laid upon us by these men and women of honor, to free our nation of these traitors and all who have forgotten the paths of grace. Tomorrow, we are comrades in arms, as we were today. There is no longer segregation of men and Elves. Tonight we are kin, who grieve together over the pyres of those who have led us to victory!"

The army shouted its triumph to the skies. The piper began again, a traditional mourning paeon of the Elves, and as the high sweet notes lifted to the

starless night, other pipers joined in, and the drummers pounded a steady, somber beat. Music soared around us, swelling into a radiant embrace for us all.

For the last time on that day, the longest day I had yet known, I called the magic to me. I went to the pyres of my beloved dead: my uncles. I pulled my sword from its sheath, and cut a lock of hair from my head for each, gravely kissed their cold brows, and lay my hair across their chests.

The rest of my family followed me, including Brial. Anner did the same for his father, tears streaming unheeded down his tired face. I joined him at his father's side, and cut a third lock of hair, laying it gently on the dead Duke's chest. I squeezed Anner's hand as I passed him to stand between our three small pyres, and the long lines of fortifications that now were the funeral biers for the rest of the human dead.

I raised my arms, letting the magic sing across my skin. Then, at the same time, the pyres caught fire. The long circle of ramparts ignited simultaneously, blazing a circle of light through the silent orchards. Many of the soldiers watching gasped. As the flames licked at the oil-soaked wood, the clouds parted. The moon burst through in argent glory, glowing upon our fallen heroes and illuminating them for a moment. They became ephemeral, shining gently in the sanctifying light of the Virgin Huntress. Then, it ducked behind the mourning clouds again and the only glow in the night was the radiance of the fires, consuming the worldly bodies of our dead.

* * * *

That night, as I lay in bed with my head pillowed on Brial's warm chest, I thought about the events of the day. My sorrow for my uncles and my concern

for the Ka'breona men battled with my joy that, against all the odds, Brial was safe beside me.

"*Cariad*, can't you sleep?"

"No. I'm too tired to sleep."

"Normal people are too tired to stay awake. What is troubling you?"

"There is something different about my magic. It feels... strange. I have more power, I think, but it takes more from me."

"Ask Kaldarte or your tutor about it," was his pragmatic reply.

"I plan on it, but there is something else. When I am in a dangerous situation, something tells me how to use my magic."

"What?" His voice was alert.

"It's like I have a conversation with someone who is right beside me. It almost seems like..." My voice trailed off and I stared blankly into the darkness.

"Tamsen?"

"It almost seems like it's my mother...telling me how to do things. The day she died, and I was hiding in the orchard, it was the same. I heard her voice in my head, telling me when to move and what to do. It cannot be she, I know, but this voice reminds me of her. But then it changes and sounds like something else."

His hands moved comfortingly on my shoulders. "Your magic is beyond my understanding, *cariad*. We'll talk to your teachers tomorrow."

I nodded, sighed, and tried to doze off. Brial was asleep again in a very short time, the rise and fall of his breathing easing me through the night. Still, I

lay waking, not finding my rest until dawn began to stain the windows.

* * * *

Early in the morning, the Elves departed with the litters of their dead. We turned out in the warm, summer sun to honor them as they carried the long, long line of biers into the forest that bordered Asphodel. The procession was silent and the beauty of the Elves unmarred as they marched by us with grave faces. Brial stood at my side, his features reflecting the solemnity of the occasion.

Elves are a long-lived people. Loss of life to so many at such young ages threatened the continued existence of the race. The young Elves who'd been hurriedly trained to protect the Elven sanctuary in Laton would have to fill the gaps.

Brial Ka'breona would not accompany his friends and kin to their final resting places in the Elven forest. He refused to leave my side.

Acheros Ka'charona led the procession, and with the death of his traitorous wife, a measure of pride had returned to the sorrowing old Elf.

After their departure, cleanup progressed rapidly under my beloved's watchful eyes. I spent the morning resting, my insomnia adding to my fatigue, but rejoined our commanders in the afternoon. We once again met in my parents' chamber, so that the invalids of our group could join in the discussion.

We proposed many theories as to the next move of our adversaries, but agreed upon none. As the day wound on and we had accomplished nothing, I began to think longingly of bed and the privacy of our room.

Unexpectedly, Anner rose to his feet. He drew his sword and laid it at my feet. Following it with his sheath, shield, and helm, the new Duke of Ceolliune knelt before me. "I have dishonored my vow to you, Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel," he began gravely. "I did not guard you as you asked me and I drew my sword against Brial Ka'breona. I foreswore the oath I made to you. I am not worthy to continue to bear these gifts of my father. My sword and arms are forfeit to you, as a mark of my failed honor."

"Anner, Duke de Ceolliune," I replied. "Asphodel will not take your arms. You are not dishonored; you were controlled by an evil sorcerer and not responsible for your actions. Pick up your arms, my friend. We hold no blame upon you."

His grey eyes looked up and met mine.

I returned his stare and my heart wept for his grief. Through all of the mourning for his father, this had weighed upon his mind. It was yet another event to lie at my uncle's door.

"Be at ease, Anner," Brial said quietly. "I know your heart. You would never betray us so."

Anner bowed his head and took my hand in a grip so tight that I fought to keep the pain from showing on my face. When he released it, the side of my signet ring had pressed into my flesh, leaving a reddened line to mark it.

"I have a request," Anner went on, his tired eyes taking us all in by turn. "Will you come to Ceolliune for my investiture as Duke? I would like for my friends to join me."

"I wouldn't miss it." Even as I said this, an idea blossomed at the back of my mind. "Besides, we've been at a loss as to what we should do now. Perhaps the answer we seek is in the city of the usurper. Jeshan de Callat wouldn't have

left for Geochon without a great many plans set to carry out in his own town.”

“True,” Glaucon said, pouring another goblet of wine.

“There is also the possibility that he may try to interfere in the succession of Ceolliune,” Brial interjected. “If that is the case, then it would be our duty to come to the assistance of our ally, would it not?”

I could tell by the look on Anner’s face that this possibility had never occurred to him. The first real laugh I felt in days bubbled to my lips. Anner looked sharply at me, and then joined in as the others did.

“I’m sorry, Anner,” I apologized. “For a moment you looked so shocked at the suggestion. We all know Jeshan wouldn’t have the slightest compunction in doing such a thing. It struck me as funny, that’s all.”

“I forgive you,” he said dryly. “Anything that will bring a smile to your lips is a wondrous thing, milady.”

Once again, his words brought an anxious hush to the room. I frowned. *Does everyone know his secret turmoil?*

“Ceolliune it is, then,” Brial said, his voice too hearty for my taste. “As soon as my lady and the others are able to travel, we will set out for your ceremony, my friend.”

“Thank you,” Anner replied with his customary courtesy. “You will all be very welcome to my home.”

Surprisingly, Liliath’s eyes were the ones to lock onto mine. She, too, was frowning. I was not the only one to sense the undercurrents. The tension in the room didn’t grow but remained an ominous flow beneath the courtesy and overtures of friendship. I met her eyes again. She nodded, and the talk continued.

I would talk to Liliath tomorrow, I resolved. Perhaps she sensed something I did not. I was all too afraid, however, that my perceptions were as accurate as ever.

* * * *

That night, instead of the familiar dream I had grown to fear, I dreamt something different. Anner's father stood sadly at the side of an ornate throne, upon which Jeshan de Callat sat in the royal robes and crown of Ansienne. Before the usurper, in fetters, Brial knelt with his head high.

"You should never have defied me," my uncle said, malice threading through his soft voice as he walked into my line of sight. "As a result of your interference, my niece still roams freely. Since you are so determined to protect her, I give you a fate that you may share with her."

I felt the magic tingle, as a single, high, wavering cry slashed across the room. The dream ended abruptly, as if someone had pulled a drape closed on it.

I woke to find Brial's arms wrapped around me as he slept. His profile, beautifully carved against the dim light from the fireplace, was cold and strangely remote.

Sleep did not return to me that night.

Chapter Twenty-Three

In the weeks that followed, the families who had once lived at Asphodel returned to us. As we prepared to depart for Ceolliune-Callat, Asphodel fell back into a domestic rhythm. Small children played as their parents laboriously constructed their small homes brick by brick. Thanks to the ruin of the fields, there was plenty of mud and straw to form the bricks, which they did faithfully every morning.

During the long, hot afternoons that summer, they turned their efforts to the castle. A month after the battle, the Great Hall was cleared of debris. After six years, the frame for the new hall rose from the ashes of its predecessor.

Singly or in groups, more of our folk returned to us. My father's reeve arrived three weeks after the battle with his wife and children. He had moved to Beotte after my parents' death. After he heard of the attack upon Asphodel, he settled his affairs and returned to his home.

His arrival delighted me. I could leave the manor in his hands while we were gone and I knew that might be a month or more. He would oversee the reconstruction of the estate far more knowledgeably. I gave him my father's old study for an office and bedchambers in the castle until the laborers could build a house for him.

Soon after his arrival, I dug under the hollowed out hole in my rooms. I walked into his office and gave him the gold I had hidden there.

"This is all I have," I said quietly. "This is all that my parents had hidden away. Use it to supply the estate for the winter."

"Milady," Charot replied with a delicate cough, eyeing the bag I dropped on his desk. "Asphodel's wealth was never kept here in the castle. Every year we sent it to the bank in Beotte. Your father never liked keeping gold on the premises. He said it was dangerous, as we were so isolated. I kept five percent of the earnings and deposited the rest for safe-keeping."

"My uncle probably stole it as soon as he could get his hands on it."

"Well, that's the thing, you see," Charot said. "He couldn't touch it, although he tried."

"How you do know?"

Charot looked embarrassed. "When Asphodel was destroyed, I had a feeling you were safe. I went to see the Marquis de Beotte. He was very helpful. He kept the disposition of Asphodel stalled in the King's Court. I went to work in the bank to insure that money was there for you when you returned. You have a solid amount of money in your account now, milady. You are not rich, mind you, and this year you will make no money since so much will be required to rebuild. I should think, however, that you're comfortably well-to-do."

I returned to my room with the gold, shaking my head. I had yet another reason to be grateful to Mariol.

Myrielle had returned to Asphodel two days after the battle. She embraced Mariol with a glad cry and gave an equally enthusiastic greeting to me. Efficiently, she took over the management of the household. She supervised

the women who came to cook, launder and clean. She catalogued and ordered supplies. She set herself to reorganizing Asphodel from a military camp to a home. "As long as you live, milady, you'll never have any interest in the domestic side of things," she informed me when I tried to remonstrate with her. "I enjoy doing this; it keeps me involved, and it keeps you free from worry on that front. Besides," she added with a twinkle, "it allows me to keep an eye on Mariol."

Anner and Mylan left soon after the battle: Anner to arrange for his investiture as Duke, and Mylan to supervise the organization of the military arrangements for his own town. Mariol and Glaucon remained at Asphodel, assisting Beron as he recovered and supervising our remaining forces.

I insisted that Anner take his soldiers with him when he left. He protested, silenced only when I said flatly, "It's better for you to take them, Anner. We do not know if Jeshan has found a way to insinuate his way back into the city. March into Ceolliune-Callat at the head of your army and consolidate your position. We will be along in a few weeks. We'll know if Spesialle is on the move by that time. I doubt that he'll be able to think about campaigning any time soon."

I spoke with new assurance these days, summoned up from a core of fear that ate away at my insides. Spesialle was injured and angry. Like any wounded animal, he was in his den licking his wounds, but he was also making plans. Until his wounds healed, he would not attempt to implement them.

But I had a guilty secret. My strength, already lessened before the battle, remained dangerously low. Although I tried to hide my frailty from the men around me, Kaldarte knew. She sat me down one afternoon and lectured me sternly on what I could and could not do. I obeyed her, to keep her from telling Brial, and took a very nasty brew with every meal.

My sleep did not refresh me and my meals did not give me strength. Brial, occupied with the repairs to the estate, did not seem to notice my lethargy. I attempted to disguise my weakness as best I could.

The summer waxed as we recovered from our clash with Spesialle. When it began to wane, we made our preparations to leave for Ceolliune-Callat. A messenger arrived from Anner, informing us of the date of the ceremony. Those of us who were to go finished our plans accordingly.

* * * *

This was to be the first procession of state I would make as the Lady of Asphodel. More importantly, it was also the first public appearance of the leadership of our victorious army. Myrielle took these facts to heart and spent the final days of our sojourn in Asphodel designing regal clothes for me. "You need to look inspiring before all the nobility and the clergy at Anner's investiture. Your raiment must be something truly special."

We did not see her for three days. When finally she reemerged, she descended on me like a boot on a bug. I was debating our plans with Mariol when she burst through the door, grabbed my arm, and hauled me from the room, to the smirking amusement of the men in attendance.

"Myrielle! What in the name of the gods are you doing?"

"I need to fit your gown," she muttered distractedly, jerking me into our chambers.

"Can't it wait until later?"

She glared at me so fiercely that I succumbed with a small sigh. I let her undress me and when I stood only in my shift, she dropped the elaborate gown over my head. "You've lost weight!" she all but shrieked.

"I have been a little busy."

Once again, she nailed me with a pointed stare and once again, I submitted. I stopped protesting and stood quietly while she fussed and muttered with her latest creation.

A half hour later, Brial entered the room, his eyes alight with mischief. "This was more important than the council, *cariad*?" He cocked the brow over his left eye impudently.

"Ask her."

"I'll just watch." He sat in a chair by the hearth. "I like that color on you," he added, running his eyes over me with a wicked grin.

I looked down. The gown was a work of art in heavy silk of a deep, rich crimson that Myrielle found among the stored fabrics in the hidden storeroom. The red matched the color of the cabochon ruby precisely and it glowed with a jewel-like shimmer.

"Really?" I asked with a meditative air. "Maybe I should ask Myrielle to make me a night robe from it, if there's any left."

He laughed and rose to pour some wine. When he asked Myrielle if she would like some as well, she ignored him and continued to push pins into the hem of the gown. Brial handed me the glass with a rueful smile. "Do you think she'll be done with you before we go to bed, my lady?"

"Who knows?" I lifted the glass to my lips, only to have Myrielle slap at my legs.

"Don't move!" she snapped. I looked helplessly at my lifemate, who laughed and took the cup to my lips.

* * * *

An hour later, freed from the irritable seamstress and her masterpiece, Brial and I walked out onto the terrace. The return of my retainers had brought a new sense of peace to Asphodel. One of the first things I had them do was reclaim the terrace as a place of tranquility. Now there were chairs and benches to sit upon, clay pots full of flowers, and a little dining area, tucked near the kitchen gardens.

One spot was untouched, save for the placement of two chairs and a small table. It was to the spot of my mother's death that we headed now.

No one would disturb us here; we had claimed it for our own. Our privacy was dear-bought and everyone understood that when we were here, we were to be alone. We sat side by side and looked out over the ravaged fields of my estate.

I sighed and laced my fingers in his. He brought my hand to his lips and said softly, "Next year, *cariad*, this will all be different. It will be healthy, and blooming, and will stay that way for years to come."

"I know. I am just depressed at leaving here so soon."

We sat in silence as the sun dropped behind the horizon. A cooling wind blew gently across us, carrying the first sweet breath of autumn. My birthday was coming soon; I was almost ready to enter my twentieth year.

Brial toyed with my fingers and finally spoke in a quiet, firm voice. "You are not well, *cariad*."

"No, beloved, I am not." I brushed the hair from my eyes with a trembling hand. "I have not regained my strength. Kaldarte thinks it will take some time for me to improve."

"Why did you try to hide it from me?"

"I didn't want you to worry overmuch. I will be fine, Brial, it is just taking more time than we thought."

"You shouldn't be going on this journey. Perhaps you should stay here."

"I can't insult Anner that way," I retorted. "We're just taking a trip, not going to war. I'll be fine."

He surprised me by sliding from his chair and standing above me, looking down at me with a frown. "I am worried about you, Tamsen. I think you are doing too much."

"I'm not doing anything. You won't let me."

"Your health has been shattered. You should try to do nothing but rest, *cariad*."

"The little bit I do is necessary. Believe me, Brial, I will be better. Kaldarte's medicine is already helping."

Without a word, he bent over and plucked me from my chair, holding me against his chest. I sighed and rested my head against his shoulder while a tear trickled down my cheek. The unwonted docility on my part frightened him worse than anything else had, I think.

"I will ask for something to make you sleep," he said worriedly as he

carried me back to our chamber. "In the morning, we'll decide if you are well enough to travel."

He hesitated, as if about to ask something else, but kept his silence as he climbed the stairs.

* * * *

Kaldarte was at my bedside while Brial paced behind her. She checked me over thoroughly and gave me a potion, but her face was puzzled. Finally she said, "Brial, sit down!"

He threw himself into a chair. I exchanged a small smile with Kaldarte at his action. Then the smile faded, and she looked me full in the eyes. "I don't know what is wrong with you. I only have a guess."

"And that would be what?"

"When you called the magic to you, raising the storm, it should have been impossible. The power it takes to control such a thing should be beyond the abilities of any mortal."

"All right," I said after a moment's pause.

"I would venture to guess that you 'borrowed' magic from somewhere, maybe even from the gods. The strength you used to support such power may have been partially destroyed in the attempt."

I was silent, having already thought of this possibility myself. Kaldarte's eyes were wise, but sad as they looked at me.

"So, I may never regain my full strength, then?" I asked briskly.

"That is a possibility."

"Will I die?"

"I don't know."

"What do you think?"

"I don't think you'll die," she replied. "I see too much in your future to accept that as a possibility. You will be very weak for a time. You must be very careful with what you do, and not try things that are beyond you right now. In fact, you shouldn't try any magic for a while. It wouldn't be a good idea."

"Wonderful!" I exclaimed bitterly. "I get to do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing until I'm better. That makes me a useful part of our little rebellion, doesn't it?"

"I didn't say you couldn't use your mind," Kaldarte pointed out with some asperity.

"What about this trip to Ceolliune?" Brial asked.

"She can't avoid it," Kaldarte replied. "She must go; she represents her people and must do honor to Anner. It will be your job, Brial, to insure she doesn't do too much."

With a sinking heart, I stared from my lifemate to Kaldarte. She smiled as she continued, "She can ride, but I recommend that she ride pillion with you. When you are in Ceolliune, Brial, keep an eye on her and do not let her get too exhausted. I will give you a potion that will make her sleep, and she should have it every night. If you can get her to take a nap every day that will help too."

In one blow, Kaldarte had given Brial the power to determine my actions

every day. What made it even worse was that I was too tired to argue with them. I fell asleep as they talked.

* * * *

In the morning, I was groggy from Kaldarte's medicine and irritated at my restrictions. As servants scurried about, locking lids on trunks and bringing us breakfast, I sank into a foul mood. Brial, wiser now after two seasons' worth of our lifebond, didn't let on by so much as a twinge that he noticed my temper. Instead, he was kind to me and I was left with an anger-induced headache and no one to release it on.

Wisely, he had the grooms bring out my horse, saddled and ready to go. I stared first at the horse and then up at Brial. He cupped my face and said in a low voice, "I know you would hate to ride pillion, Tamsen, so I offer you this deal: ride your horse out of Asphodel proudly, so your retainers will see the Lady of Asphodel leave here straight, tall, and well. Then, when you tire, you must tell me immediately so that we can rest. Are we agreed?"

In that moment, I loved him even more than I had before. Brial knew me so well and cared so deeply for me, that he had found the one way to keep me obedient to his wishes. I leaned up on tiptoe to kiss him. When his arms trembled around me, I pretended not to notice. I knew this went against every instinct my lifemate had. Once we were well on the road, I would ask him to take me up pillion, just to make him happy.

His strong hands lifted me into the saddle, hovering near me until he was sure I was settled safely. Then he swung up onto his own mount's back, reining in to remain at my side. Glaucon was going with us, as were the twins, Wilden,

and Mariol. We took several troops of Elven archers with us. Four servants trundled along behind us in a coach laden with our luggage. I raised my gloved hand, the cabochon ruby glinting in the sun. Brial rode beside me, his black eyes shining, and we rode from Asphodel to the cheers of the ones left behind.

* * * *

The trip to Ceolliune-Callat lasted ten days. South of Asphodel, we took the road that traversed the length of the river Ilia and followed it to Beotte. We stopped in Mariol's city overnight. That evening, the Marquis and his retainers feted us in the Great Hall of the ancient, sprawling castle. After the feast was well underway, Mariol beckoned for Brial and I to join him. We followed the mage to a room just off the Great Hall where Mariol turned to me with an enigmatic expression on his face. I argued with him when he handed me a small coffer stocked with jewels, but he brushed my objections away.

"If you don't want to wear them, sell them. If nothing else, you can use the money to rebuild that castle of yours. It's not like these are the family jewels, Tamsen."

For the majority of our trip, I rode pillion with Brial. At first, it felt strange, used as I was to riding my own horse. Eventually, it became a time of sweet pleasure to me. I was not the same woman who had confronted him about my right to stay at Asphodel for battle. I remained completely docile under Brial's charge. After a few days, I think, he would almost have preferred a good, normal argument with me.

The time of rest, however, did not improve my health. Kaldarte's potion sent me swiftly into a dreamless sleep every night, but I awoke the next day still

ravaged by remorseless exhaustion. Day by day, I fell further into a lingering lassitude and fragility. Surprisingly, Brial did not comment on it. It was as if we had a conspiracy between us: to ignore my health and concentrate on the time we had together.

At night, after we had eaten and I had drunk my medicine, Brial would take me into his arms and lay with me until I dozed off. He would point out the constellations whirling on their unchanging paths in the skies above us. I lay there, reveling in both his voice and his touch. When I awoke the next morning, he was still there, a smile upon his face as he leaned over to kiss me.

It was as if he was compelling me to get stronger. In my new deference, I tried to obey him.

When we spotted the towers of Ceolliune-Callat on the tenth afternoon, Brial called a halt near some trees. He clambered down and lifted me to the ground. Calling my maid over, he said simply, "Prepare my lady for her entrance into the city."

The maid bobbed a curtsy and smiled at me reassuringly. "Lady Myrielle told me what you should wear for this, milady. Come with me."

An hour later, we were ready to proceed. I had bathed in the cool waters of a stream nearby and my long hair was braided into a twist on my head. Myrielle's gown, a riding suit in Ka'antira blue, was another of her clever, divided skirt creations. It was split to allow me to ride comfortably and astride. Once I dismounted, the long, paneled coat disguised that fact and the dress was as formal as a Court gown. The design put me in mind of the surcoats that the knights wore, and it occurred to me that Myrielle was smart enough to give me that military air deliberately.

The girl held a mirror for me so that I could see myself and I frowned at

my pallor. Anner would notice it immediately and I did not need him to be worried too. "Bryse," I asked my maid, "is there anything we can do to make me look, err, healthier?"

She tactfully handed me a rabbit foot dipped in a pink powder. I looked at her closely. "You're the daughter of my chamberlain, aren't you?"

"Yes, milady," she replied with a dimpled smile.

"You take after him." She laughed and went to repack the trunk. I ran the rabbit's foot over my cheeks, and a faint pink tinge to my skin rewarded my efforts. With that, I turned and went back to where Brial waited.

He, too, had changed. He wore the Ka'breona armor, surprisingly, and I smiled as I approached him. "You look exceedingly handsome."

"And you, *alanna*, are more beautiful than ever." He grinned lasciviously as he lifted me to my saddle. He remounted and we began our final leg of the journey.

* * * *

As we entered the gates, I noticed many of the townsfolk had come out to greet us. Hundreds of them lined the streets, cheering and gaping in awe at the Elves accompanying our party. Most of them wanted to see the Lady of Asphodel, who had called together a rebellion and saved her people from the usurper's army. Brial rode at my side, his face solemn. Neither he nor the Elven scouts acknowledged the cheering crowds around us.

Anner's men stood at regular intervals along the street as well. When I

passed, each man raised his sword to his visor in salute. The tribute touched me. As we rode by, each warrior fell into step behind our party. It was a gesture of solidarity that was not lost on the crowd. Their cheers burst forth in a great shout of pride for their men, the heroes of our last battle.

The streets were twisting and constricted, following an ancient route to the castle that stood on the far western edge of the city. I glanced to my east and saw a second castle: the hereditary home of the Counts de Callat. This city, once divided and jointly ruled, was now solidly under the thumb of the new Duke de Ceolliune. Our procession continued up a steep, sloping road: part of the ancient breastworks built to defend the castle soon after its construction.

Brial leaned toward me from his horse to ask, "Are you feeling well enough for this, *cariad*?"

I answered with a smile and he pulled his mount closer. When we crested the slope, we saw Anner. He waited for us in a courtyard with his councilors and Mylan, Earl of Phoclydies, at his side.

We halted our horses and Brial leapt to the ground first. He lifted me down from the saddle and bowed. He would have fallen behind me for the walk to where Anner waited, but I held out my hand to him. "Please?"

Without a word, he placed my hand upon his arm and walked at my side, his silver armor shining in the sun. When we stopped in front of our friend, I curtsied deeply.

Anner raised me to my feet. "Milady of Asphodel, welcome to Ceolliune-Callat! We are honored to have you as our guest!"

"Your Grace," I replied politely, as he bowed to me in return. "It is the honor of Asphodel to join you upon this occasion. May you reign long and well in this beautiful city."

Anner pressed my hand and his eyes fell on Brial. "Swordbrother and friend, welcome to my home. We are grateful for the presence of you and your lady."

Brial inclined his head. The two men clasped forearms. Anner then moved on to greet Mariol and Glaucon. I gave Brial a reassuring smile. As the welcoming ceremony concluded, we followed Anner through the great double doors into the cool corridors of his home.

* * * *

We occupied a suite of rooms that were more luxurious than the ones I had loved in Mariol's house. The Ceolliune family was among the oldest of the Ansienne nobility and their wealth rivaled that of the Crown. Our servants settled our things while I sank into an upholstered chair with a tired sigh. Brial sent a man for some wine and came to sit at my side.

"You are tired, *cariad*."

"I'll be all right in a little while. I'll be glad to sleep in a bed again."

"It should do you some good," my lifemate agreed.

The servant hurried back in with a decanter of wine and two glasses on a tray. Behind him, one of Anner's servitors bore a tray with small meat-filled pastries in them. The food and drink refreshed me and I glanced at Brial with a smile.

"I never thought I'd say this," I remarked, "but thank the gods for Myrielle! If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be equipped to deal with this

magnificence.”

Brial looked around with a grimace, the normal Elven response to the homes of humans. “It is a bit more lavish than Asphodel,” he allowed with sarcastic understatement.

It was, indeed. Thick woven rugs lay upon the tiled marble floors, and the fireplace took up most of the space along one long wall. Frescoes adorned the ceilings and heavily gilded ornamentation hung upon the walls, which gleamed with lavish color. Dark blue curtains hung at the windows, which rose from the floor to the ceiling, and around the huge bed. There were delicate chairs scattered before the fire and a discreet table with two chairs stood between the windows. Curtains screened a bathing chamber from the main room. A huge tub was set into the floor, and I smiled at the sight of it. A dressing room, a sitting room, and rooms for our attendants completed the luxurious suite.

I took another sip of wine and nibbled on a pastry. “As soon as I feel up to it, I’m going to take a long, hot bath in that big tub.”

“That will do you good, *cariad*.”

I lowered my eyes, so that I peeped up at him from beneath my lashes. “Aren’t you going to offer to scrub my back?”

A flicker of amusement touched his eyes. “I thought we’d agreed that you weren’t going to try those wiles on me anymore,” he admonished sternly.

“You agreed; I didn’t. Besides you like ‘those wiles’ a lot.”

He smiled at me then. “They can be a lot of fun. Especially when your own thoughts make you blush.”

“My thoughts don’t make me blush,” I protested. “Yours do.”

He pulled me onto his lap. "Fortunately, *alanna*, you don't catch most of my thoughts. You'd spend all your time blushing if you did."

I kissed him. Sudden ardor surged through us both. After a moment, he pulled away and looked down at me, his breathing slightly ragged.

"You must be feeling better," he murmured. "We will wait a bit longer, *cariad*. Despite your subtle adornment," and he ran a slender finger along my cheek, "you are still too pale for my comfort."

I did blush then and he laughed to see it. A few minutes later, Bryse entered the room to tell me my bath was prepared. He stood and carried me into the bathing room. I was laughing when he set me down, but he left me with a regretful kiss and sped from the room.

* * * *

Dinner that night was a formal affair, presided over by Anner in the Great Hall of his castle. Most of Ceolliune-Callat was present, sitting at long, low tables in their finery. We, on the other hand, sat at the high table with the other invited nobles. The widowed Duchess, garbed in mourning clothes for her dead husband, sat at her son's left hand. She directed the pace of the meal with small gestures to the chamberlain, who related them to the servants. I sat at Anner's right hand and Brial sat next to me.

I wore one of Myrielle's sumptuous creations, this time in the soft, spring green favored by the Elves. Unbeknownst to me, she had also made Brial a doublet of the same material. I thought he was handsome, the green velvet stretched across his shoulders and his fair hair pulled back into a simple braid.

My gown was more magnificent than any I had worn before, save my Presentation Gown. It was very low cut, and the Ka'antira emerald rode between the curves of my breasts. With emeralds winking from a bracelet and earring set I had found in the coffer Mariol had given me, I felt unusually elegant.

Conversation during the meal was formal and meaningless. Anner did take the opportunity to inform me that he would send someone for us afterwards and we would have our real conversation in his study. For the time being, we sat on display at the main table, in order to give the city a chance to look upon us.

I ate little. Ceolliune cuisine was spicy and most of the rich foods did not suit my palate. I had some fruit and cheese and a small serving of roast quail, served in a delicate sauce rich with cream. When the servants brought the dessert course, however, I could not refuse a pastry heaped with sweet raspberries and meringue.

We rose after the meal was over, thanked the Duchess cordially for a wonderful feast, and escaped to our suite. Bryse was there to help me change. When she left I sat in one of the chairs close to the fire while I brushed out my hair.

"It's not fair to turn that hair loose on me," Brial remarked mournfully from the window. "How am I supposed to stay over here and restrain myself if you're going to resort to tricks like that?"

"You're not supposed to stay over there," I replied lightly, running the brush through a thick curl over my right shoulder.

He laughed and joined me. His warm hands rested on my shoulders as he bent to give me a kiss. I leaned into the kiss and when Brial pulled away, he was laughing again.

"No, Tamsen," he said, shaking a finger at me. "As soon as I get caught up in you, someone will knock at that door to take us to Anner."

"It might give you something to think about while we're trying to be serious in our discussion," I purred.

"You are an evil woman."

"You taught me everything I know, Brial," I replied, pulling the brush through my hair again. "You have no one to blame but yourself, you know."

He smiled at me. Taking the brush, he brushed my hair himself. Whenever he did this, I would melt into a warm ball. His hands were so gentle, and the brush strokes so soothing, that it never failed to put me to sleep. Ten minutes later, I was dozing in my chair. When the servant came to fetch us, Brial had to awaken me with a wry smile upon his face.

* * * *

"There was no sign of any of Jeshan's men," Anner reported. "The entire family is gone from Callat, along with their trusted retainers and servants. I would venture to guess that they are in Geochon, helping to establish the monarchy."

"So," I said thoughtfully, curled against Brial's side on a sofa. "That means that we control all of the central two-thirds of the kingdom, with Jeshan and his forces in the north at Geochon and Spesialle to the south with his armies. We have access to the ocean and control most of the Ilia River. Am I correct?"

The men nodded in agreement. I continued after a brief pause, "Why is

that, I wonder?"

"What do you mean, milady?" Anner asked. He had completely reverted to his old formality, especially when addressing me.

"I mean, surely they knew that you would oppose them," I pointed out. "Not including Asphodel, which had to have been a surprise, they would have been stupid not to realize that your cities and armies would oppose their usurpation of the crown. Anyone with an eye can see it clearly on the map; why would these two renowned strategists have overlooked it?"

"They couldn't have," Mylan agreed, peering at the map. "No military commander could."

"Then that is our first, and most important puzzle," I announced. I felt exhaustion beginning to take its toll upon me once more and struggled to speak coherently. "What advantage do they have that enables them to ignore standard strategy?"

Silence fell across the room as the men considered my words. Brial tucked me under his arm so that I could let my full weight fall against him. "It must be something that nullifies the advantage that gives us," he noted.

"What could that be?" Mylan asked.

"Allies," Mariol said. "They have forged alliances with our neighbors! Look!" He put one hand to the north, another to the south, each on the western border of Ansienne. Two countries fell under his hand: Tartarus to the north and Vaulad to the south.

"Exactly," I said. "They hole up their armies in their strongholds, and wait for their foreign reinforcements to arrive. Tartarus probably has struck a deal with Jeshan for the Elven forest. Their kingdom has few resources, and the

forest would bring them a great deal of valuable timber. Vaulad, on the other hand, has always started border disputes, ever since Spesialle and its harbor came into Ansienne. It would be a simple matter to promise them the territory west of Spesialle. Who would argue? Gabril would end up with half of Ansienne, so he wouldn't cringe at losing some of his western lands. This strategy would enable the traitors to fight a two-front war without straining their resources. They can rely upon their allies to give them the men they need to take control of the entire kingdom."

"It was probably their backup plan all along," Anner concurred. "If they had defeated our armies at Asphodel, negotiations could 'fall through' and nothing would be lost. But now, Spesialle and Callat are going to release the wolves upon us so they can regain what they lost."

"What will we do about this?" I asked.

No one responded. I looked from face to face, and saw no sparks of inspiration leaping to anyone's eyes. I sighed, and looked up at Brial. He immediately got to his feet, helping me to rise and putting a supporting arm around my waist.

"We will retire now," he said smoothly. "We all need to think on this, and perhaps a night's sleep will bring us a plan of action."

Anner rose to his feet, as did the other men. "You may have the right of it, my friend," he replied, after a sharp look at my face. "Your lady seems to be exhausted, and we can resume this in the morning."

Brial hustled me out of the room, carrying me as soon as we were out of sight. Before I knew what was happening, he had me into my nightgown and tucked into the huge bed. I looked up at him weakly from the piles of pillows.

"You have pushed yourself too far today, *cariad*," he said, pouring out a

measure of my nighttime brew. "Sleep now and you'll feel better in the morning."

"I'm tired of being so weak," I complained, opening my mouth meekly for the medicine.

"I know, Tamsen". He stripped off his clothes and slid under the covers, pulling me to his chest in a swift, strong motion.

"Brial, I am afraid," I said, already growing sleepy.

"Afraid of what, *cariad*?"

"There is something I don't see in this. It's like a puzzle with a piece missing," I replied. "Their actions don't make sense."

"No, they don't," he agreed. "We will find out their plans, beloved."

"I love you."

"And I love you," he said, kissing me gently as I nestled against his chest.

* * * *

My dream came again that night, despite Kaldarte's medicine. I watched as two warriors dragged Brial into the chamber in chains. His face was thin, and pale, and there was a half-healed cut on his forehead. Jeshan de Callat sat upon the throne, glaring at my stoic Elven husband as Gabril de Spesialle taunted him.

I started to go after my husband, but a hand on my arm stopped me. I looked up, and there was my cousin Liliath.

"No," she whispered, her voice a tiny sound in my ears. "Now is not the time. Wait."

I stared at her, uncomprehending. Was it Liliath? I thought it was but I could not be certain. Desperately, I turned back to Brial, willing him to turn and see me. A thin wail floated through the air over the scene, and my blood turned to ice.

Brial's eyes met mine, but no sign of recognition crossed his face. We stared mournfully at each other as Gabril de Spesialle said, "Since you interfered with my plans for my niece, you can have her death."

Brial looked at my uncle, and said quietly, "I agree. Let it be done."

I screamed and jumped for Brial. But my hand could not reach him, and as my uncle laughed, flames consumed my beloved husband.

I awoke, drenched in sweat, screaming his name. Brial started and then pulled me roughly to his chest. "Hush, *cariad*," he said, rocking me soothingly. "I am here."

I dissolved in helpless sobs against his chest. He said nothing, simply murmured words of love and comfort against my hair as my tears dried on my hot cheeks.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked me after a while, when my limbs had stopped shaking.

I did not answer him. Instead, I reached up and pulled him to me hungrily. He stiffened, and then all of his defenses shattered. His mouth fell on me, devouring me as I clung to him. The gentle sweetness he had always displayed around me in our bed was gone, and replaced with a fervor that bordered on ferocity. I welcomed it, exhilarated by his passion, and matched

him as the dream fled from my mind.

* * * *

Later, much later, I lay replete and awake by his side. I couldn't tell, in the darkness of our chamber, if he was asleep. I thought not, judging by the irregularity of his breathing. I smiled to myself, finally victorious against the barrier he had erected around his emotions.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly, his voice rumbling through his chest.

"Never better."

"Will you rest now?" he asked, a tiny thread of humor in his voice.

"What choice do I have?" I asked with a yawn, pressing a small kiss against his shoulder.

However, I lay awake all night, thinking about my dream as he slept, unknowing, beside me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

For two days, we met in council and debated our options for this new threat. Brial kept at my side, guarding my health jealously. I felt better on those days and we both hoarded my new strength. There were many festivities planned in the city to celebrate the ascension of the new Duke, but we stayed quietly in our rooms. Although our friends looked at me questioningly, no one asked if I were all right. It was like a conspiracy among us and if they guessed I had sacrificed my health in the battle, they did not mention it.

In the evenings, however, there were functions we could not miss. Always there was the formal meal in the Great Hall, with musicians and acrobats for our entertainment. We attended those, doing honor to our host and friend. Then, Brial and I met with our allies through the long, dusty-smelling nights in Ceolliune and tried to decipher the few, small clues we had.

I found time, also, for my intended talk with my cousin Liliath. She came to see me nearly every morning, chasing Brial from the room and supervising the concoction of my daily medicines herself.

When I brought up her reaction at our last full Council at Asphodel, she sighed. "The feelings Anner has for you are causing tension between he and Brial," she pointed out sadly. "Although they are trying to subdue their feelings as unworthy, it still remains in the backs of their minds."

"I know. I'm not certain what to do about it."

"Nothing. They are grown men, and older than you. Let them worry about it."

"I will, unless it gets out of hand," I replied.

She peered at my face. "You're very pale. Aren't you feeling any better?"

"Not really."

Liliath frowned. "Maybe I should check you over. That medicine should be helping you more than it is. Lie down."

I lay back on the bed while she ran through the quick, thorough examination that Kaldarte had taught her. I was lost in thought as she ran knowledgeable hands over my limbs and torso. Suddenly she rocked back, her face blanching.

"What is it?" I asked sharply, sitting up.

Liliath's eyes were huge. "Tamsen, did you ever stop to think that you might be pregnant?"

* * * *

Pregnant? How was that possible? I had faithfully followed Kaldarte's instructions; every morning I drank the infusion of herbs that should prevent conception. The more I thought about it the more likely it seemed. My continued weakness, the drain I felt on my strength even when I rested could all be attributed to this simple fact. As I considered it, my spirits sank. Brial had

probably suspected this. His overwhelming concern for my health was easily justified if he thought I carried his child.

Fortunately, the Elven *vialigatis* allowed for the legitimacy of children conceived during the yearlong bond. Our child would be acknowledged as heir to us both. In the eyes of human society, however, there would be a great deal of controversy. The human world had no provision for a ceremony of handfasting; unless there was a marriage soon, our child would be considered a bastard.

The baby would be an object of great power in our world, coming as it did from Asphodel and the Elven royal family and backed by the military might of its father's house. It would be a threat to the ambitious men who even now were tearing our kingdom apart.

Liliath had informed Cetenne of the pregnancy. After a quiet talk with the Ceolliune midwife, they'd returned with a new batch of herbs to help me through the early phases of pregnancy. When Cetenne suggested that it might be wise to inform Brial that he was to be a father, however, I balked.

I thought of Brial's probable reaction to my news and groaned. As overprotective as he already was, he'd be even more so once he knew I was pregnant. A long, unending vista of days locked in our bedchamber at Asphodel swam before my eyes. I wouldn't be able to keep my condition secret for long. Eventually, he would have to know.

And on that day, every bit of freedom I had would disintegrate.

* * * *

Anner's investiture was the next day. He had, according to the martial

traditions of his family, spent the previous night in a vigil in the temple of Aresen, the god of war. During such a vigil, three friends would keep watch while he prayed. To my surprise, Anner asked Brial to be one of his vigil-sharers. Brial agreed and I had a full night alone in our bed.

Bryse awoke me at dawn, just as the faintest light peeked over the horizon. Yawning, I went to bathe. We hurried through my preparations. Bryse arranged my hair high upon my head in an elaborate confection of braids and ringlets. When that was complete, she laced me into the lavish crimson silk Court gown. She pulled a set of rubies from the coffer of Mariol and added their fire to my toilette. Finally, she applied the cosmetics that were required for the most formal Court occasions to my pale face. She touched my lips with red stain and darkened my brows and lashes.

When the herald arrived to summon me to the temple, I was ready. I used this thought to buoy me; Brial was still assisting Anner in these final minutes before his ascension to the ducal throne. Behind me, my uncle Wilden and the twins fell into step, all of them resplendent in formal Elven attire in the Ka'antira colors. Wilden, as my ceremonial bodyguard for the occasion, strode behind me with the blade of his sword laid flat across his palms and lifted to chest level. This was an ancient indication of readiness to protect in Elven tradition.

Cettenne and Liliath were breathtakingly lovely, as any Elfmaidens are when compared to the briefer flame of beauty we humans enjoy. They had dressed simply, in the delicate gauzy fabrics that the Elves preferred for formal dress and their hair fell unbound down their backs, as was appropriate for unmarried Elfmaidens of rank.

Next to their effortless, unpainted beauty, I felt fussy and ridiculous.

I stood alone as the herald announced, "Her Royal Highness, Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel, Countess of Asphodel and Princess of Leselle!"

Suppressing a grimace at the grandiose sound of my title, I moved forward at a slow, steady march. Behind me, the herald announced my cousins. I felt thousands of eyes on me as I passed. My Elven uncle strode two paces behind me with his drawn sword and stern, beautiful features. I kept my eyes fixed on my ultimate destination: the immense dais at the far end of the temple.

As a member of the Ansienne higher nobility and an Elven Princess in my own right, I sat on the dais with the highest ranked people in the country. I did not acknowledge any of the whispers or murmurs that greeted my passing down that endless aisle. Instead, I proceeded slowly to the five men that stood in the center of the dais. One was Anner, in a simple white tunic and trousers. One was the high priest of the temple, wearing his ceremonial helm and carrying the traditional spear that was the indication of his rank within the priesthood. The other three men were Glaucon, Mylan, and my lifemate, Brial, whose eyes were fixed on me with a half-smile of pride on his face.

I mounted the five steps of the dais, my train weighting me down from behind and dipped into the formal curtsy that was the accepted greeting for equals meeting equals. Anner bowed, lifted my hand ceremoniously to his lips, and turned to give my hand to Brial. Their eyes met over the exchange, like a flash, and then Brial took my hand and guided me to my proscribed chair.

As I was the only ruling woman in the realm, I mounted the dais first. This distinction also did honor to my Elven heritage, as did the seating of Liliath and Cetenne immediately after me. It was smart of Anner, I mused, to place the Elves so prominently in his investiture. It established the Elven nation as an ally and as an equal. I also congratulated myself for my cleverness. Bringing my two lovely cousins, also Ka'antira princesses, as representatives of that nation was a stroke of genius. Wilden's impassive bearing behind our chairs spoke volumes for our importance to our people. Brial and his men, clad in the Ka'breona blue

and black, showed the military might of this hidden nation within the kingdom of Ansienne. His plate armor gleamed in the growing light of the autumn day, his fair hair long and flowing around his beautiful face and a smile curved his lips.

After he had seated me, he bowed once more and returned to Anner's side. Mariol sat next to me, magnificent in his velvet doublet and cape in the Beotte gold and cream, his face grave. That solemnity did not slip from his features, even when he whispered to me that the high priest, supposedly a warrior, certainly had not been fighting a lot judging from the condition of his protruding belly. I half-turned my head, expressionless, as if listening to what he said, and skewered him with a vicious glare. He chuckled soundlessly next to me for a full minute.

There were at least thirty dignitaries, all with their own chairs of state, to announce and seat upon the dais. Last of all, the Dowager Duchess of Ceolliune, was handed up with great solicitude by her son.

All of the nobles on the dais rose when she reached the top of the steps and bowed formally in deference to her grief. As I sank into the deep curtsy etiquette demanded, I wondered for a split second if I would be able to stand back up. The weight of my formal attire was already getting to me. Mariol cast one sharp look at me as he rose and placed a surreptitious hand beneath my elbow. I managed to make it back to my feet without incident. I waited until the Duchess sat, then the rest waited until my cousins and I had retaken our seats, before the ceremony began.

I have never possessed a great love for formal ceremonies. The smaller courtesies of etiquette and the chivalric formulae were one thing; both the Elves and humans relied on them for specific situations. Hyagrem had drilled these into me so that they were now rote. The overwhelming splendor of this

investiture, while fascinating, was a bit too much for me.

So, I let my thoughts wander.

Mariol had instructed me on my behavior the day before like this: "We sit there, looking as regal and as uninterested as possible, to give Anner as great an impression of support as we can. Normally, the king would have placed the ducal coronet on his head. As it is, we must make do. We may be in rebellion against the usurper, but all of the niceties must be observed. It is very important that you, especially, make a formidable impression. We could sway many of the fools who will attend this ceremony to join us in the field. A great deal rests on your ability to pull off the ascendancy of Asphodel in our country."

Which, I thought as Anner knelt before the priest, was likely to make this day one of the longest days of my life. I attended the ritual with only half a mind. Anner recited his pledge to the people of Ceolliune while kneeling, and the priest anointed his head with oil, muttering a prayer in a loud voice. Then he bade Anner rise.

Followed by his three friends, Anner walked to the great altar in the center of the platform. Glaucon carried his helm, Brial his shield, and Mylan his sword. At a word from the priest, the three warriors laid their charges upon the altar.

The priest moved behind the altar, lifted his arms, and shouted: "*Aresen vigila!* Your son, tested in battle and heir to the house of Ceolliune, stands before you. He asks for your blessing upon his investiture."

The priest poured more of the sacred oil onto the armor and sword. Acolytes of the temple lit smudges of sagebrush around the perimeter of the dais. The thick smoke made my eyes water, but I kept my expression serene. The priest prayed over each item before handing them to one of the three men to

rearm Anner. The sword was last, slid into the sheath the previous Duke had carried when he died on the fields of Asphodel. Mylan presented the sword on bended knee and the priest stepped forward to fasten the heavy leather belt around Anner's waist. Anner bowed his head. He knelt, removed his helm, and tucked it beneath his arm. The priest drew the ducal coronet from beneath the altar. It was a slender band of hammered gold, set only with a single star sapphire at its front.

Lifting the coronet above his head, the priest intoned, "Thus do we announce that Anner, son of Anton, has risen to the rank of the most revered Duke of Ceolliune! Bless him, great lord of war, as he continues the greatness of his house! The blessing of the gods is twofold; what they give you they give in love. But for every gift, there is a reckoning, and that reckoning is yours, god of war! *Aresen vigila!*"

He placed the coronet on Anner's head and those of us seated on the dais rose as instructed. When Anner got to his feet, we, in turn, bowed to him, in honor of his new station. He turned gravely for the acclamation of his people, who cheered loudly at the sight of the handsome, serious man who stood before them in his new glory.

Suddenly, he broke with tradition. He gestured to the priest, who picked up a second spear from the top of the dais and crashed them together, shouting, "*Aresen vigila! Aresen vigila!* Ceolliune is at war, and asks your blessing upon her!"

The cheering died as if a sword had sliced through the thousands of throats facing us. The new Duke of Ceolliune gazed gravely down upon his people. "I am come to you in a time of great danger." His deep, rich voice carried across the swiftly silent crowd. "Our king has been murdered and his throne stolen by the traitor of Callat. Our country is divided, my friends, and we are

surrounded. To the north, this usurper who calls himself king lies in wait for us, while to our south, our despised neighbor the Duke de Spesialle gathers forces to him with allies from our closest neighboring kingdom. I do not come to this seat lightly; I come here on the heels of betrayal and regicide. I occupy this seat because my father, seeing these things, died to prevent them from reaching our beloved city. I have declared that we are at war. We will take this fight to the end, buoyed by the gods who know that we are righteously roused to battle!"

For the first time, he paused and the people in the temple shouted joyously for him. They looked upon the austere features of their new ruler and his words stirred them to action. His people had loved Anton de Ceolliune. They transferred this love unquestioningly to his son. Anner stood before them in his ceremonial armor, his grey eyes shining with glory, and his people adored him for it.

Next to me, Mariol stirred. "I think the rules of this ceremony are about to change," he whispered to me.

A feeling close to panic rose in my throat as Anner continued: "Therefore, my people, this I do in memory of my father and for the love of our city and our kingdom! The oaths he swore, I will fulfill! The battles that he fought, I will continue! The fealty he expressed, I will uphold!"

"Damn!" I swore in mortification. The high priest of Aresen, still clutching the two spears that heralded the Ceolliune call to war, came to stand at my side. He extended his free hand to me and I had no choice but to take it and rise from my chair. A low murmur flashed across the room, as the priest led me to where Anner waited.

Regardless of ceremony, Brial was at my side, his face back in its old blank lines. Wilden followed me, the sword flat across his palms and only I, who knew him so well, could see the sudden tension in his face at this unexpected turn of

events.

Anner turned to me and descended one step. "My father swore his fealty to you, Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel, as the best hope of our kingdom. In return, you swore to him that you would not forsake the freedom of our people while the usurper sat upon his stolen throne. In his name, then, I do also swear my fealty unto you, Lady of Asphodel. While you seek the overthrow of the faithless man who calls himself king, Ceolliune will follow you with her armies and her heart."

I glared at him, angry with him for not warning me about this. Anner dropped to one knee and drew his sword, which he laid at my feet. Suddenly, I realized that he really meant to do it. The little ceremonies of the chivalric code that we had performed in the past would be duplicated here, in this public arena. He lifted his face to mine and waited until I held out my icy right hand to him.

"I, Anner, Duke of Ceolliune, pledge the might of my sword and my armies to your cause, Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel. My sword is sworn to your service, and if I foreswear my word, I forfeit my honor to your grace," he recited, his voice joyful as it rang across the room.

I had no choice. "Asphodel accepts your fealty in this, milord Duke, and returns to you the pledge we made to your revered father. As long as the usurper sends war onto the people of Ansienne, Asphodel will oppose him, with you at our side. To this, I do swear my honor—"

I hesitated. I couldn't think clearly. Without realizing what I was doing, I discarded the familiar words of the chivalric code. Instead of finishing "and my service" as the code required, something prompted me to conclude, "— and my life, even unto and beyond my death. My heirs will fulfill my oath if I am unable to do so. This I swear in the sight of the gods."

Anner kissed my hand and lifted his sword to his face in salute. As I stared down at him, bemused, a noise caused me to look up. Mylan and Glaucon had fallen to their knees at Anner's side. Mariol also knelt with his slim decorative rapier drawn and laid upon the marble steps.

Even as I watched, the remainder of the lords on the dais filed down to swear their service and many of the minor lords in the temple proper stepped forward and knelt on the marble floor before the stairs. Stunned, my gaze flew to Brial, only to see him pull the great golden sword of the Ka'breona and kneel, followed by my uncle and the twins.

My eyes glazed in shock at the sight; horror welled within my chest at this honor, this devotion for which I had never asked. As the kneeling throng in the Temple chanted the oath to me, their voices rising as one, I locked eyes with Anner. Pride shone from his face along with a pious joy at the effect his tribute had upon the assembled men. I narrowed my eyes at him for his duplicity and turned to start accepting each man's sword in turn.

The last to reach me was Brial, who bent low as he kissed my hand and murmured in a hard voice, "I think we have something to discuss, *cariad*."

My eyes met his, startled; his black glance skewered me as he moved back to my side. I shivered, a sudden chill running down my spine, as he offered me his arm to escort me back to my chair of state. He returned, his face smooth, to Anner's side as he was ritually seated on the ducal throne.

I was bewildered at his reaction until Cetenne leaned forward and whispered, "Tamsen, you idiot! Don't you think you should have told him you were pregnant *before* you pledged your heirs to this oath?"

Suddenly, all of the pieces fell into place for me. I shut my eyes in horror, while around me the elaborate ritual of the investiture proceeded.

* * * *

The feast that followed the ceremony was flamboyant and immense. Held outdoors in the massive courtyard in front of the ducal palace all the citizens of Ceolliune turned out to honor their new duke. I sat in the place of honor and responded courteously, if woodenly, to every remark Anner made to me.

Brial sat silently at *my* right, eating little and saying nothing. He had removed his armor and now wore a formal tunic. Unfortunately, his demeanor overshadowed his Elven beauty. His face grew more impassive with every passing minute and I quaked inwardly at the sight. If he were this angry at a *possibility*, he would be enraged when I told him that I was pregnant. Our child was already a reality and I, unthinking, had sworn that child's fate to our cause, to a future that was uncertain and filled with danger.

I had not yet experienced the nausea associated with early pregnancy, but even as I thought it, queasiness churned in my belly. I pushed the dainty, beautifully arrayed morsels of food around on my plate and wondered how long it would be before I could leave. I risked a swift glance at Brial, who was looking at my plate and frowning. Resolutely, I lifted a forkful of carrots to my mouth, willing my stomach to stop its acrobatics.

I had to explain to him that I hadn't known for a full day yet! Even now, a small doubt tickled at the edges of my awareness. Brial would never believe that I was so stupid that I did not know my own body.

It was hours before we could get away; long hours in which we watched the children of the city perform a traditional dance for their new lord and his guests, followed by musicians and minstrels who vied for the prizes Anner gave

out. I sat through it all; my face composed and as blank in its way as Brial's ever was.

However, I smiled and applauded politely, until the musicians struck up a beautiful, but sad, dance tune just as the sun set behind the turrets of the castle of Callat in the distance. I was about to make my excuses to Anner, when Brial appeared at my side, bowing with his hand extended. "Will you do me the honor of this dance, my lady?"

"Certainly, my lord." I put my hand in his and got to my feet.

He led me to the dancing square set up before the high table, and slid his arms around me as we stepped into the opening measures of the dance.

I peered at his face and when his black eyes met mine the pallor of his face struck me. His skin was pale, as were all the Elves, but this startling whiteness was different.

Brial leaned in close to me. "In a few minutes, you will make your excuses and I will escort you to your chambers, Tamsen."

I had planned to do just that, but being ordered to was something different entirely. "I thought we'd stay for a while longer, actually."

His grip on my hand became painful. I caught my breath and darted another look at his face. His complete lack of expression warned me not to argue.

"Very well," I conceded, even as my eyes narrowed and my chin rose a little. "If it's so important to you."

The dance over, I made my way back to the head table. Mariol's face was inscrutable, but his eyes twinkled at me as I murmured a conventional excuse of my exhaustion and took my leave of the noble guests. Wilden fell in behind me,

his sword returned to its scabbard. I turned and shot him one anguished look, which he acknowledged with a deliberately assessing glance at Brial. We then made our way out of the courtyard and back into the palace.

* * * *

Once in our rooms, I called for Bryse to help me undress and put off the inevitable while I escaped into the dressing room. I was soon clad in one of my favorite loose gowns, the cosmetics washed from my face and my feet blessedly free from the sharp-toed shoes that were required with formal Court dress. She left quickly on my order. With a sigh, I picked up my hairbrush and returned to our bedroom.

Brial was still in his formal tunic. He stood at the window with a goblet of wine and stared out over the celebrating people in the courtyard. I darted an uneasy look at his face. He was distant, remote, his thoughts hidden by a melancholy mask. I took a chair near the hearth and began to brush out my hair.

He threw back the remainder of the wine in his goblet and turned toward me, regarding me steadily. The silence in the room was disconcerting.

"I think there's something we need to discuss." Even his voice was tired, deepened by restraint.

I looked at him, trying to gauge his mood. The old blank look had dropped over his features again. I knew I had to proceed with great caution.

Before I could put together a reply, he asked, "Don't you think you should have consulted with me before you pledged our children to follow this path, Tamsen?"

"Yes," I replied immediately and dropped my hands to my lap. "I should have. I don't know *what* made me do it, Brial. I didn't think about it before I made that promise. It just happened."

My effort to appease him didn't work. He glared at me for a moment. His face tightened in an attempt to keep his temper under control. "You have condemned our heirs to this battle, Tamsen. We don't even *have* children yet and because of this ridiculous oath we are bound to raise them to continue a war that, at the moment, looks hopeless."

I looked down at my hands. I could see the calluses upon them. Long hours with the sword had toughened them. An image flashed into my mind of a young boy with Elven features and silver-ringed eyes, training with Wilden in the courtyard of Asphodel. Horror filled me, and I closed my eyes. When I reopened them, I knew that all of my fears were written upon my face. I glanced back up at Brial to find him staring at me.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?"

"Yes."

He set the goblet carefully onto the table at his side. "How long have you known?"

"Since yesterday."

"Did you plan on informing me?" His voice rose as his brows drew together into a frown.

"Not like this." I sighed. "I was going to wait until we returned to Asphodel. I wanted to be home first."

"It never occurred to you, when you've been so ill, that you might be with child?" he asked evenly.

"I never thought about it," I admitted. "I took the medicine Kaldarte gave me to prevent pregnancy. As far as I knew, I wouldn't get pregnant! I never considered it as a possibility."

Brial turned back to the window. "You're no longer making decisions just for you, Tamsen. You're making decisions for us, for our children, for Asphodel and for the Elven Realm."

"The Elven Realm?"

"Like it or not, you are the heir to the throne of Leselle. When you pledge your heirs to a task, you are committing the entire Elven Realm. You have sworn them to a course that is alien to their nature. Did you stop to think that your heirs, *our* heirs, are also Elves? That they are also *my* heirs?"

"No, I didn't," I admitted. Guilt brought tears rushing to my eyes, and I choked them back.

"No, you didn't," he agreed. "Now I, too, am bound to uphold your word."

He came to sit opposite me, folding his tall frame into the delicate chair. "How far along are you?"

"Not far. I think it happened right before the battle at Asphodel." I had thought about this as well, lying alone in our bed the night before. I had gone into battle carrying new life. I had called up a terrible magic, one that had destroyed my strength and punished my body. I did not want to think about what that might have done to the child inside of me.

"Three months then. There is yet time to get you home before it is too dangerous to ride."

Brial took my hand absently, looking past me into some dim future that I

could not yet perceive. "He will be a child born of Asphodel and the Ka'breona, and an heir to the seat of Antir – what a responsibility upon us, *cariad*, to teach him of his heritage!"

"Yes," I agreed softly.

"There is only one way to keep you both safe," he murmured, still lost in his reverie. "Spesialle must be killed."

I stared at him in alarm. "Brial, that's the *last* thing you should think about right now! You can't keep us safe if you're running all over the continent looking for my thrice-damned uncle –"

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Let me worry about protecting you and the child, *alanna*. It is my responsibility to do so."

"But what if –"

"Not now, *cariad*," he interrupted me. His mood changed swiftly and he pulled my hand to his lips. He pressed a kiss upon it and smiled at me, happiness transforming his face. "Let it wait until tomorrow. Tonight, let's just be grateful for this blessing of the gods."

Blessing of the gods. The phrase rang in my ears, the way something significant always does when dropped into casual conversation. *Blessing of the gods.* The room whirled around me, and I clutched Brial's arm.

"Are you ill?" he demanded sharply.

"No, beloved, just tired, I think," I replied, closing my eyes against the dizziness. "Just let me lie down for a while, and I'll be all right."

I rose abruptly and made my way to the bed. Brial lay beside me and after a while, I sank into a sleep so deep it was almost a stupor. I awoke many

hours later, with the sounds of the festival gone in the quiet moonlight. *Blessing of the gods.*

Why was that so important? Why was I tossing in the heat of the Ceolliune night worrying over those words? Alongside it ran another phrase: *A new and terrible magic you will bear, such as the world has never seen.*

Daphnis' warning. What if that admonition wasn't meant for me? What if those words were in reference to my child, who was within my body when I called the energy and power of the earth itself to strengthen my magic?

In my mind, I heard the high priest of Aresen. *"The blessing of the gods is twofold; what they give you, they give you in love, but for every gift there is a reckoning and that reckoning lies with you, oh god of war!"*

As I slid back into sleep, the phrase reverberated in my dreams, and I watched Brial in his chains, with a crying child lying before him alongside a golden, gleaming Elven sword.

Chapter Twenty-five

The next day, however, the realities of my new situation sank in. When the servants brought our breakfast in, Brial awakened from a sound sleep to see me at our table, regarding a map spread on the floor in front of me.

“What are you doing?”

I nodded at the young girl who set down our tray. She bobbed a curtsy and left, closing the door behind her. Brial, always indifferent to human standards of modesty, reached for his dressing robe and came to join me at the table as I poured each of us a cup of tea. “I am looking at this map of Ansienne,” I replied absently, reaching for a piece of toast.

“Why?”

“To see if I can find a point where Callat might most logically send his reinforcements against us.”

“I see,” he said, thoughtfully, looking at me over the rim of his cup.

I looked at him. “All right, Brial, what is it?”

“What?”

“What’s on your mind?”

"I was just wondering if you intend to run a war while you are with child?"

That gave me a moment's pause. I thought for a few seconds. "I won't really be running it. You and your father and Anner will probably do all of that, but I think that I should probably be there."

"Why?"

"Because of the oath of fealty Anner duped everyone into swearing yesterday! They swore allegiance to Asphodel, and right now I *am* Asphodel."

"True," he agreed mildly. "You should consider something else."

"What?"

"Our child is also Asphodel, and it is your primary responsibility to keep him from danger."

I set my cup back into its saucer with a clink. "I knew this was coming. It's not like I'll be leading a charge on horseback, Brial. I'll just be behind the scenes, to make certain that our new allies honor their oaths."

"Not if your health doesn't permit it," he replied smoothly, but the dark glitter to his eyes belied his mild appearance.

"Not this again!"

"Absolutely, *cariad*. You swore your heirs would fulfill your pledge if you could not; which limits your involvement for now and the next few months to providing that heir safety. There are some changes which must now take place."

"What sort of changes?"

"To begin with, we must be married immediately," he replied, toying with

an apple from the tray before us. "Although our union is legalized among the Elves, it must be celebrated among humans to legitimize this child as your heir to Asphodel."

"If you had married me in the first place, this wouldn't be necessary," I pointed out spitefully.

"True, my love," he agreed, the gleam in his eyes more pronounced. "I thought I was looking after your best interests at the time. I see now that my concern was unnecessary."

"So marriage," I said. "Better late than never. What else?"

Those black eyes met mine steadily. "You will return to Asphodel and *stay there until the child is born, no matter what will happen.*"

My mouth dropped open as I stared at him in shock. "You can't be serious."

"Completely," he assured me with a humorless smile.

"But, Brial--"

"There is nothing to discuss, *cariad*. No one will take your side on this argument, Tamsen. If you accept me as your lifemate, and your husband, then you know I will uphold your oath and your honor on the field as if it were my own. I will carry the weight you bear for Asphodel. You will remain in safety and care for yourself and our child."

The finality in his voice did nothing to mask the fear behind his words. I looked up at his set face and realized a horrible truth: this time, Brial was correct. No one would side with me against him. The argument was lost already.

"I agree," I heard my voice saying. "I will remain in Asphodel, if that is

your wish, but first I have two demands to make.”

“What?” He folded his arms across his chest and scowled at me.

“First, someone must go to the Elves in Laton. We need to take a quorum of the Elven council to Asphodel with us for the ceremony.”

Apparently, he couldn’t find anything wrong with that request. He nodded after a moment. “And what else?”

I took a deep breath. “I must go to the sanctuary of Daphnis in Leselle.”

“But, it was destroyed when the city fell,” he objected.

“No, Brial,” I replied, once again feeling the tingle of the Seer’s blood coursing through my skin. “The sanctuary remains in the ruins of Leselle and I must go there.”

Eyes narrowed, he frowned at me. “Fair enough, *cariad*. We will send Wilden to Laton, we will be married at Asphodel, and you and I will go on to Leselle...if the Seer agrees that you are in good enough health and if the situation around the forest is secure.”

“Agreed.” I diverted my attention back to my map.

“Why are you looking at that thing?” he asked with a long suffering sigh.

“You did not forbid me to use my mind, Brial,” I retorted with a smile. “That, at least I can still do.”

* * * *

Less than an hour later, a respectful herald arrived at our door to request

our presence in the Duke's reception room, which we used as our temporary base of operations. I rolled up my map absently; Brial frowned at me, but made no comment. I smiled and hoped he was not too suspicious as we followed the herald through the corridors of the palace.

As we entered, the men jumped to their feet. I raised my hand in protest. "Please, gentlemen, you'll get tired with all of this jumping up and down. Thank you for the courtesy, but let's just forego that from now on, shall we?"

There were more men in this room than on previous occasions. Anner's transparent ploy had brought more allies into our fold, but most were unknown to me. I looked around the room carefully. Taking a deep breath, I plunged into my idea. "I have been thinking, my lords," I began, unfurling the map. "We know, or guess, that Jeshan de Callat and Gabril de Spesialle have formed alliances with our neighbors. The question before us then is simple. How do they plan to execute their conquest of Ansienne?"

"Obviously, they have offered something to both Tartarus and Vaulad," Anner replied.

"Exactly. Tartarus, having few natural resources, probably demanded the lands of the Elven forest. This would give them control of our northwestern territory as well as most of Lake Onros." I indicated the area on my map. "With Jeshan's control of Geochon and the port cities on our northeastern coast, this wouldn't deprive him of too much. The forest has been inviolate since the end of the Elf wars and offers him no benefit."

"If that is the case," the man sitting nearly opposite me began, "then they will move into that area in the spring."

I agreed. "Spesialle, on the other hand, has probably promised the southwestern territories to Vaulad, in a straight line to the west of this city up to

our border with Laton. That would give them important coastlines to our south, while keeping Ceolliune-Callat on the western border of Ansienne. The traitors would put forth this proposition with every intention of taking it back after our rebellion is over. Neither country would have the resources to defend their new possessions adequately for some years. Callat and Spesialle, on the other hand, would have a seasoned army ready to resume control of these areas."

"That makes sense," Mariol said, tapping his front teeth with a well-manicured finger. He looked up at me. "What are you suggesting?"

"We can't protect both fronts at once," I replied. "So, we'll have to select one direction in which to concentrate our efforts. Once that boundary is secured, we can turn our attention to the other."

"Which direction, then?" Anner asked, staring at me.

"Which direction constitutes the greater threat?"

The men frowned at the map and I waited patiently for someone to arrive at the same conclusions I had already drawn. Myrielle's advice about men had been a lesson learned for me: men didn't like women in charge. I had to manipulate them in the direction I wanted to go.

"Tartarus has the larger army," Mylan said at last. "The northern parts of the kingdom should be secure for a few months at least. The Tartarans can't get through the northern passes during the winter."

"I think it might be possible for us to position ourselves along the western edge of our country and prevent them from entering Ansienne at all. Then, after his reinforcements have been stopped," I continued with a chilly smile, "we can march on Geochon and take the usurper from his throne."

"It has merit," Anner said after a long, silent pause. "It would mean we'd

need a base of operations in the north, from which to establish our army.”

Glaucou said, "We can do that at Asphodel! The entire border is just a couple of days' march, if we go through the forest." He looked up at me with a smile, pointing out his idea on the map. "The Elves will be with us, so that shouldn't be any problem."

As the others in the room began to plan, I shot an innocently surprised look up at Brial. His face was resigned. Once again, I caught that questioning black glitter in his eyes. "This is your idea of staying at home?"

"That is what you ordered me to do," I reminded him. "I'm just trying to make you happy, Brial."

"What's this?" Anner asked.

Brial and I exchanged glances. "Brial wished me to stay at Asphodel this winter, that's all. He was just commenting on how...convenient your plans will be for me."

Mariol frowned at my impassive Elf, and then shot me a stern look. I widened my eyes again at him and he snorted in the back of his throat.

"Forgive me, gentlemen," I said, rising to my feet. "I have not yet recovered my strength from the battle at Asphodel. I think I will retire to my room, and leave you to discuss this."

Despite my earlier admonition, they all rose to their feet. I then looked at Brial and continued, "My husband and I will also be formalizing our union according to the ways of the people of Ansienne before the snow flies. You are all welcome to Asphodel to witness this ceremony in a month's time. We consider it a formality and an opportunity for some of you to meet our Elven kin. As you may know, I am no warrior, save by accident. I serve our army in a

completely different realm of responsibility. Therefore, Brial Ka'breona will have my full authority regarding the army or the lands of Asphodel."

It was a tense moment, with the new men who had sworn their fealty staring in shock at the stoic Elf by my side. I looked around the room, noting each man's response and said sharply, "The Elves have already lost their homeland to this war, gentlemen, and have fought valiantly at the sides of our men. Brial Ka'breona is not only my husband; he is a leader in the Elven army and the son of their general Beron Ka'breona. I assure you, his military experience far outweighs mine. There is no room in this cause, to which you all swore yesterday, for ancient prejudices and fears. It is time to heal the wounds of the Elf wars, my lords, and I promise you that the house of Asphodel will only honor the men who accept this healing. There is no room in my service for any who think otherwise."

A few men shifted their positions uneasily, but no one spoke out. A new wave of weariness washed over me, nearly driving me to my knees. I must have gone violently pale, for Brial instantly put a hand to the small of my back in support. No one seemed unmoved by this sudden display of frailty; stories of my magical intervention and consequent battle with Spesialle had flown swiftly through the kingdom. My exhaustion was understandable and in the eyes of many, proof of the higher magic that most thought was impossible.

Brial motioned to a servitor, who listened to his whispered orders and scurried from the room. A moment later, Wilden entered the room. He looked at me and took his place at my side.

"Take her to our room," Brial said softly. "Send for Liliath. I will be here if I am needed."

Wilden nodded and I inclined my head to the now-quiet men in the room. "Good day, gentlemen."

He followed me from the room, staying one step behind. I struggled to walk from the room under my own power, barely making it through the door before I felt my legs give way.

* * * *

We lingered in Ceolliune-Callat a fortnight. While I rested and hoarded my strength for the journey home, Brial spent his days in council with the other leaders within our growing army. When we finally departed, on a day with the first crisp autumnal breeze rustling around us, it was with the knowledge that our allies—and their soldiers—would start their trip to Asphodel soon after us. Our friends would be there for the wedding, set for four weeks hence.

Wilden left with Mylan, headed for the Elven sanctuary and the required quorum to witness our marriage vows. I also resolved, with Brial, Anner, and Mariol, to hammer out a treaty between the Elves and our coalition that would preserve the inviolate status of the Elven forest. I hoped this would bring the Elves home, and allow them to rebuild their culture in the forest that had engendered it.

We traveled home in easy stages. The season lengthened as we progressed through the cooler north, and the evenings took on a definite chill. Brial was considerate of me, since I was now feeling truly ill with nausea that lasted for most of the day. Truth to tell, I was beginning to enjoy Brial's pampering. We elected to keep our news to ourselves, save for our families.

When we reached home, Asphodel was in the glory of its harvest time splendor, the vibrant hues of the forest accentuating the renewed golden glow of the castle. The Great Hall, I was surprised to see, rose once again from the

remains of its predecessor. My first sight of my home was a group of men shingling the new, highly steep roof with shale from the river bottom.

“Oh!” My voice caught in my throat. “It’s almost done!”

More of my retainers had returned in our absence; Charot had hurried the work on the Hall, a runner having informed him of the plans to base our army from my lands – and the wedding. It was beautiful once more and to see the new immense beams framing the ceiling, the flagstone floor clean and whole, and the immense fireplace once again glowing with a homey fire brought tears of happiness to my eyes. I might not have the marble floors and frescoed ceilings of Ceolliune, but to me no sight was lovelier than the comfortable solidity of Asphodel.

Since we could now hold council in a more suitable place, Myrielle had moved us into my parents’ old bedchamber. The room had a new character of its own, with new hangings of a cheerful blue on the windows and bed. Kaldarte had placed some of her beautiful woven rugs before hearth and bed and several wall hangings I particularly liked around the chamber. Myrielle had dipped lavishly into the stored fabrics, upholstering the new chairs one of my artisans had made for us. New tables, shelves for my books, and several lidded trunks had also made their way into the room. The only thing unchanged was my mother’s dressing table and even it was cleaned and waxed to new beauty.

We settled into our new quarters happily, spending our evenings in front of our own hearth .

Kaldarte’s reaction upon learning of my pregnancy was not what I had expected. She looked at me sharply and immediately examined me herself. “You are right,” she admitted with a small frown. “You are with child.”

“I don’t understand how I could be,” I said, somewhat defensively. “I

always drank that tea you made for me.”

“Nothing works completely to prevent conception.”

She looked at me as she sat in a chair by my side. “Tamsen,” she began seriously. “You must be very careful during this pregnancy. The child compounds your inability to regain your strength. You are going to have to spend most of your time resting in bed. I will talk with Myrielle and we will prepare your meals. It’s essential that we keep you rested, and food in your belly, if you want to come through this safely.”

I stared at her. “You’re making me an invalid.”

“Tamsen, this child was conceived at a time of great stress, when you used an immense quantity of magical power. Magic and gestation are a chancy mix, child. Follow my regime for a while, and then, if you are better, we can ease up a little bit.

“Yes, Kaldarte.”

“Oh, and Tamsen? No magic, no military meetings, no being on your feet all day...are you getting the picture?”

“Yes, Kaldarte.”

She gave me a long, summing up glance. “Just in case, I think I’ll speak to your lifemate. You can take no risks with this, Tamsen.”

Her admonitions frightened me enough that I actually followed all of the restrictions laid upon me. Every day, I walked a little on the terrace, ate rich, meaty soups (Kaldarte’s orders), and spent a great deal of time either lying on my bed or lounging on a new chaise that sat by the fire in the Great Hall, poring over my books. Interestingly enough, my dreams ceased to trouble me and the terrifying weakness began to subside.

Then Wilden arrived with the Elves from the sanctuary.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I was reading, as usual, curled up on the chaise with a quilt tucked around me when the shout went up at the sight of the Elves. My own men numbered nearly four hundred soldiers now, with more arriving every day. The warriors who wore the Asphodel badge already considered themselves one with the Elves. This was due mainly to Brial's unceasing work with them, as well as the respect that Beron garnered. The Elven General was much improved now from his wound, spending most of every day working with our soldiers or overseeing the fortifications of a more permanent nature that were going up around my lands. Therefore, when the cavalcade of Elves appeared, the Asphodel army lined up and cheered them as they came through the gates.

Wilden had brought all the Elven Council, along with the entire Elven army. The pipers of the Ka'breona played merrily as they marched and my heart swelled with pride as I stood at Brial's side in front of the castle to greet them.

Beron stepped forward to take charge. We had decided to house the Elves in the forest, and thus create not only the beginnings of a resettlement but also a perimeter in the woods that would serve as a defensive line around the northern borders of Asphodel. He led the army off to the forest and I welcomed the Council into Asphodel, where we had rooms prepared for them.

Acheros Ka'charona, less bowed down by events than when I had seen

him last, greeted me smilingly. "Tamsen Ka'antira, we thank you for your welcome into your home."

I held out my hand to the old Elf with a smile. "It is our pleasure to have you in Asphodel, honored Elder. I am glad you will witness our marriage."

"It is fitting that we celebrate your union," he said. "It is a joyous occasion between Elves and humans I once thought impossible."

Brial laughed. "There were times, Elder, when I thought the same way."

"You are blessed, to love each other so well in this troubled time," Acheros answered with a smile.

Myrielle showed them to their rooms and I shot a look at my lifemate. "No escape now," I noted wryly. "I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

"I couldn't escape you from the moment I saw you, *cariad*," he replied, lifting my hand to his lips. "You were in my mind from my first sight of you, standing at the side of your tutor and defying me to insult you further."

"I very nearly smacked you."

"I deserved it," was his cheerful response, and we laughed as we returned to our room and our solitary meal.

* * * *

Wilden had also brought Ardenne with the Elves. She spent most of her time with her daughters. Widowhood had brought a serene gravity to her, as she mourned Lamec. She brought me the Ka'antira wedding garments the next

afternoon. When I thanked her, she smiled sadly. After that, I saw little of her.

I spent my time working on the treaty I intended to propose between humans and Elves, with help from Brial and his father. Two days later, the first of the human contingents began to trickle into Asphodel, led by Mariol and the warriors of Beotte. Within a week, the rest had gathered.

I didn't participate much in the plans for the wedding. I left that to Myrielle while I spent the time I was allowed to be active in negotiating the treaty between the two races. The terms were simple. The forest of Leselle was inviolate and separate from Ansienne, while the Elven nation would keep the northwestern boundary of the kingdom safe from attack. Minor clauses were included on trade and laws proposed to insure the equality of both peoples.

We ratified the treaty the day before our wedding. In our new Ansienne, the country we were trying to build, both of my heritages would be respected and honored. In my mind, I was thrilled that centuries of distrust were eroding. In my heart, I was grateful that the future of the Elven race, so dubious just a short while prior, was now more secure. Perhaps in my lifetime, I would see the resurrection of the Elven nation.

Then, all my thoughts turned to our wedding.

* * * *

We had decided to marry, as we had handfasted, in the Elven tradition. Humans would witness the event, and so verify its legality.

I woke that morning, to find the twins grinning at me on either side of Myrielle. "Oh no, you don't," I mumbled. "You are not going to poke and prod

me for hours today, Myrielle. I'm just going to take a bath, brush my hair, put on my gown and get married."

"Nonsense!" she replied, as I sat up and looked for Brial.

"He's not here," Cetenne informed me. "Wilden came to your room after you fell asleep and reminded him that he wasn't supposed to see you today until the ceremony."

"Brial didn't go along with it quietly," Liliath continued. "I believe that Anner and Glaucon ended up throwing him into a horse trough around midnight."

Myrielle handed me a cup of tea. "Bryse is preparing your bath right now," she said briskly. "Kaldarte and Ardenne will be here after they see to a few more things."

I sent her an exasperated look. "I don't want all this fuss!"

"That's nice, dear," Myrielle continued, ignoring me. "We actually found some rhododendrons still growing not far from here, so you'll have a lovely bouquet."

I sipped my tea, willing my stomach to settle. Cetenne sat on the edge of the bed with a bounce and I groaned.

Liliath laughed. "Humans aren't used to pregnant brides, are they?"

"Not very often," I retorted acidly.

Myrielle patted my knee. "Just try not to throw up on him, dear, and you'll do fine."

After a long, hot bath, with chamomile flowers scenting the humid air, all control over my appearance ended. Despite my protests, my hair was curled and

arranged around the ancient, fragile wedding veil. The Elven brides who wore it before me simply laid it over their unbound hair in token of their modesty and virginity.

“Obviously, neither of those attributes apply here,” Myrielle pointed out, presenting me with a box. “Let’s go for something a bit more formal.”

I looked at it suspiciously and sighed. “Mariol’s been going through his family jewels again, hasn’t he?”

Myrielle actually managed to look innocent. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Tamsen.”

Inside the box was a parure of emeralds set in white gold, obviously of Elven make. There was a delicate tiara, with fragilely traced vines, and each leaf was an emerald, faceted and cut to shape. A matching necklace, bracelets, and earrings completed the set.

“Those are the Ka’antira bride-jewels,” Kaldarte said, her face gentle and glad. “They were hidden and saved during the Elfwars. Antir gave them to Elyssia when they wed and I wore them when I married Ar’ami. They remained hidden until Lamec wed Ardenne. Now they are yours, my child, until you have a daughter of your own. Wear them in honor, and in memory of the Ka’antira brides before you.”

They draped the veil artfully and secured it with the tiara. The bride gown and mantle I had worn before, although they hung a bit more loosely on my frame this time.

To make up for not being able to design my wedding gown, Myrielle had outdone herself on the twins’ gowns. Cetenne wore green; Liliath was in the identical heather color of my gown. Their gowns were simple, but beautifully fitted to their slim forms.

Ardenne brought me the cloak. "In Elven tradition, a woman is cloaked and hooded for her wedding. Only the women of her family or close friends could see her before the ceremony. To preserve this maidenly modesty, therefore, the bride was cloaked until she should meet her betrothed at the altar. Then, he would remove the cloak, as a token of his acceptance of her virtue."

I laughed. "Brial had better accept my virtue. Any lack of it is entirely his fault!"

The hood of the cloak was cleverly wired, to stand over and around the bride's head so as not to tangle the veil. Before I put it on, however, Bryse brought the long mirror I'd found undamaged in the attics, and beckoned me to look.

For the first time, I did not recoil from the silvery hair I had awakened to that morning so many months before. The veil softened it, and against the heightened color of my face, the curls shone through the diaphanous fabric. Long, loose curls tumbled over the tiara, and down beside my face to lie against my breast. The emeralds glistened in their delicate settings, and the gauzy mantle and gown flattered a figure that had seemed too thin of late.

For the first time, I looked at my reflection and saw my mother; her lovely skin and delicate face surrounded by fair hair were finally reborn in me. I put my hand to my mouth, stunned. For a moment, I was grieved. My mother should be with me on this day. That feeling receded before a purely feminine surge of pride.

"You look like Solange," Kaldarte said, reading my thoughts. "You are beautiful today, Tamsen."

"Do you think so?" I asked, suddenly insecure. "Do you think Brial will agree?"

“Brial thinks you are the loveliest woman in the world,” Kaldarte replied with a smile. “For him, no one else compares with your beauty.”

Tears sprang to my eyes and I turned to her. This Elven woman, who had raised me and taught me to love again, was as dear to me as my own mother was. “*Matris mea*,” I said in ancient Elven, sinking to my knees. “*Sancte meam nuptalis*.”

Kaldarte’s eyes welled up and she laid her hand on my brow. “Beloved daughter, I give thee my blessing on this day. The gods grant you a lifetime of love and joy.”

I got to my feet and embraced all of them in turn. The sounds of music drifted up from the terrace, where Stygad, the Elven priest of Actaeos, waited before our guests. Kaldarte lifted the veil gently over my face and Ardenne placed the wedding cloak, of soft white wool glittering with tiny white topazes, around my shoulders. She busied herself pulling up the hood and tying the ribbons around my neck.

“The gods go with you, Tamsen,” she said softly, her eyes faraway as if remembering the last time she had stood as surrogate mother to me.

“And you, Ardenne,” I replied. Liliath handed me a bouquet of elegant white rhododendrons. Cetenne handed me the ring I’d had made for Brial, a companion to the ring I had given him at our *vialigatis*. This ring was gold, also in accordance with Elven tradition. The women of my family lined up around me: the twins in front, as maidens, Myrielle and Ardenne at my sides, and Kaldarte at the rear. We left the room, walking slowly to the stairs.

* * * *

The sounds of harps and flutes hung in the crisp autumn air, hovering over the flower-bedecked terrace as we stepped from the castle. I kept my eyes downcast, moving slowly with the music. The women of my family led me to where Ar'ami, his face glowing with pride, waited. I peeped up at him when he offered me his arm and he lovingly touched my cheek, as he had done when I was a child. Then he led me to the altar, his hand folded over the hand I had laid upon his arm.

"Today, we are gathered to join this couple in the bonds of marriage," Stygad's voice came to me when we stopped. "They have agreed to formalize their union, already recognized by the *vialigatis*. Today, the house of Ka'antira is bound to the house of Ka'breona, and we are called to witness this union."

Ar'ami spoke in a quiet, clear voice. "The Ka'antira bring their daughter, Tamsen, to Brial, son of the Ka'breona, this day. We present our well-beloved daughter to you in honor and pride. Is it your wish to accept her, Brial Ka'breona?"

"It is my wish," Brial said, somewhere to my left.

His hands went to the ribbons at the neck of the wedding cloak, and I looked up into his beautiful black eyes, shining now with a love so proud that I choked back tears. His hands shook as he untied the cloak and pushed the hood back from my face. Liliath stepped forward to take it from him and I stood before him in the bridal finery of the Ka'antira. I heard a small murmur from behind me and knew that there were many people witnessing this event.

Brial held out his hand and placing my own in it, we turned together to face Stygad. "In the eyes of the gods, marriage is a sacred trust," he said, his face showing none of the hesitance he had at our *vialigatis*. "You are lifebound by

your love and your trust and through this act swear this vow beyond this life to the next. Do you so swear?"

"I swear it," Brial said first.

"I swear it," I said softly.

"Then kneel, and prepare to give your vows to each other and the gods," Stygad intoned. I handed the bouquet to Cetenne, and we knelt.

"I, Brial Ka'breona, do swear to you, Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel my life and honor, my love and fidelity, the strength of my arm and the depths of my heart before the gods."

"I, Tamsen Ka'antira de Asphodel, do swear to you, Brial Ka'breona my life and honor, my love and fidelity, the strength of my arm and the depths of my heart before the gods."

"We beseech you, gods of the Elves, to hear and bless this couple for the vows they have sworn to each other before you. Give them joy in this life, bless them with children, and let them honor and revere each other and you," Stygad prayed, arms raised to the skies. "In token of these vows, bless these rings, which serve as reminder of the bonds undertaken here, and as symbol of the constancy of love and life in your eyes."

I gave Stygad my ring for Brial, which he dropped into a crystal chalice of clear water, following that with Brial's ring for me. He held the chalice to the sky, murmured a prayer, then he poured the water into a crystal platter on the makeshift altar top. "With water, we purify this union, in honor of the love you bear."

Then Stygad dropped dried flowers and herbs into the water. "With the fruit of the earth, we abide by this union, in honor of the sanctity of your vows."

Finally, he lifted a slim, steel blade from the altar. He placed the blade into the flames rising from the brazier next to the crystal platter until the blade turned red. He lifted the knife to the skies. "As does this blade glow from the fire, so do the flames of your love glow in the eyes of Elves and man, mortals and gods. Let the flames of your love be tempered by the water of time, and may it forge your bond from this life into the next."

With that, he put the red-hot blade into the water, and with its needle-like point lifted both rings from the water. "Take these tokens of your love, and place them on your lifemate's hand," he ordered us.

Brial slid his ring onto my hand first, and then I, my sight blurred with tears, put my ring onto his finger. Both rings fit on top of the rings from our *vialigatis*. We joined our ringed hands, and bent our heads for Stygad's blessing. He laid his hands on our heads, and murmured, "Go now, daughter of the Ka'antira and son of the Ka'breona, and be thou blessed. Today you swear your troth before the gods, and they honor your union. May thy marriage be sanctified. Go forth as husband and wife, joined unto eternity with a bond that may not be forsaken. In the name of the gods, I pronounce thee wed."

I raised my head and looked up into my husband's eyes. I was still lost in them, when he carefully lifted the veil from my face and leaned in to kiss me.

The tranquility of the ceremony vanished as cheers rose from the throats of hundreds of people. I turned at the noise and my eyes met those of Anner de Ceolliune. For a moment, it was as if the sun dimmed above us, then Brial reclaimed my attention with a ringing laugh of joy.

* * * *

We spent three days together, unimpeded by the demands of war and politics that occupied our friends and family in the Great Hall. On the one occasion we attempted to join them, an indignant Mariol chased us from the room. "Are you crazy, Brial? For the sake of the Gods, man, take your wife outside and enjoy yourselves! It's precious little time you have for a honeymoon, so make the most of it!"

He pushed us out the door with a disgusted look. Brial and I laughed until we cried, sitting in our special place on the terrace. Bryse, blushing, brought us lunch and darted away almost immediately.

We weren't forbidden to join our guests for the evening meals, however. At nights, we would sit with our guests in the great hall and the feeling of being part of a family again overwhelmed me. Beron, in particular, seemed pleased to have a daughter. He had given me the trinkets and jewelry of his much-beloved wife with a paternal kiss and the gruff request, "Wear these for my sake, daughter. It will give me joy to see them on my son's wife."

On the third night, as we curled up together in front of the hearth on a thick woolly rug we had received as a gift, I reminded my husband of his promise. "Brial, when can we go to Leselle?"

I felt him frown slightly against my hair. "You've never told me why you want to go, *cariad*. The sanctuary of Daphnis was destroyed when the city fell."

"I know it wasn't. I must ask for her blessing on our marriage and our child."

He chuckled. "Is this some Ka'antira tradition I don't know about?"

"I don't think so," I replied. "It's just something I need to do."

His arms tightened around me. "Very well, then. We can leave in the

morning, but I do not want you walking all that way. Would you object to riding pillion with me?"

"No, beloved, not at all."

* * * *

We rose early the next morning. Brial got his old squad of Elven scouts to accompany us, while I packed a small bag and sent Bryse to the kitchen for food to take on our journey. We did not tell anyone, save my maid, we were leaving. Two hours after dawn, we were deep in the quiet forest, the scouts flanking us in the trees.

I have said before that Brial came back to himself in the forest, and this day was no exception. His reserve dissolved once we left human habitations for the solitude in the woods of Leselle. We spoke rarely, not wanting to disturb the peaceful quality of the woods, and stopped often for rests. Even at our easy pace, we reached the deserted house of Ar'ami in late afternoon. We stopped there overnight, the guardians welcoming me home.

The next day started in much the same way. I enjoyed myself, finding this quiet sense of being alone with my husband much to my liking. The day was cooler and low clouds gathered in the western sky.

After we stopped for a light meal and a rest at midday, we rode on. Brial squinted up at the darkening sky and said, "I think I'd like to try to make Leselle before this storm builds up any more, *alanna*."

"That's probably a good idea," I replied. "Wet horse is not my favorite aroma."

He laughed as he lifted me back into the saddle. "Do you think you're able, Tamsen?"

"I'm fine," I assured him. "I've been feeling a lot better lately."

He mounted in front of me and I leaned against him as we rode. I closed my eyes, and let the rhythmic sounds of the horse's hooves lull me into a half-doze.

"Ka'breona! Beware!" The shout came from our left.

Brial pulled up the horse quickly as I came awake. He jumped down, drawing his sword as he did so. "Get into the saddle, *cariad*," he ordered me in a low voice. "Quickly, get out of the area! I'll catch up."

I nodded, swiftly sliding into the saddle. Touching my heels to the horse's flanks, I urged him into a trot, turning his head toward the depths of the forest. Behind me, I heard the shouts of many men as they rushed into the clearing where my husband stood, alone.

I huddled low over the horse's neck, cursing my helplessness. I heard swords ring and the unmistakable sounds of the Elven scouts rushing to assist him.

Suddenly, in front of me, ten men rose from the brush. I reined in the horse, thinking to take another direction.

An arrow flew into my arm. I screamed and the horse reared. The last thing I saw as I fell was the badge on the soldier's uniforms. Then I hit the ground and blackness swallowed me as pain shrieked through my body.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

My world of blackness grew lighter as I struggled to open my lids. When my eyes opened to a squint, everything began to spin and I groaned. I felt the bed sink as someone sat on the edge.

“Slowly, Tamsen,” Kaldarte’s soothing voice said quietly. “Let me get you something to drink. Just keep your eyes closed for a little while longer, and the dizziness will fade.”

“Kaldarte?” I whispered, my throat scratchy and sore. “What are you doing here?”

“Hush now,” she said gently. “Just drink this, child.”

A cup touched my lips. I sipped a cool fruity drink that eased my painful throat. The vertigo began to recede. Slowly, I lifted my heavy lids. I was back in our bedchamber at Asphodel. I turned my head to see Kaldarte at my side, her face shadowed.

Memory rushed back into me. Kaldarte saw it, and put her hands on my shoulder, preventing me from rising. “No, Tamsen. Lie there quietly.”

“Brial? Where is he?”

“Brial is well, and is close by. I will call him in a little while.”

"He's well?" I repeated stupidly. "But the soldiers...he was by himself."

"He took no hurt, child. His men were not so far away that they couldn't come to his aid."

I closed my eyes in a relief so profound it was painful. That pain called my other pains to mind. My left arm ached dully and my stomach—

My hands flew to my abdomen. I looked up at Kaldarte wordlessly and my eyes filled with tears before she even said a word. When she did speak, her voice was thick with grief.

"I'm sorry, *filia*. You lost your babe."

"No!" I screamed. I burst into tears, struggling to rise from the bed. Instantly, Kaldarte's arms went around me, pulling me against her. She held me while I sobbed out my grief.

"It's my fault!" I wailed. "I should have stayed at home! Oh, gods! I should have known better!"

Kaldarte's voice was kind, but firm. "Tamsen, this pregnancy was dangerous from the start. The magic you called on weakened you to the point where keeping this child was difficult. Your body was already debilitated and too feeble to hold on to the babe. It could not survive any trauma. I am sorry, child. There will be children for you in your future, but this child was not meant to be."

The words of Aresen's priest sounded in my head again. "For every gift there is a reckoning," I murmured, shock quieting my sorrow.

"I know you must grieve, Tamsen. Your husband needs you now. He blames himself for this. If you mourn together, you will find strength."

I did not answer and my tears stopped without warning. Into my mind's eye flashed the badges I had seen on the attacking soldiers: the lion and swords badge of Jeshan de Callat. My grief subsided, replaced by a cold, gnawing anger that cloaked the pains of my body.

* * * *

Kaldarte sat with me through that long night. When she made to summon Brial, I begged, "Not yet, please. I need to be alone for a while. I only want you with me."

Kaldarte agreed. She sent Bryse to tell my husband that I was awake and would call him later. She sat there silently, bringing me broth to drink, and then a hot concoction of herbs I recognized. Herbs used to stop bleeding and pain.

Through the dark hours between midnight and dawn, my mind came back to full awareness. Jeshan de Callat's men had tried to kill us. Instead, they had murdered my child. I didn't think of the pain in my body; instead, I dwelled on the emptiness I felt there.

And a decision, a dark, cold resolution grew in my heart. Once before, my family was taken from me, but I was too small and weak to revenge myself upon the murderer.

Not so this time.

Jeshan de Callat would pay for this. He would pay for my pain, and for Brial's. He would suffer for the life he had taken. I would *make* him suffer.

I let fury overtake my grief. I would mourn when my rage was sated.

Until then, I would heal and regain my strength. When I was whole, there would indeed be a reckoning. The reckoning was due to me, from the traitorous self-styled king of Ansienne, who had murdered my child and tried to kill my husband. When the dawn had stained the skies red, I said quietly, "Kaldarte, I would like to see Brial now, please."

* * * *

I heard him open the door. When I saw his face, a pang of sorrow seared through my self-constructed barricade of rage. His beautiful face was drawn with sorrow and fear; fear, I knew, for me.

I held out my hand to him. "Brial, beloved, I am well. Do not be afraid for me."

He gathered me to him, his arms trembling. I knew he wanted to embrace me hard, to reassure himself that I was well, but he also feared to hurt me. I leaned my face into his chest and I felt it heave beneath my cheek.

"Thank the gods, you are safe, *alanna*!" he breathed, his voice hoarse and rasping. "I thought I had lost you!"

"No, beloved," I murmured soothingly. "I am well."

He held me away from him and looked searchingly into my eyes, maneuvering around the bandages on my upper arm. "Are you feeling better?"

"I am feeling much better than I did when I awoke."

I couldn't read the expression in his eyes; they were dulled with exhaustion and grief. "Kaldarte told you?" he asked gently.

I closed my eyes against another spear of sorrow. "Yes, Brial."

He pulled me back to his chest. "I am sorry," he whispered brokenly. "The fault is mine! I should have known that they would try something like this!"

"There is no blame on you, beloved," I said weakly.

"I should never have put you in such danger." His voice so low and filled with self-loathing made me wince.

"Brial, listen to me." I tried to add strength to my words. "They were obviously planning to get close enough to us to kill us anyway. If it had not happened there, it could have been anywhere. They were coming to Asphodel." My voice hardened of its own accord. "All blame in this is upon Jeshan de Callat."

He stroked my hair back from my face and gently laid me back against the pillows heaped behind me.

I looked at him and my heart contracted through the hard walls I had built around it. I said gently, "Please don't blame yourself, beloved. I cannot bear that, right now! I can only thank the gods that you are alive and here beside me!"

"When I got to you," he said softly, his eyes haunted, "I thought you were dead. You were so pale, and there was so much blood! I was terrified I had lost you, too."

"We are here together, my husband. We will survive this, together."

I pulled him to me, and held him as he wept. I never thought to see him so wracked with sorrow and guilt. I closed my eyes, stroking his tangled hair, and the ominous, bitter purpose inside of me strengthened.

* * * *

A week later, I finally rose from my bed: weak, thin, and tremulous. My wounded body was healing, but the coldness in my soul would not let me grieve. I spoke quietly when someone else spoke to me, but I did not release the emotions I had trapped so tightly within me.

Brial's sense of guilt abated, aided by my firm denial of fault on his part. He was gentle with me, helping me when I grew strong enough to get from my bed. I leaned heavily on him for the first few days, until strength flowed back into my limbs.

We did not speak again of our lost child. Any time someone raised the subject I politely, but firmly headed them off. The secret we had hugged to ourselves in our elation was exposed by our sorrow.

I spent a great deal of time alone after that. Once I was out of bed, I moved around the castle quietly, forcing myself to recover. The wound in my arm healed cleanly. I exercised it frequently, stretching the ripped skin and muscle to combat the stiffness. Every night when I went to bed, it ached from the exertion. Every morning when I rose, I worked it harder.

Few had known of the lost child. I was glad of this. I couldn't bear the sympathy from too many. Our families knew, and Mariol, who had guessed, and Myrielle who missed nothing. Hyagrem, Anner, Mylan, and Glaucon, I believe, Kaldarte told.

The emptiness that had stunned me upon awakening receded before the coldness that followed it. I sat by the fire, or walked on the terrace, and I

planned Jeshan's reckoning.

If his soldiers were that close by, he was not far away. I had discovered, judiciously questioning the twins, that none of Jeshan's men survived the attack upon us. Brial's rage when he saw me felled by the arrow drove him to destroy the attackers.

The trail to Jeshan, I decided, lies through the forest of Leselle.

As I worked to strengthen my body, I toiled equally on forming my plans. When I was ready, I would find this traitorous King. It was my obligation, to my house and to my unborn heir to revenge myself upon Jeshan de Callat.

It was also necessary, I knew, to be careful with how I proceeded. Brial must never suspect I planned any such thing. He would try to stop me and I knew that I would not allow anyone to restrain me. Even my husband would not be able to interfere with this.

It was with lowered eyes that I begged Beron to involve his son more fully in the military plans underway in the joint council held every day in the Great Hall.

"He needs something to occupy him, *patris*," I told him quietly. "I don't want him to continue brooding about our loss. It isn't helping him to recover."

"And you, Tamsen?" Beron asked gently, his hard, warm hand holding mine. "What will help you recover?"

I met his eyes squarely. "Time, *patris*; time for myself alone, time in which I do not worry so much for him."

"I understand, my daughter," he said gravely. "I will see what I can do."

I lowered my eyes again as he kissed my brow and left. I felt no shame in

using Beron such. The time I had asked for would be time I could spend in implementing my plan.

After two weeks, I began to feel more like myself. There was some soreness in my arm, but the secretive exercise had strengthened it almost to normal. I remained weak; the terrible debility from the battlefield remained.

But for the first time in months, I felt magic sing along my skin. The power grew in me. I kept my silence as it surged from the frozen, dead place in my womb. His father's machinations occupied Brial for long hours during the day and I maintained my quiet fiction more easily when it was only for a few hours at night. He returned to our bed when color began to stain my skin again and while he slept, I lay against his chest and worked out my plan.

When I did sleep, I dreamed of what might have been: of the birth of our child, and the joy it would bring us. I dreamed of a son with huge, slanted black eyes. I dreamed of a daughter, fair-haired and delicate, with pointed ears.

Then, one night, I dreamed of my uncle.

He sat over the chalice of vision with which I had seen him once before. I stood before his table and our eyes met over it. "Lost your child, did you?" he asked me malevolently, a smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

I didn't answer him and he laughed. "If I can't have you, niece," he gloated, "I will simply have to take your children."

I awoke in a slick sweat, heart pounding against my ribs. Brial slept on, as my eyes stared sightlessly into the darkness.

* * * *

I went out the next morning for a walk and smelled snow in the clouds. *The first snow of the season*, I thought and a bitter, chilly smile twisted my lips. I returned to our room and opened the door to the hidden stairway. Lifting the bag I'd prepared to my shoulders, I threw a thick cloak around my shoulders and descended to the long passage in the wine cellars. Without a second thought, I opened the secret door and slipped out into the beginning of the storm.

I moved swiftly that day, knowing I had only a few hours before anyone noticed my absence. The snow fell gently at first. When I was a good distance from Asphodel, I released a tiny surge of magic into the clouds. In answer, the snow thickened, obliterating my passage. With luck, I would be miles away and undetectable when they found me gone.

My pack was full of food, carefully hoarded from my daily trays, I had warm clothes and my sword hung at my side. I had asked Myrielle not long before to make me a cloak of winter white. The wool was thick and lined with fur on the inside. Against the deepening snow, I was invisible. Once again, I blessed Ar'ami for the woodlore he had taught me.

I traveled the entire day, continuing well into the night. When I grew too tired to continue, I made a tiny lean-to of pine branches, dusting them with snow. I crawled inside, and called heat into the Elfstones I had brought with me. Then I curled around the core of warmth, and fell asleep.

* * * *

I awoke at dawn, to find several inches of snow on the ground and more falling. I knocked the lean-to flat, knowing the snow would cover it completely within an hour. Pulling an apple from my pack, I ate it as I continued my journey.

I moved roughly parallel to the river. The Ilia's source was on the edge of the Leselle forest. Somehow, my thoughts led me there. I believed I would find Jeshan de Callat close to that area.

Near the headwater was an Elven outpost. My plan was to reach that outstation and expand my search for Callat. At my current pace, I could get there by early evening. The day was grey and chilly, not the true, bone-biting cold of deep winter. The snow was wet and piling up quickly. Mentally, I thanked the gods. The deeper the snow fell, the less the likelihood I would be discovered.

In late afternoon, I detected signs of recent movement in the forest: branches low to the ground snapped off, wide swaths of underbrush trampled, and a scarcity of animal movement. I took a deep breath. It appeared my hunch was correct.

Accordingly, I took extra care, slowing my pace as I moved through the woods. I stirred the snow clouds to greater activity. Men who were not watching for me would not see me in the whirling snow. Just before nightfall, I spotted the grove where the Elven outpost was hidden. I greeted the guardians respectfully and entered.

This station was smaller than the one Brial and I had stayed in before. I piled my Elfstones in the cooking pit and they instantly flared into warmth and light. The little chamber heated rapidly and I laid my cloak aside, hanging it to dry.

I would rest here, I decided, until midnight. I pulled cheese and fruit from my bag and sat by the hearth, thinking. If Jeshan was close by, I could easily find him in the snowy silence of the forest. Then, it would be time for the reckoning.

My meal finished, I lay down to sleep.

* * * *

I crept from my hidden den when the night was at its darkest. I inhaled deeply of the sharp, cold air as I scanned the woods around me. All was silent and my tracks from earlier were tiny, shallow depressions in the snow that any Elf could see, but no human would notice.

Satisfied that my hiding place was secure, I swung into the lower branches of the guardian trees. As my weight bent the laden branches, snow dropped over the entire area, obliterating even those minuscule signs of my passing. My arm ached with the exertion, but I ignored it and closed my eyes.

Using the same technique I had enacted in battle, I sent a searching finger of magic to prowl through the woods. Starting in a small circle, I gently extended it outward, probing with my mind for any sign of humans.

A mile and a half to the east, I felt what I sought. A large gathering of men was clustered around a clearing near the banks of the river. I was right. Jeshan's men were there and within my reach. I lightly skimmed across the guardian branches and felt my way along the trees for two hundred yards. Then, I dropped to the ground and wormed my way through the gorse bushes clustered thickly beneath the trees.

* * * *

An hour later, I crawled on my belly under a cluster of low-branched evergreen trees, and peered out over the camp. There were at least forty tents, including one larger than the rest in the center. There were sentries, I sensed, every fifty feet in an equal perimeter around the camp.

Now that my goal was so near, I tasted the fiery sting of rage in my mouth. I took a moment to calm myself, forcing my breathing to slow. When I had accomplished this, I sent out another magical probe, locating the sentries closest to me. Gently, I put them to sleep. Then, I crawled from beneath my hiding place and quietly made my way between them, and into the camp.

The tents were dark and quiet, save for occasional snores. I threaded my way through them, my soft leather boots making no noise on the trampled snow. Stealthily, I made my way to the central, larger tent and stopped dead as I saw Jeshan de Callat's lion and swords badge on the flag fluttering above it.

You fool. You have delivered yourself to me.

I stopped before the entrance, and threw a shield around the tent. Then, I pushed the tent flaps aside and entered.

He was asleep on a camp bed. I stood above him for a moment, staring down at his face. This man had stolen not only his King's throne but also my child's life. This man, who had smiled at me and laughed when we met at his salon, who was already plotting the overthrow of the throne as he paid me compliments, lay before me with a slightly troubled frown on his sleeping face.

I let my hatred swirl around me until I grew dizzy. Then I stamped it

firmly down. I turned and sat in his large chair, which was pulled up to a table. On the table were maps and letters, jostled together as if thrown about in a temper. I pushed my hood back from my face, called flames to the brazier that warmed his tent, and lit the lanterns hanging from the ridgepoles.

“Jeshan de Callat,” I said loudly, “it is time for you to awaken.”

He stirred, mumbling as the light hit his eyes. Then, he sat bolt upright. His eyes focused on me and widened in shock.

“You wished me dead, Your Grace,” I said pleasantly. “I have come to discover why.”

“How did you get in here?” he blustered.

“Don’t bother,” I advised him calmly as he opened his mouth to call for his guards. “I have put a shield up around this tent. They will see or hear nothing of this encounter, Your Grace.”

He shut his mouth with a snap and furrowed his brows as he stared at me. “You’re very brave for a young girl,” he noted finally. “What’s to stop me from killing you myself?”

“Nothing but me,” I replied. “I thought that you and I should have a chat, Your Grace.”

He collected himself, then, swinging his legs to the floor as he regarded me steadily. “So, are you running errands for your thrice-damned uncle now?”

I raised my brows. “Spesialle is nothing to me but another obstacle to subdue. If you know my history, you should be aware of that. Besides, he’s your ally in all this.”

He snorted. “He’s no ally of mine, although I had to discover that the hard

way. The bastard double-crossed me.”

“Really? So he took your plan of using other kingdoms as reinforcements for himself?”

“How did you know about that?”

I shrugged negligently. “It wasn’t hard to deduce, Your Grace. After all, I do have brilliant strategists working alongside me.”

His blue eyes were cold as we stared at each other in silence, then he said, “So, what is it you want, milady of Asphodel? An alliance?”

“I don’t tolerate traitors at my side,” I replied bitingly. “I have less use for you than my uncle does.”

“Then why are you here?” he demanded, his eyes darting to his sword belt hanging on the back of the chair in which I sat.

“This is a reckoning, Your Grace,” I said simply. “You took something from me, and I am here to take retribution for it.”

He looked puzzled and I continued. “Your little ambush was well thought of, Your Grace. It almost worked. Unfortunately, when my husband saw me fall, he destroyed your men.” I toyed with a goblet that stood before me. “But you destroyed something else, something dear to me, and I have come to see you pay for it.”

“What are you talking about?” he demanded sharply.

“My child,” I said quietly. “I lost my child because of your ill-timed plan. Once before, a traitor took my family from me and I could not do anything about it. This time, however, I will.” His eyes met mine again, and this time there was fear behind them. I smiled grimly. “I see you’re beginning to understand.”

"Spesialle said you were a mage," he commented. "He also said you weren't very strong."

"You should know better than to believe my uncle," I informed him. "The last time I saw him, my sword was in his leg and I had just destroyed most of his army."

"Easy to say," he pointed out.

"Easier to prove," I replied. I felt the magic pouring from me and reaching out into the silent camp.

"How many men do you have here, Your Grace? A hundred? Two hundred?"

"Two hundred!" he snarled at me, anger starting to override his caution.

"Then you should watch this lesson I have prepared for you and those who follow you," I said quietly. I dropped the shield from the tent, and drew my sword. Pointing it at his chest, I said shortly, "Out."

He preceded me into the starless night. I left my sword leveled at him as I said, "This is how weak of a sorceress I am, Your Grace."

I called fire into the magic. Flames erupted from the clustered tents and screams flew into the night air.

He watched in abhorrence. I observed, detached, as every tent in the encampment, save his, erupted over his soldiers' heads in a matter of seconds. The men ran screaming into the night, then stopped, in amazement, and watched the camp as it was reduced to embers. When all was silent, I withdrew the fire from the air and turned to the ashen-faced man at my side.

"Perhaps you should have considered your actions more carefully, Your

Grace,” I said. “A weaker sorcerer than I would have burned your men alive.”

The stunned sentries were running back into the smoking perimeter of the camp, swords drawn. They caught sight of me, my sword drawn on the man they knew as King, standing in the center of the destruction.

“This is your only chance to save yourselves from a similar fate,” I warned them coldly. “I am here to administer justice to this treacherous usurper and have no wish to slaughter you. You may turn and leave, but if any of you take one step further I will kill you where you stand.”

To a man, they stopped dead in their tracks, staring at me with a mixture of awe and terror. Several tense seconds passed and then one man bolted. His flight caused a chain reaction in the rest of the men. They all turned and fled into the dark night.

“As you can see, Your Grace,” I said, my voice pleasantly mild once more, “it is now just you and I.”

“Why don’t you just kill me and be done with it!” he growled.

“I admit the thought is tempting,” I mused. “But it occurs to me that you might be of greater use in another way.”

“What do you mean?”

I met his eyes squarely. “I want you to abdicate, with a signed confession of your part in Lufaux’s murder and a written renunciation of any claim you or your family have to the throne of Ansienne,” I said simply. “Then, I will turn you over to the justice of the people.”

“So, you want the throne for yourself?”

“No. I have no ambition for thrones. I would have been content to remain

peacefully on my lands, if you and my uncle had not decided to involve me as you did. If Spesialle had not executed my parents, I would have grown up a normal, probably brainless girl. If you had not usurped the throne and ordered your men against me, both in the field and in ambush, I would have shunned politics. Instead, I would be quietly married now and expecting my heir. As it is, I respond to the actions you make. Between the two of you, you have made me what I am. Tonight, you face the consequences of those decisions."

"I never suspected this in you when that conniving old Marquis brought you to my salon. I salute you for your steel."

"Thank you for the compliment, Your Grace. Shall we go inside and compose your papers of abdication?"

He regarded me for a long minute and shook his head. "I will not sign it," he told me. "I will not renounce the claims of my family to the throne."

"Surely you know that they will never be allowed to hold it," I said.

"What you allow and what happens are two different things. I have many children who will carry on after my death. My line does not end with me."

"Not yet," I said grimly. "No scion of the line of Callat will ever rule in Geochon."

"It doesn't really matter anyway." I detected a note of honest sadness in his voice. "Spesialle has betrayed us all."

"So my guess was correct then; we can expect the armies of Tartarus and Vaulad to attack us in the spring."

The look on his face was answer enough.

"And that's why you're here," I finished, the conclusion leaping to my

brain. "You're here to try and prevent an invasion that you set up yourself."

As I said this, I sensed someone moving behind me. I spun on my heel. A terrified sentry stood fifteen feet away. I immediately called heat to his sword and he dropped it with a yell.

"Come here," I ordered him. He stumbled toward us, his breath sobbing in his throat. "I want you to witness this. You have no need to fear, as long as you do not attempt to attack me."

I turned back to the Count de Callat. "Ansienne faces a war on all fronts, then, led by Spesialle. Why didn't you attempt to contact me? Any of us, in fact? If you had brought me this news, instead of trying to kill me, instead of murdering my unborn child, things would be different now. You should have known that the good of our kingdom would supersede any past hostility."

"Your alliance would never have agreed to leave me on the throne," he answered swiftly. "I thought that if you were eliminated, they might naturally turn back to me. I discounted your ability to command their loyalty."

"They would never have done so, Your Grace. Too many of our kin and friends fell in battle at Asphodel. Anner, Mariol and my husband would never have permitted that to happen. Now, because of your overwhelming ambition, our country faces enemies on all sides and my evil uncle from within. You have doomed us, Jeshan de Callat, at the very least to years of war."

He straightened himself as he stared down at me. "You are right, milady of Asphodel, but I still refuse to renounce my children's claim to the throne."

"So you still haven't learned?"

He did not answer me.

I sighed, in genuine regret. "You leave me no choice, Jeshan."

"Kill me with your magic," he said steadily. "I have no defense against you."

Without another word, I thrust my sword into his heart. His eyes registered a brief moment of shock as the slender blade slipped between his ribs. He fell to his knees, his hands automatically flying to the sword in his chest. Then, as the light faded from his eyes, he slid limply from the sword to lie at my feet.

I looked down at his still form, watching the blood soak into the snow and mix with the soot from the conflagration of a few minutes before.

Blood on the snow.

My hands shook so badly I almost dropped the sword.

I had killed someone.

No longer would distance and magic shelter me from my actions. This time, for the first time, my blade had ended another's life. The blood seeping through the icy powder at my feet was there because of me, because of my hatred. It was a horrible moment when I confronted the darker, murderous side of my nature on that ice-rimed night. I swallowed against a surge of nausea.

Then I slid my gaze to the stunned guard to my side. "What is your name, sir?"

"Demont," he stammered in fright.

"Demont, do you understand what happened here tonight?"

"I think so, milady."

"This man had our king murdered and stole his throne," I said grimly. "His ambition has led us into a war, not just among ourselves, but with the

countries that border us. I gave him a chance to redeem himself, but he refused it from pride. His death was ordained, whether he accepted my offer or not. The people would never have let him live."

"No, milady," Demont replied, with more assurance this time. "I would never have followed him if I knew then what I know now. Lufaux was a good king. I swore my allegiance to him when I joined the army. When Callat took the throne, I thought my oath bound me to him."

"Exactly," I agreed. "I want you to know that my actions do not stem from a desire for a crown. Jeshan de Callat had to die, in punishment for his crimes. My reasons for my actions, however, were more personal. I cannot justify them to you, only to myself."

"I understand, milady. I would feel that way myself, were I in your shoes."

In the distance, I heard the sounds of pounding hooves. I looked toward the woods and sighed. Demont had knelt in terror before me only a few minutes before. Now he stood solidly, his coarse face set in grim lines. I met his eyes and found respect reflected there, tempered with compassion I never thought to find in a stranger.

"I asked you to witness this," I began slowly, "so that someone would know and vouch for my actions. If you can do so in good conscience, Demont, perhaps we can prevent more bloodshed for this traitor's ambitions. Ansienne has too many deadly foes set against her now. We can no longer countenance dissension among ourselves. Do you understand?"

Demont looked me full in the face. "I will vouch for you gladly, milady, and I will follow you wherever you lead me!"

"I'm glad," I said simply. "The horses that are approaching probably

include my husband somewhere in that troop. I am willing to wager that he is extremely angry with me and in a few minutes, you are going to witness me receiving the most spectacular lecture that I will ever experience. But soon we will leave for Geochon and I will need your help, my friend."

I knelt in the bloody snow and removed the royal signet from Jeshan's cooling hand. The last time I had seen this ring, it was judging my claim as the rightful heir to Asphodel. I handed it to Demont.

"It is your charge to hold this ring until the rightful heir to the throne is determined," I told him. "Regardless of what anyone may say or do, I order you now: under no circumstances does that ring come to me. I am not your sovereign. You must protect this, at all costs, for whoever our rightful ruler is. Do you agree?"

He took the ring from me gingerly. "Milady, I swear it!"

"Good!" I said. "Now, do you think you can bring me the chair in the tent? I really need to sit down before I keel over."

He hurried to do my bidding. When Brial slid from his horse, he found me sitting calmly by the body of the usurper, my bloody sword across my knees and a lone warrior standing behind me. Brial rushed to me, his black eyes glittering in the light reflected from the snow.

"My husband," I said before he spoke. "The murderer of our child is dead by my hand. The usurper Jeshan de Callat has paid his reckoning to our house."

I burst into tears. The sorrow I had bottled up for three long weeks finally broke through the barrier of hatred I had built around it and I began to mourn the loss of our child. Brial hesitated, then threw the sword from my lap and pulled me into his arms.

"Cariad," he murmured. "Weep, beloved. I am here for you, as you were for me. Anything else can wait, until your grief lessens."

"I'm sorry," I sobbed into his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Brial!"

The cleansing sorrow flowed through me and the wracking sobs hurt in the chill air. In that moment, there was no time to think of thrones or wars or traitors. There was only grief for our loss, for the child who had only begun to signify so much to me and who had meant more than I knew.

* * * *

While Brial tended to me in Callat's tent, Anner and Mylan were taking control of the camp. After sending Glaucon back to Asphodel for more men to secure the border, they set the stunned men of the Ansienne army to building a new encampment on the ashes of the first. I heard them shouting orders as I wept against my husband's chest. Eventually, I cried myself to sleep, exhausted from the emotional toll of the past few weeks.

The next morning, the men joined me in the huge tent. Despite the braziers heaped with glowing coals, a frigid breeze rustled under the tent flaps. I pulled my knees to my chest in Jeshan's big chair and wrapped my cloak around them for greater warmth. Then I looked at the men around me.

Brial, his eyes still shadowed by grief and worry, sat next to me. He bent over a map of the western border with his father. Beron fingered the sword hilt at his side; it was obvious that the Elven army would have to shoulder most of the defense against Tartarus. Wilden stood near the tent flap. Just behind him, Mariol leaned against a tent pole, his eyes distant. Mylan's deep voice drifted

into the tent as he directed the men outside. Anner sat across the table as a sergeant reported on the progress within the camp. Demont sat nervously in a corner, staring unabashedly at the Elves. His hand clutched the pouch at his belt where he had stashed the royal signet of Ansienne.

"Glaucou will bring as many men as he can as reinforcements," Anner said. "We are fortunate that we were already funneling troops into Asphodel. Between Jeshan's men and our own, we should have several thousand here before the week is out."

"Will that be enough?" I asked.

"No." Beron looked up from the map. "I'll send Balan for the Elven army. Tartarus will have to come through the Elven forest to reach Ansienne. We have time to fortify the border against them."

"We do have time for that," I agreed. "What we *don't* have time for is political turmoil in Geochon."

"You're right," Mariol said. "Without a ruler, Ansienne is in greater danger from within than from Tartarus. Claimants to the throne were just beginning to set their plans when Lufaux died. Now that Jeshan is dead, the fight over the crown could very well lead to civil war."

"Didn't Lufaux have any heirs?"

"Too many of them. That's the problem. I can think of fifteen people who have a legitimate claim to the monarchy." Mariol lowered himself in a chair, frowning. "The best thing for us to do is to proceed to Geochon. There we can reassure the people, secure the city, and call a council to decide the succession."

"And whose claim do we support?" Anner's question brought a heavy silence to the tent.

"I don't think we can decide that now," I interjected. "We should wait until we find out who wants-and deserves-the throne first."

"We'll take five hundred men with us," Anner decided. "That should be enough to take control of the city."

"We need to be very careful with our approach to this," Mariol warned. "Although we need to enter Geochon from a position of strength, we don't want anyone to get the idea that we're coming as conquerors."

"What do you think, Tamsen?" Anner asked.

I glanced at Brial. He nodded slightly, as if he knew what I was going to say. "I think you're right, Mariol. We need to get the question of the Ansienne crown resolved quickly. If Beron agrees, we should leave him in charge of the defense of the border while the rest of us go to Geochon. How long do you think it will take Glaucon to return with the reinforcements?"

"No more than three days," Beron replied. "It will take a little time for the infantry to make their way through the forest."

"And you, *cariad*?" Brial asked.

"I need time to rest and regain my strength," I said after a moment. "Eventually, we will find ourselves at war again. I'll trust to all of you to deal with the armies, but I need to be prepared to contend with Spesialle."

"Can you?" Mariol asked quietly. His face was solemn. "Are you certain that's what you want, Tamsen?"

I thought about it. Asphodel, for the time being, was secure. The Elves were safe in their sanctuary across Lake Onros. As more men gathered on the plains east of the Elven Realm, the army warding the troublesome border with

Tartarus would gain strength. All of that would be forfeited if Geochon – and the rest of the kingdom – went up in flames.

If that happened, my uncle sat in Spesialle waiting for his opportunity to take control. If he did, then everything we'd fought for – and lost – would be in vain. My uncles, Anton de Ceolliune, and our child would all have been sacrificed for nothing.

"It's what I want," I said quietly. "It's what I must do. I made the decision long ago to thwart Spesialle's plans. I have always known I would have to confront him in the end. Until that happens, I will do everything I can to prevent him from achieving his goals."

Brial took my hand. "I agree, *alanna*. As long as you wage this war, I will be at your side."

"Then we are in accord," Anner said with that strange glow of fervor lighting his grey eyes again. "In the morning, we will ride for Geochon."

As the others agreed, I stared past them. The tent flaps were open just enough for me to look upon the snow-churned mud of the camp. In the distance, the grey smudge of the Elven forest blended with the lowering gloom of the early winter skies. A vague murmur of disquiet stirred against my mind. I had a score to settle with Gabril de Spesialle, one born in snow and blood and the numbing grief of a child. My nostrils flared at the remembered stench of roasted flesh. I saw my mother's blood spill upon the stones of Asphodel, and the trees writhe as the relentless fury of the storm lashed them. Through the horror of my waking dream, a thin voice traced a line of resolve into my mind.

You should always try to remember that for every blessing the gods give, there is a reckoning. Thus do the gods test us, judging our ability to bear the chalice of decision that will, in the end, determine our fates.

The memory of Daphnis' words awakened the power within me. Magic sang along my skin and purred through my veins. With it came the conviction that another warning lurked beneath her words: a meaning that I had yet to fathom. My eyes fastened upon those of my husband. His face was grave, but his black eyes glittered with pride as he returned my gaze.

Cold, hard knots tightened in my soul once more. "I'll be ready to confront Gabril de Spesialle," I said at last. "I'll make sure of it."

The End

We hope you enjoyed this fantasy romance by Celina Summers. The story of Tamsen and Asphodel is not yet over. We invite you to join our community loop at www.amp_community@yahoogroups.com to stay tuned for the next portion of this epic drama.

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