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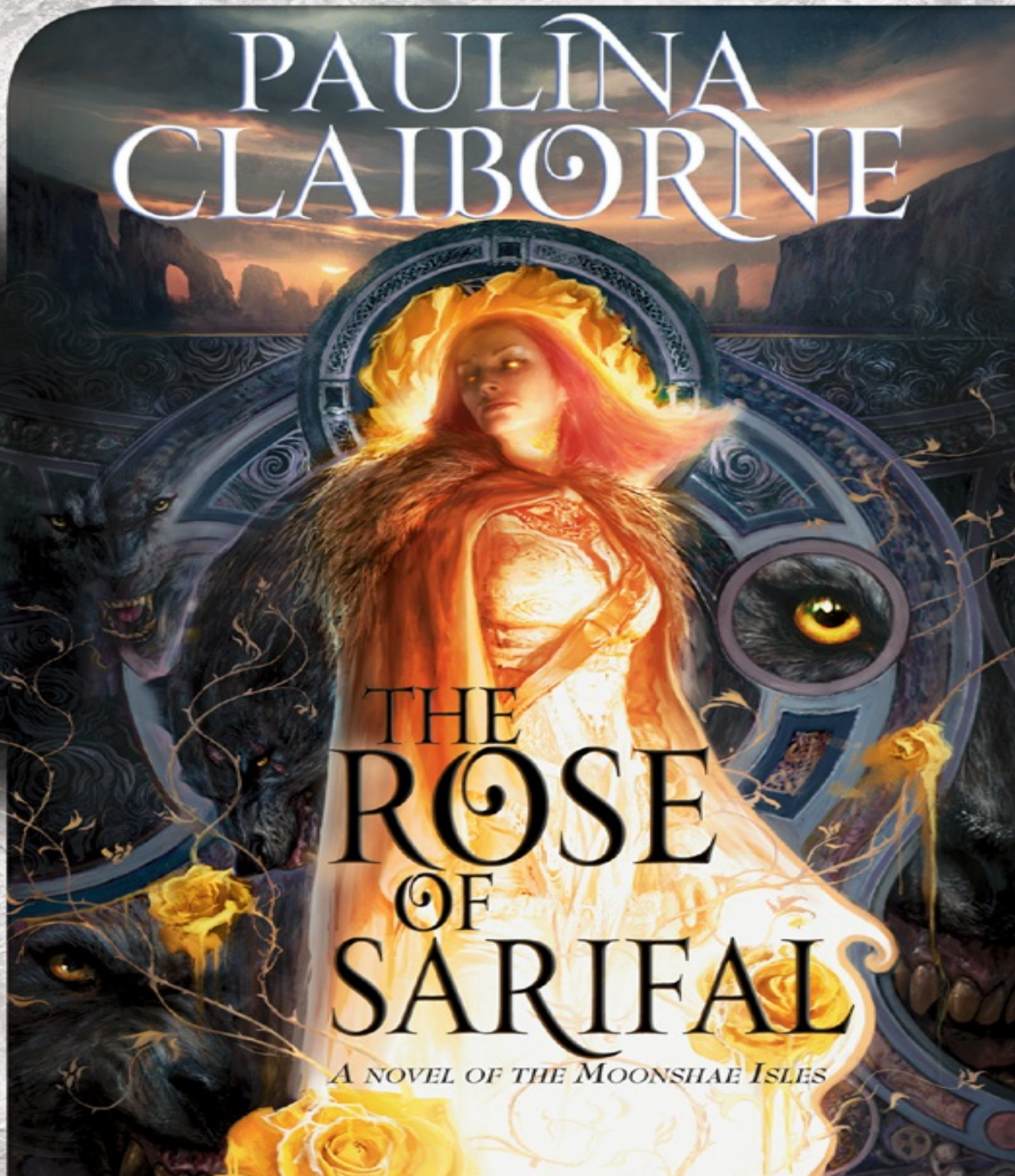
FORGOTTEN REALMS®

PAULINA CLAIBORNE



THE ROSE OF SARIFAL

A NOVEL OF THE MOONSHAE ISLES

“Take the helm,” he told Marikke, and as the boat shuddered and yawed he leaped onto the gunwale, barefoot, his longbow in his hand. The Savage stood beside him with his sword outstretched, the blade glowing with red fire. He was muttering and cursing, and Lukas could feel a prickling in the air, as the sword sucked down energy for a strike.

Now the boat was well alight, and with his arrow nocked, and with the naga’s grotesque head weaving and turning not forty feet away, he paused. Almost overwhelming in its intensity, he felt the sudden, harsh joy of losing everything, of letting go the garbage and

detritus of his life. For years he had sailed the *Sphinx* over the Trackless Sea. She carried all he owned. Not seven months before he had finally paid her off. Fine—good riddance—with this one shaft he would remake himself clean and new. Below him he could hear Marikke's prayer, and he let fly. Guided by Chauntea and his own skill, the arrow pierced under the creature's chin, lodged in the thinnest part of its neck where the scales were weakest. At the same time a crooked branch of fire burst from the golden elf's sword. The air stunk of lightning.

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FORGOTTEN REALMS®

PAULINA CLAIBORNE

THE ROSE OF SARIFAL

THE ROSE OF SARIFAL

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DEDICATION

This book is for Trainer Thompson, Rose Shuker-Haines, Noah Savage, Ben Hynes, Jasper Rosenheim, and of course Lucius Park, my son.

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About the Author

Moonshae Isles

Welcome to Faerûn, a land of magic and intrigue, brutal violence and divine compassion, where gods have ascended and died, and mighty heroes have risen to fight terrifying monsters. Here, millennia of warfare and conquest have shaped dozens of unique cultures, raised and leveled shining kingdoms and tyrannical empires alike, and left long forgotten, horror-infested ruins in their wake.

A LAND OF MAGIC

When the goddess of magic was murdered, a magical plague of blue fire —the Spellplague—swept across the face of Faerûn, killing some, mutilating many, and imbuing a rare few with

amazing supernatural abilities. The Spellplague forever changed the nature of magic itself, and seeded the land with hidden wonders and bloodcurdling monstrosities.

A LAND OF DARKNESS

The threats Faerûn faces are legion. Armies of undead mass in Thay under the brilliant but mad lich king Szass Tam. Treacherous dark elves plot in the Underdark in the service of their cruel and fickle goddess, Lolth. The Abolethic Sovereignty, a terrifying hive of inhuman slave masters, floats above the Sea of Fallen Stars, spreading chaos and destruction. And the Empire of Netheril, armed with magic of

unimaginable power, prowls Faerûn in flying fortresses, sowing discord to their own incalculable ends.

A LAND OF HEROES

But Faerûn is not without hope. Heroes have emerged to fight the growing tide of darkness. Battle-scarred rangers bring their notched blades to bear against marauding hordes of orcs. Lowly street rats match wits with demons for the fate of cities. Inscrutable tiefling warlocks unite with fierce elf warriors to rain fire and steel upon monstrous enemies. And valiant servants of merciful gods forever struggle against the darkness.

A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE

PROLOGUE

"Do not speak to anyone," said Mistress Valeanne. "If someone asks you, then just smile and nod your head. It is a beautiful night, and we are out for a ride by the lakeshore to Crane Point. It is natural for us to be here. No explanation is necessary."

"But I thought we should wait for my sister," said Amaranth. "Didn't she tell us not to—"

"Yes—please, my lady," said Valeanne. "She will meet us where we are going. In the interval, try to

remember that since your mother's death, you do not know who is your friend."

"But—"

"Hush," said Valeanne.

They had left the water-citadel of Karador before first light. Now finally, at sunset, they had climbed out of the woods of Myrloch Vale and into higher, sparser country; six dragonborn soldiers on their enormous mounts, and two eladrin, one a child.

"I'm tired," complained Amaranth. "I don't understand why I have to hide. When will we be there?"

They had changed horses at Glenraugh and taken something to eat away from the company. Now the mounts were weary again, as they left the trees and came up the path between the lakes, Ulls and Innes, one black water, one green. A guard post was there, the source of Valeanne's concern. It stood at the terminus of an old wall left over from human times. Grass grew on its battlements, and the gate had tumbled down. But the torches were lit, a line of intermittent lanterns that stretched from one shore to the other.

"I don't understand," protested

Amaranth. “Why did we have to leave, the last night of midsummer? Didn’t they need me for the anointing? I was going to be an aunt again, a real aunt this time. Nana had laid out a pretty dress and my new shoes. Now we’ve spent all day like this, when I could have been having fun. You lied to me—my sister isn’t here. No one is here. I hate this place—where are we? I hate you,” she added as an afterthought.

“Gods give me strength,” murmured Valeanne. The sun was setting in a blaze of crimson light. She squinted up at the bare hillside

on the other side of Ulls, where a larger beacon had flared to life.

"Madam," rumbled Shamasar, the captain of the dragonborn. He pointed with his scaly finger toward the lighted door and windows of the ruined guard tower. "Look at them—a company at least. Someone is expecting us. If we're to reach the steeple of the hippogriffs—"

It was as he said. There were soldiers at the guard tower, more than necessary or usual at this lonely outpost.

"If we go back," said Shamasar, "we can retreat into the woods

again and pass along the far shore by the crags. We can reach the steeple from the other side."

"No," said Amaranth. "I'm not going anywhere. I refuse." She was a red-haired girl, dark-eyed, small for her nine years.

A horn sounded up ahead, a single, plaintive, menacing note. Valeanne stamped her horse in a half-circle and reached out for the child's reins. "You're right," she said. "There's too many. We have to—"

Below them, behind them, the trees closed in over the trail. But now there were lights down there

too, flickering among the branches, fey lights in many colors. “Shit,” she said. “We are betrayed. My lady, hide your face. Pay no attention—”

But it was too late. Amaranth had pulled her pony free and spurred it up the slope, toward where the black shadows of the soldiers massed by the gate. More stumbled down the hillside, dark silhouettes against the fiery clouds. Amaranth pulled the hood back from her face and shook her red hair free. “Sirs,” she said, calling out to the approaching soldiers. “I’ve missed the entire midsummer festival

because of these idiots. It's not fair. I'm hungry and I want to go home."

The wind shifted, and the pony shied in terror from the harsh scent. These were no eladrin or elf guards, Valeanne saw as they approached. In the half-light, she could see their black faces and white hair.

"Drow," said Shamasar. He yanked on the bridle of his dragonspawn mount. The creature turned its wicked beak and raised one clawed foot from the stones. Shamasar drew his sword. "Haroon, Gesh," he shouted. "Fall

back.”

They were caught. Below them, among the ash and linden trees, more of the drow had massed along the path, bold in the failing light, shaking their spears. Among them and farther back, Valeanne could see larger creatures from the Underdark, come up from Myrloch—cyclops guardsmen in steel armor, their axes as tall as men, their single eyes shining yellow.

Above her, up the slope, a drow soldier scampered through the rocks, snarling and gesticulating, her skin and armor black, her hair as white as ash. Her nose and the

ridges of her eyes were pierced with iron rings. She laughed and showed her sharpened teeth, and reached for the pony's head. But Lady Amaranth stood on her stirrups, and with her riding whip she struck the drow across the face.

"Ugly!" she said, which was untrue. The drow were beautiful, elves of the black night, eladrin of the shadows.

What alliance had brought them out of their bottomless cities and into Myrloch Vale? What had Lady Ordalf promised them, that they did her bidding? One of them had climbed to the top of a boulder

above Valeanne, a drow priestess of the Spider Queen, and out of her, as if conjured from her hands, webs and tendrils of a fog of darkness spread into the air, obscuring the new stars.

Valeanne pulled a crossbow from its scabbard and shot a quarrel through the drow's chest. Then she spurred upward beside Amaranth as the dragonborn divided ranks, three behind them to block the way, three to ride with them up the slope. The ones behind, Valeanne knew she could depend on them not to run, turn, flinch, take a single step backward, or do

anything except die fighting, even against these odds—twenty, thirty to one, it looked like. Already Valeanne could hear the hawking, whistling grunts as the two males, Haroon and Gesh, drew air into their bodies through the gills behind their cheeks, distending the sacs of poison or burning acid that would soon spray from their jaws to turn the slope below them into a cyclone of fire. In the middle, the female—Valeanne hadn't known her name—had freed her mount's barbed head. She sat easy in the saddle, a bastard sword in either hand, ignoring the arrows that had

begun to fall. She raised her head, and for a moment Valeanne could hear the bitter, skirling, hissing death-chant of her race, before it was lost among the screaming drow. But even after that the words, unspoken, hung above them, the quatrain that begins, *"Fire of black heaven, high beacon of the morning star, / lit with my last breath, I will not disappoint you …"*

"Madam," said Shamasar, polite as always. He had ridden up ahead, his greatsword in one hand, a hammer in the other. Valeanne watched, awestruck, as his mount reared onto its hind legs, while at

the same time Shamasar unfurled the scaly wings from behind his back. Stretching high above him, twenty feet from tip to tip, the wings provided balance as he goaded his mount forward step by step. Cowed, the drow fell back, while at the same time the remaining two dragonborn cantered up away from the path, while Valeanne and Amaranth fell in behind them.

Now the whole slope was lit with fire. Dry blue lightning flashed above their heads. They rode through the boulders until the land evened out, the long lake on their

right hand, the guard tower on their left.

Ordinarily it is a mistake to divide a weaker force, but the dragonborn weren't ordinary soldiers. The three who held the trail up from the woods had spread apart to block the entire vale, from Innes lakeshore to the cliffs below Ulls Peak, a space of a mile and a half. They had bathed the slopes with poison and cold fire, and when Valeanne looked back, she could see not one of their enemies had gotten through. Ahead, Shamasar kept their flank while they cantered over the dry turf

toward Ulls. There the black water had receded from the shore, leaving a strip of sand where they could race the horses.

They were headed for Crane Point, a spit of land that stretched into the lake where the royal house of Sarifal had kept a hunting lodge. The court had come to hunt elk in the month of Leaf-fall, ever since the leShay Queen Ordalf had brought the fey to Gwynneth Island a hundred years before. Then the high towers of Karador had risen from the Feywild through the clear waters of Lake Myr, and the human kingdom had fallen.

Most of their works had fallen with them. Always the eladrin preferred temporary structures. The lodge at Crane Point was less a building than a stable for the horses, and an open field where enslaved Ffolk and Northlanders, bred for docility, would build and then dismantle the high pavilions while their masters drank and gathered and played music by the shore, admiring the flights of rainbow crane around the base of Corwell's Steeple, all that remained of the old citadel.

"Hush, my lady. Don't cry. Don't be afraid. Your horse is wounded

and cannot run. Climb up behind me."

"I'm not crying. Flower needs a rest, that's all."

In every battle there are strange pockets of quiet and nothingness. Valeanne and Amaranth had fallen into one of them by the small, black, lapping water of the lake. Above them played the dragonfire, and arcs of soundless lightning from the east. Shamasar had kept the drow at bay while Lady Amaranth dismounted. Staring with fright, lame and hurt from the drow arrows, the pony spread his front legs and refused to budge,

while Amaranth held his cheek.

The pony lowered his head. Soon he would settle and lie down while the numbing poison did its work. There was a cold wind off the water, which Valeanne knew was not quite natural to the time or place, and carried with it the faint whiff of carrion. She knew the drow priestess she had killed was not the only one among these dark elves, and the wind would soon catch them in a black, cold net of fog. Already, smokelike clouds drifted above them as Valeanne brought her horse around.

"Why did they hurt Flower?"

asked Amaranth, as if all this strength and fury had been unleashed to kill a single pony. Valeanne turned in the saddle to study the summit of the steeple at Crane Point, looking for the fire—there it was, the signal. It gleamed through the black clouds that spread like a miasma over the water, a product of drow conjuring.

"There's the hippogriff," rumbled one of the remaining dragonborn, a female. "Madam, we must go."

"But I won't leave Flower," protested Amaranth as Valeanne spurred close, stretching out her

hand.

"Lady, we spoke of this. This is not safe for you. Mistress Tiana has arranged a sanctuary on Snowdown at the court of Erliza Daressin, just for half a month, until this has blown over."

She was lying, and the child saw it in her face. Amaranth locked her arms around the pony's neck and would not budge. But then there was no more time for gentleness and persuasion, because the battle had claimed them once again. It swirled up from behind them, where the fey had overwhelmed the guards. A company of drow, armed

with spears and shields, came up the slope, with worse creatures on their flank. Captain Shamasar was there, and he cantered back slowly, then turned his mount to face them once again—a half-dozen enormous spiders, as big as horses. But from each of their bloated thoraxes protruded the body of a drow, her chest and arms and head, a grotesque spider-centaur. Two of them crouched low, and as Valeanne watched they launched themselves through the air, each fanning the air with two short fireblades.

Burning arrows struck around

them. “Madam …” insisted the nearer dragonborn. She walked her mount away from them, down toward the lakeshore.

But Amaranth wouldn’t turn her head to look. “I hate you. I won’t go.”

Shamasar cut one of the driders from the air. But the other was on top of him, and by the light of its burning sword Valeanne could see the stumps of the arrows that protruded from the captain’s armor. Sighing, she raised her crossbow and shot Flower through the brain, six inches beyond the child’s hands—the beast was

perishing in any case. With its last strength it reared away, breaking Amaranth's hold, while at the same time Valeanne reached and grabbed the girl by the arm, pulling her up across the horse's neck while she bit and fought. Valeanne dropped the crossbow and spurred forward with the two remaining guards. A second drider was down. But now the rest of the dark elves had reached Captain Shamasar and pulled him from his mount. Valeanne bent over her saddlebow. She clasped her hand over the child's mouth. "Some day you will understand," Valeanne

murmured into her ear. “I’ll save your life if it kills me—I gave my promise to your mother. You disgusting little pig-shit bastard daughter of a fool, are you still too young to see the difference between good and wrong?”

Sometimes, though, the difference is unclear. Amaranth bit down on her finger, and even through the glove Valeanne could feel the little teeth. They were galloping along the lakeshore, the dragonborn up ahead. Valeanne watched the dragonborn raise her head and call out to the hippogriff in a word of flame that burst open the night, a

gout of fire from her scaly jaws.

There was a stone platform at the steeple's top, a hundred feet above the lake. In times past there'd been a temple there, an altar to the moon. That's where the hippogriffs waited to take them to Snowdown and safety—that much was true. The plan had been so simple. Out of season, there was no one here.

Coming back had been the lie, as the girl must have understood. They'd been betrayed. The plan had been to take a cup of mulled wine at the guardhouse then ride out to Crane Point to see the pair of wild griffons nesting in the

steeple at the promontory's tip, a sight not seen here in a generation. In the evening the hippogriffs would come. But now they had to catch them on the run. If their plans were known, then there'd be soldiers at Crane Point. Sure enough, a flare went up from the lakeshore a mile and a half ahead, illuminating the high stone ruin of the steeple, the broken arches and the gaping perch about halfway up, where the hippogriffs' wild cousins had made their giant nest. Above them at the platform of the moon, the winged mounts took to the air, trying to escape the sudden

light and the bombardment that would follow it, a missile of green fire and a crack of thunder—too late. One of the noble beasts erupted into flame, its feathered wings alight, and Valeanne could hear it screaming as it fell into the lake, obscured at the final instant in a cloud of steam.

The dragonborn repeated her signal then galloped on ahead. She would fight her way onto the promontory, a last, futile ride. Valeanne pulled up sharply by the water's edge. The second one loomed over her. "Madam," he said, "We can do nothing more. I

can buy you five minutes, not more than that." He raised one claw to the ridge between his eyes, then drew his sword and rode back slowly the way they'd come.

"Thank you," murmured Valeanne. It didn't matter now. The flare had faded over the lake, and she sat waiting on her horse, the child blessedly still.

"My lady," said Valeanne, as a second flare rose over the lake. "I'm sorry. I have failed you."

But as she watched, two enormous shadows rose from the nest on their high perch. Angered, perhaps, by the attack on their

smaller, domesticated cousin, or else furious at what they might interpret as a threat to their own offspring, too weak yet to fly, they took to the air. Evading the new bombardment, they wheeled once around the steeple and then dived, stooping above Crane Point, each of their outstretched talons the length of a man.

"I'm glad I could see that," said Valeanne. She let the girl down to the sand and then dismounted stiffly. She'd spent a long day in the saddle. The girl was docile now, looking up in wonder as the darkness closed in again, her eyes

full of tears, her red hair wild. On her neck, above her collarbone, Valeanne could see the rose tattoo.

As the second hippogriff came in and landed on the sand, the girl smiled and clapped her hands. Valeanne tried to soothe her mare as it shied away, patting her once on the rump and letting her go. Then she reached up to touch her shoulder, where a drow arrow had grazed her, deflected by her leather armor. It had scarcely broken the skin. But it was enough. Her arm felt stiff and cold.

The rider was also hurt, his armor cooked along one side, caught in

the blast. He reeled in the saddle, holding on to the horn between his knees. His helmet was black with soot.

"Come," said Valeanne. She lifted the girl up behind the rider and buckled her in. She slid a final gift into the girl's pocket, something to lighten the darkness. Then she stepped back, and drew her short sword awkwardly with her left hand.

"I'm not going without you," said Lady Amaranth.

New tendrils of shadow had gathered overhead, hiding the stars. "There's no room for me,"

she said. “Tell Queen Daressin that __”

But the rider touched the beast with his goad. It raised its beak, screamed once, and flung itself into the air, golden wings outstretched. Valeanne watched it climb up in a spiral of darkness out of sight. Then she walked down to the still water of the Ulls, bent to touch it with her sword’s point, and settled down to wait.

CHAPTER ONE

Caer Corwell

The only natural harbor on the west coast of Gwynneth Island is the long firth that leads up to the ruins of Caer Corwell, once the seat of the House of Kendrick and the prettiest city of the Moonshaes. Elsewhere, in the long channel between Gwynneth and Moray, the granite cliffs tumble to the sea, without a beach or an inlet for more than ninety miles. Or else the poisonous bogs and fens blur the distinction between sea and land.

Only in the extreme southwest could any boat hope to find shelter, after beating back and forth against prevailing winds and picking through the shoals and pinnacles that formed the harbor's natural defenses, the only ones it still retained.

A hundred years ago the firth would have been crowded with merchant ships and ships of war. The harbor itself would have been full of barges and chandlers' coracles. Any intruder would have had to pass under the towers of the fort, now roofless and abandoned. But on this crisp spring day, as the

Sphinx came about inside the breakwater, the only creatures Lukas had seen were gulls and otters, and the dolphins following in his wake. As the crew left the boat and pulled their skiff along the reach, all he could hear was the ringing silence, for the wind had died as they had crossed the bar.

In the clear water he could see the hulks of old ships, sunk at their moorings by the fey and their mercenaries more than a hundred years ago. Now, the skiff crunched ashore. They pulled it up the dry sluice and stowed the oars, then climbed up the great stairs to the

first of the stone courts, dotted with statues of ancient heroes. The gnome was first, then the Savage, then Lukas and Marikke, then the shifter and the watersoul genasi, his skin glowing with energy and cold blue-green lines of fire. Last came their leader, the only one of them unarmed as befit his rank—a solicitor from Alaron, and a distant cousin of the king.

"They should be here to greet us." He frowned. Not yet thirty years old, emaciated and weak chinned, Lord Aldon Kendrick clapped his hands. "Hello!" he cried out. "Hello there!"

“This is stupid,” muttered Lukas, his longbow in his hand. He and Marikke had once tried to defend Kendrick to the other members of the crew, out of a sense of racial solidarity that had worn away in time as his decisions became more and more erratic. That morning, aboard the *Sphinx*, he had spent an hour below deck, curling his moustache and rehearsing a short speech before the glass, inspiring words of liberation and hope.

“Suicidal,” agreed Marikke, priest and healer to the rest of them. Red-cheeked and yellow-haired, she smiled cheerfully.

Lord Aldon carried a salutation from the king, a message for the Winterglen Claw, a shadowy and secret corps of human runaways and rebels, Ffolk and Northlander, united in their struggle against the fey. He carried a promise of money and weapons at some future date, in return for an oath of loyalty to the king, as Lukas understood. The idea seemed vague and insubstantial to him, not worth the risk, except for the money he'd been promised. But still, to sail into the harbor in the bright afternoon, climb up among the empty civic buildings as if knocking on an

enemy's front door—all that was insane.

"You there," said Lord Aldon, addressing the gnome and the elf—Suka and the Savage—he hadn't learned their names. "You've been here before. What do you suggest?"

They stood in the old Court of the Moon, a stone expanse surrounded by crumbling, yellow-brick buildings and a long balustrade above the port. A dry fountain rose from the center of the square, an alabaster statue of Selûne, goddess of the moon, her face shrouded in an alabaster veil. One of her outstretched arms was gone,

broken off at the shoulder.

"You know the fey," Aldon continued. "I suppose you are the fey, or were, in some cap—"

He broke off as the Savage turned on him. The golden elf's handsome face was twisted with contempt. "You haven't listened to a word I've said so far," he protested, his voice soft with anger. "This is the date and time and place of your meeting with the Claw. I myself am *not* convinced these people exist, as I have told you. Yet here we are. What do you think? Is it possible we've walked into a trap?"

The Savage made an imposing

figure, the sun bright in his yellow hair, gold rings in his nose and lips, gold tattoos on his dark skin, his greatsword on his back. Still, his sarcasm was lost on Aldon Kendrick, who goggled at him briefly then turned to the gnome and asked, “What about you?”

Suka laughed. “I think we’re not important enough. I mean, who would bother?” She was a small example of a small race, dressed in a leather jerkin. Her hair stood out in clumps, a curious and unnatural shade of pink.

“She’s right about that,” muttered Lukas.

He turned to Marikke, but she was gone. She had ambled over to the statue, and stood by the dust-choked bowl under the goddess's feet. Water, in the old days, had dripped down from her fingers.

"Bright Selûne," murmured the cleric. As if in answer to her prayer, a single drop of water fell from the goddess's finger into the stone bowl.

Lukas looked up in surprise. "Ware," said the genasi in his whistling, eerie voice. He drew his scimitar. Cold fire sputtered along its blade.

The sun was halfway down the

horizon. The shadow of the statue protruded almost to Lukas's feet. As the ranger watched, arrow on string, the shadow faded, though there wasn't a cloud in the blue sky. Instead, the sunlight itself had changed and weakened as the sky turned color, tending toward a deeper, colder purple, or as if dusk had suddenly come. At the same time, as if to compensate, the empty iron cressets along the balustrade came flickering to life, first tendrils of black smoke, then a gentle radiance.

In a moment the crew had their weapons out, had assumed their

postures of defense, while Lukas ran to the balustrade and looked down over the port, where the *Sphinx* still rode at anchor. Only Lord Aldon stayed where he was, winking vaguely at the sky.

But all was still. Above them, the light had lost its force, and it grew cold. In the center of the square, the fountain overflowed. Lukas could hear a light, sweet laughter, and looked around for Suka—it didn't come from her. The gnome crouched beside an overturned stone urn, crossbow raised. But from the Palace of the Moon on the west side of the square, someone

stepped out of the shadows of the long colonnade, a single eladrin, empty hands upraised, her long black hair braided down her back, dressed in a diaphanous gown of red and green that moved around her when she moved. In the square the water and the fire followed her, flowing from the goddess's stone hands and rising up from the broken cressets, until the rest of the city and the world beyond the stone balustrade lost substance, faded into shadow in the middle of the afternoon.

The Savage, the golden elf, stood in front of her, his weight on his

back foot, his greatsword in his hands. Only he was undiminished by the lady's brightness, her opposite, perhaps, his yellow hair glowing in the torch fire, his black clothes a source of darkness as she seemed a source of light. She stared at him, spoke a few soft words in Elvish, then lapsed into the Common tongue, "Please, my cousin, put up your weapon. I mean no harm. I believe you have a secret you might share with us someday, or else share with yourself, but I won't say anything about that. You also, my little cousin," she continued, pointing

her slender forefinger at the gnome. “You have nothing to fear. I have not come here for revenge, whatever crimes you have committed. You see in me a simple eladrin maiden, here to greet you on behalf of … whom? The Fingernails, is that it? No—the Talons. Forgive me for my lack of skill in your language—no, the Claws, that’s it. The Claws of Winterglen. Such a violent name! You must excuse Captain Rurik—he could not come himself. He had an engagement that could not be broken. So he sent me.”

She shrugged a little, turned in a

half circle, then took a few staggering steps. “You must forgive me. I had something to drink while I was waiting. And I’ve brought something for you. I thought you might be hungry after a tenday of biscuits and dried sausages.”

Behind her in the Palace of the Moon, a new light shone among the columns of the portico and from the stone window frames, a row of empty arches save for the greenish glow. None of the crew had for a moment relaxed their vigilance, unless you could count Lord Aldon Kendrick, besotted by the beauty of the girl in front of

him. He wiped his lips, wagged his big head back and forth on his long neck. “Yes,” he said, making a motion to the others. “You may stand down.”

They didn’t move until Lukas gave the signal, stepping forward as he replaced the arrow in his quiver. They found themselves moving, he imagined, through a trap made of spider silk rather than steel, and it was not with steel that they could free themselves. And though the air was thick with menace, he felt instinctively it was not meant for them, the members of his crew, and that the trap

would tighten only if he resisted.

Aldon Kendrick, though, was already caught. The golden elf sheathed his greatsword on his back and stepped aside. Kendrick replaced him, and as the lady stumbled from feigned drunkenness he took her by the elbow. She thanked him with her smile and drew him forward into the portico, where Lukas could see a table had been spread for them, or else for Kendrick alone—there was one silver plate, one knife and fork, one silver goblet, one chair. It occurred to him she knew the others were not so stupid as to eat

or drink anything she gave to them, which left only Kendrick.

Even two days before he might have intervened to save the man from his own innocence and foolishness. But he had brought this danger on himself. Lukas already knew that Kendrick—weak when he should have been strong, obstinate when he should have given way—would tolerate no opposition to his orders, and he had ordered them to lay their weapons down. Lukas was nothing if not dutiful. He raised his hand, and his crew gathered round.

The lady favored him with a

complicit, conspiratorial smile as she drew Kendrick to the carved chair and sat him down and poured a cup of wine for him. So vain he was, Lukas imagined, that it never occurred to him to wonder why there was only one place set. It was the honor due his rank. On board the *Sphinx* he'd never dined with them. He was too proud. Instead he had preferred the single cramped, uncomfortable cabin below decks.

Now he took off his cap and gloves and bowed his head. The lady curtsied and drew up a stool. She had her own cup of wine, but

she didn't drink. Instead she made a gesture with her finger, and Lukas could hear, as if at the limit of his hearing, a sound that was like music.

"Please, my lord," she said. "Am I right in thinking you are Aldon Kendrick, worthy and handsome cousin to King Derid in Callidyrr? Yes, the family resemblance is too strong. You must allow a simple maiden to entertain you, while you wait for Captain Rurik—please, whatever you desire …"

Kendrick sipped his wine.

"Oh, that was too easy," smiled the lady. She turned her head

toward Lukas and the rest, where they had gathered on the portico. “Come sirs, and you also,” she continued, indicating the golden elf and the gnome. “Cousins, and you, sir,” she said to Lukas, “let me thank you for not resisting me. Death comes so soon for your kind. So soon, but not today. That would have been a shame. Besides, I have need of you—strong soldiers! Brave warriors. And loyal, too! Loyal until death. No, I am teasing. This fellow, how much was he paying you?”

Just at the limit of his hearing, a sound that was like music, a violin,

perhaps, and then a pipe. Lukas could almost hear it better when he wasn't listening. "You knew we were coming," he said. "The men who hired us to protect him, I think now they must have wanted us to fail."

The lady laughed. "Do you now? Captain, you have a suspicious nature. But let me ask you this: If you don't manage to defend him, despite your best effort, will you forfeit your reward? Or were you prudent enough to take your payment in advance? No matter—whatever coin was promised, I will double it."

She had stood up from her stool, and now she stood behind Kendrick's chair, her long hand caressing his cheek as he goggled and drooled, his freckled face empty of understanding, his big head wagging back and forth.

For days Lukas had despised him. Now, seeing him helpless, he could only feel pity. "I'll take him back," he said. "He's a cousin of the king. He'll require him breathing, at least, though it is obvious this mission was not intended to succeed."

The lady was dark-haired, bright-skinned, with long golden eyes. She

smiled, and drew her thumb along Kendrick's shaven jaw, across his throat. "Ah yes, his mission, to a nonexistent army of assassins and rebels. The Claw." She mimed the word with her curved fingers. "Is this something I should fear? I don't think so. Not when I've received another message from another Kendrick—oh, this king has many cousins. I am envious. Captain," she told him, "I believe you've been misled, as you yourself have guessed. What you see here is the successful end to your endeavor, we can agree. Why would you bring his lordship all

this way, just to take him back again? No. This is a job well done."

Lukas looked around at the faces of his crew, gathered around the table. Gaspar-shen, the genasi, stared down at the tabletop, spread with pies and jellies and roasted meats that gave off no smell at all. The energy lines on his bald forehead glowed with a lambent flame.

Kip, the little shifter, catlike and quick, reached his padded hand out for a pear then drew it back. His fingernails retracted.

"Now that you mention it," said Lukas, "usually we're paid half in

advance. This time we had debts against the crown, which were dismissed by the high procurator."

"He promised you the rest?"

"Yes." Lukas made a calculation, doubled it, then doubled it again. "Three hundred gold pieces."

"Ah, so you see. But let me promise you, Lord Kendrick's safe return was not part of your contract. On the contrary. Cousins of kings, they hate each other, always."

Lord Kendrick's forehead was high and bald, his hair drawn back in a queue, which normally he coiled under his velvet cap. The

lady took it in her hand. She pulled back his head to show his throat and his protruding larynx, which convulsed as he swallowed. “It doesn’t matter,” continued the lady. “You humans—now, tomorrow, what does it matter? You understand—” she indicated with her golden eyes the gnome and the elf—“these others, what does it matter? What can they expect, fifty years, sixty years more? But I was already old when Caer Corwell fell, in the Year of Risen Elfkin. From the battlements I watched those other Kendricks dance on the scaffold, King Derid’s

great-uncle, or great-great-uncle—they breed like mice, or weasels. Now here's another one. He lives, he dies, in the blinking of an eye."

She ran her thumbnail down the length of his throat. A thread of blood followed it down. "There, it is done," she said. All together, they watched Lord Kendrick's throat swallow and convulse, swallow and convulse, swallow and convulse. Then it was still.

"A sad thing," she said, reaching for a napkin from the table. She wiped her hands. "But not tragic. Not like the death of one of ours, or even—" her eyes glittered as she

nodded at Suka and the Savage —“traitors like you. Traitors to the fey.”

Suka grinned, stuck out her tongue, and ran her fingers through her pink hair. Like the elf, she had several piercings and tattoos, including a purple dog’s head on the surface of her tongue. From its mouth protruded a silver stud in the shape of a bone, which she now exhibited to the company.

Their host stared at them then threw down her napkin, turned, and stalked out through the portico. Outside it was a bright day, the last of the afternoon. The

torches were dark, the fountain dry, the shadows long. “Leave him,” she said, and they followed her to the long stairs.

“Come,” she said to Lukas, who hurried by her side. “You see you were meant to die here with Lord Kendrick. Three hundred gold pieces—the high procurator of Alaron could have promised you six hundred, or a thousand. He never meant to pay. But I have work for you.”

In the light she was impossibly lovely, with her straight, dark hair and pearly skin. But now that Lukas knew that she was old,

hundreds, perhaps thousands of years old, he could see behind her eyes a hooded shadow. She climbed rapidly downstairs then turned into the cobblestone streets of the old town. The doors gaped open in the empty houses, stone and brick, and dark passageways smelling of bat dung. Flocks of birds rose from the courtyards, and rats scurried among piles of fallen masonry.

She turned under a high gate into the block of an old prison, its windows covered with a mesh of corroded iron bars. Lukas stopped her in the courtyard. “We aren’t following you here.”

His crew moved into position, a ragged semicircle behind him. He raised his hand. Weapons were useless. His own bow was upon his back.

The lady turned around, then came back toward him until she stood uncomfortably close, her eyes almost level with his own. Even at that distance, her body and her clothes gave off no scent. “Captain,” she said, her thin dark lips a few inches away. “What is your name?”

He told her. “And me,” she said. “Do you know who I am?”

“I have an idea.”

“Tell me,” she said. Her teeth were small and very white. He watched the tip of her tongue move between them. It was dark, and a peculiar shade of lavender.

“I believe you are High Lady Ordalf of Sarifal, queen of this land.”

A hiss escaped her lips, and Lukas could feel her cool breath. “Is that what you believe?” she asked, her long eyes mocking him. “Then you must also believe I have the power to destroy you where you stand.”

He shrugged.

“But I mean you no harm! On the contrary, I mean to reward you.

Three hundred gold pieces from the procurator—you won't see that gold, I'm afraid. You wouldn't even see it if you dragged Lord Kendrick's worthless carcass back to Alaron. But I will make you rich men."

She blinked, and a tear formed in the long lashes at the corner of her eye. She raised her hand to touch it, pull it away, roll it between her fingers, a jewel now, or something close to it, a sapphire or a piece of crystal. She laughed, flicked it away. "And not just men," she continued. "Please, introduce me to your company."

The prison walls rose above them, three stories high. In the late afternoon, the flagged courtyard was full of shadows. She stepped away, then moved around the semicircle as Lukas named each member of the crew. “What kind of creature do you call yourself?” she said to Gaspar-shen. “You must forgive me. I do not travel much. This is the farthest I have been from Karador in many years.”

The genasi—small for his race, blue-skinned, almost naked—stood with his legs spread. “What kind of creature?” repeated the queen. Her gaze flicked briefly down his body

to his eel-skin breeches. “And you, a human woman,” she said, moving to Marikke. “Priestess of Chauntea—you don’t find it … difficult, to share your quarters with so many … males?” She laughed, curtseyed sardonically, drunkenly, and then continued on to Kip, the cat-shifter. “Boy, I hate your kind.”

She made as if to turn away, but then turned back. Her beautiful face took on a hard, penetrating look. “Touch me,” she commanded, and Kip, hesitantly, as if against his will, brushed his hand against her outstretched fingers. She gave

an exaggerated shudder, then smiled. “I hate you,” she repeated. “But not as much as I hate traitors.” She stared long and hard first at the elf, then the gnome.

Suka yawned, once more showing them the stud in her long tongue. “Thank you,” said the queen. “That’s quite enough. More than enough. Three hundred thalers each,” she said, mentioning the Amnian gold coins now current throughout the islands. “Three hundred more on your return. When you bring me … what I want.”

She paused, then continued:

“Captain, come with me. You and one other—you,” she said, pointing at Suka. “The rest, wait for us beside the dock. You understand, I need some security. Someone to guarantee you won’t just sail away with my gold.”

She gave the genasi a final appraising glance then turned away under an arched doorway. Lukas nodded, and the company drew back, except for Suka, who peered up at him. “Your choice,” he said.

She shrugged as if to say there was no choice. The two of them followed the queen through the

archway at the top of a flight of stairs, lit from below. Under the level of the port, the walls sweated and stank.

And there were men here too, the first Lukas had seen, sallow Ffolk on unknown errands dressed in urine-colored rags, who sank to their knees as the queen passed. “Behold the Claw,” she said. “The Winterglen Claw. Rebels. Warriors. Perhaps we should be quaking in our shoes.”

She was barefoot. Her high-arched soles left prints on the damp stones, as if she dried them just by touching them. The Ffolk

squeezed their eyes shut and pressed their fists against their mouths. “Doubtless they will kill us in our beds,” she murmured.

Two levels down, the stairs debouched onto a wide, low-ceilinged gallery, stinking of offal and slime, lit with torches. She paused. “Captain, let me tell you a story.”

Again she came to stand in front of him, her lips close to his own, her cool breath on his face. “Ten years ago, I had a sister, who was taken from me. A half sister. My mother’s daughter, not my father’s. She was … younger. Much, much

younger even than my own son.

"You know," she said, "that things are different for us. You humans can have many children in your tiny lives. An eladrin woman—one, perhaps two pregnancies, each one lasting several years. We give birth in pain, you understand. We live a long time, and because of it, it is the youngest who inherits. Always the youngest. My sister was nine years old when she disappeared."

"Where did she go?"

The queen shrugged. "It was a mystery. A traitor stole her from her bedchamber in the high citadel.

Suborned six members of my dragonborn guards. They took her to Crane Point on the lake, that much is known. There was a plot to kidnap her and take her to the castle of the Daressins on Snowdown—she did not arrive. Though we do not visit these places, still we have eyes and ears. A hippogriff snatched her from the lakeshore—we saw it. After that, nothing. Except a rider washed up on the west coast not far from here, at the entrance of the firth. A rider's corpse, burned from the fire. This was ten years ago."

"Maybe she drowned," Lukas

said. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you? But you’re not listening. Snowdown is to the east.”

She turned abruptly, and he and the gnome had to hurry to catch up. “Let me show you something.”

At the back of the gallery was a spiral stair, its stone steps slippery, choked with filth. Barefoot, the queen climbed down it, unconcerned. The room below was lit with a charcoal brazier, and the air was foul. Three large prison cells, lined with iron bars, stood in a row.

The queen smiled. “There, you

see?” she said to Suka, indicating the left-hand cell. “One of your a n c i e n t masters from the Underdark.” In fact much of the cell’s space was occupied by a single bloated body, a purplish-gray, yellow-haired, hump-backed giantess with an iron mask locked over her head and half her face, to occlude her evil eye. She stank.

The middle cell stood open. “Please, my dear,” indicated the queen. Suka stepped over to it and peered in.

On the inside the cells were separated from each other, again, with rows of iron bars. “Do you

like it?" asked the queen. "It won't be for long. Or that depends on Captain Lukas, I suppose."

Inquisitive as a mouse, Suka darted inside and made a circuit of the bars. Inside the left-hand cell, the fomorian turned her heavy head, and Suka wrinkled up her nose, then caressed the ring in her left nostril, as if by doing so she could affect the smell.

"Of course no weapons," said the queen. "And captain, a sense of urgency. Every five days we will remove one of the bars between her and that." She nodded toward the giant. "And perhaps one along

the other side.”

A jailer waddled forward out of the shadows, a fat, flabby, bearded man with a ring of keys. Lukas nodded, and the gnome unstrapped her crossbow, unbuckled her short sword. “What will you feed her?” he asked.

The queen laughed. “Oh, chicken and wine. Snails in honey sauce. She’s not a prisoner, after all. Rather a pledge, until you bring back what I’m asking you.”

“Which is?”

For an answer, she waved her hand to the last cage. In the dim light Lukas could see a figure

huddled up against the back of the wall. The queen snapped her fingers, and the jailer held out a glass ball, oval in shape, which she grasped in her left hand. Soon, a milky light spread from her fist, the rays jutting out between her fingers. “Look,” she said.

She thrust her hand between the bars. In the new light Lukas saw a naked creature lying motionless on its side. Its eyes were closed.

Its form was roughly that of a human woman, with big shoulders and hips, fat breasts and a wide belly. She was covered in hair, thin and pale along her front, thicker

and darker on her back, rising to a ridge along her spine. She had only two fingers on each hand and foot, thick, fleshy fingers over a wad of callous, fingers that were sharp and heavy, narrowing to curved, wicked points.

The queen shifted her hand, and a single beam of light touched the animal, caressing her long jaw, showing the curved horns at the corners of her mouth, the predatory teeth, the small eyes, the wide, distorted nose with its upturned nostrils. “Look,” repeated the queen. She let the beam play along the creature’s sinewy arm, and

then she showed a bald place at her waist where the hair was thin or else shaved away, revealing a pattern that was artificial and deliberate, a tattoo of a climbing rose, a yellow rose etched in black and silver.

"The Rose of Sarifal," murmured Lukas.

It was the royal symbol of the leShays. "Do you think? If that were true, then I would—wait," said Lady Ordalf, and with her right hand she pulled her black hair away from her neck, while with her right hand she turned the light, so he could see the elegant tattoo

below her ear, this one tinted pink. “My mother had a white rose inked on her backside because she was a whore, and died a whore’s death. Yellow was my sister’s color. But what is it doing here? Does this mean my sister …?”

She clapped her hands together, loud as a thunderbolt. The animal started awake, and then immediately began to shift into a more human shape, her features shortening and softening, her hair receding or else falling away, her fingers dividing and growing longer. Embarrassed suddenly, she put one arm over her breasts, while

she brought her thighs together and put her other hand into her lap. She bowed her head, and her pale hair hid her face.

"There exists no force or power," said the queen, "that can transform one race of creature into another. Amaranth was a leShay, half of my own blood, heiress to a royal house. Perhaps she was bound for Snowdown and the court of the Daressins. But what if the wounded rider fell into the sea, perhaps in the channel between Gwynneth and Moray? What if he was lost as he made his turn, and left my nine-year-old half sister buckled in her

seat? Tell me, what do you know of Moray Island? You must have seen the coast from your ship as you came down from Alaron."

Lukas shook his head. "I've never set my foot on Oman or Moray. It's true, we saw the fires on the way, and at night you can see the signal fires back in the hills. Men used to live there. Maybe some still do. There were men in all these islands once upon a time."

"Yes," replied the queen, "the fey remember. But we're not travelers like you. There are too few of us. You hate us, hunt us down if you find us away from home. It is your

jealousy. You love to kill what lives so long, what is so much wiser and more beautiful. As for this creature, she's from Moray, we know. She was dressed in leather clothes made from the hide of those great animals who live there. We do not have such beasts. Even instead, the lycanthropes do not wear clothes or sail on boats. We found her drifting on a spar after a storm. She will not speak to us. No pain was too great for her to bear. She spoke no words, either in Elvish or the Common tongue, which is all we know. Perhaps you would care to try."

Lukas shrugged, then asked the lycanthrope her name in several languages, Chondathan, Damaran, Draconic, and Primordial. She raised her head, and he could see her porcine eyes shining in the dark. But she said nothing.

Curious, the gnome cocked her head. *"Captain,"* she said in Damaran, *"you will not leave me here?"*

"No," Lukas told her in the same language. *"I promise."*

Suka smiled, showed her tongue. "Fourteen days is all you have, before that creature—" she nodded toward the fomorian who, on her

hands and doughy knees, had pressed the side of her face against the bars—"turns me into soup."

When Lady Ordalf reached to grab Suka by the ear, the gnome ducked her head away and uttered a word of misdirection. Then, dignified as any queen, Suka stalked into the cage and let the jailer lock her in.

"You will not speak these foreign words," said the eladrin queen. "Not in my presence. You will not plot against me or conspire. And you," she said, turning to Lukas. "You will take your ship to Moray Island. You will find my sister there

—she is alive. My only sister is alive against all odds, and after these ten years. I know it and I feel it. You will find her and bring her …”

Lukas shrugged, assuming a nonchalance he did not feel. “If she’s alive,” he said, “I’ll bring her back.”

The queen stared at him. A smile touched her lips. “You misunderstand,” she said. “One part of her is all that interests me. Bring me her head. That’s what I want to buy.”

CHAPTER TWO

Landfall

Behind the breakwater there was a stretch of sand near where the *Sphinx* was moored, and there they had pitched their tents. In the morning the city was deserted, as before. Nor could they find the street that led down to the prison where they had left Suka in her cage. That whole section of the port was different in the morning light, full of low, collapsed buildings and crumbling alleyways.

Now, four days later, the wind

blew from the northeast. The tea sloshed from Lukas's cup as he tacked back and forth. The *Sphinx* was a sturdy boat, broad-beamed, and he had to struggle to keep it close to the wind. He was running on the fore- and mainsails only, not too much canvas because of the rocky pinnacles that made the straits treacherous this close inshore. Moray was out of sight to the west, but still he hugged the Gwynneth coast, heading for the narrows where he could make his crossing.

Up at the bowsprit the genasi lay on his stomach, one arm dangling

down. Always he was there when the ship was under sail, reaching to the water that reached back to him, rising and surrounding him with glowing spray. Marikke tended the foresail. The boy, Kip, was in the cockpit. “I don’t understand,” he said. “How could we leave her? We didn’t even fight.”

These were the first words he had spoken since they’d left Caer Corwell, which meant he was feeling better. On the boat his cat nature had all but disappeared, he hated water so much. Any spray or drop of water, it was as if it burned his skin. An oilskin hat covered his

short, calico hair. He wore his oilskin coat, too, as if they ran a gale or were expecting squalls. It was a clear, cold, bright spring day.

"Tell him," said Lukas. The golden elf was clambering aft, and now he slipped into the cockpit. As always he was dressed in black—black boots, black breeches, and a soft black shirt, a mixture of silk and linen, buttoned carefully to his throat. He wore a gold ring on each of his dark fingers, and his long yellow hair was fastened in a golden clasp.

The Savage was the name he had

adopted when he escaped his family. Many elves kept battle names—his real name he told no one. He scratched under his long ear. “That was the leShay High Lady Ordalf of Sarifal,” he said, “queen of the fey, ruler of Gwynneth Island. We couldn’t fight her, not there.”

“I don’t understand. Why not?” continued the shifter. “She had no weapons I saw. Not in that dress. If she had underpants, I’d be surprised. Eladrin die like anyone else, I’ve seen it. If we’d fought together … That’s what we do.”

“Not this time,” Lukas said.

The Savage nodded. “That’s the point. Each one would have been alone, struggling in darkness against forces we couldn’t see. Or she would have had us fight each other, thinking we were fighting her. Or she could have turned any one of us, and had him cut the others’ throats.”

“I could have beaten her,” murmured the shifter. “We could have. Marikke and me.”

But the Savage continued as if he hadn’t heard. “Weapons—we’d have been her weapons. She wouldn’t have raised a finger.” He turned toward Lukas. “It’s your

fault. You were the one who bound us to that idiot," he said, meaning Kendrick.

Lukas frowned. "He hired us. And I gave my word. You knew the risks."

"It wasn't his coin."

"Not as it turned out. Would you have preferred to rot in jail? They were talking about hanging you in Callidyrr. I made the best deal I could."

"It was no one's coin," the elf insisted. "There was no coin. Just a worthless promise from the procurator in Alaron—there's coin now. The bitch loaded us up with

it," he said, meaning Lady Ordalf. He touched the tattoo on his cheek where the lines ran like golden wires under his dark skin. "Blood gold. If the gnome dies, I won't spend a copper."

They came about onto a starboard tack. Lukas's tea was cold. He watched the headland, half hidden in the shining spray that rose from the genasi before the mast. "That will console her," he said. "Besides, you'll spend it. Remember why you were in prison in the first place." Of all of them, the elf had the most expensive tastes.

The Savage reached under his shirt. He drew out a gold thaler and made as if to fling it away into the water or else peg one of the gulls that followed them—once, twice, three times. His green eyes shone in his dark face. Then he grimaced, and replaced the coin in the pouch under his armpit. “What do we know about Moray Island?” he asked.

“No one knows anything,” answered the shifter. “Only rumors. But here’s another thing I don’t understand—it’s not far. Lady Ordalf’s got no reason to trust us. If she’s so tough, why not do this job

herself?”

Lukas watched the headland, the pinnacles that marked the entrance to the narrows, a line of rock spires like chimney stacks, or the spines of a dragon. On this tack they would avoid the last of them. “The fey don’t like to travel. Every step they take from home, their power drains away.” He smiled. “With humans it’s the opposite.”

He was joking but if that were truly so, he thought, then he would be the strongest man alive. Certainly he’d been all over the Moonshaes in the past few years. He had set himself the task to learn

the secrets of these islands. What were rumors to Kip, to him were truths brighter than facts: Moray was cursed. Its gentle shores and harbors were the blight of any captain so foolish as to steer his ship too close.

In another few hours, at sunset, he would turn the *Sphinx* to the west. And he would crowd on sail, raise the fore- and staysails, and the topsails too. He'd built the ship himself, and if he were to lose her, he'd rather see her die as she was running hard. And he had chosen a night crossing for two reasons, only one of which made sense. The

other was personal. But if the stories were true and the ship were to catch fire, he'd rather you could see it from far away, racing before the wind, a fire ship with every shroud alight.

Up by the raked foremast, Marikke sat by herself. She had called upon the great Earthmother of Toril to freshen their sails and bring them safe to Moray across the straits. Now she had ceased her incantations, the nineteen formal prayers and the twenty-one codicils, two hours of labor that

had left her exhausted. Yet she was happy even so, and not just happy to be done—evening prayers would start soon, after all. But she was glad as she looked up at the straining sail. She imagined her body now possessed by the goddess, as if the wind that drove the boat flowed through her, or as if the sinking light that warmed them fell from her. She felt light and heavy at the same time, relaxed and alert, as the wind whipped her yellow hair over her face, and the cold spray rose around her; the genasi at the bow had raised his own kind of

exultation.

There were as many ways to speak to the goddess as there were creatures in the world, she thought, because the goddess took many forms. She had heard priestesses of Chauntea claim that all the deities of the pantheon—good and evil, light and dark—were really aspects of the same god. Not everyone thought so. In many places of the world, these priestesses would have been put to death, their bodies hoisted onto gibbets to make food for flying rats. But here in the private temple of Marikke's mind, she found it brave to think so,

brave also to think the opposite, that some gods disappeared and died as the world changed, and so were gone forever. Since the Spellplague, many evil demigods had disappeared, as the world shed its need of them. Marikke had heard a story when she was young, how a seven-masted ship had sailed the straits between Gwynneth and Moray. Wherever it passed, a gigantic shrouded figure stood on deck shouting, “Malar is dead. Great Malar is dead.” And on the cliffsides, and from the mountain peaks, and in the deep forests of Moray rose such a wailing of

lamentation that it seemed the land itself was crying out. Malar was dead, cruel exarch of the hunt, tracked down, it was said, by his own beasts. Marikke hoped that it was so. But what did it mean to kill a god, if there was still a creature who believed in him?

Back in the cockpit, the golden elf was complaining. “It’s not true. I left home when I was scarcely grown. Sometimes you forget that I’m a fey.”

Lukas laughed. “You’re the one who forgets it,” which was true.

The Savage had a taste for human women. On Alaron he had seduced the wife of a high official, convinced her to rob her husband, which was the reason they found themselves in their current predicament. A bad situation, which Lukas had swapped out several times for a worse one. Moray was cursed—didn't everyone know it? Perhaps, but they didn't know the particulars. Lukas considered whether to tell them what kind of danger they faced. He'd want to know if his last hours had come, if their positions were reversed. On the other hand,

why steal the surprise? The knowledge wouldn't change anything. He still had to weigh the certainty of Suka's death against the likelihood of theirs. Nothing had changed. He had no choice. It was too bad about the boat.

And it was possible they knew the risk as well as he, and this was the way they had chosen to confront it, this light, inconsequential talk about gold and travel. In which case it would be impolite to smother that with weighty and depressing subjects—death, say, or dismemberment. Surely they could guess why he had packed the skiff,

which now bobbed in their wake, with food and weapons in the hidden, watertight containers below the bulwarks. Only rumors, Kip had said, talking about Moray. The elf hadn't demanded what they were.

To distract them, Lukas asked a question to which he'd guessed the answer: "Why do you think Lady Ordalf wants her sister dead?"

The Savage shrugged, answered immediately: "She is in danger, for all her power. Because we didn't find Captain Rurik, it doesn't mean he doesn't exist. The human population of the island hates her

—that doesn't matter, perhaps. But now the fey hate her too, the elves and the eladrin. I have heard that Karador is empty, and many of the eladrin have moved to the vale of Synnoria, where they are free from her. They will not protect her if the Ffolk rise up."

"She has lived too long," Lukas added. "Most of the fey were born under her reign."

"How is that possible?" asked Kip. "Isn't she one of them?"

"Yes and no," said Lukas. "She's a leShay. The eladrin live three hundred years; she lives forever, almost. There's just one leShay

family in Sarifal, and they grow sicker and more paranoid in every generation. Imagine if you had to live in your father's house for a thousand years, live with your brothers and sisters for a thousand years or longer. They cling to each other, and they hate each other, too. Amaranth is by far the youngest, and her mother married out of the family. Polluted the pure blood. Broke the code. Ordalf is her half sister, remember." He put the tiller over and turned west.

Up at the bowsprit, the genasi

watched the headland fall away. Above him the sail luffed, and then spread wide. With the wind behind them, it was as if the sea grew still.

Motionless, he watched the crew scurry along the decks, and the sails rose around him and the ship shuddered forward. Then he looked down into the water once again. These human tasks were not for him, a creature of the chaos. He took no pleasure from hard work. He shared none of Lukas's joy in making things or changing the direction of events. Those were the consolations of a mediocre spirit, which did not share, as he did, a

pure connection to the elements and the water of the world. Now already he could feel the ship find the deeper water of the straits, the deep blue current that flowed from pole to pole, and manifested itself in him, now, here. A cloud of spray rose up around him shining blue and green where it touched his body. Through it, as the droplets fell into the sea again, he could perceive in some instinctive part of his mind, the contours of the rocky channel as the ship plowed the deep, opening up a furrow that led into the sunken sun.

In time the sky grew dark and

then shone black and moonless, pricked with stars. Gaspar-shen lay on his back, staring upward. They'd passed the midpoint of the channel, and now he felt the Moray shelf under the ship's keel, as gentle and benign as Gwynneth had been rocky and abrupt. Then something else, a groaning in the deep.

He flopped over onto his stomach, surprised to see they'd come so far. The rest of the crew had retreated to the cockpit, where they crouched over the binnacle under the lantern. They had no need for sounding with him in the

bow, feeling the water's depth, the soft sand bottom. But still he was surprised to see the coast of Moray, a black smudge against a paler black, and a fire burning on the hill.

He imagined the others saw it too, and imagined also the thrill it gave them, the anticipation of some powerful enemy. But under the water there was something greater, a force that issued from the serene inlet perhaps two miles in front of them, the stream that drained the swamp.

Aft, Lukas stood, his hand on the tiller. Gwynneth was behind them now. Turning to look back, he saw a lighted beacon on the bluffs above the strait, a bright blue fire marking the way they'd come, someone signaling to someone, which surprised him and troubled him. But it was too late now to worry—soon they'd have to take in sail. He pictured in his mind the map of Moray he'd once seen, complete with soundings, a mariner's chart almost two hundred years old, prepared when there were still Northlander settlements along this coast.

He saw it in his mind's eye, examined the contours. Two minutes more and he'd have to come about, turn northward once again. He felt almost disappointed. Was it possible the fire nagas of Moray were some foolish myth? No, he'd met a Captain Blau in Callidyrr, who'd sworn he'd seen a ship burn to the waterline and then sink with all hands while an enormous serpent with a human head nosed among the wreckage, looking for survivors. Blau had been drunk when he told him; of course he'd been drunk! Why bother to stay sober after such a

sight, no matter how long ago?

So it was almost with relief that he felt something grinding in the timbers underfoot. “Hey,” he called, and saw the genasi standing in the bow, holding onto the shroud, pointing up ahead.

And when the sky erupted into flame, revealing a serpent with his head ten feet above the bows, Lukas had time to realize that the old stories were wrong about one powerful detail—there was nothing human or humanoid about the snake’s triangular, flat head. Blau had lied about that, reciting with horror how a snake with an old

man’s bearded face had held one sailor by the feet while another with the head of an old woman had seized hold of his neck, like a married couple fighting over a muffin, pulling it apart until the jam flowed out.

What a pile of shit that turned out to be, Lukas thought, just as Gaspar-shen dived into the water and the foresails burst into flame. Lukas put over the tiller and hauled on the main sheet, but already the boat felt sluggish and unresponsive, and he wondered if she’d been damaged below the waterline.

“Take the helm,” he told Marikke, and as the boat shuddered and yawed he leaped onto the gunwale, barefoot, his longbow in his hand. The Savage stood beside him with his sword outstretched, the blade glowing with red fire. He was muttering and cursing, and Lukas could feel a prickling in the air, as the sword sucked down energy for a strike.

Now the boat was well alight, and with his arrow nocked, and with the naga’s grotesque head weaving and turning not forty feet away, he paused. Almost overwhelming in its intensity, he

felt the sudden, harsh joy of losing everything, of letting go the garbage and detritus of his life. For years he had sailed the *Sphinx* over the Trackless Sea. She carried all he owned. Not seven months before he had finally paid her off. Fine—good riddance—with this one shaft he would remake himself clean and new. Below him he could hear Marikke's prayer, and he let fly. Guided by Chauntea and his own skill, the arrow pierced under the creature's chin, lodged in the thinnest part of its neck where the scales were weakest. At the same time a crooked branch of fire burst

from the golden elf's sword. The air stunk of lightning.

The *Sphinx* had turned into the wind, all lines loose, all sails flapping. "Bring up the skiff," Lukas said. The shifter pulled it close, where it bobbed in the chop.

Another naga lifted its head above the water. Lukas loosed another arrow and saw it bounce off the creature's eye ridge. Bad shot—it was difficult to keep his balance with the boat rocking back and forth. He had locked his elbow around one of the main stays and worked his bare toes under a cleat, but even so it was hard to avoid

pitching overboard. He saw the creature turn its head, saw its yellow eye brighten as it found the skiff—Kip had pulled it alongside, and Marikke was climbing into it. Above Lukas's head, the topsails were on fire. Below his feet, the bow had slid into the waves.

Another shot—this one lodged in the creature's nose. It turned to look at him. Enraged, it left the skiff alone, and as its jaws opened and its forked tongue slipped out, Lukas imagined that perhaps he could see something human in its face, not in form so much in its baffled, malign expression. The

ridges over its nose were like eyebrows—he could see that now. The nose itself was blobby and big. He sent arrow after arrow into it. While the others climbed into the skiff, Kip stepping lightly, trying at all costs to avoid the spray. The Savage caught Lukas's eye, then shouted something that was lost in the flapping sails. He clambered aboard, and Marikke pushed down the daggerboard, raised the little lateen sail, and the skiff was away. It was better like this. Lukas himself would swim for it. He slid his last arrow into the creature's mouth at a range of ten yards, then

threw his longbow overboard.

Burning debris rained down on him. He could feel the heat on his cheeks, and knew the water would be cold. Nevertheless, he stripped out of his green wool jerkin, and when his head was free again he found himself looking into the face of another naga, just risen from the deep, its head hanging as if suspended a few feet above him. From this angle he could see its coarse, flat, wicked features lit with fire, and perhaps a smile. The water sluiced from its neck. One ear dripped with seaweed.

Mesmerized by fire, even fire of

their own making, the nagas would watch the boat until it sank, and they could turn away. By that time, Lukas hoped, the skiff would have found its way onto the other side of a narrow spit of land that stretched out from the coast, would have made landfall. Gaspar-shen, he hoped, would have already found it, would have guided them inshore.

Now the skiff was a hundred yards away, almost out of sight beyond the circle of firelight and the clouds of smoke. Stupidly, Marikke had brought it around to pick him up instead of racing

straight for the beach. Lukas could swim this distance, had done it before. Already they'd drifted in enough for him to see the pale line of breakers as they fell on the sand spit. At the limit of his hearing, now that the sails were down, he could hear their rhythmic roar. He could see fire that way, too, torches or flares that spread out in a line as he watched. He waved the skiff off, pointing southward down the beach, and dived.

The problem with his crew was that even in the best of times, any kind of direct order was worse than useless, even if it was disguised as

a suggestion. And in this case, already, he had spoken only of possibilities: This might happen, and so you might have to. Even now, when everything was unspooling as he had predicted in his worst imaginings, still it was possible to misunderstand, or to ignore what was best. And of course none of them had spoken about the nagas.

Underwater, in the cold dark, he turned away from the skiff and stroked inshore. He would not come up for air, he thought, until he was out of sight. Then they'd have no choice but to do what he

wanted.

From underwater he could still see the glow of the burning boat, now behind him. All sound was gone. The water was colder than he'd hoped. He dived down deep, then turned, disoriented—was that another glow, another source of light below him, or a reflection of the fire on the surface? No matter. A long black tendril uncoiled toward him out of the inky dark and seized hold of his ankle—this was bad. Already he could feel a tightness in his chest. Soon he must come up for air.

He kicked. But the tendril had

him now, twisted around his ankle. In the blue-green light that rose up from the sandy bottom, he could see it, thin and whiplike, lined with tentacles. Even in the best and most watertight plans, you had to be prepared for unseen dangers. And these particular plans were nowhere near the best—set a new standard, actually, for stupidity and porousness—oh, well, he thought, kicking as he fumbled for the dagger at his belt. With the hooked blade in his hand he reached back and thought, I hope I don't cut off my foot.

It took a moment for his brain,

starved for oxygen, to realize what happened next, when he found himself moving inside a nimbus of blue-green light. Gaspar-shen was there. He hadn't gone ahead to guide the skiff. Or if he had, he'd come back. The patterns on his skin glowed with a cold, wet fire. Water-soul, water-breather, he swept out his own knife and ran the blade along the tentacled leg that curled up from below, then caught Lukas's arm in his slippery hand and pulled him toward the surface and toward the beach, where the rollers deposited them gently on the dark sand.

“Where are the others?” gasped Lukas, when he could speak.

The genasi shook his head. They crouched together on a spit of sand that stretched out from the coast. On the other side, across a shallow bay, a bonfire burned, inland on the wider beach. “That’s where we were going to meet,” said Lukas. “Who is that?”

He knew. Black figures struggled on the shore, silhouettes against the fire. The Savage was fighting there, and Lukas watched the silent flicker of his sword, the branches of red lightning. The Savage was a good swordsman.

Behind them, flame still flickered on the wreck of the *Sphinx*. Lukas turned his head and watched as it slid softly underwater. To the east, over the black mountains of Gwynneth, the full moon was rising, a bright smear on the horizon. There were no nagas to be seen, and whatever foul creature had held him by the ankle, it had pulled back into its hole or cave to nurse its wound. Everything was peaceful, for the moment. Shivering on the cold sand, Lukas looked up at the sky. Malar's Eye, the red star he'd used to set his course, looked down at him.

“I’m hungry,” said Gaspar-shen. His voice was thin and high. His breath whistled through inhuman nasal cavities. The lines on his bald head glowed dimly in the quarter light.

“You’re always hungry.”

“I would like some … custard pastry.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

For a moment more they watched the play of the Savage’s silent lightning. Then suddenly there was another flash of light in another color, a white cyclone of flame. It wasn’t just the lycanthropes down there. “Let’s go,” Lukas said. He

staggered to his feet, and together they took off at a run, down toward the base of the sand spit and the bonfire there. All was silent as they ran half a mile along the packed sand toward the larger beach. Even with the east wind, Lukas could smell the swamp as they approached.

They would be too late, he predicted. The storm of red lightning had blown over. In the bonfire's glare, as he stood out of breath on the long strand, Lukas could see the damage it had caused. Two dozen shapes littered the water's edge, lycanthropes caught

in the act of changing, or else in their pure wolf's shape, their bellies burned and slit, their guts black and smoking on the sand around the skiff, which they'd pulled up and then staved in. More corpses bobbed in the water, or else drifted inshore, all beasts and half-beasts, Lukas saw with relief. Kip's oilskin hat floated on the surface. For whatever reason, they had taken his crew alive.

He examined some of the corpses for the rose tattoo, but found nothing. All were wolves except for one, a red boar killed in the act of changing, tusks sprouting from his

mouth. Everyone had heard of the lycanthropes of Moray Island, but this creature was a surprise to him, until he remembered the shape-shifting pig he had seen in Caer Corwell, in her cell.

They had ransacked the skiff but left much of value, or at least of use—clothes, mostly. Lukas found a wool shirt and pulled it on. He found a pair of boots. Then he unfastened the hidden compartment and drew out his weapons, his long sword, his spare bow and quiver. Queen Ordalf's gold he left behind. But they dragged the ruined skiff into the

dunes and flipped it over.

"Custard," repeated the genasi in his high, soft voice. "With … white chocolate."

"Maybe tomorrow." Lukas wondered if Gaspar-shen was joking, or half joking—sometimes it was hard to tell. The genasi had lived most of his life within the Elemental Chaos where, Lukas supposed, custard was in short supply, let alone white chocolate. Right now, he would be satisfied if they could avoid death for a few hours. That would be like icing on a cake.

Lukas was a tracker, but the trail

they followed from the beach required none of his skill, even in the dark. Behind the beach, in the wet, soggy ground, he saw paw prints and cloven footprints only just filling with water—the lycanthropes had scarcely ten minutes' start. But even so, Lukas knew they'd never catch them. They would run like wolves.

CHAPTER THREE

Black Blood

Kip, the cat-shifter, came to, trussed-up in the predawn chill, damp soot in his nose. The boy's desire for a bath threatened to overwhelm him, make him move when he knew he shouldn't move.

When light broke, it would be the third morning after the fight on the beach, where he, Marikke, and the Savage had been taken prisoner. Since then the lycanthropes had brought them from the coast, the first day through swamps and

forests, the second day through treeless, upland meadows—pastureland when men still lived here, when all of Moray was a Northlander redoubt, and where the shaggy, long-haired cattle had been famous. But now finally they were coming onto the spine of the land, the curved ridge of mountains that ran through the middle of the island from Black Giant in the south to Scourtop above them, a line of jagged peaks and glaciers.

They had not been harmed, despite the twenty or so lycanthropes the Savage had killed when they attacked the skiff.

Perhaps their own lives had no more value to them than other people's. They had left their dead unburied or else floating in the water, and they had pulled their prisoners into the fen, along a track through the cold mud.

But Marikke couldn't run like that, all night like a wolf. Gasping for breath, she had collapsed on a dry island in the middle of the swamp, where Kip and the elf faked a weariness they didn't feel. Unspoken was the need to delay, to allow Lukas and the genasi to catch up.

But the lycanthropes weren't

having any of that. Already half their number had split away north, while the rest had alternately dragged and chased and lashed their prisoners west toward higher ground. Under the full moon they gathered under an oak tree, its bark stripped and cut with claw marks. The ones who still had human faces muttered and complained, while the rest snarled and howled. Scanning them with his bright cat's eyes, the boy could see that there were pigs among the lycanthropes, sows and boars. And there were cats, like him or partly like him. Kip wondered what

emergency or cause had brought them together and made them forget their natural antipathy—the leader, a wolf lord with a reddish coat, led into the slavering circle a troika of great pigs, who caught the prisoners up in their strong, peculiarly joined arms and flung them up across their backs. Then they could make time.

Naturally fastidious, at first Kip had been happy to be carried, happy to get his feet out of the mud. But the journey had quickly proved uncomfortable. They had tied his wrists and ankles, and flung him up like a sack of grain

for the hard, jolting ride. And when they stopped to light a fire or make food, that had been worse—the lycanthropes had discovered quickly that his nature was similar to theirs. But because his form and his understanding were so much more refined, so much closer to a human being's, they hated and resented him, mocked him out of jealousy, and called him names. The ripped-up, bloody offal they had given him to eat, he had not been able to touch.

Now was the third morning, and as the stars grew pale, Kip found himself where they had flung him,

curled up against the pig-creature's broad, hairy back. The lycanthropes slept in piles, tangled together with their own kind. As always, their animal nature prevailed during slumber. The boy, also, felt the subtle, tiny shift like an electric charge in his mouth, hands, and feet, as his teeth and nails receded. He savored the feeling, as he did every morning upon waking.

But he did not stir. He didn't want to disturb the animals who lay around him. He wanted information, and after he had opened his eyes briefly to examine

the heaped-up embers of the fire, he shut them again, and instead allowed his gaze to turn inward, focusing now on his connection with the creature beside him, whom he was touching through his face, arm, and breast. He felt under his cheek the stiff, shiny, mottled bristle, the long muscles underneath, the occasional tremor or twitch. All that was like the skin of water on the surface of a pond, and he was the fisher cat, crouching by the shore, claws outstretched, hating the water yet fascinated also, looking down and down for the small fish, slow and

sluggish in the cold depths, because the animal was asleep. A flash of yellow, and he had it on the bank, had slit its cold belly and spread it out, a map of entrails, and in it Kip could see a world of enemies as the pig-man perceived them, the hostile islands of Oman and Norland and Gwynneth and Alaron, where lycanthropes were hunted and despised. Even here on Moray the enemy still held fast, stubborn outposts of men and orcs and infestations of fey, all of whom must be driven out and destroyed, for the sake of the Black Blood.

The boy allowed his thoughts to

move and stretch a little bit. “Where are my friends?” he asked without asking.

Another fish on the bank, slit open. “They are here.”

“Where are you taking us?”

“Into Orcskull.”

“Why?”

This one was darker, deeper, an eel slithering away. But he caught it and hauled it up, though it twined around his wrist. “Great Malar says it. Great Malar wants it.”

No sooner had these words, unspoken, risen to the surface, than he caught a glimpse of

something lower down, something at the bottom of the pool, a shadow or a shape that waited there, its red eyes glowing in the dark. Kip shuddered, and he felt the wereboar come awake under his body as without moving he slunk away from the inner water and feigned sleep.

Not far away, Marikke lay on her back, her face unquiet, her long hair tangled and caked with mud. Unlike Kip, who craved physical contact even when he was in danger, who was always brushing

up against you or else reaching out to touch your arm, she had dragged herself away from the night fire, humping on her elbows and her knees to be alone. This was not because she had any illusions of escape—her wrists and ankles were tied too cruelly for that. It was because she needed space for the goddess to find her and speak to her alone, space to become greater than she was. Now she was dreaming, close to the surface of sleep, because of the pain in her swollen hands. But even so the goddess crept out to her, lightly on the thin edge, and greeted her with

the sign of the morning. In Marikke's dream she had taken an unusual form, a cloud of bees buzzing without sound, and yet retaining the shape of a young girl.

"Daughter, I am afraid," she said, though she was young enough to be Marikke's daughter. "The ice is breaking in the mountains, and Great Malar wakes. An angel comes to prepare the way. Swift is his sword, bright is his hair. But it is your choice, what happens next."

Hurt and cold as she was, Marikke said nothing. "You're not listening," said the girl, her mouth drifting and reforming as the bees

turned and moved. “You’re not seeing what I see. Oh, it is because you are suffering,” she said, and even in this dreadful bleak morning Marikke almost had to laugh, because now the goddess was around her like a golden cloud, caressing her without touching her, moving the blood through her body and opening her up. It was a cold, clear dawn in the Month of Melting, and there was frost on the rocks. Back to the east the way they’d come, the sun was rising over the straits.

Always her heart lifted when she came into the mountains. It was a

landscape she knew from the time when she herself was a little girl in her father's stone hut in the Fairheight hills on Alaron, watching the wet clouds chase the rainbows up the valley. The Orcskulls were drier, the chalky ground the color of exposed bones. Still she took comfort in the graceful granite peaks that rose behind her, touched now with dazzling light. Surely the goddess was in all places, and all creatures served her in their own way.

But where was the person who had attacked them on the beach, the mage with the shining sword

who had taken the Savage by surprise as he cut the lycanthropes apart?

"Where do you think you're going?" Harsh and deep, the voice came from behind her. The first day of this journey from the coast, she could scarcely tell the lycanthropes apart, and all their words sounded like grunting and babbling in their distorted mouths. But now she recognized the Common tongue. Now the goddess had blessed her with understanding, which allowed her to twist away from the kick when it came, the clawed foot that caught

her in the side and not the head. The creature rose above her now, a rust-colored old wolf-man, the leader of his pack, his beard grizzled and stained. He reached down with his cruel hand, and with his claws he hooked her by the rope between her wrists, and dragged her down toward the encampment where the fire had burned the night before. There he threw her on her face in the dry dirt.

They were in the ruins of some Northlander stable or sheepcote from the old days, a roofless rectangle of laid stones, collapsed on two sides and the fire pit in the

middle. Kip was there with a wereboar squatting over him, an albino giant with a broken tusk, who had forced his cloven hand into the shifter's hair and pulled back his head. "Where is he?"

The Savage had disappeared during the night. Always this was the lycanthropes' vulnerability, their long hours of sleepiness after gorged meals and frenzied motion —they spent more hours asleep than awake. Only a few of the cleverest were able to maintain their human shapes during slumber. The previous day they had gotten into camp long before

sunset, and most of them had immediately collapsed into an unconsciousness that was expansive rather than profound, their claws twitching in their dreams.

The Savage was gone. The golden elf had slit his bonds, doubtless with some secret dagger he had hidden in his clothes. The two young wolves that had been supposed to guard him lay with their throats cut in a smear of dark blood.

But why hadn't he freed her where she lay, away from the others? Marikke had never trusted

him—how could you trust him? Everybody, everywhere had learned to hate these elves, arrogant creatures from the wilderness beneath the world, or else, if you wanted to think of it that way, from the mossy grottoes and shifting forests inside ourselves. Their outward splendor buried their black hearts. If one of them claimed to have changed his nature, run away from home, what then? Surely he could change back just as easily. Surely also the many traps he'd laid for human women, as sticky and repulsive as any web …

“Where has he gone?” snarled the albino pig-lord, forcing back the shifter’s head. In his right hand, the creature clutched a knife between his two heavy fingers. Kip whimpered in fear. At these moments of crisis he was at his most human, a thin pale boy with a shock of yellow hair.

Later, with the goddess’s help, stripes of red and brown would appear in it, but at this moment it was almost white, because of his terror. Around them and in the gap of the collapsed wall, Marikke looked into the faces of twenty or thirty creatures whose bestial

nature was now paramount, and whose voices now drew tight around them like a noose of sound.

"Oh, sweet Mother," Marikke prayed. "Not my will, but yours. Even so, a little help might be appreciated …"

One of the wolves, his long back decorated with a ridge of colored mud, lumbered through the gap. His jaws sagged open, and his long tongue protruded into the shifter's face, while at the same time the pig-lord's hand had changed into a boar's cloven foot again and dropped the knife. But he pressed the sharp edge of his foot into the

boy's neck, while the rest of the animals screamed and gibbered. Marikke closed her eyes, trying to find a place of inner calm, however provisional and momentary, a foundation from which her prayer could rise. The wolf-man stood above her, his clawed foot in the middle of her back. She sought her place of soft tranquility until she found it at the moment when several of the animals cried out in surprise or grunted in dismay, and she opened her eyes to see a man break into the circle, kicking the beasts aside. He seized the wereboar by its tail and dragged it

back, twisting it at the same time until the creature flipped onto its side, struggling to right itself, digging its feet into the chalky ground.

"Great Mother," Marikke prayed. And at first this person did seem like the manifestation of a prayer, because the beasts cringed away from him and were suddenly quiet. And because he himself seemed touched by heaven in the light of the rising sun, wearing clothes so bright they seemed to glow. And his sword when he drew it from the scabbard on his back seemed to burn with reflected light, as the

beasts pressed down their heads into the dust or else turned to offer their bellies or their throats.

This was the sword-mage that had defeated the Savage on the beach. Then, in the darkness, Marikke hadn't seen him clearly. She didn't much care about the faces of men or women as a rule, and she was suspicious of physical beauty, which she imagined always hid an inner flaw. Yet to her, suddenly, the mage appeared achingly, painfully lovely, with a loveliness that seemed not decorative only, but seemed to mean something, to symbolize something true and just

and right and eternal—that was at first glance. So she was surprised to hear his voice when he spoke, a voice that held none of those same qualities, but was instead as harsh and jarring as an eagle's scream.

"Brutes," he cried, "what have I tried to teach you? Patience and discipline. That is what's required to be a man. You howl and complain of failure, yet turn away from every chance at victory at the first scent of blood. Believe me and have faith. Soon you will hunt again."

As he spoke he swung his sword, catching one beast after another

with the flat of the blade, so that they yelped and scrambled back. One was too slow, a young boar, and the mage turned his wrist suddenly, so that the sword bit. One stroke, and the fleshy head sagged free, and the arteries spurted blood into a puddle. “Take him and prepare his body. Some of you must be hungry after this long run.”

Two of the wolves crept forward and dragged the wereboar away. Marikke knelt in the dirt, hands clasped, eyes averted. Now she was able to examine the mage more closely, and saw new details she

had missed in the power of his first impression. There were gaps in his mouth where he had lost teeth. And she could see the lines of his veins and arteries, pulsing blue and red under his transparent skin. And there was some discoloration on his neck, some scaly rash that disappeared into his shirt.

He stepped toward her with the point of his bloody sword held low. He drew the blade between her wrists, freeing her of the cruel ropes, then moved behind her and freed her ankles. Then he did the same to Kip where he lay on his side.

“Rise,” said the mage and then laughed when he could not, his hands and feet as cold and useless as rocks. Terrified, Kip turned onto his back, his hair as white as bleached bone.

The pig-lord, who had recovered some of his human shape and clothes, now shambled forward. “We had an elf,” he grunted. “A golden elf. Yes, a golden elf. He escaped during the night.”

The mage shrugged. “I know him. I do not fear him. I made him prisoner. Let him starve here in the wilderness. These are enough. These two are what I want.

Tonight the Black Blood tribes will gather in the dark of the moon. Tonight, standing in our own flesh, we will see the Beastlord roused from slumber, and he will call us by name. He will not turn away from our sacrifice, or despise it. You will see."

He strode over to Marikke, still on her knees. He bent down beside her, and she could smell his carrion breath. "Our sacrifice," he repeated. "All of us must give up something. Even me. I recognize a servant of the goddess. My name is Argon Bael. What is yours?"

Marikke told him. This close, she

could feel the heat that radiated from him, see the brightness of his skin. She closed her eyes. “Oh, my lady,” she prayed. And as she did so, she recognized the mage. He was the Beastlord’s angel of vengeance, as Chauntea had described him. Marikke could see that now.

She felt his lips close to her ear. “This is a matter of justice, not revenge,” he whispered in his harsh voice. “All the other islands, they will hunt these creatures as they find them, exterminate them all. Here only are they safe. Is it too much to ask, one little island in the

bright sea? One little sanctuary for the Beastlord? You know there are orcs in these mountains. And giants. And on the north coast, in Trollclaw, even men. Not all of them are dead. Is that fair, do you think? Is it too much to ask, to be rid of them? To wipe this land clean?"

"There is room in the world for all creatures," murmured Marikke, sounding stupid even to herself.

"Is there? Is there so?"

He helped her to her feet. When he touched her hands, the pain in them disappeared, and she could move her fingers. "Attend the boy,"

he said, nodding to the shifter. “Stay with him. You know they hate him more than you. Because he is more like them. It is their own nature they can’t stand. Do not stray from me. I will protect you. These others …”

He swung his sword, shaking the blood of the wereboar off the blade. The gesture took in the ruined stable and the nearby ground. At that moment their enemies did not seem intimidating. Many sat or squatted, staring vacantly, while others curled up, already asleep. But after Argon Bael wiped and sheathed his sword,

he clapped his hands. And in a moment the circle had reformed. The lycanthropes surrounded them again, and caught them in a net of focused and intense ferocity, following every motion or gesture with their eyes, and giving the impression that it was only Argon Bael that kept them from tearing Marikke and Kip apart.

"Come," he said, and strode through the collapsed wall into the bright light of the morning. Above him, Marikke could see his wings, which seemed incorporeal, not part of his body so much as implied, a shimmering trick of light that

spread out behind him, where the air seemed unsteady and discolored. He extended them as if for her inspection.

She helped the boy to his feet. Grabbing, chafing his hands, she provided a small version of the comfort the angel and the goddess had given her. Murmuring a prayer, she stroked the blood into Kip's fingers and led him forward, stumbling through the ranks of wolves until they reached the open hillside and the beginning of the rock fall. There a fresh breeze waited for them, and a change in the weather. Clouds passed over

the sun, wisps of fog blew over the mountain crests, and it began to rain.

Crouching above them in the rocks, the Savage welcomed the fog, which soon pressed around him like wet feathers. He welcomed anything that hid him. Soon the peaks were lost to sight, but he could still peer downward through the boulders and watch the lycanthropes pick single file through the scree. These were the conditions that submerged the beast in all of them, the small wet

rocks unsteady, and slippery, and uncomfortable for claws and cloven feet, for anything but hard boots. And so as they toiled upward, they appeared to him more and more as a line of unhappy men, held in place by obedience or duty, because animals in this weather would crawl away to shelter and stay put.

Moving from boulder to boulder, taking particular care not to kick loose any falling rocks, the Savage shadowed the line, making a path that was parallel to theirs and a hundred feet above it. In time they climbed up through a ravine at

whose bottom flowed a quick, gray stream fed by snowmelt. They had left behind the grassy meadows and the drier upland pastures, decorated that morning with buttercups and lavender and mountain columbines. The golden elf in his black clothes, intent as he was on never being discovered, nevertheless with part of his mind was always witnessing and worshiping the beauty of the land, as he climbed up through the gorse bushes and juniper trees, their flat green needles lined with droplets from the fog, and here and there a complete spider's web, hanging as

if made of water.

He had no weapon save for the tiny dagger he had hidden in his underclothes, which he had used to free himself the night before. He scanned the line below him for the packhorses. It was peculiar how, even in their most human incarnation, the lycanthropes betrayed their animal nature, not so much in their physical morphology—especially at this distance—but in the language of their gestures and their social hierarchies. In the front of the lines there were the predators, the panthers and the wolves,

swaggering and aggressive. Behind them the pigs, less truculent but more devious, enablers and counselors and minions, prey and herdsmen, too. In their most human shape they herded livestock, a few dozen sheep and goats, and the line of packhorses carrying the baggage. One of those horses, in one of those big packs, would have his sword.

He skirted through a patch of juniper above the scree. Up ahead he could see the angel, glowing in the dim, foggy light. He was the one who had taken the Savage by surprise, that night on the beach.

And behind him the boy and the healer, stumbling and unsteady—the Savage also, in the night, had struggled with his little knife, his fingers cramped and bloodless. None of them had eaten anything since they were captured. The Savage was lucky to have found himself close to a sleeping pig-girl, a small shoat of perhaps fifty pounds, whose throat he had cut while at the same time locking his cold palms around her snout, while he rolled onto her head and stifled her. With a strange sort of pleasure he had felt the hot blood flow over his hands. Later, he had even drunk

some of her blood, which had disgusted him. But it was good to be alive.

The ravine narrowed and grew steep. The stream was now more of a waterfall, and the lycanthropes labored up through the spray. The angel disappeared through a keyhole in the rock. The Savage, clambering above him, could see the land open up. There was an updraft here, and the fog rose like a curtain to reveal a broad bowl below the peak of a high mountain, its summit clad in ice. And he could see among the tumbled stones the ruins of a town, and stone forums

and amphitheaters. The angel strode along a double line of collapsed columns, roofless and headless, yet each one carved in a different geometric design. There were no emblems the Savage could see, no statues of men or beasts, no floral patterns or even curved lines, but only zigzags and jagged edges and hard angles, all indicating or leading to a single point, an enormous square opening in the granite flank of the mountain on the other side of the circle of ruins, perhaps a mile away.

This place was far older than the

wrecked farmhouses down below. Those were remnants of the Northlanders or Ffolk who had once lived in this section of the island, not long ago. But these structures were grander, evidence of an extinct civilization perhaps not even of men but of some other more perfect, more gigantic creatures, now disappeared.

Moving along the walls of fitted stone, far from the central avenue of columns, the Savage followed the lycanthropes into the porch below the mountain.

Looking up, Marikke tried to imagine the labor that had slaved away this temple from the rock, hundreds of years, perhaps, and thousands of men. They stood in a broad atrium that led into the heart of the mountain, a vacant granite cube sheathed in marble, embellished with a relief that showed a line of carved symbols on either wall, a progression of geometric shapes leading to the tunnel's throat. There a hole had been hacked out of the living rock, rougher and older even than the porch, and black with accumulated soot. Ironwork cressets were fixed

on either wall, and as the angel led them forward he touched with his sword the torches hanging there, one on each side. They flared up as he passed.

But at the tunnel's mouth, under the first pair of torches, he turned and made his preparations. Not everyone was worthy to descend into the rock. This was the temple of the Beastlord, and here a distinction had to be made between the hunter and the hunted, the predator and prey. The sheep and goats and horses, brought along as draft animals or food—were left in the atrium with a single she-wolf to

guard them. Marikke could sense her disappointment when Argon Bael stretched out his shining sword to indicate her, a brindled, powerful creature that along with only a few others had maintained her wolf's shape throughout. Now she gnashed her great teeth as if trying to argue, until the angel raised his hand.

The herbivores bolted out into the drizzle where they stood in dispirited groups while their guardian prowled around them. Over generations, she imagined, they had become used to wolves. But the angel kept behind another

one of the wereboars, whom he slaughtered with his shining sword, and Marikke was horrified to see the creature at his most human with his cloven hands outstretched, with his snout upraised, his bulbous face full of understanding. By contrast, the others were at their most bestial as they tore him apart, there on the porch.

Marikke and Kip retreated to the side, where they climbed up onto some tumbled rocks. Marikke put her arm around the boy's shoulder. His clothes were damp, and he shivered with cold. His hair was bone white in the torchlight, and as

his head fell forward against her side, Marikke could feel on the surface of her skin a pleasant sort of pain, his mind probing into her for comfort. And so she tried to provide it as she had for all these years, ever since she had found him orphaned on Alaron when he was just a kitten, as you might say, his family's isolated cottage in the high pastures broken into and destroyed by people who despised his kind, or mistook them for lycanthropes out of willful ignorance. All over the Moonshaes they'd been hunted down.

But he was more than just a

shapeshifter. He had another, more secret gift. Lady Ordalf had sensed it in Caer Corwell. As she watched the beast-men snarl and fight over their uncooked meat, Marikke prayed to Chauntea the Great Mother, whose servant she was. The rock walls impeded her, and her own dark mood. But the goddess was as merciful as always, and soon it was as if a small flower had pushed itself up through a bed of stones, and the boy found her hand and squeezed it.

But the angel of vengeance, also, felt a change in the rock chamber. Putting his sword aside, he

clambered up to stand over them. And because he was unarmed, and because of the small measure of peace in her heart, and because the boy had now closed his eyes in sleep, she was able to look up at him without fear. She could see that he also was weary and unquiet, his hair dirty and thin, and a rash over his cheeks.

"Tell me," he murmured, "is there anything else left there for me?"

He reached down and seized her by the hair, hurting her a little bit. "Let me tell you why you're here," he said. "I want you to know, because when a woman and a child

sacrifice their lives, it must be in the spirit of loving kindness, a gift rather than a coercion. Otherwise it is for nothing."

He tightened his grasp of her long hair, pulling her head back so she could look into his eyes, haunted and colorless and ringed with darkness. "You must think we are alone here on this island. All the others, boats travel back and forth between the busy harbors. But here also I have ways of getting news, and when I heard from the fey queen in Karador that she was sending a gift to me, a priestess of Chauntea and a shifter boy, I

dispatched my servants to the beach to intercept you and bring you here. I saw the signal fires across the strait from Kork Head. A present from Lady Ordalf, who is otherwise a mangy vixen from the pits of the Nine Hells. The others, they don't matter. Do you know why that is?"

Marikke had already guessed, but she wanted him to say it: "Tonight it is the dark of the moon," continued the angel. "For many years the tribes of the Black Blood have gathered here and prayed to our god's memory, and watched our power dwindle. Northlanders

in the Delve, raping our land of its treasures. Terrible creatures in these same mountains. But that's not all, and not the worst. For ten years in the ruins of Caer Moray there has bloomed a flower."

But now suddenly Marikke didn't want to hear what he was talking about. She wanted to know about the Beastlord. Ever since the Spellplague nearly a hundred years before, the grip of Malar had weakened in these lands. No lycanthrope now living, or his father, or his father's father, could have seen him prowl these mountains. For all these

generations, Marikke imagined, this one angel had kept the fire of his worship burning in this place with stories, and faith, and empty rituals.

Tonight that would change. As she looked at him, as she listened not to his words but to his tone, Marikke could see and hear in Argon Bael a mixture of urgent hope and desperation. He was like a starving man who has been offered meat, but fears he is too weak to stomach it. Or he was like a man grown used to insubstantial shadows, and both fears and craves the light.

“Tonight is the night of prophecy,” he said, and the air carried to her, again, a whiff of carrion. “Queen Ordalf knew it—I saw her face in the surface of the pool when she spoke to me. It is because of our sins that the deities of fury turned away from these lands and left us alone. I have tried to nurture the pure faith, even as I have seen many of my beasts abandon it over these ten years, seduced by heretics in Caer Moray. But tonight we will redeem ourselves, and you will help us.”

Wildly and circuitously, he spoke of a prophecy Marikke knew:

These small deities, cast down in the Spellplague, could not reassume their actual flesh without the intervention of a greater god, the Great Mother, perhaps. Until then they could exist only in nightmares and visitations, when they could trouble the minds of their worshipers and gnaw on their dreams. They survived best in memory, which was not strong among the savage lycanthropes.

"I will not help you," she said.

"Ah, but what about the boy? Do you think he could live here without you? Or without my protection—my people hate him,

because he can survive in the human lands. They will tear him limb from limb."

Marikke tightened her grip on the boy's shoulder, felt his cheek against her side. "I will not help you," she said.

"But what if I don't need your help?" Argon Bael bent over her, his narrow face as intense as any bird of prey's. "Queen Ordalf is notorious, but not for her stupidity. She scarcely saw the boy, yet she knew what he was. She touched his fingers and she knew."

"I will not help you."

"I think you will," he said, and let

go her hair. “Come, my boy,” he continued, smiling, and Marikke could see his angel nature struggle to the surface, as if he’d lit a lamp inside himself, and she could see it glowing through his alabaster skin.

The torchlight around them seemed to diminish, and outside the afternoon was far gone. Argon Bael bent down and gathered up the sleeping boy into his arms, and with a tender gesture brushed his shock of hair from his delicate ear, just faintly tinged with calico fur. Kip seemed to fall into a deeper slumber, and he put his arms around the angel’s neck for

comfort, and sighed as if reassured. Argon Bael carried him over the wet stones of the porch, stepping lightly over the smeared blood, and into the tunnel's mouth.

Miserable and dispirited, Marikke followed close behind, and as they moved past the torches in their brackets each one flickered to life as if touched by the angel's essence and then bound to mimic it, all the way into the mountain's heart. The tunnel was rough-walled and unshaped, in contrast to the marble porch, a hole that wound down into darkness, its floor covered in gravel. "Oh, sweet Mother,"

Marikke prayed. But it was as if the goddess of the forests and the fruit trees had no purchase here, and could not find her in the dead underground, in the Beastlord's tomb.

The lycanthropes followed, quiet and subdued. Perhaps they also were lacking faith, Marikke thought. Perhaps every month Argon Bael had tried some trick like this to keep their hearts alight. "Oh, sweet Mother," she prayed, "make me wise when the time comes—" but there was silence in the part of her mind where the goddess lived. Instead she filled it

with worrying and predictions while she ransacked her memory for the words of the prophecy that Argon Bael had mentioned. And there was something else he'd said. "Tell me about the flower," she asked him. "In Caer Moray. Is it a … yellow rose, by any chance?"

The torches around them burned up bright. The angel hurried down the slope, which curved to the right. He stopped and turned, his eyes blazing, his sword across his back, the sleeping boy in his arms who cried out as if beset by evil dreams.

"This is not a flower that is native

to Moray," hissed Argon Bael. "It is an alien species that has come to us from Gwynneth Island, where it crept up from the Feywild, beautiful and deadly. Let me tell you what the lycanthropes have done in Caer Moray, these last ten years. They have turned away from Malar and the hunt. They offer no blood sacrifices. They ignore our cherished festivals, and instead have forged alliances with our enemies. In the winter months they visit Northlander villages in the deep snow and bring food to them if they are starving, smoking meat from their own tables. They claim

this is an ancient rite, handed down by Garmos Saernclaws himself—it is a heresy, a perversion. The Feast of Stags, they call it. Always they feed the human part and starve the beasts, so that many of them can no longer run on four legs and stumble if they try. Slaving together under their fey princess, they have rebuilt the old human walls, the human towns and palaces that our ancestors burned, that our ancestors spilled their hot blood to destroy, and now they live in them, sitting in chairs and sleeping in beds and roasting their food in fire. They do all this as if in

Malar's name. And he permits it in his slumber. But when he wakes …"

In his arms, Kip moaned aloud. The angel smiled, and stroked his brow with a gesture that seemed for a moment like tenderness. Then he turned and hurried down the slope, deeper into the tomb.

The Savage, crouching in the drizzle up above, in the darkening afternoon, now witnessed a strange thing. He hid behind a broken marble pillar. In front of him the horses, sheep, and goats stood in clumps, tearing at the

grass that grew up through the stones, or nibbling at the wet branches of the gorse trees. Among them and around them prowled a wolf, an enormous brute who had established a perimeter for them, squatting to piss along a circuit of fallen stones. Whenever she got close they shied away in terror, but then quickly forgot as soon as she retreated into the wide porch, where, because of a protruding section of the wall, she was invisible to them, but not to the Savage as he watched. Distracted for a moment by a noise behind him, the elf turned his head. But it

was nothing, a trick of the wind between two stones, and when he turned back the beast had changed.

This in itself was no surprise, because the lycanthropes were always changing, moving back and forth between their beast and human forms through a dozen different gradations. Even in the most rapid transformations he could see the shift, as their jaws, hair, and teeth grew or receded, and their joints reformed. Even in their most human state, he could still see the beast inside of them, and even as animals he sensed the human clawing to get out.

Nor did they wear clothes. The Savage had heard of lycanthropes wearing coats or cloaks and breeches, even boots, when they wanted to hide among humans or come into a town and steal away a human child. But these, far from any need to hide their nature, had run naked ever since they'd fought them on the beach. By contrast, the woman in front of him had no animal in her as far as the Savage could see, no hairy hands or cheeks, and no protruding teeth. Instead, the cloak she wore was made of a brindled wolf's skin, its fierce, dead face arranged over her

head as a type of hood. She carried a totem stick in her left hand. She was staring straight at the Savage, and it was obvious she knew he was there. Her face asked a question, and to answer it the golden elf stood and showed himself, though still keeping his body hidden from the flock of herbivores that anyway, the Savage guessed, would not have shown much interest, so intent were they on finding food.

The Savage knew what he was seeing. The druid made an impatient gesture with her hand, so he stole softly to the porch.

“I’ve been watching you all morning,” she said as he came out of the rain. The porch was empty. Flames flickered from the cressets in the tunnel’s mouth.

“I am—” he began.

But the druid raised her hand. “No names,” she whispered, drawing close. “I see you are loyal to your friends, which surprises me, because I hate your kind. But I have been watching you these past days. I did not think you understood what loyalty was, or had any honor inside of you. The fey murdered my family at Caer Corwell. Eladrin soldiers hung

them from the battlements, the children too. But you have followed us all day when you could have run. I honor that, and so I will pledge my life to save them, the priestess of Chauntea and the shifter, if you help me. I am desperate. They have gone to rouse the beast."

She was, the Savage guessed, one of the Ffolk, perhaps a secret emissary of King Derid Kendrick in this most inhospitable of lands. Tall and thin and dark, she peered into the Savage's face with intense blue eyes. All these druids were a little crazy, the Savage thought, or more

than a little. But he was used to people hating the fey.

"Are you with me?" she asked.

"There are only two of us."

"Are you afraid?"

All this time the sky outside the porch had darkened as the rain increased. The Savage opened up some of the packs the horses had carried up from the valley, looking for his weapons. He found a long cloth bag, which he unstrapped to find his sword. "I'm not stupid," he said, "if that's what you mean." He drew it from its scabbard and watched the fire play along the blade.

As if in response, a stroke of lightning struck outside the porch, and the rain redoubled. Thunder exploded over them, and the Savage looked out to see the grazing animals scatter away into the darkness out of sight. The druid raised her totem stick, and the Savage guessed she was controlling the storm at least a little bit, bringing it close, joining in its music.

It wasn't that he wasn't used to the long odds, but he disliked feeling trapped. It was one thing to follow thirty or so lycanthropes into a hole. It was another to feel

forced or obliged to do it, because of the manipulations of some human woman—pretty though she was—who made no secret of her contempt for him and all his kind. If she only knew. He also had his reasons to hate the fey.

Lightning flashed outside, as if playing in the bowl of the ruined town. The rain fell in sheets, and occasionally it would splatter inward, pushed by the wind. The Savage found himself staring at the girl, her chapped lips and sunburned cheeks and bright eyes and thick black hair, her body under her leather clothes. The

problem with these humans, he thought, was that their lives were too short to give them patience. Lukas also was like this, the way he threw himself and all of them into a fight without a plan, or at least a plan he would share. Perhaps this was due to the natural inferiority of human beings, which manifested itself sometimes as arrogance. He swung his sword in front of him in a complicated pattern, to limber up his wrist.

“What are we waiting for?” he asked.

She smiled, and the weathered skin made creases at the corners of

her eyes. “You’re right. We are too few to fight the Beastlord in his den. We need a third.”

A third? thought the Savage. We need a seventeenth. What was wrong with these people?

He had found some dry binding cloths among the saddle packs. Putting his sword aside, he used one to wipe his arms and face and hair under the druid’s appraising glance. After a few moments she moved to the stone steps that led down into the storm and stood looking out, to give him some privacy, perhaps. At the same time, she might have been using the

lightning to signal to someone down below, someone who now leaped up the steps into the shelter of the porch, a leopard with a piebald, mottled reddish coat who shook himself and then began his transformation into a man dressed in a leopard's skin.

"Eleuthra," he said when he could speak. "Well met!"

"Einar," she said—his name, evidently. Another human, this one a Northlander, the Savage guessed from his red beard and red hair. "Einar Stormsson," she continued, but she did not smile. The Ffolk and Northlanders were ancient

enemies, had shed each other's blood for centuries throughout the Moonshaes, until the Amnians and the fey and other newcomers had had the bad manners to disturb them—Stormsson turned, and in his flaring nostrils the Savage could detect some of Eleuthra's disgust.

"What's this, a fey?" said the Northlander. "You surprise me. Phew—he stinks."

Acutely self-conscious of his dark skin and black clothes, his long yellow hair still glistening and wet, even his golden tattoos and the gold rings on his fingers and ear ridges, the Savage turned to

Eleuthra as if seeking confirmation, and was happy to see the clear dislike in her face as she surveyed the other druid. “He has come to help us in this fight.”

“Phew—you trust him?”

Perhaps her own bigotry seemed less attractive when she saw it in other people. She glanced at the Savage, and he could see her face soften. She almost smiled, as if to reassure him. Great, thought the elf. Now that it’s established we all hate each other. But paradoxically, he felt strengthened by their low opinion. He picked up his sword and turned his back to them, as if

goading them to follow, and strode forward into the tunnel's mouth, the flat of his blade over his shoulder, whistling a tiny common melody, which he had learned on Alaron.

Down below, at the bottom of the curling path, Kip and Marikke had reached the tomb, a vast cavern hacked from the living rock, fed with air shafts, because the torches burned bright. High above them the rock ceiling glistened and dripped, and the rough walls held a reddish hue. Underfoot the floor was lined

with agate tiles, which looked like the flesh of a flayed animal in the red light. And in the center of the space, perhaps sixty feet from the cavern's entrance, there stood a high table of a different, lighter stone, carved with runes and ancient petroglyphs, and on it lay the body of the Beastlord.

The table was about the height of a man's chin. The lycanthropes had crept around the cavern's wall until they had surrounded it in a rough circle. Most held back, but the bolder ones had crept forward on their knees. Argon Bael, with Kip in his arms, had made a circuit of

the table, igniting as if with his passage the stone lanterns at its head and foot, illuminating the creature that lay huddled on its surface, its spine curled almost in a circle.

Despite the lantern light it seemed to exude darkness. Steam rose from it, and a rank cat smell. The angel spoke, his voice loud and harsh in the enclosed space. “You understand why the leShay queen sent you to me, and I brought you here. We could have killed you but the Beastlord stayed our hands, because he needed you.”

He came to stand next to Marikke

and spoke more softly, conversationally. “All of us for all these years have wept for him, but it has not been enough. These stones are red from the blood of our sacrifices at the dark of the moon. This time we require an intercession from the Earthmother of Toril, to free the Beastlord from his tomb. Do you understand me?”

Marikke shook her head. “I cannot.” And then as if to justify herself, to stave off punishment, she blurted out: “All this way we’ve been climbing down, and I have called upon her. We have ways of praying that are constant, of

giving and receiving like the rise and fall of our own breath. Or the cycle of blood within our bodies—we can pray without ceasing," she babbled, overexplaining in her fear. "But she is gone from me, gone from this place."

The boy lifted his head from the angel's breast. His cat eyes shone in the lantern light. "This is not a game," said Argon Bael. "String her up."

And Kip could see that there were niches hollowed in the cavern's wall, and thirteen altar stones that made the circuit, cubes of carved basalt, brought from the surface

long ago. Some of them still had skeletons or the remains of dismembered corpses hanging above them from a net of chains that rose up to the roof. Six lycanthropes seized up Marikke, treating her with cautious roughness as if they expected her to resist, but she did not. Head bowed, her tangled yellow hair over her face, she allowed them to pull her over to an empty altar stone, while at the same time some of the wolf-men, screaming and chattering like apes, had hoisted themselves into the chains above her head and released a pair of greasy iron

manacles. One of them, a grotesque brute with orange hair, stretched out his legs to each side and let down a dribble of piss.

"No," whispered Kip.

"Then you can help her," said the angel. "The queen told me. Lady Ordalf of Karador—she understands these things. She told me you can climb down to the pit where our god is chained—like this, perhaps," he said, nodding toward Marikke. "I have not seen him. But you have the power."

"No," whispered Kip. "Do not make me."

Argon Bael smiled, and the wolf-

men heaved on the chains, drawing Marikke up into the vault. She did not protest or say a word as she hung from her wrists. At the same time the angel flung the boy onto the stone table, onto the back of the creature that lay on it. Afraid he might fall, Kip seized onto the rank hair, and let his mind descend.

He had to force himself, for Marikke's sake.

At first, with his eyes closed, his cheek burrowed up against the beast's foul skin, he imagined he was climbing down a slippery ravine with the small stones sliding

all around him. Black night without a moon, without a sound, and no wind. Cold. In his most catlike form, he crept down over the stones, until he stood on the lip of the abyss, and jumped.

Somewhere above him he heard Marikke cry out. He twisted himself over, because it was as if the direction of his fall had changed, and what was down became not up, but somewhere to the side. He fell down through the cold, through pricks of light that were like stars. And at the bottom, the ground rose up to meet him.

Because of what the angel said up

there in the world of men and beasts, he imagined he might fall into a place just as horrible and full of terror. He imagined he might fall onto an island in a lake of fire, a barren land without a drop of water or a blade of grass. And he imagined that the deities of fury, Talos, Malar, and the rest of the divinities who had been confounded in the Spellplague, would writhe here imprisoned in pits or cages of fire. And so when he fell into the light, he imagined it might scorch his skin. And when he breathed, he imagined that his lungs might fill with poisonous,

burning fumes. So he was surprised even more than he was relieved, when he found himself coming to consciousness in the bright, crisp sunshine, lying on his back and opening his eyes in a field of pale wildflowers. And when he rolled onto one elbow he could see the creature he had come to find, a black cat leaping in and out of the tall grass, searching for field mice.

High above, Marikke hung twisting in her chains, surrounded by grinning wolf-men. She also had made her own kind of interior

descent, a way to protect herself from the pain in her shoulders and her wrists. She couldn't tolerate the sight of the great sleeping creature curled up on the table, or the boy clutching its greasy fur. And so she closed her eyes and imagined herself walking down the steps of a building in Caer Callidyrr, the city in Alaron where she had first met Lukas and the others, the entire crew of the *Sphinx*. Often, when seeking respite from the cares of the present, she would transport herself back to a place she had known, and not necessarily one where she'd been happy. In this

case, she was in a stone three-story guildhall in the middle of a warren of stone streets, far from the upland village where she'd been born in a cottage in a grove of larch trees. But the floor plan of the guildhall was a complicated one, and in her mind she hurried by the empty courtroom where she had first glimpsed the tall ranger and his genasi friend, talking to Aldon Kendrick, applying for some kind of license, and, as she later discovered, negotiating for the Savage's release. Destitute, she had left Kip in an exorbitant inn and had come here to pursue any

chance of honest employment, and maybe some that had not been so honest, a quest that had led her ultimately to Lukas, who needed a healer for his expedition. These locations in her memory were like the corridors and cramped rooms where they had taken place, and finally in her mind she found what she had been looking for, a narrow back passage and a twisting stair, which in reality had led her to the narrow office of the secretary of religious affairs, a dry young man who had rejected her credentials and had barely allowed her to speak, so contemptuous he was of

her country manners and her country clothes.

Now the room was empty. In her mind she crept across the floor and peered into the inner sanctum, where in real life she'd never penetrated, the lair of the functionary who had ultimately refused her permission to practice her craft inside the city limits. In her mind it was a spare, open place with windows along one side that overlooked a stone courtyard, a fountain, and a tree.

Her nostrils were full of the stinking cavern, which among other things had been used as a

latrine by generations of lycanthropes. And her ears were full their foul music—below her Argon Bael recited his incantations, while the rest of the beasts had broken into a kind of ragged, howling, wailing chorus that nevertheless contained vestiges of rhythm and melody. But in her mind she was immured in a stone room in a stone building in a stone city, surrounded by stone battlements. And it was here, nevertheless, that someone found her, someone she least expected, who scratched at the inner door and then came in, a little girl of

perhaps eight or nine, with muddy, bare feet and dirty, broken fingernails, her brown hair a mess, wearing a torn green dress, an urchin from the streets. Marikke knew who she was.

"Oh, sweet goddess," she murmured.

Chauntea smiled. Her lips were thin and chapped. Ghosts of freckles covered her brown cheeks. "You are hard to find," she said, her voice light and soft.

"I looked for you. I called you but you didn't come," lied Marikke, even though she knew what the goddess would say next.

“Did you? Then what are you doing in this place? This is not my house. This is not where my servants look for me.”

She came forward across the floor toward the windows, and with one hand she pulled and twisted at a lock of her long hair. “I think you are hiding. I think you are afraid to ask what you must ask.”

Outside in the courtyard, the fountain had overflowed, and water was spilling over the tiles. And the tree, old and stunted, had pushed out some new shoots. Marikke knew what would happen if she stayed. The tree would

overflow like the fountain, a chaos of green. Vines and tendrils would force themselves past the shutters and into the room itself. In time, they would pull the stones apart, and the building would collapse.

"I'll give you a hint. It is my will," said Chauntea, "that the Beastlord should be free."

At these words, far away, past the sweating cave beneath the mountain, down deep in the abyss, in a field of wildflowers Kip the shifter, who understood cats, reached down to stroke the fur of the black hunter in the grass. Marikke couldn't see that far.

Wearily, in pain, she opened her eyes, because she heard a new sound that had disturbed the savage music around the table, dispelled it in an eruption of shrieks and screams.

Someone stood between the torches at the entrance to the cave where the tunnel wound down from the surface, a golden elf with a red, flickering sword. An enormous leopard and an enormous wolf had leaped past him into the chamber of the tomb and were ripping into the lycanthropes along the walls, many of them still in the middle of their

transformations—the leopard had the snout of a yellow boar caught in his claws, while the wolf had closed his teeth behind a panther's neck.

CHAPTER FOUR

Suka in Prison

That same afternoon Ffolk slaves had come into the prison at Caer Corwell and had removed two of the interior bars in Suka's cage, according to the instructions that Lady Ordalf had left as an incentive. In fact all of the bars were bolted rather than welded to the iron ceiling and the iron floor, which convinced the gnome that the leShay queen had used this ploy before. Perhaps during her long

lifetime she had discovered that coercion was simpler and more dependable than either loyalty or trust.

One flabby soldier had worked inside the cage while four others kept watch. They had taken one bar of the twenty on either side that separated her from the fomorian and the lycanthrope, whom the jailer had cut to quarter rations in preparation for the feast. The good news was that in her human shape, the lycanthrope would break through a tenday earlier than the bloated giantess—not that Suka was particularly

concerned about the danger from that side. Although the pig-woman was more than twice her size, she seemed passive and disconsolate rather than fierce. Besides, the gnome was still armed. She surrendered her most obvious weapons when she was imprisoned, but had retained several others secreted around her body, protected from discovery by a layer of misdirection.

Lately, also, in the darkness, when the lanterns had burned low, Suka had taken the habit of singing to the lycanthrope in her hoarse alto voice to keep her own spirits

up and to make some kind of contact, under the general supposition that two females of any race or species would have to have something in common, as long as both wore tattoos.

She sang ballads from the highlands above Myrloch Vale where she'd been born. She sang the songs her father had composed for her, altering the words to popular melodies in order to fit some specific occasion, a naming day, or a broken tooth. Her father had been a drinker, probably still was if he was still alive—she'd left him after her brother died, sick of

the tyranny of the leShay. She'd shipped out to Alaron, where eventually she'd met Lukas and the others. Now she was back.

On the fifth night of her captivity the lycanthrope had surprised her by speaking in the Common tongue: "Sing that other one, the one about the girl who died young."

She was referring to *Oh, Father Dear*, the only sad song in Suka's repertoire, a story so melancholy it was almost a joke, or at least her own father had thought so. The girl had died of consumption pretty much at the exact moment when

her lover, a bold sea captain whose leg had been blown off in some episode of Northlander skullduggery, arrived at her door.

Suka's father, in between grimaces and smiles, had always managed to squeeze out tears over this piece of sentimentality—displaced tears, for he was never able to weep at the mess he had made of his own life. And perhaps the lycanthrope, also, could respond to it this way—Suka sang it for her twice in a row, and the second time she found herself inventing, as her father had, new and more preposterous details—the

lover, subsequently, had his other leg blown off after he had agreed to marry the girl's younger sister, who had died of heartstop upon hearing the news, and so on, and so on, and by the end Suka herself was crying also, as her own situation at that moment didn't seem so good. Lukas was on a fool's errand on the island of Moray, which presumably was full of lycanthropes less soft hearted than this one.

Oh, father dear, don't curse and sigh when I am dead and gone, / I'm going to a better place that I will call my own.

Hmm—maybe not. Her father's sense of the ridiculous was almost his only good quality. But this would have been too much even for him, unless he was really drunk.

Tears in her eyes, she laid her cheek against the bars of the lycanthrope's cage. She missed her friends, missed Lukas especially, though in many ways he was the most harebrained captain who ever lived, willing to risk all of their lives, endlessly, for trifles. Or else not trifles, exactly, but for his own exaggerated sense of loyalty; to redeem the golden elf out of prison, he had agreed to follow the

stupidest mortal in the history of humanity into an obvious trap. And now, for her own sake, Suka had no doubt, he had embarked on a half-baked and utterly unplanned assault on the most star-cursed island in the Moonshaes, in the service of an evil queen who would not hesitate to double-cross him and probably had already. Even so, Suka knew, he would return for her or else die trying. He was an old-fashioned fellow, with a sense of honor and all that. And he had given his word.

Only in a universe where the gods did not exist, he'd once

remarked, would mere cleverness or ruthlessness ever find their own reward. Real gods, he imagined, would reward transparency above all things, transparent motives, a transparent heart. And of course so far they had rewarded him, he claimed, if not with riches, then at least with friends.

Remembering him, missing him, the little gnome rubbed her pink hair against the bars. Without even listening to herself she had come to the end of her song. But now she hesitated, first frightened and then amazed, as the lycanthrope's hand slipped through the gap left by the

missing bar, and touched her cheek where the tears had fallen, the sharp edge of her cloven fingers scraping them away.

"Do not be sad," said the lycanthrope in her low, grunting, distorted voice. "You have nothing to fear from me."

And then—wonder of wonders—from the other side of the gnome's cell, where the fomorian giantess was sprawled against the bars, came another voice, also speaking in the Common tongue. "You have nothing to fear. We saw you lay down your life for your friends." Her voice was soft and even,

beautiful, almost. “Now they are starving us for your sake. What are we going to do about that?”

Suka couldn’t think of anything, at least not right away. She thought it was a good idea to change the subject. Misdirection was her skill, and soon the giantess was telling her story, which, as it turned out, was every bit as melancholy as *Oh, Father Dear*. Her name was Marabaldia, and although Suka mightn’t necessarily have guessed by looking, she was the most beautiful fomorian in the entire Underdark, and certainly on Gwynneth Island. A girl from a

powerful family, renowned for her artistic and musical talents, she had convinced her mother to allow her to marry her deserving sweetheart, a boy from a different tribe. The date had been set, and Marabaldia was the happiest girl in her cave or tunnel or whatever—Suka, listening, had to keep reminding herself that everything was happening by torchlight, underground—when fate intervened. Her own father dear, who had abandoned her when she was small—or at least smaller, Suka thought, not willing to believe she had ever been the size of, say,

a gnome—now reappeared with a new bridegroom, who was as rich as he was old and ugly—though, again, Suka wondered how anyone could tell, especially in the dark.

But the lovers had run away, and after a series of hair's breadth escapes had found their way up to the surface, following a seam of some precious, glinting mineral up from the Underdark and into the deepest cellars of Citadel Umbra in Winterglen forest, the palace of Lady Ordalf's son and heir, the leShay Prince Araithe. Initially welcoming, he had betrayed them like the scum-sucking piece of

dragon shit he was, selling Marabaldia's lover to their pursuers while keeping her hostage for the sake of some scheme she had never known or understood. Araithe had shipped her here, as far away from Umbra as he could manage, where she'd languished in captivity for a long, long time. She imagined the leShay had forgotten all about her.

Hidden by the flickering lamplight, Suka had squirmed and rolled her eyes for the first part of this story. At the beginning it was hard for her to feel much sympathy for someone she had been afraid might rip her arms out of her

sockets later in the month, and maybe snack on her dead body. Her father had always told her the fomorians ate people like her, though as the narrative went on, Suka found herself less and less sure. It's not as if anything else her father had told her had turned out to be true. Perhaps that was just lore left over from when fomorians used to keep gnomes as slaves down in the Feywild. But surely it was just as possible that they ate mushrooms and other nocturnal vegetables, bulging white tubers harvested in the dark. And at the end, when the sense of the story

was dissolved in tears, Suka moved to the other side of her cell and sat beside the giantess as she wept, for comfort's sake.

"And your wedding feast, what was it going to be?" Suka wanted to ask but didn't, not just because it might be awkward if the giantess had described a roast gnome with a tuber in her mouth, but also because it might be unkind to remind her, when she was crying so hard.

The new gap in the bars was too small for the giantess's hand, but she could slip hers through, and did, because of a general feeling

that it is harder for someone to devour a friend than an enemy. She found herself patting the giantess's enormous shoulder, picking at the threadbare and ruined brocade of her blue dress, while at the same time examining as best she could the iron and leather headdress Marabaldia wore clasped over her right eye, a simple mechanism as it turned out, though impossible to unlock with her big fingers. For Suka it would be a snap, and immediately she glimpsed the possibility of a plan.

A fomorian's evil eye is a peculiar thing with a distinctive yellowish

cast and unusual properties. Chief among them is the ability to affect the perception and the will of anyone who looked at her, to freeze or slow his thoughts, reflexes, and responses. It was because of this capacity that all those gnomes had been imprisoned and/or (maybe!) eaten, all those years ago. Stupid fomorians, Suka had heard, could barely slow you down. Clever ones could stop you in your tracks. She wondered if this was one of the clever ones. So far it was hard to tell, though Suka had a well-worn prejudice against the females of any race who boasted of

their beauty. Particularly if they had purple skin, and warts.

But already she was wondering if, when Marabaldia described her family's power and influence, instead of boasting she was being tactful and discreet—this sounded more like a dynastic dispute, in which case Prince Araithe's interest was easier to understand.

"Don't cry," Suka said. "Let's get you out of here."

Her plan was pretty hazy, and it was already morning, which, again, you couldn't tell by looking. No windows. But the Ffolk wardens came in with their half bowls of

gruel—actual gruel, Suka thought. How exotic. She'd heard of it for years, but never tried it before she was imprisoned here. But now she was lucky enough to eat it twice a day. And the recipe was obviously a success, at least in the cook's mind, because it never varied: dirty warm water with white blobs in it.

The next night it was the lycanthrope's turn, after the ceremonial incantation of *Oh, Father Dear*. The giantess, hesitantly, sang a few verses. And then the pig-woman, lying up against the bars, told her story, which was mostly about the Lady

Amaranth, the Rose of Sarifal, who had come to the island of Moray ten years ago. She had fallen from the sky, out of the east, on the back of a wounded hippogriff—a young girl who had blossomed into a queen, and who had changed the lives of every creature who touched her, or even touched the creatures who had touched her, the child of the goddess, the anointed one.

In the darkness, Suka rolled her eyes.

How beautiful she was, standing on the ancient battlements at Caer Moray, her red hair down her back, shining in the morning light—Suka

had a low tolerance for this kind of thing. Already she imagined that the Rose of Sarifal was probably a moron or a charlatan, chased out of Gwynneth because of some genetic or moral abnormality that the lycanthrope was too dim to register. But then she remembered that the rest of the girl's family around here were her half sister the High Lady Ordalf and her nephew, Marabaldia's friend and mentor Prince Araithe, whose rabid degeneracy was probably hard to beat, even by other members of the same family. So maybe Lady Amaranth wasn't so bad, and

surely it was impressive for a young girl to carve out a kingdom among wild beasts in the wilderness and (apparently) to give everyone tattoos, the first sign of an advanced civilization.

And it was indeed a sophisticated tattoo: a climbing yellow rose along the belly of the beast, inked in several colors under the light yellow fur. Suka studied it in the half light, willing to concede a small amount of admiration until the lycanthrope described her mission, and what she was doing in this place. She, like Aldon Kendrick, had been an emissary to

the Winterglen Claw, had built a boat with several others of her kind to sail the straits between Kork Head and Gwynneth and find Captain Rurik and his band of doughty rebels—whatever. Just because you found yourself locked up in faerieland didn't mean you had to believe in faerie tales. The Ffolk were beaten here. Whipped. Ground down. Nothing left. One glance at the slaves who brought your gruel would tell you that. Hunchbacked, eyes low, dressed in yellow rags, they dragged themselves across the floor.

"What happened to your boat?"

she asked the lycanthrope.

"Lost. Lost with all hands."

Well, that was retarded, Suka thought. The straits were less than ten miles across. It wasn't exactly the Trackless Sea, where she had sailed with Captain Lukas all the way to Ruathym—suddenly, as she remembered, she found herself swamped by a wave of apprehension and regret. I am so reamed, she thought to herself. But still, if she could unseal the mask of the fomorian, unclose her evil eye …

"How did Lady Amaranth make contact with the Claw of

Winterglen?” she whispered in the dark.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mistakes

"You make it with separated egg whites," recommended the genasi in his curious, airless voice. "It is called 'meringue.' "

"That's great."

"You need a binding agent, though, depending on the weather. Otherwise it is not crisp."

"I'll just keep that in mind."

"A little bit of fat will wreck it. A trace of egg yolk."

"Duly noted."

These conversations with Gaspar-

shen, who had no sense of humor when it came to pastry, were always a little irritating, Lukas thought, but never more so than in circumstances like these, miles from anywhere.

It wasn't as if they were starving. They had some biscuits from the wreck of the skiff, and a rabbit Lukas had shot, which he had shaken out of its skin and cooked over the campfire. It was a thin and meatless animal, but it still smelled good as it roasted on its spit. But nothing would ever satisfy you if your head was full of pudding, imaginary or remembered

—this was a well-known fact.

Lukas squatted over the fire, warming his hands. It was a chilly afternoon, near sunset on the third day after they had left the wreck of the *Sphinx*, following the track of the lycanthropes. They had camped in a dry upland hollow among the gorse bushes, which gave them shelter from the wind and further shelter if it rained. Lukas thought it might. Impassive, the genasi stood above him. He didn't feel the cold. "But on a clear day, no binding is necessary—"

"Shut up."

The genasi stopped talking, as

requested. But his complex nasal passages gave out a little whistle of interrogation, and the energy lines gleamed on his bare skin. “Please shut up,” Lukas amended. “It’s just I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I think I’ve made a mistake.”

Again—that small interrogatory noise. Lukas was the tracker, at least on land, which was an alien environment for the genasi. So this was a confession: “I think I’ve gone the wrong way.”

Which was stupid, because the lycanthropes hadn’t required any tracking. A blind man could have

followed their sloppy trail. But three nights before, only a couple of hours after the wreck, the trail had divided in the fen, and a portion of them had split away to the west into the mountains. Lukas had chosen to follow what he'd thought was the main trail north. Even at the time he'd known he was rolling the dice.

For the first two days their quarry had traveled fast, trampling the bushes and then, later, spreading o u t across the heaths. Crossing streams, Lukas could see on the banks the mixed tracks of many different animals, which had

convinced him he'd made the right choice. But now, today, he'd seen the main track dwindle as more and more of the lycanthropes had split away in all directions, in ones and twos. Now they were following a group of no more than five or six remaining animals, all wolves.

But in the swamp that first night he had seen hooves as well, heavy prints in the mud, and now he cursed himself. What was the likelihood that these six wolves were carrying the Savage, Marikke, and Kip across their backs? And even if they were, could they have moved as fast as these animals

were moving? This trail now was almost a day old.

Tonight would be another cold night, a few hours of restless sleep wrapped in the coat he had taken from the skiff. The genasi would be fine. He didn't require comfort, was tireless on the trail, would stand watch most of the night—a good companion, apart from the meringues.

And in the morning, then what? Go back and try to pick up the right trail, now stone cold? Lukas could not bear the thought of Marikke and Kip in captivity. And he had so little information. One

thing he knew: It was obvious they'd been set up, that the fire they'd seen burning on the Gwynneth hills when they had crossed the straits had been a signal to alert the lycanthropes on the other side.

But why? Lady Ordalf was the only person who knew about their mission. She had hired them to kill her sister, whom she suspected was alive somewhere on Moray. She had paid them real gold thalers—why, if she had wanted them to fail? The fey loved gold, hated to part with it, and though it was possible to imagine this whole

expedition as part of an elaborate and cruel practical joke, it was harder to image it was worth the expense. The gold, delivered to their boat the morning they had sailed from Caer Corwell, was real. Lukas was no judge, but the Savage had tested it.

No, if this had been a joke, the equivalent of a spoiled child drowning his pets in an effort to distract himself, then the lycanthropes would have killed them on the beach at Kork Head, when the Savage and the others had brought the skiff ashore. Instead, they—or whatever mage

or power had wielded the white sword he had seen that night—had captured them alive, abandoned the slain and carried their prisoners inland … for a purpose. And if Lady Ordalf had invented the entire story of the lost leShay princess—then what? Or if the story was partly real, except for the detail that the sisters were in close communication, and Lady Ordalf had delivered them to Moray for some obscure shared purpose—then what? Or if the story was entirely real, and it was possible that Lady Amaranth had spies at Caer Corwell who had lit

the signal fire at the straits, and that she was the one who had waited for them on the beach at Kork Head—then what?

It was impossible to know the truth. In the meantime Suka languished in her fey prison. Doubtless by this time her jailers had removed one pair of bars. Even though Lady Ordalf might have lied about the threat, Lukas had to assume she told the truth, which meant any goal he set himself had to be accomplished quickly. Although if the leShay queen had sent the gold in payment to her sister, or under the

assumption that it be returned, then the little gnome was already as good as dead. It made him miserable to think so.

So the choice was to concentrate on Suka, find Lady Amaranth, deliver her to Gwynneth, and hope the queen would honor her side of the bargain—a wan hope and a difficult task, particularly since the *Sphinx* was at the bottom of the sea. Or else to concentrate on the other captives and retrace their steps.

Three lives against one. “First light, we go back,” he said.

They had camped at the bottom

of a steep, shallow gully out of the wind. Above them the dry ridge was covered with coarse grass.

The genasi, standing beside the fire, was impassive. Lukas listened to his high, soft voice speaking as if to himself: “Often it is possible to stuff a meringue with custard or fruit confiture—”

He stopped, turned his head. Lukas watched his nostrils flare. But he himself was already moving, because he had heard something above them on the crest of the hill. He had chosen this place for the campfire because the light could not be seen. But now as he reached

for his bow he kicked over the small pyramid of sticks, while the genasi extinguished them, scattering sparks over the chalky ground. He drew his scimitar, and both of them crouched in the gorse bushes, waiting.

"Orc," whispered Lukas.

He had grabbed the rabbit from its stick and flung it away into the heather. Perhaps they could retrieve it later. Wiping his hands, he strung his bow and waited for the orc to show itself on the ridgeline. He could smell it up there, a sour, fecal smell. His own senses—eyes, ears, nose—were

sharper than the orc's. He worried about the rabbit, though. With one hand, he grasped the bag of supplies he had taken from the skiff and slung it over his shoulder, then he and Gaspar-shen crawled backward, deeper into the bracken. Down below them at the bottom of the dell there was a tiny watercourse, and beyond it the land opened up.

Then Lukas saw the creature on the ridge about a hundred feet above them, a stocky orc taller than a man, with a long torso and long arms, and short, bandy legs. The night was too dark to see

clearly, and so Lukas supplied the details out of his knowledge and prejudices so he could see clearly—the long fingers and toes, the predatory teeth, the face like a plate of stones, the thin black hair gathered in pigtails, the wool or leather clothes, looted from some Northlander settlement, the turquoise and coral jewelry, mined in Trollclaw. In all things they were slovenly and dirty, except for the care of their axes and knives, which were always greased and sharp. In embossed leather pouches the males carried the dried penises of enemies killed in battle—so

Lukas had heard.

The creature moved his heavy head from side to side. Some orcs were half blind because they'd gouged out one of their eyes in ritual homage to their god. This was proof of their foolishness, Lukas thought as he nocked an arrow. The purpose of divinity is to raise us up, not cripple us.

But he hoped he was dealing with a zealot, and that was the reason for the uncertain, bobbing movement of the creature's head. Another possibility was that he smelled the meat but couldn't find the direction because of the wind.

It was unlikely, though, that he was alone.

"Ware," said the genasi, next to his ear.

He meant "beware." Lukas didn't feel like it. Frustrated with his mistakes, he felt like killing this orc. The genasi must have guessed it, because he put his hand on Lukas's bow. The lines shone muted, blue and silver on his greenish skin.

The evening was gathering in. Lukas waited for the orc to move away, but he did not. He looked as if he were waiting too, surveying the countryside from his high point,

peering in every direction like a scout or a ranger, though oblivious to the enemy that lurked so close. He grunted loudly, then raised his arm, and in a few minutes he was joined by others of his kind, a dozen or so warriors.

Soon the darkness would come, and Gaspar-shen and Lukas would slip away. In the meantime his thighs were killing him as he crouched down. The orcs were in no hurry. They were setting up camp there on the ridgetop. They didn’t care if their fire lit up the night. Some of them had carried wood from the other side, furze

bushes ripped up by the roots with the needles still on. Piled high, they made a smoky, inefficient bonfire, and by its light Lukas could see the flag they'd erected at the top of a long pole, a forked banneret hanging from a crossbar, bellying in the breeze, a silver seahorse on a black ground. Even their devices and insignia they had stolen from their enemies—this one was Northlander work, surely. Lukas guessed, as the evening drew in, that he and Gaspar-shen were witnessing the celebration of a successful raid. The orcs had broached a barrel of liquor on the

ridge, and one, probably the leader, one of the so-called eyes of Gruumsh, was distributing the drinking cups out of a leather sack, a collection of mismatched crania, the skulls of defeated enemies, some of them chased with silver. He was a gigantic, hairy, shambling brute, who cut a clumsy caper along the edge of the fire, his black figure silhouetted. The others brought up captives.

"Ware," said Gaspar-shen.

It was dark enough now for them to creep away, but they did not. The orcs had captured women from some village or outlying farm, a

common event. They were not so far split from human beings that they could not interbreed, and Lukas had seen in all the towns of the Moonshaes and the cities of the Sword Coast their half-caste offspring, drunk and homeless in the streets, orphaned or else abandoned by their unfortunate mothers.

"Too few," warned Gaspar-shen.

They couldn't see much of what was going on above them, but they could hear the screams, the pleas for mercy in the Common tongue. Wisps of prayers, borne on the wind. The orcs were shouting out

some kind of music while Lukas counted them: two dozen, now. Out of frustration, he held his bow out flat and drew an arrow to his ear—then what? Maybe he could pick off six or seven. But what would happen to Suka then? What would happen to Marikke?

Or he could wait till they were drunk—but no. These women needed him now. An orc shambled down the slope on their side of the ridge, a Northlander bucket in his hand, looking for water. He was out of the circle of firelight, climbing down through the bushes when he smelled the rabbit, still

caught in the branches where Lukas had thrown it. He staggered down the remaining steps and found it, cold now, only half cooked. He was holding it up to his pale and cratered face, sniffing it, confused, when Lukas shot him through his open eye. The genasi, moving silently, caught the orc and cut open his throat before he could make more than a grunting, wheezing gurgle.

"They will not miss him for a while," whispered Gaspar-shen. "Do we have a plan?"

No plan. Lukas examined the wooden bucket where it fell: a

pretty object, banded with complicated Northlander ironwork, now staved in along one side. He found the sight of it unbearable. “Come,” he said.

And then he crossed the stream and climbed up the other side of the dell, up onto the knoll on that side, where he could see the fire burning at a distance of a hundred yards. The banner had blown down but no one cared; they were busy with the women. Gaspar-shen followed him, his scimitar drawn.

It was a cloudy, moonless night, threatening rain. Lukas figured he could get off half a dozen shots

before the orcs even knew where he was. Then they'd have to run down through the gorse bushes, and he and Gaspar-shen would have the high ground. He wished Marikke were here to pray to Chauntea for a pause in the wind, which blew from behind him. Even so it was fitful enough to throw him off, because he wanted accuracy. Not a wasted shaft. And he wanted to hit them in their faces, always in their faces, where Corellon Larethian hurt their one-eyed god in the old days—Lukas was hoping some of them would notice, would feel the weight of

their superstitions. He unstrapped the sword from his back, slipped off his boots so that he could dig his toes into the dry soil, and stuck twelve arrows into the ground in front of him.

"Wait for them in the bushes down below," he said to the genasi. "I'll join you." When his arrows were done, he'd prefer close quarters for the rest of the fighting.

First, the brutes on this side of the fire, whom he could see in silhouette. And even if he missed his aim, maybe he would hit someone behind. One, two, three—a miss. Four. Three orcs were

down, one shot through the throat in the act of raising his skull-cup to his lips.

But now they were shouting and screaming on the ridgetop, pointing toward him in the darkness, grabbing for their axes and their spears. One, two, three more orcs were down, and now a fourth, a massive creature whom he shot through the shoulder as he stumbled down into the dell. One more on the ridgetop, and he had three arrows left.

Against anyone but orcs, he and the genasi would have retreated into darkness at this point, moving

to evade a second group of warriors who would have circled back behind the hill to close them in. But one-eyed Gruumsh had taught his worshipers the doctrine of the furious assault. Everything else was cowardice. Tactics were cowardice; bows were elven, coward's weapons. And so now the bulk of the orcs crashed down the slope into the dell, an undifferentiated mass. Lukas could see the genasi down below, his short sword in one hand, his scimitar burning with a watery, cold fire, lines of energy snaking in patterns down his back as he crept

through the bushes; he shot his last three arrows almost without aiming, drew his sword, and ran down the hill to meet his friend.

It was only after he had disabled two of the enormous, enraged, brain-damaged creatures—one with a cut across the hamstrings, one with a thrust into the belly—that he realized how difficult their situation was. It had been hard to estimate the numbers. But now he could see that fourteen warriors at least were left, and despite their losses were pushing Lukas and Gaspar-shen steadily back, steadily uphill out of the bushes that were

their only cover. Once in the open ground, it would be hard to guess how they'd survive.

Lukas wondered as he hacked and parried, cut and thrust, whether it was normal for him to think so clearly and dispassionately in these moments of bitter combat. His body moved without thinking, and his thoughts, untethered, floated upward as if into the moonless sky. Looking down, he could see the land laid out around the fire on the ridge, beside which the orc leader, Gruumsh's eye, peered down into the dell, a hideous smile on his mutilated face. At the same time he

was thinking of the catalogue of mistakes he had made, not just here, tonight, but in the recent past, ever since the first mistake of choosing to accept the commission, for no evident money, to accompany Lord Aldon Kendrick on his idiotic journey to Caer Corwell. And even in the not-so-recent past, when he had left Baldur's Gate where he had built t h e *Sphinx*, whose spars now, doubtless, littered the beach below Kork Head; he could see the wreck in his mind's eye as he continued his ascent, and the entire coast of Moray from the Orcskulls to

Trollclaw, more than a hundred miles. He saw lightning storms in the mountains, and moving toward him. He imagined he was rising up and up, and he could see the coast of Gwynneth now and Alaron behind it. Only his body was struggling in the dirt down below, ducking under the massive blade, stumbling up and backward, always backward, with the genasi at his side. He was wounded. He could feel that, too, a heavy pain in his side.

"Ware," said Gaspar-shen. And then they'd run out of room, and so they staggered up through the last

trees. The open knoll was above them. Lukas found himself looking up into an orc's murderous face. He really did have one eye. The left one had been cut away, and so Lukas stepped to the blind side and cut the brute across the neck; he didn't go down. Off balance, Lukas saw the axe start its descent, just before the fletching of an arrow sprouted in the orc's breast, and he fell backward down the slope.

Another archer was up there on the knoll, a good one. The wind had come up and the storm had risen. An explosion of lightning, and in the interval before the

thunder crack the archer managed to bring down three orcs in succession while Lukas clambered toward her, holding his side and dragging Gaspar-shen, who had lost his sword. The genasi was wounded behind his ear, a deep cut that flowed with the shining green ichor that was his blood.

And the archer wasn't alone. Others were up there, pale figures in gray robes, who ran down softly through the throng of astonished orcs, armed with light weapons, knives and slings, pulling down their heavier prey and chasing them into the gorse.

Soon it was done. Bewildered, Lukas waited for the rain. He sat beside Gaspar-shen, watching the quick gray figures climb the ridge to the bonfire and the eye of Gruumsh and his captives. The archer squatted above Lukas, and with quick, impatient hands she examined his side under his shirt.

"I'll live," he said in the Common tongue, accepting a bloody towel to press into the wound. "Look to my friend."

But now he saw that someone had taken Gaspar-shen away. He felt lightheaded, weak from lost blood. He looked up at the archer,

dressed in light leather armor and a leather cap, which she stripped off to reveal a coil of red hair.

"Where is he?" Lukas asked.

The archer shook her head. "It's going to rain. Let us bring you to some shelter. I am—"

"I know who you are," Lukas said.

CHAPTER SIX

A Resurrection

Eighty miles away there was rain in the Orcskull Mountains and in the deserted city below Scourtop. There was even rain that trickled down through ancient ventilation shafts into the cavern at the mountain's root and seeped across the floor. It puddled in the slime below Malar's table where the lycanthropes had circled round, as if to protect their slumbering god from the onslaught of three warriors—the Savage with his red

sword, and the two druids, Einar and Eleuthra in their animal shapes.

Marikke hung suspended in a net of chains, her wrists chafed and bleeding. She lifted her head to watch the wolf and the leopard rip into the pack of beast-men, who at the first moment of the assault were almost human, vulnerable in their terror. But as they grasped the crushing superiority of their own numbers, their most bestial instincts returned to them. Marikke watched the leopard go down under a seething pile. On the other side of the tunnel's mouth, the wolf

had been brought to bay by the albino pig-lord. The Savage, in the center of the floor, had opened the bellies of a pair of werewolves, and as Marikke watched he brought his sword down across the back of one of the great cats. Red lightning flickered from his blade, and the lycanthropes cringed away from him until Argon Bael climbed down from the table, his own sword glittering with light. Marikke saw him swell and grow, his face shining so bright he was hard to see. In a moment all the darkness and the shadows in the cavern were banished to its edges, while at

the same time the angel's wings, visible for the first time, stirred the air and extinguished the torches, which were useless now in any case. The light streamed from the angel's head and hands, and the runes along the blade of his two-handed broadsword gleamed with holy power. The elf seemed diminished, frail by contrast, until with game courage he lifted up his blade, lifted his face also, and Marikke could see his eyes.

The light that flowed from the angel, transfiguring and pure, was now the greatest source of light in the noisome cavern. Whatever

object it touched, it seemed to light it from within. The surface of the stone table glowed, and the sleeping bulk of the Beastlord also appeared to glow, each black hair alight. Kip had fallen to the side, and he seemed asleep, though with an egg of light inside his chest that illuminated the bands of his ribs. Argon Bael swung his sword, which seemed to cut away the lies from everyone it touched, leaving them defenseless. One of the druids was already dead, his naked body gnawed to the bone. The other cowered in a corner, a simple human woman wrapped in a wolf's

skin.

The Savage stood over her, protecting her, his own sword branching with electric current—a winged, batlike creature sprang at him, and he slashed it from the air. Marikke hung above him. The wolf-men had fled, leaving her alone. Now, undistracted by their malice, she could work on the manacles that held her, which had been made for someone with larger wrists. Her own were slippery with sweat. She was able to slip the heel of her left hand through the ring, little by little, while at the same time she watched the duel that moved below

her, tentative at first, as the opponents took each other's measure. The angel's sword separated truth from darkness, and when the light of it cut across the Savage's face, Marikke gasped in astonishment as she worked her left hand free, for suddenly she understood why she had mistrusted him all this time. She had been right to hate him, wrong to feel guilty or unfair. What the golden elf did, whether he behaved nobly or honorably, manipulatively or arrogantly, all that was unimportant now that she saw him for what he was, revealed in the

light of the angel's stroke, which cleaved the air. The Savage's beautiful features, his golden hair and green eyes, all that was a lie.

In her mind she prayed to Chauntea without ceasing, begging her to reduce the pain in her wrists and strip away the living tissue also, reduce her proud flesh. This was a piece of ritual abasement with a metaphorical meaning. Tonight, Marikke meant it in cold seriousness—smaller, made little, she could slide herself free from the intolerable manacles, the intolerable pain in her shoulders as she swung and dangled back and

forth. “Free me from the bonds of care,” she prayed, meaning the words literally for the first time in her life—a tiny slip, her wrists greased with sweat.

Below her she could see the Savage’s demonic form rise to the surface of his skin, as his eyes took on an unholy reddish flush, as his pupils narrowed into vertical slits.

Marikke prayed:

Earthmother, let my outward form reflect my inner misery. Squeeze me of excess. Make me little, as I have no desire to be great.

The sweat dripped from her fingers. In a moment, in her

despair, she found herself sufficiently diminished to feel the grip of her iron bonds soften for an instant—Chauntea had heard her. Below, the Savage struggled with the angel. The red sword rang against the white one, and the air trembled with the force of the electric charge. Momentarily revealed, the golden elf's fiendish nature was now obscured in the storm of battle, which had taken on an elemental quality. Under her, a devil raised his sword against an angel of vengeance, and which side was she on? The devil, the daemonfey, surely he fought for

her, to free her and Kip from their imprisonment on the altar of the Beastlord. Surely he had climbed down this winding tunnel to release her from the pit of death, swung his blade against the army of her enemies, whose smoking and disemboweled corpses lay around him—the rest of the lycanthropes had pulled back against the walls to watch the red sword press against the white one. Marikke could see their eyes shining in the circles of conflicting light, and some of the awestruck lycanthropes had laid their heads down on their paws.

How could the Savage have hid himself from her for so long and so successfully? With what intolerable and astonishing effort of will had he kept that cast of red out of his green eyes, kept that pretty elf delicacy in his hands and movement? Even when he was asleep his fingers had not relaxed into claws, and spines of bone had not protruded from his skin—she had seen him aboard the *Sphinx*, wrapped in slumber and his black robe. Even now, when the angel's wings shone above him, an effect more of light and shadow than of flesh, there was no trace of

competing bat wings, no sign of a scaly or barbed tail protruding from his trousers. Was it possible she was mistaken? No, but she had seen his demon's eyes when the light of the angel's sword crossed his face, and she had recognized in his terrible beauty the wide forehead and high cheekbones of House Dlardrageth itself. And surely it was no ordinary elf that could press Malar's avenging angel down against the stone table, hammering and pounding the red sword against the white.

Her hands aching, her arms insensible, Marikke prayed:

Great Mother, help me to choose wisely—

Better yet, you make the choice.

Finally it was as if the goddess had acquiesced, had bowed her head, and Marikke's tightly folded palms slipped through the manacles, and she was falling, just at the moment when Argon Bael parried the red sword and flung it upward in a last desperate attempt. The Savage staggered back, his sword point flailing wide. But before the angel could leap on his advantage, Marikke had tumbled onto his back. She felt the burning, shining skin. She had

fallen perhaps twenty feet onto his back, which was enough to knock him to his knees, while at the same time she heard the goddess's voice —the same impertinent little girl whom she had seen in her distorted recollection of the guildhall in Callidyrr, as if through a shard of broken glass, a little girl in a green dress who spoke into her ear as she rolled, stunned, from the angel's back and slid down to the floor: "Malar doesn't need him."

The Savage stood above them. The red blade hammered home. The white one flickered and went out. Extinguished suddenly, it left

the cavern rinsed in darkness, except for the guttering red flame along the blade of the demon elf. The torches were all out. Some of the lycanthropes were whimpering, other screaming softly in the sweating air. Marikke rolled onto her side.

She had fallen away from the table and lay on the greasy floor. Her arms were hot and numb. Raising her head, she saw a glow on the stone tabletop, a sphere of radiance. She imagined the black bulk of the unconscious god, and Kip's discarded body, while at the same time she listened to the voice

in her ear, the muddy little urchin from the slums of Alaron.

"Good and bad, evil and kind," the girl lectured primly. "They're just words in the Common tongue. Maybe they mean something to you. But I can't be described that way. I am bigger than you can imagine. We all are—we that you call gods. If we create, then we destroy. If we destroy, then we create. Look—Great Malar lives."

Marikke didn't turn her head. Instead she saw clearly in her mind's eye the little girl with her tangled hair, freckled face, chapped lips, snot-caked nose,

stained teeth. At the same time she was looking at the daemonfey who leaned wearily upon his sword above the body of his defeated enemy. His face was lit with a reflected radiance. He bowed his head, then lifted one hand as if in supplication.

All around the table, the lycanthropes had pressed their cheeks against the agate tiles of the cavern floor. Tense and immobile at the same time, they showed in their various postures the submissive urgency of beasts. From time to time Marikke could hear a little whimper of excitement,

quickly suppressed. Something was rising from the surface of the stone tabletop. She had seen images of Malar in the pantheon of gods, an enormous panther with red eyes, and claws as long as swords. But Marikke, as she turned her head, already knew she wouldn't see anything like that. Instead she saw Kip, the little cat-shifter, standing with his legs apart, his flesh transfigured as if lit from within, a tiny smile on his lips, and a black kitten struggling in his hands.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Climbing Rose

In the old human capital of Caer Moray, Lukas moved among the beasts. During the battle on the ridgetop an orc had cut him in the side and broken three ribs. His life had never been in danger, and he was healing. The previous night he had slept on an actual straw mattress on an actual bed, and in the afternoon he toured the battlements.

He leaned forward on his elbows

on the old stones, looking out over the sea of Moonshae with its white-capped waves. A fresh wind blew from the north. Lady Amaranth stood beside him, dressed in a gray wool cape—the day was pretty, though the air was cold. In places, arrows of sunlight split the clouds and struck the dark water underneath, making it tremble and glisten.

"Thank you," said Lukas, finally. "You saved our lives, my friend and me."

"Captain, we have you to thank. Without you, we would have come too late. Those women would have

died.”

She meant the Northlanders. The orcs had raided and burned a settlement along the coast, poor fishermen and crofters growing potatoes in the stony soil. They had killed the men and children, and stolen the women. Idly, briefly, Lukas wondered if it was merciful to salvage the lives of people who had lost so much. But life is always precious and the mind can heal. He knew this from experience. Besides, it didn’t matter. Stupid evil—like those orcs—must always be confronted and attacked if the world was to continue turning.

Amaranth glanced at him. “You must forgive me,” she said, “if I don’t know what to say. I have lived for a long time alone among my people, separate from my own kind. And I thought there were things I understood. You are a … man, isn’t that so? A human male?”

“Last I checked.”

She did not smile. “I determined this as I was tending you, the night before last. It came as a surprise. You must forgive me, but my life has been … sheltered in some ways, and there is much I do not understand. I must ask you—why

did you attack those creatures at such risk to yourselves?”

“The orcs? I hate them.”

She nodded as if satisfied. “It was from hatred. And if you had chased them away, despite the odds, and found those women still alive, what would you have done?”

Lukas shrugged. “I hadn’t gotten that far.”

“Because you were blind from hatred. I see that. So you would have taken them for yourselves. Mated with them.”

Startled, Lukas turned to face her. “I don’t think you understand. These women, they aren’t my

concern. I was glad to help them. But I have friends who are in danger, and I blame myself. I was stupid to bring them to this island, stupid not to follow them, stupid to have lost them. Even now, if I felt I could run, and if my friend wasn't so hurt, I would be after them."

Amaranth looked puzzled. Her brow furrowed, and she rubbed her nose. "Your friend—I think I am the stupid one," she said. "If you didn't want the women, why did you attack the orcs? Oh, blind hatred, I think you said …"

Like all eladrin she was beautiful, an impossible, mournful beauty.

Because they lived so long, even young they had no springtime in them, no sense of freshness or urgency. When Lukas was an old man she would look like this. For hundreds of years after his death, she would look like this, her skin clean as paper, her red hair blowing around her face. A leShay, or half a leShay, there was no telling how long she'd live. What would it feel like to be at the beginning of such a journey?

"I ask you," she said, "because it's hard not to imagine from what you say, that these instincts that drive you are in some way … valuable.

Friendship. Loyalty. Sacrifice. Even guilt and self-doubt. And yet you are a … man."

Suddenly bored, Lukas turned away. "Stick to the blind hatred," he murmured. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to see someone." He had left Gaspar-shen at noon, his head bound up, asleep.

"But I do not excuse you," said Lady Amaranth. "You do not have my permission to leave me."

She had turned around with him, and now they stood with their backs to the sea, looking down over one of the courtyards toward the base of the ruined keep. Below

them the lycanthropes worked among the tumbled stones, sorting them and shaping them. As far as Lukas could tell, the curtain walls were complete. But these interiors needed some work. Caer Moray had been sacked during the Spellplague, and then abandoned for a hundred years.

Amaranth made a delicate gesture with her fingers. “These are my … people,” she said. “We keep no male animals inside the gates, no bulls or rams. Instead we have … ewes, and mares, and bitches. Lots of bitches,” she murmured, and Lukas studied her

face, to see if she was aware that what she said might be considered funny—that Suka, for example, would have laughed. But there was no hint of humor in her face. In a moment, Lukas found his heart go out to her, because how could it be otherwise? For ten years, since she was nine years old, she had lived on Moray Island, alone among the humorless beasts.

She had told him some of the story the first night, as they descended through the thick woods toward the coast. And of course Lady Ordalf, her sister, had already given him the bones of it in

Corwell; how traitors had stolen her away and packed her onto a hippogriff somewhere in the highlands above Myrloch Vale; how the hippogriff's rider, wounded, had taken her off course and fallen into the sea; how she had come to Moray, alone and defenseless. Even the first night after the battle, walking along the forest path in the rain, suffering with his shattered ribs and bleeding side, leaning on a broken spear, Lukas had regretted the judgments he had come to earlier, when he had imagined some kind of collusion between the sisters—it was not like

that. If this girl had been lonely in her isolation here, at least she had not been ruined by the fey.

The lycanthropes had wooden stretchers that they used to carry the genasi and the women they had rescued from the orcs. Tireless, they had hurried on ahead, while Lukas and Amaranth stumbled behind. As they came down the long, winding paths through the wet trees, as finally they could see the lights of Caer Moray in the distance, the eladrin told him what she had discovered or concluded. “She saved my life. Mistress Valeanne. She and the dragonborn, and those

riders, they gave their lives to save me. Since then I have brooded on the source of the danger—who it was that was trying to kill me, a nine-year-old child. Who would send a company of drow from Myrloch Vale? Surely such a thing could not have happened without the permission or consent of the leShays—my sister or perhaps Prince Araithe, her son? But perhaps there is something I don't understand. If I could see them again, or talk to them, then I would ask them face to face."

Lightning flashed above them. Rain dripped down her neck. She

had bound her red hair underneath her leather cap. Earlier that night, as he felt her fingers probing his side, examining his ribs, Lukas had rejected the idea that he would ever do her harm, return her dead or living to her sister's mercy, whatever the consequences—the girl had saved his life.

Now, at Caer Moray, looking down from the walls over the courtyard, Lukas said, "I want Gaspar-shen to see me when he wakes up. I don't want him to be alone."

Amaranth smiled, a wistful expression on his face. "Yet I have

been alone all this time," she said. "No friends. You are friends with this creature, is it not so?"

He shrugged. Many things sound stupid when you say them out loud.

"And what is he … a genasi, is that what you said? From far away?"

"From the deserts of Calimshan. And yet he has a water-soul, from Abeir. Always he was looking for the sea. The Moonshaes were more welcoming than home."

"And … how did you meet?"

"In Alaron. I had a boat called the *Sphinx*. We ran cargo between Callidyrr and Snowdown, for the

Amnians."

"Yet he has a different nature than yourself."

"We manage."

He stared at her, fascinated. He knew what she was asking. He wondered how she would phrase it. "We also have a different nature," she said. "You and me."

"Is that because I am a human being?" he asked. "Or because I am a man?"

And then immediately he felt bad, when he saw the hopelessness in her face—he wasn't used to these concessions from the fey. Lady Ordalf wouldn't have considered

asking him for friendship, any more than she'd have considered asking a fruit fly or a caterpillar or a bee. But then he had to remind himself that this girl was only nineteen years old, younger than he was, and that she'd led a life that made her simultaneously more innocent and more mature—descending to this island like a blazing star, a child alighting from the back of a hippogriff amid a circle of worshiping lycanthropes. Would he have survived as well, if he were nine years old?

"If you are a sailor," she faltered, "perhaps then you could bring me

home. My sister …”

She stopped, unable to continue. Because this desire was so different from the one she had previously expressed, it must be, Lukas thought, a sign of terrible desperation—she must know and must be told, he thought, that there was no home for her on Gwynneth Island as long as Lady Ordalf was alive.

And so he told her that the *Sphinx* was at the bottom of Kork Bay. And he told her why he had come to Moray Island. He told her about Suka, a prisoner in Caer Corwell, and he found some comfort in

telling her, because the little gnome was never distant from his thoughts.

He stopped when he saw the tears on her cheeks. “And is my sister … well?” she asked.

For an answer he left her. He limped along the battlements, a pain in his side. It hurt to breathe. When he reached the signal tower he ducked his head inside, then climbed the wooden stairs down to the genasi’s room.

He was being tended by one of the bitches, as Amaranth had called them, a soft-faced, long-eyed young woman with a ridge of fur combed

back into her homespun cowl. She carried an empty chamber pot. “When can we leave?” Lukas asked, but she said nothing. Not all of them could talk.

Gaspar-shen lay immobile, his head bandaged and his eyes shut. But Lukas could tell he was awake—he didn’t sleep much, and when he did, he dived down deep into the bottom of the soundless sea. The energy lines that ran over his body throbbed and burned and took on a distinctive amber hue, made a circling pattern over his greenish skin. Today he was very pale.

Lukas sat down on a stool by his head. These artifacts—the stool, the bed, the curtains in the window—were cunning and well made in a workshop of quick-fingered lycanthropes. Amaranth had shown it to him earlier, set up in the keep's enormous banquet hall, a bewildering assortment of spinning wheels, belching forges, and turning lathes, manned—that wasn't the right word, Lukas thought—in shifts.

He touched his friend's right shoulder and felt the tiny electric hum. Lukas was frustrated and out of sorts, consumed with regret. If

only he hadn't consented to Lord Aldon Kendrick's wild goose chase. The procurator on Alaron must have recognized his desperation and recklessness—a crew of losers whom nobody would miss.

And when Lady Ordalf betrayed them to the lycanthropes, if only he had managed to keep the crew together. Now they were spread over the island of Moray, with only the golden elf's sword to protect Marikke and the boy. And if only he had not allowed himself to be distracted by the orcs. Then Gaspar-shen would not be lying here, and he would be days closer

to rectifying all this.

And yet, what could he have done differently? He could not even bear to think about Suka in her cell.

Methodically, the genasi licked around the rim of his circular mouth. His breath whistled through the slits of his nose. “In Callidyrr,” he said in his light, airless voice, “I was at the bar of a little restaurant in Centipede Street. They had a cake with something they called sea-foam icing. It was made from caramelized sugar and vanilla, combined in a double boiler …” His voice trailed away.

“Is that all?” asked Lukas. Then

in a moment: “What were the other ingredients?”

The genasi frowned, a fluctuation of his hairless brows. “Egg whites and cold water and maize sirop. Beat it for seven minutes. It whips up so delightfully, like little waves. The burnt sugar is the light at sunset over the surface of the water.”

“What was the spicing of the batter?”

“I don’t remember.”

Behind him in the doorway, Lukas heard a little gasp. He turned his head and saw Lady Amaranth standing there.

The wolf-woman pulled away the blanket from the bottom of the bed, revealing one of the genasi's shining legs.

"They grow so fast," said Amaranth. "One year, two, and they are fully grown. Ten years—most of them—and they are old. Many have died since I first came here. Not from violence—they turn gray, sleep all the time, curl up on their mats, indistinguishable from beasts. Is it possible that I could live here for another hundred years? For them, how many generations will have passed?"

She was talking about the

lycanthropes. “I have tried to leave,” she said, “but they won’t let me. I spoke to a fisherman in the Northlander settlements. But at night the rats attacked his boat and sunk it at the dock. So then I built a boat myself—I had it built. I wouldn’t step in it myself—they wouldn’t let me. I sent my friend the pig, the cleverest of all of them. They are very rare, the pigs, special and rare. My friend—I’d given her a name. I sent her with a message to my sister, begging her. But I wonder if her crew mutinied, or else she forgot—they are forgetful. I haven’t heard.

“I have waited,” continued Lady Amaranth. “But time has no meaning here. I have so much, and they have so little.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Suka's Escape

But in Caer Corwell, time was of the essence. At least Suka thought so; she was eager to be gone. The others were obviously more patient. Suka had discovered after many recitations of *Oh, Father Dear* that Marabaldia had been imprisoned close to ten years. She had made line after line of little scratches in the sallow bricks, in time-honored fashion, as if counting the days indicated some

sort of action or commitment. Suka was amazed. After a tenday she was ready to jump out of her skin. She hung from the bars, performed mental puzzles, logical and arithmetical, made endless circuits of her cell, invented conversations with imaginary people, rehearsed variations of what she'd do to Lukas when she saw him again (The cold shoulder? The swift kick in the crotch?). The pig-woman lay motionless, a sow in a sty, wallowing in the filth of her despair (and in actual filth, too), gnawing on the discarded carrots and radishes of regret, scratching

the fleas of self-indulgence—Suka could draw out these metaphors forever, in her frantic and myriad attempts to keep her mind alive.

Poke was the sow's name, bestowed on her by the ginger slut of Moray, as Suka privately referred to Lady Amaranth, most unfairly, as she herself would have conceded. Like the ritual inking of the tattoos, Suka imagined, these naming ceremonies were a solemn occasion, perhaps some absurd version of a knight's investiture: rows of lycanthropes in their white shifts, all holding candles, and the ginger slut intoning variations of

“Arise now, Poke, and bear your name with honor. Arise now, Prod, and you, Bat-shit.”

Poke didn’t move, didn’t turn her head, only followed Suka’s endless gyrations from the corners of her eyes. Only at night in the darkness did she come alive, during “story time,” as the gnome referred to it, or the hundred and one tales of Lady Amaranth, her virtue and her beauty. Fine, thought Suka. Whatever—eladrin were wicked hot. Cold and hot. It was a well-known fact, part of what made them so creepy and grotesque and horrible and bad. They were slutty

and sterile at the same time. Everybody wanted to have sex with them and nobody could.

Poke had built a boat to please her, to carry a message to her sister, and the boat had sunk immediately, burned by the nagas, while Poke had drifted in the water, cold and miserable, hour after hour …

“Wait,” said Suka. “Hold your horses. That’s not what you said before.”

Poke, who never liked to be interrupted in these orgies of self-punishment, opened her eyes. Suka could see them glittering in the

darkness. “I mean,” she said, “the other night, the first night you told us this whole damn same exact sad story, you said you had come here with a letter for the Claw. Captain Rurik. From Lady Amaranth.”

“That’s right,” said Marabaldia in her soft, sweet voice. “I remember that too.”

“Lady Amaranth has no deviousness,” amended Poke. “She knows nothing of any rebellion. She trusts her sister from the time she was a little girl. It is I, since I have been here, who have changed the direction of her mission, now I know the truth …”

Poke's speech, absurdly formal and yet punctuated with little grunts, always made the gnome smile. And she was interested in this: The pig-woman had showed more gumption than she would have guessed. Although if the ginger slut of Moray was really on the level, whether in her dealings with Lady Ordalf or on any other subject, then she was different from any other eladrin in the history of Faerûn, because the rest of them were unequivocally as bent as corkscrews.

"Tell me," said Poke, "do you believe in Captain Rurik? Do you

believe that such a man exists? Or is he …?”

Suka reassured her, though to tell the truth she didn’t particularly believe in him. But (who was she kidding?) it wasn’t as if she wasn’t brimming with fey blood, and hadn’t her own store of deviousness. So sue me, she thought, while at the same time she imagined she could use this part of the conversation to reveal her plan, how when the Ffolk wardens removed the last bar that separated the gnome from the fomorian, then they could use Marabaldia’s evil eye to freeze them in their tracks—

or something. Suka didn't know enough about the eye to have got much farther in her thinking, although she had some questions: Could you turn it off, or was it always on? If it was always on, did fomorians get involved in idiotic situations where they froze or disabled each other without wanting to, a husband and wife, say, over the dinner table or in bed, or else children playing in a nursery? Over the past days Suka had amused herself by inventing various scenarios, none of which were useful now. She didn't mention them to Marabaldia,

especially since the fomorian seemed suddenly shy around the subject, which was obviously a private thing. “Of course we can control it,” she’d protested.

“It’s a weapon you carry all the time,” Suka said now, her curiosity overcoming, for the moment, any sense of diplomacy. “I mean, even a swordmage,” she said, thinking of the Savage, “puts the damn thing down when he goes to the privy—” an unfortunate image, and Suka suddenly regretted it. Marabaldia was nothing if not modest, and had a good deal of trouble with the waste buckets and

water buckets the Ffolk left for them, always waiting until darkness, when Suka, from the other side of the cell, could hear her nervously slopping around. Not wanting to embarrass her, the gnome always feigned sleep. One night Marabaldia had even washed her clothes.

"It's not a weapon," she protested. "Besides, I can't get free." Suka, close to the bars along her side, reached in her hand as if to comfort her, but instead at the last moment ran her little fingers along the back of the fomorian's bulbous head, under her hair,

releasing the catch. Then she drew back her hand as quickly as she could in case she had violated some long-established cultural taboo, which had to be punished, say, by biting or dismemberment. She hoped the effect, to Marabaldia, was that the iron and leather half mask over her eye, which had been her constant bane for many years, had fallen away as if by magic, or else in answer to her own prayers to Selûne, the goddess of maidenhood and the moon. She burst into tears, and when she raised her head, Suka could see in the almost-total darkness, for a

moment, some vestige or version of the beauty she had boasted of.

"Do you think he will still love me?" the fomorian asked softly, "after all these years?"

Suka knew what she meant, and she found herself affected, especially since Marabaldia could not possibly be so stupid that she did not guess or know or understand that the bridegroom she remembered was now probably long dead.

Then she turned her head. Her eye shone softly in the darkness, and Suka found herself unable to look somewhere else. What her

father had described as something evil and disgusting and destructive did not seem that way. She stared into it, and she was caught.

Which didn't mean she couldn't move, but that she didn't want to. "It's not a weapon," Marabaldia had said, which Suka now believed. Doubtless you could use it that way. But anything could be a weapon. You could kill somebody with a feather, not that she'd tried.

It was like watching a play—tiny figures on a distant stage. Or standing in the dark outside the lighted window of a tiny house and peering inside. And what you saw

was hard to recognize, because you'd come in in the middle and, squinting, could discern, in this case, well, what was it? Suka found herself immobile, pressing her face against the bars, wondering if it were possible that she was staring in through Marabaldia's eye into the proscenium of her brain, or else perhaps a screen on which mental images could be projected in black and white and various shades of gray: She saw a smoky, spitting phlogiston torch, burning in an iron lantern hanging from a stone ceiling. Under it there was a silent fight between two animals, a

hooded serpent and some kind of deep-chested, clawed monstrosity with a tiny head and a circle of needlelike teeth. The snake had twisted itself around the monster but taken terrible damage, its side slashed to rags. The image faded, and under the same lantern Suka saw a party or a masked ball, with men and women dancing in formal gowns and suits. In the background, musicians played silently on violins and guitars. A handsome couple spun and twirled under the lantern, and it took Suka a moment to realize they were fomorians, and she was watching

an entire festival or celebration of fomorians, none of whom looked either grotesque or gigantic, because (Suka guessed) the images were being filtered through Marabaldia's perception, her memories or imagining—Suka was unsure which, or in the case of the monsters whether she was watching a language of symbols rather than events. The dancers disappeared, their place under the lantern taken by a blurred sense of movement, of drow soldiers marching in a line, black skin, black armor, and gleaming white hair. They carried swords and

shields, spears and longbows, and now they seemed to break out of the confines of the tiny mental theater where Suka watched, entranced, alone in the audience, and past her into the darkness of her cell, a line of ghostly images suddenly interrupted and cut off as Marabaldia blinked.

Suka had no experience of the Feywild, or of the Underdark beneath the lake, where the Feywild had first extruded onto Gwynneth Island. She had been born in Myrloch Vale. It was her father who had come up with the host of creatures, good and evil,

that had burst from that crystal, shining pustule into the world of men, displacing them from the land of their ancestors, chasing them from their homes. Suka's father had been a slave in the retinue of some fomorian lord, who had freed him for the sake of his good company, his subtle playing on the pipe and harp. Suka had never known her mother. Everything she had heard of the darkness underneath the mortal realm, where the gnomes led lives of torment, packed like maggots in the belly of a corpse, came through him, a drunken, easy-hearted old scoundrel who

never told the truth. There were sun-drenched landscapes in the Feywild also, Suka knew, beechen glades where the elves and the eladrin ruled, in the perpetual autumn of their lives.

She found herself pressing her body against the gap in the bars, reaching her hand up toward Marabaldia, who had knelt down over her, so that their faces were almost level. And when the fomorian opened her eye again, Suka gasped, for she saw a face she recognized, the gray-haired, spotted, bloated visage of her old dad himself, lying asleep on the

broken-backed settee, perhaps the last time she had seen him when, scarcely grown, she had stood in the doorway of their stupid little house in the sodden, stupid little village above the vale on the way to Crane Point. In Leaffall she had watched the eladrin hunting parties ride through.

She hadn't woken him when she left. Marabaldia blinked again, and Suka saw the cliffs above Llewellyn Harbor on the straits of Alaron, when she first saw the *Sphinx* racing the gap and then coming about, its raked masts crowded with sail. No one there had ever

seen such a ship before, though there'd been copies since, and right then Suka decided she would find the man who built that ship and join his crew and sail the seas with him, not realizing he would turn out to be one of the most chuckle-headed commanders who ever lived, looking for trouble as a burr looks for a dog's back.

And as if liberated by the sight of the little ship as it came flying over the bar, cleaving the line between the dark water and the light, she saw Lukas, tall and gawky, turning toward her with a long, slow smile. She saw Gaspar-shen, his strange

companion, the water haze around him, the lines glowing on his bald head, caught as if interrupted in one of his perpetual conversations about food—they were never really about food. He never actually ate any of the things he talked about. And the Savage, the golden elf, his face haughty and guarded also. Only once, when he thought he was alone, had she seen him with his black shirt unbuttoned, seen the terrible scars along his spine. And then the cat-boy and the priestess, whom Suka hated, with her incessant droning in the service of the goddess. Better to pretend the

gods didn't exist, and thus escape their notice. Marikke had come aboard the boat not because of any skill or help she could provide, but because of Lukas's half-baked sense of chivalry. She had needed rescuing from the slums of Callidyrr, and the shifter too.

Once the gnome had spoken her mind to Lukas, who had laughed. "You don't like her because she is a woman—" Marabaldia blinked, and Suka saw nothing more. She found herself grasping the bars of her cell, her face inches away from the fomorian's, who grinned, displaying fearsome teeth.

“Hello,” she said, and Suka leaped back.

So after that, everything was easy. Minion of a corrupt state, the warden in Lady Ordalf’s prison had no idea what he was doing. The fey queen had pretended she would remove one set of bars every five days, in order to provide Lukas with an incentive, and guarantee his return. But it was doubtless confusing to follow the wishes of a liar, whose only constant was her perpetual bad faith and her refusal to explain her motives, especially to a human slave who she regarded as a cross between a slug and a

wad of excrement. Besides, she hated the gnome, who she regarded as the most loathsome kind of traitor—one who had managed to escape the web of lies with which she had encircled her own kingdom. She had no interest in keeping Suka alive. She wanted her to die a terrible death, torn apart by her race's ancient adversary. Only that, in Lady Orlaf's mind, would restore the proper balance to the world. In addition she was far away among the crystal spires of Karador, and her commands were muted by distance. As a result, the warden had unbolted

two bars in six days, and now came again on the evening of the ninth, and Suka and Marabaldia were ready.

“Let’s go find him,” Suka had said, meaning the fomorian’s lost bridegroom, sold to his doom by the treacherous Prince Araithe.

The Ffolk soldiers came in, three men with crossbows, two with wrenches and a stepladder, and the warden with his hoop of keys. The archers arranged themselves in a triangle while the turnkey unlocked Suka’s cage.

“Stay away from the bars,” he admonished, a sallow, fat-bellied

man whose skin stank of his unhappiness. He was speaking not just to the gnome but to Poke and Marabaldia as well.

Suka's skill was misdirection. The trick was, she thought, to keep the guards from realizing that they themselves were under attack. This was, after all, the moment when the gap between the bars was large enough to let the fomorian into her cell. They had been starving Marabaldia in anticipation of this day, and therefore had to expect a certain rowdiness—it was the whole point of what they were doing. If the giantess just sat

glumly in her cage, Lady Ordalf would be disappointed. She wanted Suka to be torn apart, punished for her treason against the fey.

So when one man was up on the stepladder, unbolting the long bar, and the other man was on his knees below him, Marabaldia sidled over to the gap. “Stand away!” said the turnkey, but he didn’t mean it.

The moment the bolts were loose she smashed her way through, upending the stepladder, kicking over both the men. At the same time, Suka started yelping like a rabbit and running round and

round. She stumbled over one of the men and cut him over the eye with one of her secret knives. The idea was to make him bleed as if injured in his fall. Marabaldia had wrenched the ten-foot iron bar from its frame and made a show of chasing after Suka with it. In the pursuit she knocked the men over once again. One of them, bleeding like a pig, crawled on his hands and knees toward the cell's sliding door. The turnkey, shouting commands, had come into the cell to meet him, help him to his feet, the archers close behind. Marabaldia had caught Suka now,

and made as if to strangle her while the gnome reached up and freed the clasp of her iron mask, which dropped away.

Even now, because of Suka's feigned terror, the turnkey still imagined he was breaking up an altercation between inmates, and his task was to remove his people, lock the sliding cage, and let nature take its course. But Suka slipped out of the giantess's grasp and scampered for the opening. One of the archers brought up his bow just as Marabaldia heaved her iron bar and caught him in the chest. Then Suka was out into the

room. The turnkey hadn't moved. The gnome uttered a charm of misdirection as the bolt from one of the crossbows passed over her shoulder and crashed into the wall. She reached the brazier and kicked its leg, spilling the charcoal from its pan, scattering the coals. Now in that noisome, sweating room the most concentrated light came from Marabaldia's eye. Again, the turnkey hadn't moved. Suka slid into the final archer's legs just as he released his bolt, and that was that.

And when the men were locked inside her cell, she led the way up

the spiral staircase, up toward the surface and the streets of Caer Corwell. She remembered coming down three levels, and on the second floor she found the entrance to the main stairs leading up and down, wide stone steps around a square shaft. Peering down, she couldn't see the bottom, but only endless galleries lit with fire, brighter and brighter the deeper she looked, a spectrum of infuriated colors. She went the other way, climbing up into the darkness, though when they reached what must have been the ground floor of the brick prison,

they wandered through a series of dusty, ruined, windowless rooms without finding any exit.

"Shit," she murmured, hiding her distress. She was the one with the plan, she reminded herself, though in fact all of her thinking had ended here, with them breaking through the wide doors into the courtyard and then into the street. She had thought it might be evening, had imagined the fresh soft air. Shit, shit—she must have been spending too much time with Lukas, and some of his stupidity must have rubbed off on her. This was the fey she was dealing with.

There was no gate to the outside.

They stood looking at each other in the empty room, a big, high-ceilinged useless cube with only a single doorway. Light came from a remnant of the searing fire that rose up from the bottom of the stairwell. It curled over the threshold. Opposite, an expanse of moldy brick. But surely this was where the gate had been. What purpose otherwise could the room have served?

They had taken the three crossbows and other weapons. Marabaldia had her iron bar, and Suka had filched a long, hilted

knife from the turnkey's belt. Poke had dressed herself in the clothes of one of the archers, leaving him naked. She stood breathless in her most human shape, a strong fleshy woman with an upturned nose, long hair down her back, and a powerful set of teeth.

Now they heard a noise from the direction of the light, an ominous clanking and the stamp of heavy feet. "We have to leave," whispered the gnome. "Can you find a way?"

Unspoken was the obvious, that Lady Ordalf had sealed the gates not with bricks and mortar but

with something more subtle, a woven pattern of illusion. Suka, in one of her first jobs after leaving home, had traveled with a circus among the small towns of Alaron. One of her teachers had been a hypnotist who could make his subjects stagger around stupidly, looking for the opening to the tent. Moving her head back and forth, Suka felt some of the same queasiness, the same inability to see what was plain and clear. Marabaldia's eye was useless now.

Worse was a feeling of numb hopelessness, which Suka knew was part of the spell—it didn't help

to know it. The excited rush of her escape was over. Doubtless the Ffolk wardens three floors below had already succeeded in freeing themselves, and had summoned some terrible power to recapture her. Perhaps all of the events of the past hour had been plotted in advance by Lady Ordalf and her slaves, part of a web of fey deceit more complicated than the future of a single stupid gnome—what had made her think, years ago, when she left her father's house, that she could ever truly get away?

She heard the rhythmic smash of iron boots back in the antechamber

the way they'd come. Marabaldia stood with tears her in eyes, wearing the threadbare blue dress she'd been arrested in so many years before. Her bar sagged down. She was stuck in the same funk. Only the lycanthrope seemed unaffected. She snorted, and struck the floor with her bare foot, carving a line through the dust and plaster rubble, revealing a stripe of old mosaic. Beyond the threshold, the sound had stopped.

They heard a soft, sibilant voice speaking in the Common tongue. "Who is there?"

Suka said nothing, only bowed

her head. She recognized the source of her weakness in that voice. Nor was she surprised when the eladrin slipped into the room, a tall, gray-haired man who was underdressed for any kind of fighting. He wore a soft, embroidered linen shirt open down his chest, moleskin trousers with a tasseled codpiece over his groin, and soft, high leather boots. Instead of a weapon, he carried a pair of leather gloves.

"Bravo," he said, striking the gloves across his palm. "Your ingenuity must be commended. I am pleased I am not too late to offer my protection. Princess

Marabaldia—of course we've met. Partly I am here to offer you your freedom, and conduct you back to Umbra in the dignity you deserve. And you," he said, turning his attention to the lycanthrope. "As soon as my mother told me about you—well, she might have expected I would come. Perhaps that is why she broke her word to the brave captain—this small game she plays, with the removal of the bars." He nodded at the iron bar in Marabaldia's hand. "Am I right in thinking she had … accelerated her schedule? I think perhaps she wanted to forestall me."

He slapped the gloves across his palm, the only sign of anger, Suka thought, that he permitted himself. His voice was low, his face calm, full of the predatory beauty of the leShay. “I will not draw you into our family squabbles. But is it true you’ve seen my aunt, the Lady Amaranth?” He smiled. “It must seem strange to hear me call her that—my mother’s sister. Her half sister, of course. But she is … younger.”

All this, Suka imagined, had to do with the politics of inheritance among kings and queens who lived for many hundreds of years, and

yet whose bloodlines were so meager. Her own problems seemed suddenly tiny, whether she escaped this labyrinth or not, whether she lived or died. She stood with the crossbow in her hands, and yet defeated.

Marabaldia, however, wasn't ready to give up. "How could you have left me here for all these years?" she cried. "How could you have stolen my love from me? Were you jealous of the one little thing that was truly mine?"

Prince Araithe's eyes trembled with amusement, though his lips maintained their placid smile. "Oh,

my dear," he said, "never think that. All of this has been a sad misunderstanding, for which my mother is to blame. It was not until seven days ago that I learned where she had kept you. Luckily, all this can be fixed, because we are speaking of a trivial amount of time. A mere tenth of a century. Please believe me, your lover is waiting for you, though at the moment I cannot quite recall his name."

Suka's mind was not moving quickly. But even she could tell the prince was lying. More than that, she thought she glimpsed the

outline of some larger idea, which would not at this moment come into focus. What was the connection between Lady Amaranth's story and Marabaldia's? Was it a coincidence that the fomorian and the lycanthrope had been locked up in the same place? Was it a coincidence that Lady Amaranth had disappeared ten years ago, when Marabaldia had first climbed up from the Underdark into Citadel Umbra?

"I am here to make amends," continued Prince Araithe. "Please—put down your weapons. My dear,

look what I have brought you, an honor guard to escort you back to your own country." He raised his gloves and half a dozen drow filed into the room. Their swords were drawn.

"And we have brought one of your servants to pull your carriage. And food for you, and a wardrobe of clean clothes. Please, allow me to make amends. You have nothing in common with this … gnome, unless you would like to keep her for your slave. As for this … pig …"

The trouble with eladrin, Suka thought, their weakness, if you

wanted to call it that, was their inability to guess the feelings of lesser creatures. She saw Marabaldia stiffen with distrust, and raise her iron bar. But now the source of all the previous noise in the antechamber revealed itself: A cyclops guardsman ducked his head under the doorway and stamped into the room.

He was bareheaded, his single eye shining in the middle of his forehead, a new source of light in the now-crowded room. On seeing the fomorian he sank to his knees and raised his hands. At the same time Marabaldia's eye, which had

been dormant, caught up some of his light and turned it back. Suka could see it pass between them, a beam of golden radiance that might have been partly her imagination. She knew these cyclopses from ancient times had bound themselves to the fomorians in the Feywild and in the Underdark, worshiped them as gods. Now she guessed the reason: Surely the effect of Marabaldia's gaze was even stronger in a creature with one eye.

But at the same time she realized that the diffuseness of her thoughts, her inability to do anything here

but watch and wonder, was part of the influence of the leShay prince, who was looking right at her, a contemptuous expression on his grotesquely beautiful features—she was earning his low opinion. The drow were ranged behind him, their black armor, black weapons, and black skins glistening as if oiled, their white hair and eyebrows … ah, gods, she felt a sudden pain in her head as if she had been struck with a hammer between her eyes, just at the moment she'd begun to ask herself what these malevolent elves, the source of so much suffering in their

own dark lands, were doing here in Caer Corwell, allied with Prince Araithe. She took a step backward. It was obvious to her that the prince's interest here was the lycanthrope, as he had confessed at first. That's why he had come. Everything he had said to Marabaldia was a crude and obvious lie, which he imagined she was too innocent to understand. And Suka herself was utterly expendable as far as he was concerned. Why didn't he give his orders to the drow? They stood like statues made of night, each in a different posture of defense. And

why had he allowed the cyclops into the room? If his plan was to dispose of Marabaldia, didn't he realize that this creature would die rather than allow it? He had sat back on his haunches, his face rapt and worshipful, his single eye gleaming as if lit with inner fire.

The pain in Suka's head redoubled. Startled, she looked down at her own hands, and saw that she had raised her crossbow and had aimed it at the middle of the fomorian's back. Her fingers grasped its levers as if their will was different from her own. Then in a moment she understood: She

was to kill Marabaldia. And then the cyclops, enraged, was to tear her apart. There was no reason to risk injury to his beautiful dark elves, whom he was likely to consider as superior beings, more nearly on a level with himself. They were there for Poke, the lycanthrope. These other vermin he would leave to exterminate themselves.

Oh, her head hurt. She was astonished that the prince had left her thoughts so clear. His contempt was so profound, he hadn't even bothered to confuse them. Or perhaps he took special pleasure in

demonstrating that it was useless to understand. She stood with her feet braced against the crossbow's recoil. Behind her, an empty expanse of brick—she knew the gate was there. But she couldn't find it. Her hand tightened on the lever.

Marabaldia, by contrast, was full of feeling. The few thoughts she had were elemental and powerful. She knew Araithe was a twister and a snake, who had betrayed her years ago. If he said her lover was still alive, then maybe her last

hope was gone. She stared at the cyclops as if she could bore into his brain through his unprotected eye or reach her hand in through some gratefully surrendered portal and grasp hold of his soul. She saw his lips pull back in terror, revealing his great teeth. She saw his hands fumble for the axe at his belt. She had the iron bar she had taken from her cell, and she'd rather die than go back there. For a moment she broke contact with the cyclops. She glanced back at Suka behind her left shoulder. The gnome's pink hair stood up in clumps. Her tongue lolled out and showed her

dog tattoo. Her brow creased. She had a puzzled, terrified expression on her face. She swung her crossbow wildly, aiming almost in Marabaldia's face. But she and the gnome had sung their songs together. Marabaldia had nothing to fear from her.

But for security she captured Suka's eyes with her own, just as the gnome jerked up her hand at the last instant and shot her heavy bolt. Marabaldia felt it slide past her ear. She felt the rush of wind. And one of the drow was down, shot in the mouth between his shining teeth. The bolt had done

great damage. The drow was screaming, and Suka was screaming too. She bent over and put her hands to her ears, hiding her face. The rest of the drow were moving, and Marabaldia swung her bar. She hoped to catch the leShay prince. He had no weapons that she could see. Nor did he condescend to move aside, but just stood there with that insolent smile on his face while the ragged end of the bar whistled toward him … and stopped as if the air around him had turned to jelly, too thick and slippery to penetrate.

Frustrated, Marabaldia searched

for the cyclops again, reestablished their link, so that she could wield him like a weapon. He had risen from the ground, his axe in his hand. He caught one of the drow as he ran past him. The axe bit into the back of his head. He had not expected the creature to attack him, and he fell. The others separated into two groups, and two of the dark elves moved toward Suka as the air blackened around them. Prince Araithe was taking the light away. Marabaldia pressed the cyclops to attack him while she struck at one of the drow with her iron bar. Scimitars drawn, wary

now, they danced away and then came forward, hacking at her hands.

Suka's fight was over, Poke saw. She knelt with her hands over her ears while the drow stood above her, his sword raised. Confused, maybe, by her helplessness, he didn't bring it down. Now there were three around the giantess, who fought them valiantly with her great bar. And Poke had done nothing yet. She was managing her transformation.

One hand clutched her crossbow.

With the other, she unbuttoned her clothes down the front, so she could slip out of them easily. She felt she was climbing down a ladder, down from the furnished living spaces of a house and into a deep cellar. At each rung on the ladder she paused and looked down, before gathering up her courage to proceed. And the cellar was full of smells and noises that were not different from the ones in the house. But they changed in pitch, intensity, and significance as she descended. Foul smells turned intriguing, and then delicious. Speech sounds, which had such preeminence in the World

Above, began to blend in with many other noises she had been ignoring, creaks and grunts and raucous breathing, and the subsiding moans of the wounded drow. Underneath these, down another rung, she could hear the shuffle of footsteps and below that, suddenly significant, the movement of rats in the corners of the room.

The light changed at the same time. In her human shape, upstairs, she had watched with the others as the room darkened and the leShay prince worked his magic. But her plan was to sink below the level of his illusions, which were designed,

she guessed, for the perceptions of more complicated creatures than mere beasts. And so as she descended the ladder her vision improved, and she could see many things that had been hidden from her up above, including the gate to the courtyard and the outside street, an open postern set into the brick on one side of the wall behind them, with worn stone lintels and a stone threshold, and no door at all. Now she could feel, as if for the first time, the soft breath of outside air. It was a warm evening out there in the cobbled streets of the abandoned

town.

And she felt her body change, a sensation that brought with it an intense and aching pain as her joints reformed, her hands stiffened. This pain, bad as it was, was for Poke an outward symptom of a more terrible distortion. Like all the followers of Lady Amaranth, like all the inhabitants of Moray Island who had chosen the way of the climbing rose, she hated this. She hated the feeling of her bestial nature reasserting itself, as she lost by increments the hard-won sense of her own consciousness and sunk instead into a landscape of primal

emotions; rage, lust, fear, forsaking all the myriad variations of humankind.

But it was necessary, if she were to help her friends—with a surge of mournful pleasure she called them that, understanding also that in a few seconds she would forget the meaning of the word. A sow could fight where a woman could not. Her shoulders rose as her neck disappeared, as her jaw spread apart. Her head broke apart as she turned it to watch the leShay prince with his gloves still in his hand, the little smile still touching his lips. Enormous and furious, the

cyclops was attacking him, and yet he did not move. He didn't have to. In a moment the one-eyed creature was down, was crawling toward Prince Araithe on his hands and knees, laboring to lift his axe. But he was already defeated.

Just before her hand ceased to function entirely, before her weapon fell out of it and she herself sank to the ground, she tightened one of her two stiffening fingers on the crossbow's lever, and watched the bolt sing away. The drow had his black hand in Suka's hair, had drawn her head back to cut her throat, when the bolt hit

him in the chest. He staggered backward just as Poke sank to the floor. Tusks sprouting from the corners of her mouth, she made her run at the leShay prince. The room seemed bright as day, lit with a radiance that had bleached away all but a few colors from the world.

In her human shape she could see beauty everywhere she looked. But down here there was nothing but chaos. As she moved, she could feel the small tugs of all the mental barriers that Prince Araithe had woven in his own defense. They couldn’t hold her down here. She smashed through them like a hand

smashing through a curtain of spiderwebs. She scarcely saw or registered or understood the amazed face of her enemy as she seized his right forearm and crushed it between her jaws. She didn't hear his yelp of pain. Instead she turned and dragged him back across the floor, a light, delicate creature with no substance at all in these lower realms. Released from his power, the cyclops staggered to his feet, and with one stroke of his axe he severed the head of one of the three remaining drow that had pressed Marabaldia back against the wall.

The others fled.

Suka had also gotten to her feet. And when Poke dragged the leShay prince out through the postern door, the illusion stretched and snapped and vanished not just for her but for the higher creatures also, and they stumbled out behind her into the dark street.

CHAPTER NINE

Cross-breeding

The ruined city below Scourtop on Moray Island is by far the oldest sign of sentient habitation in the entire Moonshae archipelago, so old that it has no name in the Common tongue or any other language. The glyphs that decorate the stone table at the mountain's root, the walls of the cavern there, and the carved tablets in the ruined public buildings mean nothing to any living creature. Abraded by the

rain and wind, they will disappear before they are deciphered, Marikke thought, and the record of an entire civilization will vanish with them.

But as the exposed stone broke down in the hard weather, there were other places, underground, that stayed intact, preserved by the altitude, and the absence of any insects or rodents in the high valley. The Savage and Eleuthra lay in one of these, a stone barrow set into a grassy hillock, whose circular shape betrayed its artificial nature.

In the aftermath of the battle

around Malar's tomb, the lycanthropes had dragged the corpses up the winding tunnel into the stone porch and had butchered them there; the dead druid and their own fallen comrades. No one had dared to touch the angel's shining flesh, and they left him where he fell, down in the pit. But they had lit bonfires out in the open, and the air still tasted like charred meat.

Now they lay around, exhausted, in little piles. Marikke picked through them on her way to the entrance of the long barrow. Tongues lolling, the lycanthropes

stared at her, not remembering or else not caring that two nights before they had hoisted her in chains above Malar's table. Her shoulders were still sore, and she could not raise her arms above her head.

But there was worse damage inside. For two days she had not spoken to the snot-nosed little girl. And now today she had ignored all her rituals and had not spoken a single prayer. She had ignored the passage of the hours, the sixteen internal ceremonies, the rhythm of the major and minor supplications. Her heart was like an empty room

where the goddess had once lived. What she did now, today, for the first time since her consecration, was in someone else's service. Great Malar had sent her on this errand, had pressed the sacrificial knife into her hands. Or no—what she had promised was not even to the god, but to the shifter boy whose form he took. She could deny nothing to the shifter boy.

She was wounded in her mind, unsure of the way forward. She ducked her head and clambered in the stone passage, not more than thirty feet until it opened to a circular chamber where the dead

were buried in stone caskets twice as long as a man. There were two of them, and between them, manacled together, lay the Ffolk woman and the daemonfey, if that was what he truly was, with the brindled wolf's pelt covering them.

At midday the chamber was lit through airshafts, a dim, uncertain light. The druid lay on her side, the Savage on his back. Marikke had brought them food and water this morning and the day before, but they were very weak. The Savage didn't raise his head.

She kept the knife behind her, tucked under her belt, and she

could feel it goading into her backside. Why did the woman have to die? Kip would not desire her death, if he were able to understand—the woman had risked her life for him. But this other, this Savage, who knew what motivated him? She pulled the hairy pelt aside and got to work. She felt no sympathy for him and used no tenderness. He had been wounded by the angel's sword, a white seam across his chest. When he lay dying she had closed its angry lips and staunched the bleeding, though the flesh was swollen and discolored. As always it was easier to heal

other people than herself—was it the goddess who had allowed her to ease his suffering? Now, in anger and despair she found herself reciting the nine names of Chauntea as she put her forefinger over the wound. Another day, another time, she would have said she was allowing the goddess to flow through her into the Savage's skin and then deeper into his flesh. When she felt the feverish heat of his infected body lessen and subside, and when she saw his skin change its color under her hand, she would have thanked the goddess, who now cooled him and

drew out the fluid from his wound, which started to weep hot, honey-colored tears.

But she had no thanks to give. Great Malar had risen. He had occupied and destroyed the shifter boy, whom Marikke had nurtured and protected all these years. The goddess had allowed it. More than that, she had required it.

The Savage lay with his eyes closed. Clinical in her interest, with no joy or thanks in her heart, Marikke pushed the yellow hair from his dark cheeks, examining the pattern of the golden tattoos under his left eye, examining his

yellow lashes and brows. She had never seen him so unguarded and so near, and she was looking for clues. She studied the pale, bleeding marks on the rim of his ear, and in his nostril, and on his fingers where the lycanthropes had robbed him—though they had no use for gold, they enjoyed hoarding it. She studied the scars along his neck, and then, pulling his shoulder so that he squirmed in pain, she turned him toward her so she could see the deeper scars along his back, the pale ridges and craters of abused tissue that ran down his spine into his trousers, the old

wounds he had always kept covered underneath his black clothes. Closing her eyes, she pushed her fingers into his flesh, probing him for information he had locked away, feeling the structures of broken bones between his shoulder blades where his leather bat wings had been torn out, and all the damage lower down where, she imagined, the horns of bone protruding from his spine had been shorn off, and his thick, scaly tail had been ripped out from his pelvis by its roots.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw he was looking at her, and

at that moment she was astonished she had ever been deceived by him. No doubt with part of his mind always he had been cultivating the illusion, altering and shrouding himself in the perceptions of his companions—had he allowed anyone ever to be close to him? How can you be a friend to someone you don't know? His green eyes were open now, and he was too weak to conceal himself. She saw the slit of demon red in the center of his pupils, and he looked at her with undisguised hatred and contempt, though she had saved his life. It had taken all his power to

overcome the angel.

"Hey," she said. "How are you feeling?"

Her interest was entirely abstract, she told herself. Next to him the woman stirred, the druid. She also had been damaged in the fight, bitten to the bone in many places on her arms and thighs. She also had lost a lot of blood, and she was still weak as a wolf pup. But healing her had been straightforward, a matter of sealing her wounds, of cleansing her and warding off infection. Marikke had soothed her with a sleeping charm, but she and the

Savage were chained together under the wolf's pelt, and she had woken, almost. She groaned.

With her left hand, Marikke touched her elbow near where the claws had ripped her. She spoke an empty, meaningless prayer and made her sleep again. She was staring in the Savage's eyes, trying to read his story in his face, the source of his deceit.

"So," he whispered. "You betrayed us after all. I told Lukas not to trust you."

Startled, she almost laughed. What did a daemonfey know about betrayal? What greater betrayal

could there be in nature than to breed with demons in order to create a master race? But even beyond that, this creature, whose true name she didn't know, had been maimed and punished by his own kind, cast out into the world to live with ordinary mortals as if he were one of them.

"Why have you helped us?" he whispered. "Why have you drained my wound?" His voice was harsher now that he didn't have to pretend.

She didn't know the answer to his questions. Had he seen the knife in her belt? Did he know why she was here? It was not to cure him—he

had guessed that much. No, but the Beastlord had a test for her.

And at that moment, she knew she would fail his test. Irritated, she shrugged one shoulder. “You have been summoned to the High Hunt,” she lied.

“By … whom?”

And when she said nothing he continued, “By the kitten boy?”

The red slits in his eyes gleamed and burned. “You know that’s not what he is,” Marikke said. “Not anymore.”

This was her great grief, the thought that Kip was lost to her. Worse than lost, because his body

was as it had always been, his face, his shy, tentative smile. With that same smile he had pressed the knife into her hands. The Beastlord was in him now, and if there was a tiny part of him that still survived, she didn't know where to find it.

And surely all of them had been deceived from the beginning, from the first night they had set foot on Moray Island. If Argon Bael had made some kind of magical communication with the leShay queen, then already she'd have known all she needed to know about her lost sister. If she sent Lukas to destroy the girl, it was

only as an afterthought. The real reason was to raise the Beastlord. Once that was accomplished, Caer Moray would fall anyway, and Lady Amaranth would die.

No, Marikke and Kip had been the important ones, the arrow's point. The others had always been expendable. In which case, why had Argon Bael spared the Savage's life there on the beach, the first night he had taken them prisoner? Perhaps even then he had recognized the devil in him, or else needed him for the High Hunt—yes, that was it. He had needed him for the High Hunt.

She remembered how the angel's sword had divided light from darkness. "When you are well enough to run," she said, "they'll chase you from here."

Among Malar's worshipers, the High Hunt was their only sacrament, a day and a night or sometimes longer, and a clean kill at the end. In celebration of Malar's rising, Marikke decided, this was to be the Savage's fate, and the druid's also—she felt pity for her sake. As for the daemonfey, good riddance, because of the lies he'd told. "I think tomorrow morning you'll be strong enough to

give them sport," she said.

"I came for you," he whispered. "I risked my life for you, to save you from the beasts. You and the boy. That's why I am here. She too," he said, meaning the druid.

Marikke felt tears in her eyes. This was not how this was supposed to be. She was not supposed to feel anything. What did he want from her? Would he like it better if she killed them now, cut their throats with the Beastlord's knife, as he had demanded? "Tell me what you are," she said.

"You know what I am."

She could hear his tortured, shallow breath. Each inflation of his lungs brought pressure to his wound. “Let her go free,” he said, meaning Eleuthra, the druid. “I was the one who brought down Malar’s angel, stopped his mouth with dust. I will lead you a good hunt, I promise.” He smiled. His teeth were different now, in a way she couldn’t quite identify.

“Don’t cry,” he said after a moment. “Everything you do, you must have courage.”

Her tears and her weakness were not for him but for herself. Malar would not forgive her. For a

moment she caught a glimpse of the golden elf that she remembered on Lukas's crew, from the first days on Alaron when she had come on board, his smiles and jokes just slightly out of sequence with the rest of them, as if he always had to translate what they said into a different language and then back again before he spoke. "Don't cry," he said again.

She looked away from him, up into the crude stone dome. She felt the tears well up. "Tell me what you are," she repeated.

"You have guessed," he said. "I am a pilgrim from House

Dlardrageth in Cormanthor. You guessed that much. I took refuge in Alaron."

In the indirect light she couldn't see the scales on the surface of his skin, so fine and delicate they were.

"My mother died in childbirth, because of what I was." He broke off. She didn't look at him. Then: "Free me." She could hear the clank of the chain as he shook it in frustration. "Free her, at least. You would have died, strung up in the roof of Malar's tomb. Didn't you see the other skeletons, the sacrifices, hanging up there above

the altar stones? A hundred years of uselessness. But it was the angel whom Malar wanted. That was a sacrifice worthy of him. That was blood worth spilling, and it was I who spilled it. Now we are quits. The girl has done nothing wrong."

"The gods don't care about right and wrong," said Marikke, remembering what Chauntea, the most generous of all of them, had told her in the cave. "Only men and women care."

"That's your excuse, now?" His voice came tortured, slow. "And isn't that what you are? A woman?"

But she was thinking about the daemonfey and his relations with the wives and daughters of the rich men of Alaron. Before, she had been disgusted to hear of these liaisons, had thought of them as predatory, compulsive, and immoral, evidence of the deep scorn that the fey, in their hearts' core, always felt for human beings. But now she realized there was something worse, that the Savage had betrayed these women, put their lives in danger … for what reason? A mix of carelessness and aggression. How many of them now had fiends or half fiends

growing under their hearts, ready to slice out through their wombs, as the Savage had murdered his own mother? Tears in her eyes, she left him and crawled out though the mouth of the barrow into the open day.

In pain, the Savage tried to shift his body. His hands were manacled in front of him, the chain looped around the druid's body. Moving, he disturbed her and she moaned a little. Looking down, he saw her eyes were open.

"What did your father do to you?"

she whispered.

He found he didn't want to tell her. Chained to her, his weight partially on top of her, he was suddenly embarrassed. "My father was in prison for a long time," he said. "Then he was set free. This was in Ascalhorn, near the high forest. He was a warrior, scion of a noble house. A royal house. He fought against the armies of Seiveril Miritar. But he was defeated and driven from his family's ancient citadel. His cousins were gathering for another assault. But he had lost his heart, and he didn't want to fight anymore."

In fact he'd scarcely known his father. He didn't know why his father had done the things he'd done. He knew he had fought with Sarya Dlardrageth in the great war. Then he was gone to the Sword Coast, to Baldur's Gate, where he lived secretly. Whether he'd been banished or had run away, the Savage never knew.

"And … what did he do to you?"

How could he have lived among humans, the Savage thought, unless he had done to himself what he had done to his only child, maimed himself, thrown away his own power? But the Savage didn't know

anything about that, or about the person who had been his mother. He had been raised by servants, trained in the warrior's way. He found he didn't want to talk about it.

But he felt the druid's hands move over his back and down his spine. Marikke had made no effort to be gentle, and had hurt him and healed him at the same time. But these hands were different, tentative and soft. He imagined Eleuthra was trying to comfort him. But the pressure of her fingers caused a pain that was not physical.

“I hate the fey,” she said, close to his ear. “I’ve always hated them. So I hate you, even though you didn’t fight like one of them. You fought like one of us.

“Almost like a man,” she explained, and she touched him lower down. “Gwynneth Island was a paradise until your people came.”

This corresponded to no reading of history that the Savage had ever heard. Before the fey had come to Myrloch, the people of the island had slaved in penury, scratching out a living so the House of Kendrick could live in splendor, as

they still did in Alaron. Northlanders and Ffolk had squabbled over trifles, constantly at war, hacking each other to pieces in their stony glens.

But whatever. He felt her fingers on his leg. And he imagined the two women, Marikke and the druid, between them were bringing back his strength, making him whole. Grateful, he turned toward her, and found her staring up at him with blue-black eyes.

“There’s something—here,” she said. “Something old.” She wrinkled her nose. “The stink from your body masks it. Makes it hard

to find." She stuck out her long tongue. "You don't think these chains can hold me?" she asked. "Nothing can. Because it disgusts me to touch you. To be so close to you. Don't look at me. Don't move."

He closed his eyes. He could hear her breath, smell it, feel it on his face. That was how he became aware of her transformation, the sweet smell of her turning rank and acrid as she turned. He felt the wolf hide that had covered them retract across his body. Once, in Callidyrr, he had shared the bed of a rich merchant's wife, and as she

slept she had pulled the blanket from him inch by inch, leaving him exposed and prickling with cold, as now. She had known what he was. Anyone who'd seen him naked could not help but know.

But now the beast was struggling against him, scratching with her claws, frustrated by the bonds meant to hold a human woman. The wolf struggled free.

The lycanthropes were insufficient at anything that required care or sustained attention. Chaining people up, guarding prisoners, imagining contingencies, were not their

strengths. Marikke could easily have predicted the druid would transform herself. That she did not take precautions, the Savage thought, reflected her ambivalence. And perhaps Kip didn't care if he went free. In a good hunt, the quarry needed time to run and hide. The longer the time, the more uncertain the outcome, the richer the sacrament, the happier the kill.

"Go," he said.

She stood above him now, her great paws on his chest, and she bent down to lick his face. Her breath was thick and foul. Tentative as a woman, weak from

loss of blood, she seemed stronger as a beast. She yawned, and shook her heavy shoulders, hurting him.

"Go," he repeated.

But she leaned down and took the chain between her teeth. She worried it, and dragged his hands forward until he saw the manacles were loose around his wrists. The rusted ironwork had come loose when she freed herself. She pulled him forward, and where Marikke had sat he saw a knife on the ground, a knife of hammered steel with a blade like a beech leaf. The healer must have dropped it. The blade was strong enough to break

apart the rusted links.

The wolf was sniffing around the base of one of the stone caskets when he sat up. Aching, he rubbed his hands. She'd climbed up on her hind legs, pressing at the lid of the casket, scratching at the seal. Wearily, he got to his feet and looked where she wanted. The stone lid came to a peaked ridge in the center and was carved with geometric designs. He thumped on it a few times, wondering why she was interested. Whimpering, she made him continue, obliged him to put his strength against the stone, which yielded a little bit.

The wolf licked at the seal, an indented circle in the lid's end. Unwolflike, she pressed the pads of both her paws into the carved circle, bracing herself with her hind legs. The lid yielded inch by inch until a black gap appeared, thick with dusty webs. Unconvinced, the Savage paused, because he could not guess what kind of disease or charm might lurk inside this box, now disturbed, perhaps, for the first time. The lycanthropes would have had no interest. And perhaps the Northlanders who had once lived in this part of the mountains had known something he didn't

know, enough to keep away from here.

As for the druid, why hadn't she said something about this? Maybe the wolf wanted something the woman didn't want, was afraid even to ask for. Now she dipped her paw into the gap and hooked up a wad of cobwebbed filth while the Savage peered in, looking for movement.

There was none. The light shifted, and he found himself staring down into a nest of bones. The casket had no bottom, was just a stone frame laid over the uneven ground. And he suspected immediately that

he was looking down into the lair of some strange animal or worm, and that the webs Eleuthra had broken through did not belong to anything so ordinary as a spider. But in the chalky, churned-up earth he could see a dark hole leading down, a burrow or a sett with entrances and exits in some other place. The hole was lined with filth, and the air was foul and rank. When he bent over the casket he could taste it in his mouth. Lukas could recognize any animal by just its smell, but the Savage had never been a hunter. He had a high stomach and was easily

disgusted. The servants who had raised him in Baldur's Gate had kept bees. He had often seen them slide the lids away, and now this casket seemed to him a nightmare version of a beehive. He wondered why the druid was so insistent, why even now she was yelping and whining, still up on her hind legs, and why he himself was fascinated, as if, like an augur, he was trying to decipher the meaning of the bleached, gnawed rubble of bones that filled up the majority of the stone casket, the bones of many animals mixed together.

But there was something else. The

light shifted again. The Savage, now that he was not bothering to alter, for appearance's sake, the pupils of his eyes, was able to see better even in murky darkness. He caught a glimpse of something shining there in the litter of bones at the hole's mouth. He loved gold, not just for the sake of the luxuries you could buy with it, but for its own soft, heavy, lustrous sake. He had always had gold. His father had left him gold, but now the lycanthropes had stolen it—not just the bag of thalers under his armpit, but his personal trinkets also. Why would Eleuthra change her mind

about him if he could only stand before her bare-chested and unadorned, like a beggar or a slave? No wonder she hated him. Perhaps she understood this, which was why she whimpered with her ears pulled back, and scratched at the stones.

He expanded the demon centers to his eyes, opened the red slits. Knowing the risk to be unacceptable, yet goaded by his own cupidity and the whimpering expectations of the wolf, he leaned over the casket and plunged his arm over the side, while at the same time the dry bones under his

hand erupted into movement and the dragon flew up—a creature the size of a house cat, who fixed his jaws into the Savage's wrist. Another one ascended into the low dome, flapping its scaly wings around his head as he pulled back, before it found the long, low entrance to the barrow and disappeared.

But the Savage had grabbed hold of the treasure and wouldn't let it go, a circlet of gold, and more gold glinted underneath. Lips curled in disgust, he held up his wrist with the creature suspended from it, wings momentarily still. The wolf

ripped and snapped at it until it also fluttered up into the dome. Hissing, spitting venom, it dived at the Savage's eyes and ripped at his naked shoulders when he ducked his head. Then it also was gone out of the tunnel's mouth.

"Happy now?" the Savage snarled.

The Moonshaes were full of stunted, miniature versions of fell species from the mainland. These dragons had ripped the skin loose from his forearm. He leaned into the casket again and pulled out a shred of silken winding cloth, rainbow patterned, faded, yet

curiously intact. The reptiles had built their nest in an old tomb, and though they had added to the pile of bones over the years, the Savage could distinguish the remains of the original occupant. Cursing, he bound his forearm in the winding cloth, wondering where Marikke had gone to. The bitch had betrayed him, but maybe he needed her now, her healing arts.

"Satisfied?" he spat out, even though it was obvious the wolf was no such thing. She was still on her hind legs, scratching at the casket's stone lid, until he reached down and brought up the other objects in

the trove, a mixture, he thought, of a king's funeral regalia and whatever treasure the dragons had been able to amass—gold coins, rings, and jewels. And a long steel sword, wrapped in rotting cloth. He snatched the circlet from the bone temples of the king's enormous and distorted skull. When he raised it up over his own head, it dropped down immediately around his neck.

There was a small part of his heart that was overjoyed with the sight of these treasures, whatever the cost or consequences, whatever his predicament. He had felt naked

these past hours since the lycanthropes had stripped his gold away, more naked than the loss of his shirt had made him feel. A ring, made for the littlest of the king's eight fingers, a vestigial spur of unjointed bone, fitted on his thumb. Another ring, ornamented with geometric patterns, he could use to gather his yellow hair behind the nape of his neck.

He filled the pockets of his trousers. There were jewels, too, some cut and faceted, some not. One of them, a smooth sphere, gleamed like a demon's eye.

He looked at the druid, who

cocked her head. “What?” he said, “this is what you want, isn’t it?”

But she was still anxious and unhappy, until he reached down for the king’s thighbone. She had lost her own totem stick, and perhaps this would help her, he thought. And as soon as she had it in her jaws, she dropped to her four paws and ran out through the burrow’s entrance in the light of the setting sun.

Marikke watched her from the door of a ruined building. She had seen the dragons fly up into the

amber light a few minutes before. Now she watched the wolf stop and lower her muzzle to the ground, the bone in her jaws, a raised ridge of hair between her shoulder blades as she picked through the piles of lycanthropes in their most bestial shapes, asleep or else regarding her blearily, having forgotten what they were there for, or what it meant to be a prisoner. The Beastlord, after all, had given them no commands, and Marikke's had been ambiguous. She watched the wolf lope down one of the streets of the ruined town.

After a few more minutes she

watched the Savage staggering after, the king's sword awkwardly perched under his arm. He held his bandaged arm. His shoulders, too, were scratched and bleeding.

She watched them disappear among the rocks. Then, raising her head high, combing her hair back from her face between her fingers, she walked back to the stone porch below the mountain. Once there, she turned again into the sunset, sniffing the air, admiring the light. The torches flared behind her in the tunnel's entrance, and all the twisting way down to the Beastlord's lair. She made her

prayers as she descended, murmuring the names of the Earthmother not in supplication but in farewell. Since her last encounter with the goddess, she had decided to put her faith in the hearts of mortal creatures. Because how was it possible to know the truth? Perhaps we fool ourselves by worshiping Chauntea and despising Malar, and Talos, and Bane, and Asmodeus, the entire pantheon of blood and evil fury. Chauntea is generous and loving, we might tell ourselves, the source of all good things. But if there was only one god with many aspects, and if her

purposes could not be understood by mortal creatures, any more than a dog could hope to understand Marikke, then it was best to trust in people after all. Why would Chauntea permit Malar to roam free?

No, she would put her trust in Kip, the shifter boy who loved her, because she had saved him from starvation and death, and given him a home in the world. Surely there was enough of him left inside his own body and his own heart for him to remember her, perhaps to pardon her. She would not run with the others. Knowing her as he did,

the Beastlord would find her in an hour. There would be no High Hunt for her.

Now she was in the slimy, agate-floored cavern once again. The torches burned up bright. Kip sat on the surface of his table, and he turned his calico head and smiled as she approached. Her heart rose up to see him smile.

"Did you do what I asked?" he said, his voice light and musical, just as she remembered. Surely there was something of him left.

He had the black kitten on his lap, and he played with it. "Oh, Kip," she said at once. "Forgive me.

I was preparing for the hunt. I had them all locked up in one of those old crypts on the mountain. But the chains were all rusted and they broke free. We'll have to go quick. But the trail is clear."

A pucker appeared between the boy's clear brows. "Hunt? There's no hunt. That's not what I asked."

"What do you mean? I didn't understand …"

"I wanted them dead. I told you. They killed a dozen of my people, and my angel, too—my angel, who kept me nourished all these years." He paused. "What crypt? There's one on the ridge that Argon Bael

used to guard for me. Not there. You did not put them there."

She bowed her head. "Forgive me," she said. Already she knew it was useless, that the god had spoken. "Do you remember," she pleaded, "my father's house in Alaron, on the heights? Do you remember the pear tree in the field, when it blossomed in the spring? Do you remember when you—"

"I gave you the knife to cut their throats, to water with their blood my holy ground. I gave you the knife. Do you have the knife?"

She brought her hands up to her face in supplication. "I don't have

it.”

“This was the knife for Malar’s sacrifices and the Black Blood on Malar’s altar,” interrupted Kip with his soft, childlike voice. “Do you have it?”

As he spoke, he rose to his feet on the tabletop. And the lycanthropes who had been resting, curled up against the cavern’s walls, got to their feet. Some of them stretched and showed their claws. Summoned by their master’s voice, they gathered in a circle. Marikke spoke. “Kip, do you remember that first evening we came to Caer Callidyrr, and you were so

frightened I had to lead you by the hand while you closed your eyes? We came in through the gate, and when they rang the bell you put your hands over your ears …”

This was probably not the best thing to remember, but it was all that came to mind. Marikke watched the circle close around her, a pack of wolf-men taking charge. She would have preferred someone else, for her last wish. Briefly she examined the interior spaces—the glade, the lakeside, and the snowy field—where Chauntea had so often visited her, but they were empty, barren, not a

footprint there.

CHAPTER TEN

The Battle of Caer Moray

In the unnamed city below Scourtop, an incarnation of the Beastlord, standing with his weak legs spread on the stone tabletop, directed and administered the sacrifice. Only when the priestess's body was successfully dismembered and its smoking parts distributed among the temple's altar stones did he pause to remember the High Hunt. By that time the Savage and Eleuthra had several hours' lead.

But Kip the cat-shifter was not the only embodiment of Malar on Moray Island. That night, a hundred miles north, among the human settlements along the coast, sleeping next to their exhausted husbands, the Northlander women struggled and cried out, disturbed by the same nightmare: A great panther, its heavy jaws befouled with blood, crouched over their marriage beds, polluting the sheets with the stink of his hot breath. Shivering in the cold dawn, they shook their men awake, begging them not to go out that day in their frail boats to catch the spring

herring and the langoustines, or climb up into their potato fields—not that day.

In the hills and forests above the towns, the Beastlord marshaled his troops. The great panther, his shoulders striped with mange, moved between the cedars in the dark woods, his tail weaving like a serpent. Down below, the Northlander farmers cursed and whipped their animals when the wooden plows stuck in the marl, until the crazed oxen and draft horses turned and trampled them. Out at sea, the fishermen were lucky with their catch, returning

with their bulging nets to empty towns, their women and their children gone.

In the afternoon the animals had rebelled against them, the simple beasts, maddened by instincts they didn't understand, and the lycanthropes who hid among them, who had crept in through the palisades among the rats and dogs. They stole children from their cribs, and dragged women, screaming, from their household tasks. Chattering and cursing, the wolf-men lit fires and threw open the gates.

Toward evening the first refugees

arrived beneath the walls of Caer Moray on the bay, and were welcomed inside. Lady Amaranth was sitting in an upstairs room with Captain Lukas. Gaspar-shen, feeling better, was taking a bath, his head and body entirely submerged in the iron bathtub, his slitted eyes staring up through the cold seawater as he lay blowing bubbles from the bottom. He'd been in there for hours.

Lukas was playing the violoncello, its long neck over his shoulder, its squat body between his knees. Lady Amaranth sat entranced. Many females of her

closest court had come into the room and pressed against the walls, as many as could fit, while even outside in the halls and corridors the lycanthropes huddled to listen. In the courtyards work had stopped.

During the course of renovations, the day before, a pig-woman had discovered an old storeroom, its door choked with fallen timbers. Left over from human times, unlooted by orcs, the room contained a number of old treasures, including some musical instruments wrapped in velvet, with waxed pouches for the strings.

Lukas had not had much opportunity to play in recent years. So for him the dances and sonatas that he managed to conjure from the delicate old spruce wood felt like an emanation from the past, a rediscovery of his childhood in the big house in Loudwater, where his father's third wife had taught him music. Small things—the smell of the rosin, the squeak of his fingers on the strings—brought big memories, and in the middle of one sequence of arpeggios he caught a sudden glimpse of his stepmother as if she had been with him in the room, her bright eyes

and pale lips outlined in kohl. She'd been scarcely older than himself, younger than he was now. And then other sensations also, the fragrance of her dark skin, the pressure of her hands as she corrected some mistake. Oh, he had studied diligently under her care and learned much skill. But his father had not forgiven him.

Who can step into a river twice? For the water is different and we ourselves are different. At these moments when we are borne into the past, our unhappiness can become a kind of pleasure. Music makes it so. Lukas in a single

trembling note recaptured an image of his stepmother as she paused at the threshold to rearrange the bodice of her dress, to compose herself before she reentered the public spaces of the house to reassume her duties there. She looked back at him, smiling crookedly as if she almost blamed him for taking something from her—no, his father had not forgiven him, and he had had to flee the house. No doubt his younger brother had inherited everything.

Lukas's eyes were closed, and he told himself that he must open them or else risk embarrassment.

When he did, he found himself in a room full of lycanthropes who, through their listening, had been transformed beyond the ordinary upper limit of their humanness. He found himself in the center of a circle of women whose faces and features were only slightly out of true, and whose rapt eyes followed every motion of his fingers. And Lady Amaranth was weeping, without any groaning or moaning or distortion of her beautiful features. But tears dropped from her lashes onto her cheeks. She, too, he guessed, had sunk back down into the past. To follow her

he slipped into a minor key, one of the few gifts to humankind that the eladrin had brought up from the Feywild, and the foundation of all their music. He played her a love song from Karador, and wondered as he watched her face if this was the first music she had heard since she left home, and whether she recognized the tune, and what it meant to her. He wondered what she remembered of her first nine years, the richness of her life then, its poverty now. There being no connection between morality and art, he imagined Lady Ordalf's court was full of music.

But Gaspar-shen, when he rose to the surface, couldn't understand what he was hearing, a low, bellowing sound like the moaning of a calf, and then a scraping, squeaking noise. The iron tub was in what had once been a stable. Clothed in just his eel-skin trousers, carrying a towel, he walked through the gallery of wrecked stone stalls so that he could stand in the shadows at the edge of the courtyard and look up at the candlelight in one of the peaked windows of the keep. The sound came from there. Ah, yes, he had

heard it before: The sound of his friend rubbing horse hair against catgut strung over an ornate wooden frame.

But there were other noises, too, closer to hand. He stood wiping his head with his towel, gingerly blotting the lips of the wound behind his ear, where the orc had hit him with a cleaver. With his spread fingers he combed back the cilia that looked almost like a ridge of hair down his spine and between his shoulder blades, while lines of energy formed blue-green patterns underneath his skin, always moving, mixing and reforming. But

now a thread of scarlet moved over his belly, and he turned away from the music—that was what Lukas called it—toward another source of noise, more urgent and meaningful, and because of that more beautiful to him: someone hammering at the gate.

Caer Moray occupied the top of a low hill. It was a simple structure, a curtain wall between five round towers. Along the north side, built on a pinnacle of raw stone above the rocky beach, emerged the keep, mostly ruined now, as were the galleries and guardhouses that lined the outer walls. The courtyard

was full of old stone cisterns, and a well that cut diagonally through the rock, down to a sea cave underneath the pinnacle. The gates were wooden, fifteen feet high, and Gaspar-shen could see immediately they were the weakest part of the fortifications, battered flat during the orc wars and now hastily rebuilt out of the original timbers. The gate was flanked by smaller towers, in the base of which was the postern, which now stood open. Lady Amaranth's guard of wolf-women had opened it to guide in the survivors from the ports.

With his towel around his neck,

Gaspar-shen retrieved his weapons, then climbed the spiral stair up to the battlements so he could watch them come in. Peering through the embrasure, he could see the deep ditch that lined the curtain wall. The postern led into it, below the raised causeway that strethed across the ditch into the gate. Formerly, he guessed, there'd been a drawbridge, which Lady Amaranth had lacked the skill to rebuild. Instead she had filled the gap with rubble. The women, leading or carrying their children, had followed the road from the northwest as it wound down

through the hills. Gaspar-shen counted several scores of the Northlanders, barefoot, dressed in their long embroidered skirts, their yellow hair braided or cut short, their faces pale and exhausted. Behind them, driving them, he could see the wolves coming down out of the woods, the vanguard of the lycanthrope army. They did not attack the women, but held them to their road, chivvying them onward, though Gaspar-shen guessed that if any of the women had stumbled or fallen back, they would have made a quick task of them; now they spread away from the road over

the open meadows that led down to the bay east of the castle. They ran back and forth down there in figure eight patterns as if playing a game, as they waited for the rest of the troops to come down through the spruce and cedar trees. The sun was setting behind the ridge.

The women were inside now, the postern locked and barred. Lady Amaranth was below him in the courtyard. Lukas was with her. They were greeting the new arrivals. The genasi watched them for a moment and then turned back to see the lycanthropes, reinforced now, spread out on either side of

the causeway and the road, enclosing the walls in a long, ragged, disorganized semicircle from the high ground of the pinnacle to the beach. More and more were slinking down through the trees, and they carried torches. Some dragged loads of fallen wood out of the forest, which they built up in intermittent piles.

Lukas had come up the spiral stair. “It’s the walls,” he said, as he took his place beside him. “They don’t have much in the way of weapons.”

“Nor do we.” Gaspar-shen paused, hawking up moisture and

dribbling it off the edge of the embrasure in a long line. Regenerated by his saltwater bath, by nature he was able to produce a great deal of saliva. He watched it fall out of sight into the ditch, a sequence of tiny glowing spheres. “They could have taken those women,” he said. “Why did they not?”

Lukas strung his bow. “It’s the hunt,” he said. “The quarry’s run to ground.”

The lycanthropes, as the sky grew dark, lit bonfires at the forest’s edge. They built scaffolds, tying the timbers together with vines. Then

they brought out some of the men captured in the towns and stripped off their clothes, while Lukas and the genasi watched from the walls. Lady Amaranth was with them. She had sequestered the women in the old banquet hall, below them where there were no windows. She didn't want them to see her servants and followers as they slipped out of their clothes and began their transformations, a pack of wolves now, massed around the postern and inside the gate.

A few retained their human shape. They lit torches along the

circuit of the walls and took their positions in the guard towers. Some joined Gaspar-shen and Lukas above the gate pointing their long, hairy fingers toward the row of bonfires and the men that hung above them now. Above the barking and snarling, gibbering and caterwauling outside the walls, Gaspar-shen could hear the sound of screaming. Lukas drew back his bowstring. The genasi raised his hand. “Too far,” he said—Lukas’s worst of many faults was his sentimentality. Why would he waste arrows in this empty way, to shorten the suffering of men

already dead?

Lukas said nothing, only lowered his bow a matter of ten degrees, and shot.

“Stupid,” Gaspar-shen observed, but now he saw, three hundred yards beyond the gate, an open space amid a circle of wolves, and a great beast in the middle of it, a panther, he thought, until the creature rose up on his hind legs like a gorilla, and raised his paws into the air. So, no ordinary animal, and the arrow never reached him, though the shot was true. It exploded, burst into fire like a shooting star, while the beast

sank to the ground again.

Lady Amaranth had rejoined them. She had changed into her leather armor, and tied her hair up under her leather cap. She had her own bow, and a wolf-woman behind her carried sheaves of arrows from the storehouse, which she laid out on the battlement. And so Lukas began to shoot in earnest, the great bow humming as he drove the stragglers back beyond range. Some of the wolf-women carried their own bows. The genasi guessed they might be terrible shots.

Five animals were dead in the

open meadow, a boar, three wolves, and something Gaspar-shen couldn't name. Bellowing, a yoked red bull tumbled from the causeway, and as if the sound were some kind of signal, all the other beasts quieted down. The great panther prowled beyond bowshot. He screamed, and the lycanthropes came forward at a run. Some carried the lopped trunks of spruce trees they had cut in the forest, thirty feet long, borne on the backs of a dozen animals. These were the siege ladders, and the lycanthropes set their trunks into the ditch and set them up against the walls. With

superhuman agility they scrambled up them. Once on the rough stones of the upper wall, they scampered up through the embrasures to struggle with the women there. Lady Amaranth was their commander, and she shouted, lit one of her arrows in the torch above her head, and leaned over the battlement to shoot directly down into the ditch.

When he was spitting, Gaspar-shen had seen, lit from the glow of his saliva, a narrow stream in the bottom of the ditch, which he had assumed was sewage from the castle, though he had not caught

the scent. But as the flaming arrow fell he guessed it might be something else, a flow of naphthalene from some ancient cistern. With his scimitar in one hand, his short sword in the other, he had jumped onto the parapet and hacked at a trio of wolf-men on the narrow stones as the ditch erupted into fire. Impregnated with naphthalene, the bases of the trees also burst into flame, which climbed up the pitchy bark. Screaming, many of the lycanthropes dropped down into the smoky fire, while the ones that remained above were quickly

overwhelmed.

Gaspar-shen could hear the hum of Lukas's bow. Lady Amaranth was with him. They were shooting onto the causeway where the enemy pressed at the gate. Borne on a flood of outstretched arms, more tree trunks moved slowly from the forest's edge. Gaspar-shen guessed they would be more careful this time, and perch them from the ditch's outside lip. The lycanthropes had their own source of fire. They piled brush and timber against the gate. Two wolf-men labored over the rubble of the old bridge, one carrying a torch, the

other a leaking skin of oil. Lukas shot them both, but someone else snatched up the flame.

"Sortie," Lukas shouted, but Gaspar-shen was already halfway down the stairs to where the wolf guard massed in the courtyard. The edge of his scimitar gleamed with an electric blue. With one hand he unbarred the postern below the gate. Everything outside was red fire and black smoke, except for a line of stone steps that led up to the causeway.

And Lukas was behind him, sword in hand. They hacked their way up to the gate, and when their

enemies turned to flee, the wolf-women chased them down. Lukas spilled the skin of oil into the rubble of the causeway, and then pulled away the brush and threw it down into the ditch, where it caught fire. Lady Amaranth gave them cover from above. Then they retreated.

Variations of this same sequence returned during the night. The lycanthropes had hewn new trees and brought them to the wall, to the ditch's outer lip. Shorter, set at a different angle, these new siege

ladders couldn’t reach even the deepest embrasure, so that the wolf-men were vulnerable as they scrambled up the last stones, clinging to the rough masonry. Many died. And in the hours after midnight it began to rain, a steady downpour that extinguished the bonfires and made the rocks slippery.

A hard wind blew off the sea. The waves of lycanthropes, as they dashed themselves against the walls, established a slower rhythm. Finally, toward dawn, Malar himself came to the gate.

But the defenders had suffered

too. The ditch now ran with water, and the naphthalene wouldn't ignite. The last sortie from the postern had ended in disaster. Now the door was locked and barred, but the enemy controlled the causeway and had brought up battering rams. Lady Amaranth watched them from above. Captain Lukas's strange companion with the glowing skin kept the small door, with what remained of the wolf-women.

The captain was with her. All the arrows from the storeroom had been spent. The weather had made marksmanship difficult, but even so

the ditch was full of bodies, the causeway paved with them. Lukas had led the counterattacks along the battlements and had supervised a new tactic. With iron bars they had broken apart some of the crenellations, laboriously built over the past year, and pushed the heavy stones onto the heads of their attackers. Each success tore a new gap in the wall.

But they had not touched the rock over the gate itself, fearing for the integrity of the entire structure. Now, as the enemy regrouped, Lady Amaranth and the captain stood side by side, sometimes

looking out, sometimes at each other.

She had lost her cap, and her long wet hair had tumbled down. Her face was smeared with mud, and she was bleeding from a wound in her shoulder, where one of the wolf-men had stabbed her. She felt close to tears, not just because the small community that she had built was failing, and would fail. Not just because many of the lycanthropes that she had raised up from pups or shoats were wounded or dead. Not just because she now saw she had been crazy to think that she could maintain a citadel of

female authority here in this wilderness—where had all the young ones come from, she now asked herself, that she and Esmerella the midwife had birthed in the nursery? Of course—the lycanthropes had been going out into the forests and the fields of their own will to mate with the creatures who were now battering down their doors, surrendering to them one by one in degradation and pain, forced by nature—she herself had not forbidden it. They were not her prisoners.

No, that was the larger truth, too big to think about. But there was a

smaller truth also, which had to do with her own citadel. Captain Lukas turned toward her. He also was not looking his best, bleeding from a cut over his eye, one arm hanging awkwardly. His lips were split, his clothes badged with blood. He'd laid his sword along the top of the parapet, and he was smiling at her, a man she scarcely knew, the first man she had ever seen, a man who had put down his life in her defense. Their enemies were endless, surging like the sea below the walls, and doubtless in an hour or two hours they would break through the main gate and

overwhelm them. But she had kept a smaller gate inside herself, and this man stood outside it, his blue eyes and dark hair.

"Are you hurt?" he said.

"It's nothing."

But she was lying, because she was hurt. It was quiet down below, the noise stifled by the rain, and the preparations for the final attack. And no one was around them on the walls. The lycanthropes tended the wounded. Amaranth crossed the broad, wet stones until she stood facing Lukas, just a few feet away, and then one foot, and then a few inches, and

then nothing. Careful not to touch his scarcely healed ribs, she put her hand out.

"Lady, you're crying," he said, which was not true. She reached up to touch the tears on his own cheek. How could anyone tell in this rainstorm? She knew because she could feel the shudder in his breath.

"It's all right," he said—how could it be all right? How could anything be all right? He bent to kiss her, and she turned her head to avoid him. But then she turned back, fiercely and furiously pressing her lips against his, and

then opening her mouth so he could feel her teeth. He was the one who was here, and that was just as well. Better him than another. Look at the damage he had taken for her. Think of the damage he would take. Besides, he had played so sweetly in the afternoon, songs from her childhood in High Karador.

She felt his hands on her back. There came a shout from down below, and another shout. In time they turned away from each other and leaned over the parapet to watch Great Malar come down the causeway toward them, moving in

the middle of a phalanx of enormous wolves. He lumbered forward on squat, bandy legs, swinging his hunched body forward on his massive knuckles. But then they saw him rise up, straighten his back, raise his head, step forward almost like a man as his legs lengthened and reformed, his arms dwindled. Then he was down on all fours again, his long black tail lashing the air, his claws and teeth like sabers. Then his rough black pelt took on a scaly sheen, and he sank down lower, a black alligator wagging his enormous jaws. As he moved forward, his body

transformed through a spectrum of predatory beasts, until he reached the gate itself and stood up on his hind legs.

"Lady, I must go," said Lukas.

He ran his fingers through her hair. Then he lifted his sword off of the stones and ran down the spiral steps into the courtyard to take command of the gate. She watched him, and then looked past him to the broken cistern midway to the keep, the mouth of the tunnel to the sea. There was fighting there too, wolf-men who had climbed up from the water. Lycanthropes were inside the walls. So that was that.

From down below she could hear the sound of the battering ram, a hollow pounding on the old, uncertain timbers.

The rain fell. Amaranth wiped the water from her eyes, then looked up at the sky. All of her women had run down to join the fight at the gate. She was alone on the battlements, so she was surprised to see movement along the wall to her left. A small figure walked along the outside edge of the parapet, balancing precariously over the abyss, her little arms spread wide. She raised her head, and when she saw Amaranth she

smiled, clapped her hands, and made a mincing, dancing series of steps until she stood above her, a little girl in a green dress, her long hair tangled, her lips cracked and chapped, and she was missing some teeth.

"Hey, you," the little girl said. She was completely dry. Now she turned an ungainly pirouette and peered over the edge, where Malar and his beasts smashed at the gate. She wrinkled her snotty nose. "I don't like him. I only had one priestess on this entire stupid island, and he killed her. The only one in generations, and he

chopped her up into little pieces." She turned back to look at Amaranth and closed one eye. "Shall I chase him away?"

"Please."

"I don't like him," repeated the goddess. "He makes a big mess." She squinted, then picked a ball of snot out of her nose, examined it briefly, and flicked it over the parapet. "You know," she said, as if conversationally, "your walls are coming down."

Amaranth said nothing.

"It is not my will," continued the goddess, "that they should stand."

There was screaming from the

courtyard. The postern was broken open, and there were wolf-men in the courtyard. They had found the doors to the hall where the Northlander women had taken refuge. From where she stood, Amaranth could see neither the genasi nor Captain Lukas, though there was still resistance down below, she knew. There would always be resistance.

There was a hollow booming underneath her feet where the gate was giving way. The stones shuddered from the impact of the ram. But then Amaranth could feel a different kind of rhythm deeper

and lower down, as if the crashing of the timbers formed the surface echo of something more profound, another gate deep under the earth.

"Look," Chauntea said, and pointed her dirty little nail-chewed finger. To the east, beyond the beast-strewn meadow that led down to the shore, Amaranth could see a black line on the horizon under the milky dawn light, as if somehow she could see the bluffs of Oman Island fifty miles away across the strait, and they were moving toward her, a wall of water, she saw now. At the same time she could feel the cause of the

great wave, a low trembling inside the earth, and as she watched, she saw the topmost tower of the wrecked keep, high on its stone pinnacle, crack and collapse.

"It's time for you to go home," suggested the goddess. "There's no place for you here, you and the Northlanders. This is the land of the Black Blood."

"I've tried to go home," murmured Amaranth.

"Try again. East of Karador, by the water, there's a sacred grove of trees where the women pray to the Earthmother. In the evenings they pray to me, hoping you come back.

When the light of the setting sun touches the water, they catch it in their bowls and pour it out again. It's a libation, silly! They have a good reason to pray. Your sister is a tyrant. Your nephew is a monster. That's the sad truth."

"I've wanted to. But I can't find a way."

"You'll find it," consoled the goddess. "Not land, not sea, not air. Find your boy and go. Follow the signs to the gateway in the Breasal Swamp. It will bring you home. Bring the boy with you. Tell you the truth," she said, "and hope to die. He's cute."

“He’s not—”

But the little girl laughed and stuck her tongue out, as if to say, “I saw you.”

Amaranth turned back toward the sea. The battering ram had stopped its noise. Everything was quiet on the battlements, partly because she and the goddess stood as if in the silent epicenter of chaos, and partly because for a moment the lycanthropes had ceased their fighting, and all of them drew breath and looked around. The world itself was drawing breath. Amaranth watched the great wave suck the sea away from the beach,

revealing weedy boulders and sunken wrecks—there had been a battle here in the old days, between the fleets of the Northlanders and the Ffolk.

Then the wave broke, and lost its height, and surged ashore over the low bluffs, across the meadows, over the causeway and beyond, until it flowed into the ditch itself, and broke against the walls of Caer Moray. When it pulled back, Amaranth could see Malar the Great in the shape of a black alligator, tumbling over the fields toward the shore.

"Goodbye," Chauntea said.

Turning on the parapet, stretching out her arms, she danced back the way she had come, sometimes hopping on one foot. Whether it was from the force of her steps, or from the water churning underneath her, just behind her the wall cracked and slid down into the ditch—Amaranth wasn't watching. The chaos closed around her now. She picked her sword up from her feet and ran down the steps into the courtyard where the fighting was over, the armies were dispersing, whatever remnants could pull themselves away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Captain Rurik

"Kill him," Suka said, scratching her nose.

They stood outside the prison in Caer Corwell. Poke had dragged the leShay prince over the cobblestones, away from the blank wall and down the street. Now they paused to draw breath and consider the next step, Marabaldia, the gnome, the cyclops, and the pig. It was early evening, and there was a mist over the port.

No one followed them. For a moment, Prince Araithe seemed almost human in his vulnerability, whimpering with shock, his velvet cap awry, his eyes closed, his gray hair stringy and unkempt, his shirtsleeve ripped and bloody. He lay on his back. Poke had him below his elbow. His gloves were gone. Marabaldia stood above him in her old blue dress, holding the iron bar she had taken from her cell. In this light her eyes shone in different colors.

"Kill him," repeated Suka. "You know that's what he would have done," which didn't make much

sense—she meant it's what he would have done to them, was, in fact, trying to do—whatever. She looked up at Marabaldia, and for a moment before she turned away in self-defense she caught a glimpse of herself in the giantess's right eye, as if in a mirror.

With an odd sense of distance she saw herself as others saw her, a tiny figure with an upturned, freckled nose and short pink hair, grinning with nervousness and gesticulating like a monkey, terminally unheroic, and the piercings and tattoos didn't help, seemed an obvious

overcompensation, though she'd never thought of them that way.

"You know if we don't kill him, he will hunt us down," she grumbled, even her voice unfamiliar. It didn't surprise her when Marabaldia disagreed with her. How could anyone agree with anything she said?

"And are we bound by what our enemies do?" said the giantess, her voice gentle and pure, her skin a regal purple in the failing light. "Isn't it always better to show mercy, as bright Selûne has commanded us? Perhaps instead of copying the vices of our worst

enemies, we should learn from them. Treachery and murder have brought this person low."

Suka looked away. Once delivered from the effect of Marabaldia's evil eye, she heard the wisdom of her own advice, which was obvious enough to convince even a pig, she observed. Poke had broken the prince's forearm, snapped the bone between her enormous molars, but the strange thing was, he didn't even seem to notice the pain but just lay on his back in the dust, helpless, Poke's cloven foot in the middle of his chest. It was as if his

spirit had already left his body. She wagged her head from side to side, pulling at the joint until the arm was almost severed, while at the same time she began her transformation to her human shape, climbing up the ladder gratefully yet painfully, Suka imagined, until she let the prince's arm drop from her mouth and stepped away from him, a fleshy, pink-skinned woman with a crest of yellow hair. She spat a long splinter of bone out of her mouth, then raised her hand to wipe the blood from her lips. Suka could see the climbing rose tattoo under her

arm.

"Come this way," she grunted softly. "I've been here before."

And so what else was there to do? She took off running up the street away from the port, climbing the terraces below the castle's ruined walls. Suka put her knife back in her belt, picked up her crossbow, and ran off after her, cursing freely. They were sentimental, moralizing fools, but it was possible also that they had already lost their chance, that whatever rag or shard of Prince Araithe they'd had under their hands was no longer where his spirit lived.

Marabaldia followed more slowly, her iron bar in her right hand. The cyclops came last of all, head bowed, unsteady on his feet, which Suka thought might be a matter of the terrible depth perception endemic in his kind, until she saw he had been hurt. Now, in the better light, as she looked back she realized he was smaller than she'd thought inside the prison, smaller than Marabaldia, a yellow-haired, muscular fellow, barefoot and bare-chested, except for crossed leather bands over his shoulders. He was bleeding freely from a wound in his

side. He had lost his axe.

"Where are we going?" Suka gasped as they hurried up the stone steps into the poorer neighborhoods of the abandoned city.

The large civic buildings near the port had given way to what had once been residential structures, their doors and windows black and open, their roofs often collapsed. In the cool, open air, her brain was working better, though she was still making the transition between escaping from something—drow, Araithe, certain death—and running toward something, into the

future, but what, exactly? Maybe it was indicative of a sad lack of imagination that she was running after a pig, asking it for directions. On the other hand, presumably the pig wanted to find its way back to Moray, where Lukas and the boys were chasing after the ginger slut—how happy she would be to see them again! She'd never liked or felt comfortable around women, or females of any kind. She'd hated Marikke, the only fly in the ointment of their little band, sanctimonious, like all religion freaks, but maybe she had died or something—priests and priestesses

were always among the first to go, evidence of their misplaced loyalty to the capricious gods.

"Into the trees," said Poke, answering her question.

The city of Caer Corwell was a small one, built mostly on a hill above the firth. Suka and Poke stopped to draw breath in an open space, a vacant lot choked with dry weeds and refuse, and waited for the others to catch up. Suka turned toward the north, raising her nose into the cool evening wind, opening her senses to the breath of freedom. Above them she could see the highland ridge as it curled

away northwest of them toward the places where she'd grown up, along the southern edge of Myrloch Vale. Instinctively she looked to the other direction, beyond a gap in the Corwell wall, northeast toward Synnoria and Cambro and eventually Winterglen, seventy, eighty miles away—is that where they were going? To bring Marabaldia back home? Surely that was not her fight.

"Why?" she said, a big question that had always bothered her.

She watched the fomorian and her cyclops labor slowly up the slope—it must be difficult being so

big. It must be difficult to move or run if you've been locked in a cell for ten years. With all her heart Suka missed her little band of misfits, now that she was running away from the only place they knew to look for her. This jolly collection of ancient ancestral enemies was no substitute. But should she leave them, strike out on her own? Find her way east to the Ffolk settlements along the coast and then to Alaron, as she had many years before? But Lukas would be looking for her here. He had promised.

But then Marabaldia appeared

out of the end of the street, and joined them in the empty lot, her face agonized and frightened. “Drow,” she said, which was a relief, in a way, because it delayed thinking. And it was true: Dark figures massed in the shadows below them, gathering among the ruined houses. Suka and the pig had stopped just inside the old city wall, much of which had been cannibalized for building material even before the fey came to Gwynneth. But the gate was intact, and the road out of it. A few arrows stuck into the rubble around them, and then they were off

again, as quickly as they could, out the gate into the world, an expanse of fallow land that had once been wheat fields, and a mile or so in the distance, visible just as a smear of purple shadow in the failing light, the woodlands underneath the high, chalk-white ridge, its eastern slopes still lit by the setting sun.

But there were drow there, too. In the middle of the flat, open, shelterless, bare ground, at a crossroads marked by a stone obelisk, Marabaldia stopped, planted her iron bar, and the others gathered around her. The

cyclops was so tired and hurt that he could scarcely stand. He'd pressed his palm into his side, and blood seeped between his fingers. With her left hand, Marabaldia seized hold of his jaw and turned his face until his single eye raised toward her, and she could look down on him with all the force of her own eye. Again it seemed to Suka that she could see or at least imagine a beam of light pass between them, and she wondered what it could mean—a last farewell, an exchange of information, psychic healing? Because they were in trouble,

obviously. The drow had caught them in a spider's web. They had come out from the dark woods, and out from the shadow of the wall, and had spread into the fields at either side.

Marabaldia looked up. "Friends," she said, "let us prepare to do our duty here. And if the day should go against us, let our final consolation be that we have borne ourselves according to the highest standards of our character. A bold death is a treasure that cannot be bought or sold. As for myself—Poke, you, and Suka, and you, Borgol—I will always be grateful …"

Suka thought: What, cyclopses have names? And in this case “always” looked to be about seven minutes. The drow weren’t wasting their arrows, but moved steadily toward them along each of the four roads and also through the dried brambles of the fields. Nevertheless she found herself inspired almost against her will, as she unhooked the crossbow from her back and wound it up. She risked a smile at the cyclops, who was crouched so low his head was scarcely a foot higher than her own—Borgol, are you kidding me? What kind of a stupid name was that?

“How’s it going?” she muttered, planting her back foot and taking aim at one of the drow captains who sauntered insolently up the road, the last of the light in her white hair. Oh, well. At least she didn’t have to make any decisions. And Marabaldia had saved her life back in the prison. Suka owed her something, whatever little she had.

The cyclops had a big face, heavy and massive as if hacked from wood, but not unpleasant, his big lips and brows. And he spoke in a low voice, a rhythmic chanting in a language she didn’t think she recognized, until she did. As the

shadows darkened, she found it speaking to her from the depths of forgotten memory, a prayer out of the Underdark, in the first language of the fey.

Then she heard screaming in the harsh voices of the drow. A stroke of light split the darkness north of them, toward the wood, and the dark elves scattered from the road. Horsemen were there, a troop of horsemen. But Suka saw the captain on the west road raise her black sword, and she shot at her and missed, hitting another behind her shoulder. Then the drow were on them, and it was hard for them

to use their bows in such close quarters. Suka had her knife out, and she stabbed a fellow through his black leather armor into his belly, and felt the blood slide over her hand. The horsemen were around them, driving the drow back, and a man reached down and grabbed her by the back of her leather shirt, and lifted her over the saddle bow—she couldn't tell what kind of man he was. Someone held onto her foot, and she kicked away hard, while at the same time she watched Poke clamber up onto an enormous Cambro draft horse, twenty hands high—now that's

something you don't see every day, she thought, a pig riding a horse, and not doing it well, which was a relief. Suka wasn't much of a rider herself.

But Borgol was dead. He had stood up to protect his mistress from the arrows, and had taken two in the chest. The light behind his eye flickered and went out. Marabaldia lowered him to the ground. The horsemen raged around them, keeping the drow at bay, but only for a time because their numbers were so great. Marabaldia stood over him, and it was only when he was gone that

she stepped up into the stirrup and swung her leg over the great horse, who quailed under her weight. She pulled her dress up around her thighs and shook her bridle free; she knew how to ride. She held the iron bar above her head. And with her hair flowing in the wind she kicked her horse up the road toward the black trees.

Suka had already reached them. The boughs hung close overhead. Feeling her indignity, she squirmed around onto her back, so that she could see her rescuer, a human being by the look of him, black-bearded, dressed in chain mail and

wearing a steel cap. He had an axe in one hand, and with the other he held onto the collar of her shirt. The horse galloped with no need of direction, a beautiful flaxen-haired creature who now broke away from the dirt road under the trees, following the others through the sylvan glades, between the cedar trees, up the slope into the hills. Sharp small branches whipped at Suka's legs as they passed, and whipped at her arms.

But they didn't go far. Suka reckoned they were scarcely more than a mile into the trees when the horse paused at the crest of a low

ridge, then walked his horse downhill into a bowl-shaped dell where a fire already burned. Not a bonfire, but instead a soft, cool radiance that rose up as if from a hole in the ground. Other riders had dismounted, and the Northlander pirate—for that was what he was—released his hold on the back of Suka's shirt, and she scrambled down.

As was her habit, she tried to salve with bellicosity her injured pride. Swearing and muttering, she put herself in order, pulling her clothes down over her stomach, running her fingers through her

hair, dusting herself off, taking inventory—she had lost her crossbow but retained her knife and several other small weapons. And when her rescuer climbed down out of his saddle and busied himself with his horse, checking her for wounds, rubbing her neck, murmuring appreciation, Suka accosted him, not with recriminations, which would have been absurd, since he had saved her life, but with complaints: “Are we safe here? They’ll have us surrounded in half an hour. They can see the glow—,” et cetera, et cetera, until the Northlander held

up his hand.

"Peace," said someone else, still on horseback. "They won't come here." And when she turned her rage on him, he explained: "This is a fierce wood since the Spellplague and the fall of Caer Corwell—a wild wood. Two hundred years ago the Kendricks ripped these groves up by the roots, but they've grown back. The dark elves won't risk it. Not on foot."

This wasn't quite the reassurance Suka had been looking for. The rider must have seen a question in her face. "We'll be all right," he grunted. "This is a haven for my

kind, but we won't stay past dawn."

He raised the visor of his cap, and Suka saw with surprise that he was an eladrin, with sharp, feminine features and bright eyes that seemed to pick up a reflected radiance from the fire. He took off his cap, revealing his gray and yellow hair, which he shook free around his face. He was dressed in the scaled armor of his kind, skillfully worked and decorated with damasked lines of gold.

Marabaldia, whose horse was slower and more heavily burdened, now appeared at the top of the

slope.

"Princess," said the eladrin, making a gesture with his arm, "I am honored to welcome you. I see the reports of your beauty are justified, and if anything fail to express the truth. I did not expect, though, such courage and such grace …" all of which seemed a little much to Suka, a little over the top, since, personal virtues aside, Marabaldia was nine feet tall if she was an inch, with purple skin, straw-colored hair, and widely mismatched eyes. But maybe there was something about the magic light in the little dell, because as

the giantess swung her leg over her horse's rump and stepped down from the stirrup—the great draft horse, meanwhile, seemed suddenly buoyant, suddenly inflated because of the reduced weight—Suka was able to imagine what the eladrin was talking about. In the kind radiance the giantess's features seemed less bloated and grotesque, and her voice, always her best quality, sounded positively angelic when she said, "Captain, I will not forget what you and your brave men have done tonight. You have my thanks. You know my name and some of my history, but I

confess that I am ignorant of yours. And I wonder, do you have something else for me to wear?”

The light, also, was kind to the blue dress, which, though tattered and ripped, Suka now confirmed to be of costly fabric, some type of iridescent velvet, with a woven pattern that had been invisible before.

“In the Common tongue,” said the eladrin, “my name is Mindarion, warden of Synnoria, and I am at your service. This is my friend and companion, Captain Rurik of Winterglen.”

Other soldiers milled around,

both eladrin and Northlanders. Poke's horse had arrived with the last stragglers, and she needed help in her dismount. She rolled out of the saddle and sprawled heavily onto the ground. Her own clothes, which she'd taken from the Ffolk guards in Corwell prison, had scarcely survived her transformation and return to human shape, but someone had thrown a cloak over her, which she had wrapped around her body. Aghast, Suka looked into her face, examining the mixture of human and porcine features, and at the same time she was thinking how

astonishing it was to hear an eladrin of high rank identify a man as his friend—what did the word mean to him? To both of them? And in this new world of possibilities, was it conceivable that her own friends and companions were a fomorian princess and a lycanthrope? She felt lightheaded, sick.

"And yes," continued Mindarion. "I believe we can find some more suitable clothes."

The horses had been drawn away to the other side of the fire. Suka noticed that no one was attempting to strip them of their saddles or

bridles, and she drew a small conclusion as she turned to face the Northlander, a famous man, after all, and the reason she had come to Gwynneth Island in the *Sphinx*, with Aldon Kendrick and the others, carrying an important letter (yeah, right) from King Derid. “I have a message for you,” she said.

He raised his big eyebrows.

“The message is—” she coughed into her hand portentously—“that the leShay can kiss my scrawny ass.”

She watched him laugh. Some of his teeth were false, made of steel, and a livid scar ran over his lips

and down into his beard.

"Miss," said Mindarion gravely. "I hope, believe, and pray we can accommodate you, at some time in the future."

But in the meantime, there was much that Suka didn't understand. Later, she, Poke, and Marabaldia sat on campstools near the fire, eating bowls of actual food for the first time (in the princess's case) in many years. Suka couldn't think about that. Her own hunger was fierce enough, and she didn't even know what she was eating, nor did she care. Poke and Marabaldia had found new clothes more

appropriate for traveling. Rurik and Mindarion sat with them while their soldiers milled around, a dozen or so, not more. Suka hoped they were right about the drow, and for some reason found herself picturing the captain she had seen strolling toward her up the road, a smile on her black lips, her black sword held nonchalantly to the side. She did not look to be afraid of any fey creatures in the woods or from the trackless fens, whether night hags or shadow hounds or displacer beasts or owlbears. Suka even wondered, if she were Prince Araithe, if she might allow a few

unimportant prisoners to be rescued, if it meant discovering the whereabouts of other more powerful enemies outside Synnoria, which was, of course, impregnable. But perhaps Mindarion had hidden them somehow, wrapped them in an incantation so the light from their fire wouldn't spill out of their little dell. Certainly he looked at ease, though he didn't smile. Nor did he eat, but drank a horn of water, sniffing it sometimes as if it were fragrant wine.

"Do you have any wine?" she asked, and Rurik laughed again.

"I like you," he said, "but we

have things to discuss. Tell me about King Derid's message."

She did, while he scratched his beard. "It worries me," he said, "that Ordalf has any communication with spies in King Derid's court, even if it's not with the king himself. Of course I have been hoping for his support in our war. But he's afraid."

"Tell me about the drow," said Marabaldia. Startled, Suka looked at her, avoiding any glance at her right eye. Even so, it was hard to see any trace of the hunched figure in her cell, weeping over the various iterations of *Oh, Father*

Dear. For the first time Suka imagined something else had happened when the giantess had lost her mask, some internal sharpening of perception.

Mindarion spoke. “That is who lives in Citadel Umbra now. That is who does Prince Araithe’s bidding. The eladrin have fled from there, and everyone but the dark elves. He must have made some kind of pact, promised them something, but I do not know what.”

Marabaldia scarcely let him finish. “Tell me why he held me prisoner. And what is his interest in my friend,” she said, meaning

Poke, who sat forward on her stool, her clumsy hands in her lap, her yellow hair over her face.

Suka noticed that Mindarion answered only the second question. “He wants to find the Lady Amaranth,” he said. “His—aunt, if you’d like to call her that. The last of the leShays.”

“His mother wants to find her too,” offered Suka.

Rurik and Mindarion glanced at each other. “Yes, I suppose she does,” continued the eladrin. “But for different reasons. Her sister wants her dead. But her nephew wants her to bear his child.”

Yuck, Suka thought. Nobody spoke.

"To understand this, you have to understand the leShays," murmured Rurik, his voice low and hoarse. "They are old, older than him." He gestured toward the eladrin with his chin. "They are the root of all the fey, a long, skinny, endless little root, and they hoard their blood like gold. They don't share it. Ordalf's mother is dead now after many thousands of years. Princess Callia—Araithe murdered her, or had her murdered, a terrible crime. Because she bred outside the family after his grandfather died. He

wanted Amaranth to be his daughter and his heir. When she wasn't—well, you see."

Not exactly, Suka thought. Still no one spoke.

"Let me try to make it clearer," ventured Mindarion. "At one time there were several strands of the leShay, which they braided together in the Feywild. Now here, just the one. And they've had difficulties … stillborn babies, monstrous births, deformities that they've had strangled in their cradles. They are not … fertile. The last one was High Lady Ordalf's child, born ten years ago and lived

just a few days. It was following his death that the princess disappeared. Lady Ordalf herself nearly died from the delivery."

"And the father?" Suka asked.

"Can't you guess?" Rurik asked. "There's only the one. Ordalf's father is long gone, and she never had a brother."

"And … Araithe's father?"

Captain Rurik examined his big hands. Mindarion spoke: "… was the same as his grandfather. The leShays can't remember their own childhoods. Their own histories mean nothing to them. These generational differences mean

nothing—how could they, in a lifetime that stretches back before the first Ffolk came to Gwynneth Island? The emotions that they have, the feelings for one another, none of that can make any sense to us. The only thing to remember is that it is only the youngest who inherits. Always the youngest. High Lady Ordalf hates her sister because their mother married out of the leShays—my brother, actually, a Llewyrr knight of Synnoria, a simple eladrin, and a good man. Araithe hunted him down and killed him, and killed the princess too, his own grandmother,

when she spurned him. He wanted her for himself, wanted to marry her, if it helps you to think of it that way. And now he wants her younger daughter, too. He's already had the older one."

Nobody wanted to hear any more of this, Suka guessed. No one had a question to ask. But Mindarion continued with his answers: "Prince Araithe must have discovered that his mother had traced the Lady Amaranth to Moray Island. And he knew she would try to destroy her, because of her jealousy. She wants her own daughter. She wants to try again. But the prince is sick of her.

They are not … fertile together. That's why he came to find you," he said, meaning Poke.

Then he nodded toward Marabaldia. And when no one said anything, he continued, "And why he kept you hostage all these years. Is it not obvious? The eladrin are deserting him. There are a few thousand left in Karador, but more are leaving every day, joining us in Synnoria, in the mountains. He and his mother have an army of Ffolk slaves, and other creatures in their service. But if the Underdark rose against him, the fomorians and the rest … You have no love for the

drow."

"We have no love for the drow," the giantess repeated, blinking her great eye.

Mindarion turned his head away from her and said, "The fey are not like Northlanders, like men and women. We are too old to fight for causes, for freedom or what is right. We have no interest in such things." He smiled ruefully. "Prince Araithe is a tyrant, it is true. But we have not known happiness since we were young. We need someone to fight for, one of our kind. And so you must tell me ..." He looked toward Poke, and Suka

watched the ridges of his nostrils curl, as if he caught a faint, unpleasant odor. “Is it true? Is Lady Amaranth, my brother’s daughter, still living? Captain Rurik will send his boats to Moray Island.”

Dutifully, as if by rote, the lycanthrope recited a version of the story Suka had already heard too many times when they were prisoners, after ceremonial incantations of *Oh, Father Dear*, how a wounded hippogriff had come down like a winged star, had alighted on the beach near Caer Moray, and how the helpless child

on its back had been taken in and nurtured by a she-wolf, Deucala, as Amaranth had subsequently named her, the great matriarch of the northern shores, dead now. How the lost princess had grown up under her tutelage, and in time had brought incomparable gifts to the Northlander tribes, had liberated the Black Blood and the females of all species …

Suka stopped listening, and watched instead the play of emotions on Captain Rurik's face. She wondered why it was so damned important to him to find Mindarion's lost niece and put her

on the crystal throne in Karador. Surely he didn't need to hear this semimythic affirmation to send a boat to Moray, if that was what he wanted—he wasn't a fey, stuck at home forever, endlessly and mournfully circling the drain. He was a man, quick-thinking and resolute, like all his kind (well, most of them—some of them, at any rate) and now he turned his big rough face toward her, frowning, as if he guessed what she thought.

Breaking eye contact, she looked up at the sky. The stars shone brightly. Actually, not so brightly,

because of a new mist that had settled over the dell, small wisps of duller darkness that writhed and curled between her and the new moon. The evening wind had brought it, and brought also a strange smell. She stood up, rubbing her shoulders in the sudden chill. Captain Rurik cursed, kicked over his stool, reached for his axe, and the drow were upon them.

Not as many, perhaps. A small crew. Enough to overcome the sentinels that Rurik had posted down below. As Suka drew her knife, she looked up at the ridge on the far side of the dell, where it

rose into the wooded hills. The drow captain was there, illuminated in the soft blue light, the wind in her long white hair, a curious smile on her beautiful face as she raised her sword. In her other hand she carried a throwing spear, and Suka watched her cast it into the middle of the dell, into the glowing fire. As it fell, it also erupted into flame then exploded, scattering the radiance, extinguishing all light. And then they were caught in the noisome graveyard smell and the swirling black mist that seemed to stick to their skin, drawing them together

even as they moved to defend themselves.

Great, Suka thought, a drow magician, a priestess of disgusting Lolth, a darkwalker from the web between the worlds. But Mindarion also had some kind of power. A small new light had risen up from his clasped hands, a battle between elements that transcended the cold struggle underneath, a struggle that itself seemed less like a battle between mortal creatures than like something supernatural—the air was thick and hard to breathe, and so cold that it hurt the lungs. The horses screamed and bolted,

staggering away into the trees, some with their manes alight. And the men and the eladrin found themselves pressed together and constrained into the bottom of the dell, fighting enemies that seemed in one moment to be creatures of flesh and blood, and in the next made of smoke or spirit. Near Suka, an eladrin knight was down, his breast hacked to pieces, a hulking figure looming over him. But when she slashed at it her knife divided only air from darkness, mist from light. Men cursed—guttural oaths in the Northlander tongue. Above their heads

Mindarion's light had made a glowing roof or shelter, against which the burning shafts of the darkwalker—Suka could see her prowling the perimeter—crashed in explosive spasms, weakening it slowly until finally it caved and foundered, leaving them defenseless against the concussive blast. Suka crouched down with her arms around her head. Looking up, she caught a vague impression of Princess Marabaldia standing over her, bar upraised. Then one final explosion and she staggered and fell, knocking the gnome cold between her feet.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wolves

The Savage woke at dawn, curled up alone at the bottom of a ravine. For two days he had run from the stone city below Scourtop. During the day and while he was moving, he had not felt the cold, the loss of his shirt. During the night the wolf had kept him warm in the shelter of whatever small trees or bushes they could find. But last night it had rained, and he woke up with his teeth chattering.

He had flint and steel and he made a fire. After half an hour Eleuthra returned, the king's thighbone in her hand. She threw down a brace of fat red squirrels, which the Savage cut apart with his new sword. Its blade, astonishingly sharp, was slightly curved, forged in many layers of tempered, folded steel. A line of runes was etched into the edge, a geometric pattern whose meaning was forever lost.

Similar runes decorated the king's thighbone. The druid threw it carelessly into the rocks. She was dressed in her wolf skin and at that moment, in the dawn light, the

Savage found her intolerably beautiful—dark hair, high cheekbones, dark eyebrows, dark blue eyes. He imagined his awareness of her beauty had increased since he'd first seen her, doubled hour by hour. And he wondered if this feeling was connected to a change in the way she'd treated him since they'd left the crypt, with her ever-increasing anger.

She stood above him, a faraway look in her eyes. "I was on the mountaintop." She gestured vaguely. "I was in the thunderclouds. I looked behind us

at Malar's temple where the stones are wet with blood. They divided the priestess's body between the altar stones and burned the offerings. The Beastlord has come out to smell the morning air. He is sniffing at our trail."

She raised both hands to her hair and stretched her elbows back, a gesture he found painful, because it displayed her body's shape. "He hates you because of the creature you killed. And he hates you because of what you stole—because of your greed. Only gold has value to you. Only things, because you live so long. How could you have

any feelings for another mortal creature? I hate you too," she said, unnecessarily.

The pain in his forearm, where the dragon had bitten him, had abated. But he was afraid he had absorbed some kind of poison, something that made him lightheaded, weak. He had no strength to muster any kind of illusion, to mask the red slits in the centers of his eyes, to alter his complexion or else blunt his teeth. He had no strength to argue with her. He bent over the squirrel meat, cutting it into chunks.

"I was in the clouds," she said

again. “I saw a storm over Caer Moray, and then it moved off to the south and east. I felt the earth turn over and the battlements fall. Across the straits I saw a storm over Gwynneth Island and the fey. Nature itself rises up, and the Earthmother. In my lifetime I’ll see Karador sink into the lake and all the tunnels drowned. All of you will drown like maggots. Your bodies will rise to the surface of the water.”

He stared at her, chewing the raw meat. There was no reason to cook it, no reason to pretend. He rubbed his cold hands together and then,

as if he wanted to prove her right, he brought out the king's treasure piece by piece from his pockets, fingering the gold as if to warm himself. Already he had wound one of the rings into his yellow hair, and slipped some of the others onto his fingers and thumbs. The inner and outer surfaces were thick with meaningless runes. The metal was soft enough to take a fingerprint if you squeezed hard.

The circlet from the king's brow he slipped over his ears and down onto his shoulders. The druid was right: The gold was a source of comfort, though maybe not in the

way she thought. It felt warm to him, warmer than the sunshine that now broke through the clouds. And the jewels—he held the demon-eye ruby in his hand and felt the thrill of it against his palm, an electric charge.

"I thought you were different," she goaded him. She put her hands on her hips and drew the wolf skin up above her knees. "The goddess help me, I thought so."

All boys are used to this: The more she hated him, the more he wanted her. But it had been a long time since he'd felt so young. He closed his eyes, ashamed of his

response to her, and brought the jewel up to his lips.

"Malar will hunt you down," she said. "The goddess help me, he will hunt the both of us."

That same morning in Caer Moray, Lukas and Gaspar-shen stood in the ruins of the courtyard. The curtain wall had collapsed into the ditch along the landward side. The Northlander women were gone from the banquet hall, and many of the lycanthropes, male and female, had slunk away into the woods. The ones that were left wandered

over the fields, examining the wreckage cast up by the big wave and marking it—stumps, timber, and corpses—with their urine.

"I have heard," remarked Gaspar-shen, "of a man who owns a shop in Chasolné on the other side of the Shining Sea. He builds a confection made of creamed cheese and marzipan in a bed of puff pastry. He wraps it in silver foil and people eat it on the street. The pastry comes apart under your fingers. There are … pistachios involved."

"I'd like to eat one of those," Lukas said. That morning there was

nothing to eat in Caer Moray.

"I am not sure about that. But I would like to see the face of the man who could invent such a thing," continued the genasi. "I would like to walk the streets that smelled of such a thing. I believe we are talking about a town made of wooden houses, with long shaded galleries along the street and slatted blinds against the sun. The town smells like old dust, and oblique sunlight, and pistachios."

All this, Lukas thought, meant that his friend was eager to be gone. And he also had spent as much time as he needed in this

mournful place, full of carrion. Lycanthropes, dead, were no different from ordinary animals. Overhead, the air was full of crows.

They stood inside the fallen gate. Both had been scratched and bitten in the fight, though their wounds had scabbed over. Hurt and weary, Lukas sank down on broken stone, the remnant of a cornice, now sunk deep into the ground.

“We should find our friends,” he said. “Kip and Marikke, and the swordmage. I had hoped the Beastlord would bring them here. But I think he has many incarnations.”

“And … the gnome?” The genasi’s high, airless voice held no expression.

Lukas said, “Ever since I looked back from Kork Head and saw the signal fire I’ve feared the worst.

“These people are liars,” he continued, meaning the commissar in King Derid’s court who had sent them to Gwynneth Island, and then more particularly the leShay queen.

“They play with us like checkers,” he murmured, his words sounding weak and carping even to himself. When was it ever different between rich and poor, long- and short-lived, strong and frail?

Outside the gate a crow perched on the head of a fallen bull, part of a team that had brought up the ram. The crow pecked at the animal's eye.

"I have heard," said Gaspar-shen, "that in Chasolné there were no kings and queens. The citizens elected a guild to administer the town. There was an official to maintain the pistachio supply, and one for marzipan, and one for dough. A person could have had his own shop in the street of filled pastry. Bribes and corruption were unheard of."

Gaspar-shen's tiny lips were

incapable of smiling. But the energy lines under his skin glowed in unusual colors—peach and cherry-red—when he was talking horseshit, like now. No one knew what kind of government they had in Chasolné. The town was just a word, too far away to have a meaning.

"In order to travel there," the genasi murmured, "it would be best to have a boat."

"Yes," sighed Lukas. "It would be best to have a boat."

"In Chasolné there was a process in which a piece of hollow chocolate or else sometimes in

other recipes a piece of wood was set on fire and then entirely submerged in brine. In both cases it is called a ‘Sphinx.’ ”

“It sounds delicious.”

“It is not. No one thinks so. Especially not me.” And then after a moment: “This wave that came last night was a beautiful thing. A very, very beautiful thing. Now it is gone.”

In the years Lukas had known him, this was as close as his friend had come to a reproach. “We will find the others,” Lukas said. “Then we will return to Gwynneth Island, to Caer Corwell.” Like many

people who take on the role of leader, he was at his most definitive when he was most unsure.

"And … the Lady Amaranth?" said Gaspar-shen.

A voice came from behind them: "What about her?" The lady, hair still wet and disheveled, was climbing down a slope of gravel from the keep, surrounded by a pack of wolves. She smiled at Gaspar-shen, but didn't even glance at Captain Lukas, perched on the fallen chunk of cornice. "These are my sisters," she explained. "Daughters of the great

Deucala, who took me in when I was starving—and my brother also." She indicated a burly, reddish male, who slunk down to lift his leg against the stone gatepost. "For years he's been living beyond our walls, bringing news to us." Now that her kingdom was destroyed, she sounded more like a queen or a ruler than she had before. "This is Lightfoot and this is Bay," she said, introducing two of the four females. They all looked identical to Lukas, especially when they snarled at him in greeting, and raised the frosted hackles between their shoulder blades.

“Captain,” Amaranth continued, “I wanted to thank you for your bravery first of all.” She stared at Gaspar-shen as she said this, while Lukas examined the soil between his boots. Still he was aware of the play of colors through his friend’s energy lines, the plum color that suggested his discomfort.

“I have spoken to the wolves,” said Amaranth. “I told them about something I saw last night in the middle of the earthquake when the walls came down. I saw someone who told me something—I will go with you to Karador. That’s where I was young, and as the youngest of

my family, I have a power there. I will speak to my half sister, and she will release your friend from prison as she promised you. I do not believe she would ever harm me, and my sister's son will also welcome me home. If it is necessary, he will intercede, if for some reason I cannot understand I have offended her. He was kind to me when I was young, when he would put me on his knee and kiss me, and tell me that he loved me. And I would play with his gray hair, and marvel that he was my nephew. But surely that will give me power over him, the power to

do good. I believe my country needs me to make peace—a final peace between the Ffolk, the Northlanders, and the fey. Nor can I accomplish that from here, where I have become an irritant. Captain, I am at your service, and I will help you if you help me. With my sister and my nephew I have a bond of blood that cannot be broken, and I will reward you—all of you."

All this was to Gaspar-shen. "How much?" he said, which Lukas thought was a kind of a joke, though it was hard to tell. If he was right, then it was a joke that flew

straight over Lady Amaranth, who looked up at the genasi, after her bold and noble peroration, with a confused expression on her face.

"I want my friend to negotiate for me," Lukas said. After the carnage and uncertainty of the night before, the day had turned out bright, a warm sun and a blue sky streaked with horse-tail clouds. He looked up at Amaranth, wondering briefly if he should have stood when she approached, and that was why she wouldn't talk to him—a breach of protocol. But he was tired and filthy, and he hadn't slept. He had laid his sword upright

against the stones, and he reached for it as he rose to his feet. The wolves sniffed at him and growled. Amaranth didn't look at him. She glanced away and blushed. Because her skin was so pale, he could see the color move over her cheeks.

"I'm depending on you," she murmured, which touched him.

Later, when he'd made his preparations to depart, he knocked on the door of her room in the old keep, where she was talking to the wolves. At Caer Moray he had seen many lycanthropes whose human guise and form might have been close enough to fool him if the light

were bad, or if he hadn't been paying attention, or if he hadn't already known the truth. Performing human tasks, huddled in their homespun clothes—these wolves weren't like that. They had made no effort to be something they were not. For one thing, they were naked, covered with hair, and their body language, also, was more bestial than human, the way they scratched themselves, sniffed and licked at each other, wrinkled their noses, and bared their gleaming teeth. Lukas wondered if they knew how to sweat, because their mouths were always open,

their tongues extended, their lips damp.

Even when the genasi wasn't with him, at first it was hard for Amaranth to look at him. Lukas assumed this was because of what had happened on the ramparts when Malar the Beastlord hammered on the gate. He resolved not to speak of it, even though it was hard to see her without remembering that he had touched her, kissed her on her eyes and cheeks and lips, not long ago. But he was sure that Bay and Lightfoot and the rest would rip him into little pieces if he mentioned

anything like that. He wondered if they could even smell his thoughts on the subject, the suspicious way they looked at him and licked their teeth.

"Lady," he said, "I will do what you request. But I must ask you to consider: You have two families of wolves, but these are like lambs compared to your family on Gwynneth Island."

At these words the lycanthropes surrounded him in a rough circle. One of them, the largest female, had stared at her until she dropped her eyes.

"You escaped here with your

life," he said. "Nothing has changed in ten years. I will return to Caer Corwell for my friend's sake. But after that I could take you somewhere else, to Alaron, perhaps."

She looked at him for the first time that day, in the light. "The fey must go where the fey are wanted," she said. "Where they are … tolerated. You are not the only one who has a duty to perform."

She glanced out the window and continued, "I will leave this place to the daughters of Deucala. But Coal will come with us." She

indicated the male lycanthrope who squatted in a corner of the room. “Our way is neither land nor sea nor air. Captain, I understand we must search for your friends first of all. I know you are loyal to your friends—I honor that. Captain —” she looked back at him from the window, a streak of light across her face—“will you be my friend?”

“You were the one who told me about these things,” the Savage said. He held the ruby in his palm. “Now you blame me for taking them.”

“You’re a liar.”

But it was true. It was the wolf who had gone up on her hind legs to push the stone lid from the sarcophagus. But maybe the druid in her human shape couldn’t remember what the wolf had thought or done. Maybe she moved back and forth between two separate consciousnesses. Or else maybe that was what she pretended, for reasons of her own. Maybe even her hatred of him was a pretense. What had he done, that she should hate him so? He’d saved her life, after all. Maybe that’s what she couldn’t forgive.

Or else maybe it was in her nature to hate him for himself, regardless of what he said or did, the same way that it was in his nature to care for her, not for any reason. She stood above him with the sunlight behind her head, her body poised as if to leap at him, to strike him or else scratch him with her nails. She raised the king's thighbone onto her shoulder. It was carved and incised with letters, but also broken and gnawed, as if in her wolf's shape she had cracked it to suck out the ancient marrow. Her dark hair, blue eyes, chapped lips and cheeks. He squeezed the

ruby in his palm and felt the thrill of it, felt also the heaviness of the gold circlet around his neck, the throbbing in his forearm where the dragon had bit him. His head ached, and he felt sick, lovesick, he thought—he hadn't felt this way for many, many years. He had forgotten the sensation, the feeling of being separate from yourself, the feeling also of being simultaneously powerful and weak, clever and stupid, good and bad. Best of all, there was no reason to hide himself from this woman. He could be himself, because she knew the worst about him. Perhaps soon

he would tell her his real name.

"What do you see?" he asked.

She glowered down at him. "They are preparing for the hunt. The dogs go first and then the pigs. The rest will follow. Malar the Beastlord …"

As she spoke, the Savage found himself not so much listening to her as watching the scene that she described as if through her eyes. Or as if the world around him—the rocks, the dry ravine, the little fire of twigs, the gorse bushes, the mossy freshet with a single trickle of water—all had disappeared, or else receded into the background of

something else, a vision that lingered halfway between reality and illusion, like painted images on a transparent screen—images that moved.

He saw the boy Kip standing erect between two collapsed stone pillars, the black kitten in his hands. He raised it up above the pack, who swerved and turned around his boots. The little shifter grinned and licked his lips, his animal nature evident in his hooked nails and wicked teeth, more evident than the Savage had ever seen. And his hair, which previously had ranged from white

to calico, depending on his mood, was dark now, black as the kitten who hung suspended from its nape. With a sudden gesture he dashed it onto the rocks so that it disappeared into the swirl of beasts—it was so vivid, the Savage cried out.

But this was surely what love was, this ability to communicate, to see something through your beloved's senses. How long had it been since he'd felt this way? Forty, fifty years? When Eleuthra's mother was a little girl, perhaps, he had known someone in Baldur's Gate, a girl with squinting eyes

whose face he could now scarcely bring to mind. But he had felt … in tune with her, in harmony. Like now.

He replaced the jewel in his pocket. “I’m the one he’s searching for,” he said, getting to his feet, rubbing the grease from his hands, the squirrel queasy in his stomach. “You could go free. Run away to safety under his nose. North of here. Down to the coast.” In her beast’s shape, he thought. And he would let her go, because he loved her.

She wrinkled her nose. “I want to be there for the kill,” she said.

“When the dogs rip you apart.”

He shuddered, and a thrill went through him. She didn’t mean it. How could she mean it? The night before she had curled up next to him, and he’d felt the warmth of her hairy body. When he woke in the middle of the night, he’d found new scratches on his shoulders and his ribs.

“You ought to save yourself,” he persisted. “Run down to the Northlander villages. They will take you in.”

She looked at him as if he were insane. “I’ll stay with you,” she said. “They’ll track you with my

scent.”

What was this buzzing in his head? Was this love? It had been so long. These human women had so much juice in them. Not like the long-lived fey. When she was close to him he felt the heat rise from her body, invigorating him, making him crazy. Now she came down from the boulders above him and stood in front of him, close enough so he could feel her breath and smell her smell, which even in this body had the partial stink of a wild animal. She reached out and touched him underneath his arm, the angry cicatrices where the

doctors had maimed him, and yet left traces of his nature that could not ever be expunged. If he were a man, a human creature like her, a Ffolk warrior, or else a rich man in Caer Callidyrr, would she love him then? The Savage didn't think so.

"I'll follow you," she sneered.

Where? But he knew. And he imagined she must know too, that her reluctance or ignorance was for show, because if he had a vision of the place and a sense of how to get there, where could it come from, if not from her? He was a stranger here. But she had run through every forest dale and mountain

valley on Moray Island, or else seen them from the air through some druidic process he didn't understand. But now, in his mind's eye, he could see a place, a pool of water in a narrow wood, a grove of beech trees with silver trunks and copper-colored leaves turning over all at once as the wind caught them. And there was something in the water, a reflection that was different from the pattern of branches that spread over the surface, perhaps because of the soft breeze, or perhaps because there was something submerged there, some relic or portal of a simpler

time before the Spellplague had altered the secret pathways of the world.

Had he dreamed about the place? If so, had the dream come from her, because she had slept with her head against his breast? In the middle of the night she had regained her human shape, and he had embraced her, and she had resisted after her own fashion, and then stopped resisting, and then scratched him on his shoulders.

She turned her face to him. So close, she was. His hands were slick with squirrel grease. He felt the bulge of the jewel in his pocket. His

body was wracked with a dozen new sores and wounds. His head ached, and yet still he kept, as if in the center of his skull, the vision of the little pool in the beech grove.

"You must know the place," he said, his voice a dry croak. And when she said nothing he went on, "Tell me. Were there ever … fey creatures—drow or fomorians, dwarves or elves, or any monsters from the Underdark—here on Moray Island?"

He watched her teeth, the tip of her tongue, when she replied, "They annihilated them. One by one. Hunted them down. Scoured

the land. Cleansed it. After the Spellplague. One hundred years, almost. Good riddance."

"Where?" he said.

She laughed. "You tell me. You're the one with the … *telkiira* in his pocket. You're the one who stole it. The … loregem. Has it made you … stupid yet? I think it would kill me if I touched it. Has it told you want you wanted?"

"It told me," he said. And he bent down to kiss her, only she slapped his face away.

Ten hours later, Malar the

Beastlord paused in the same spot where the Savage and Eleuthra had camped. He examined the cold remnants of the fire. Almost on a whim he had maintained his human body, now the worse for wear. His feet were broken and bloody from the stones, his hands and arms ripped and pierced from following his pack of hunters through the brambles. They hadn't stopped since he had put them on the trail.

Jumping over a fallen tree, he had cut his leg to the bone, which caused him no pain. The boy, though, was in agony, which gave

the Beastlord a distracted kind of pleasure. Like all gods he was a simple creature, intent on his own gratification, on revenge on the world that had imprisoned him. That it had been Kip who'd freed him, he neither understood nor cared.

The boy was a prisoner inside his own body, as Malar had been inside his tomb, aware of time, able to feel, yet helpless. Occasionally, as he ran, Malar could hear the grunts and screams that came unbidden to his own lips —he loved the sound of them. He loved the sight of his bloody

footprints and handprints on the bare rocks. Cut and mauled in a dozen places, he squatted down and inhaled the fragrance of the campsite, which told him everything he needed. The pack was around him, tongues lolling out, panting or else lapping at the water from the little spring.

The quarry had turned. They were headed to the fens.

But he wanted to move faster. The boy was falling apart. He could proceed no longer. His small bones would break. With all his mind the boy prayed and begged for a relief to his suffering. He had

started up above, below Scourtop, at the moment the pack had fallen on Chauntea's priestess. When the dogs had pulled her body back and forth between them, and her joints had first given way, when her red arm and clutching hand had been separated from her shoulder, then he had started his prayer, a small, weak noise. Malar lived in the landscape of the beating heart, the pumping lungs, the wheezing bowels; he did not listen to prayers. He had no interest in what was happening in the boy's brain. But in time he found himself annoyed as the words, by dint of

repetition, finally impressed themselves on his divine consciousness—“Oh, my Mother, my Mother, my dear Mother …” A prayer to Chauntea, the great whore who had birthed the entire world. Or perhaps the priestess had been the boy’s actual or adopted mother. Who could understand these human things? But hour after hour the boy had rasped out variations of the same words, squeezed them out through his bleeding lips, his broken teeth. At the same time liquid had poured out of his eyes, obscuring the god’s sight—it was enough. Time to

make an end.

He let the prayer rise up. Because of the boy's pain it had become meaningless, a garbled shriek. But Malar had a command of his own. His hunters were in their simplest beast shape, but they could respond to human words. He called them back from the trail at the bottom of the ravine, where they were eager to set out again. In time, my beauties, in time. But first—

They moved around him in a circle. A person standing up above, or a bird flying overhead, would have seen a terrible thing: a child, hurt beyond endurance,

disappearing beneath the pack of wolves. Presently they drew back in a froth of red. The body, mauled past recognition, twitching still. Somehow, the corpse seemed larger than the child had been, as if clay or marl from the blood-saturated ground had coated it, or as if the wolves had added something of their own saliva and energy, without subtracting anything. And the corpse started to move, to split apart, revealing the larger animal underneath, the oily black pelt, the heavy claws. It ripped at what was left of the boy's shredded skin.

“Follow the signs,” said Lady Amaranth as she bent over the path. “That’s what she said.”

Embarrassed, almost shamefaced, she had revealed her conversation with the goddess. “I’m only telling you part of it. I know you must find your friends,” she said. “I accept that. But we can’t neglect the signs.”

“What signs?” asked Lukas, though he knew. He hated these signs. He had spent years perfecting the art of chasing enemies or game, turning every broken stick into a narrative, a vision of the past. In a muddy

puddle he could see, as if reflected in a mirror, an image of the creatures who had stepped that way—or so he told himself.

But these signs were like a joke. They'd found the first more than a mile from the coast, far beyond the wreckage from the wave. It was the body of a lycanthrope, hanging upside down from the bough of a white pine tree, not a mark on him. Rigor mortis had frozen his face into a horrifying rictus, a parody of a human smile. It had extended his right arm perpendicular to his body, had even extended his forefinger, which

had pointed uphill.

What kind of a narrative was that? Later on, three twigs had formed an arrow pointing along the ridge, though there wasn't any sign of the person that had made it, not so much as a bent blade of grass. Half a mile onward, a spider's web was soaked in dew, the outline of an arrow spun into its fabric.

Irritated, Lukas had kicked it from the stalks of grass that held it. Not that it mattered—for the first day the goddess had led them in the direction he would have chosen anyway, back to Kork Head, where

he could pick up Marikke's trail again. In his mind he held a vision of her and the boy held captive in a wooden cage, surrounded by a pack of howling lycanthropes. Marikke had her arms around the little shifter, protecting him. The Savage could take care of himself, at least in the ranger's imagination—he was never there, was always somewhere else.

But on the morning of the second day, the goddess had tried to lead them inward, away from the coastal swamp where he and Gaspar-shen had chosen the wrong way their first night on Moray

Island. And when he had reminded Amaranth of her promise—that they would look for his friends first of all—she had acquiesced. Still, she found it hard to look at him and spoke instead to the genasi, or to her brother, the wolf. She had allowed him to lead her toward Kork Head, but the goddess would have none of it. A couple of hours after they'd turned their backs on her last blaze of signs—a sequence of aspen trees whose leaves, though it was springtime, had already changed color—they discovered something new.

The wolf's name was Coal,

because of a black mark on his forehead. He ran down a rabbit, tore into its stomach, and there, packed inside the viscera, was a slip of ivory or a spur of bone that was not natural. The rabbit had been slow and sick. And the piece of bone had writing on it, miniature letters written in a bloody ink, a fey script that Amaranth and Lukas could decipher once Coal had brought it to them—the bone tasted awful, he indicated in a series of grunts.

Lukas held the piece of bone up to his eye. Here is what the letters said: “You are stupid. Is your friend

a freak? He is not from the real world.”

Impassive, the genasi scratched his arms, running his sharp nails along the lines that ran under his skin like glowing veins. His thin lips closed and opened, but he said nothing.

They continued southeast. In the afternoon Coal caught another animal, an otter on the bank of a small stream. The otter didn’t slip into the water, didn’t run away. His head and body were covered with tumors, and his little eyes, when Coal slit his belly, seemed to be pleading for release. A stink

rose from his insides, and a black fluid erupted from his body, as if it had been held under pressure by his skin. Coal jumped back, and the fluid splattered on the dry ground, leaving tiny marks in the same fey script: “Stupid, stupid.”

But they pressed on. As they neared the coast, they discovered a man sitting on a stump. He was ancient, asleep in the sunlight, his long white beard sunk to his chest, his long white hair struggling out from underneath his broad-brimmed hat. He was dressed in rags, and a walking stick lay beside him. At first Lukas imagined he too

had expired, and that they were supposed to open him up to find some new insulting signal from the Earthmother. He'd be damned if he did that. But there was no human habitation in fifty miles, and there was no reason for this man to be here, no way for him to get here to this glade in the woods with no path or road to follow.

They gathered around him, and he opened his bleary, ice-blue eyes. If he was frightened of the wolf, he didn't show it. He spoke in the Common tongue, his voice high and weak, "The goddess be praised. It is as she told me years ago, that

at the end I would see a genasi warrior, and a beautiful maiden, and a wild beast, and a stubborn fool. That would be the end of my life's passage, and the beginning of another journey that would take me far from here, beyond the Astral Sea. I was just a boy when I saw her in my mother's garden, and since then I have wandered my life away, searching for this moment. Here it is at last. And I was to give you a message … let me see. She made me repeat it over and over. Let me see …"

His voice trailed away. Cursing silently, Lukas bent down over

him, close enough to smell his foul breath, his teeth worn to carious stumps. “Let me see,” the old man mumbled. “It was so long ago. I saw here in the garden—she was just a little girl. A girl my own age, but I knew who she was. Since then I have looked for her all over the Sword Coast, and now all through these islands—not for me to follow in my father’s trade. Not for me to marry and have children. But all these years I have been searching for you four—at first I thought it would be a matter of months! A year at most. I did not guess it would consume my life—oh, I am

ready to see her again."

"The message," suggested Lukas grimly. The old man was pitiable, but he refused to pity him. This was all Chauntea's trick, an invention of the past few hours.

Amaranth, though, went down on her knees and took his hand. "Younger than you," he said, "and not as pretty. But I knew who she was. She made me repeat the message in a language I didn't understand—I hope I can remember it. I made a little song out of it and would repeat it to myself before I went to sleep."

Amaranth had tears in her eyes.

Lukas had an inclination to seize the old man's hat and pull it down over his eyes, or grab hold of his beard and wag his head from side to side. Lukas looked up at the genasi, who studied him impassively. The wolf sat on his haunches in the grass.

The old man closed his eyes, perhaps to compose himself for death, perhaps from the effort of remembering. When he spoke, it was in the primordial language of the gods: *"Idiot. You're a pig's ass. Your nose is like a big, fat turd, and your friend is ugly. You've taken the girl far afield, and for what? The*

daemonfey is going toward the same place. The loregem showed him, and you will meet him there. Tarkhaan's son, Bishtek Dlardrageth, whom you call the Savage. This is my desire and command. As for the other two, you must look no further, unless you search in the Nine Hells. They are dead. The priestess and the boy. Malar killed them."

Lukas stood up straight. "You're lying."

"Am not. If you don't believe me, wait for a few hours right where you are. You'll see Malar face to face. No, here," the old man continued, stretching out his clawlike hand.

“I’ll show you.”

But he didn’t. Instead he fell backward off the stump, legs in the air.

Amaranth bent over him. “Oh, dear,” she said.

“Leave him,” Lukas said.

“No. How can you be so heartless?” she said. She had been holding the old man’s hand, but now she pulled away in disgust, because the hand had come apart. She staggered up, and together they watched the old man’s body subside, as if through an instantaneous process of decomposition—his flesh was dry

as ash. After a moment Gaspar-shen drew his scimitar. With its hooked end he drew back the brim of the man's hat, showing the heap of powder that had been his skull, while clumps of his beard and hair drifted away.

"He was a liar," Lukas said again. "He didn't show me anything. And … the golden elf has no demon blood, I'd swear to it. You'd be able to see it in his face," he continued, remembering a morning when he had seen the Savage washing, seen the scars along his back, the sharp bones of his vertebrae almost like spines. "And

Marikke and Kip aren't dead. And … he didn't show me anything," he concluded, repeating himself lamely, while at the same time he could not but imagine the Beastlord in his panther's shape bounding toward them through the forest, surrounded by his pack of wolves.

After a moment's waiting while Lukas overcame his doubts, they turned back the way they'd come.

But it was the Savage and the wolf that first arrived at the place. They had crossed a river near an

abandoned town, the stone streets empty, the roofs caved in. But the bridge to the far bank was intact, an elegant single span, and on the other side a raised cobblestone track that led into the marsh—what had once been, the Savage guessed, irrigated agricultural land, now flooded and overgrown. But then they passed an earthen dike and the road gave out, and then they were in the marsh itself, and the way was difficult. Not for Eleuthra, who slid through the undergrowth and loped tirelessly ahead, but for the Savage, who slapped at the mosquitoes and stumbled through

the muck. In places he had to cut himself free with the king's sword, whose edge was supernaturally sharp. Nevertheless, the prickers caught at his bare skin, and sometimes he had to draw breath, lightheaded, close to tears.

The treasure he had taken from the tomb now weighed him down. But more than that—the gold was changing him in ways both good and bad.

At moments when he bent down in the undergrowth, his ears ringing and his head aching, he thought he would remove the rings from his pockets and his fingers

and his hair, remove the circlet from his neck, and drop them one by one into the noisome pools, saving the ruby for last. Or else he would scatter them in different directions, because he imagined that together they held between them a black power. At such moments they seemed too heavy to lift. But then he would remind himself how deeply he'd been hurt the past few days, the wound he'd taken to his chest in his fight with the angel, the dragon bite he'd taken to his forearm. Surely it was not just the effect of Marikke's healing that had enabled him to

survive these things, that had reknit his bones and strengthened his blood and healed his skin. Surely there was some spell or magic in the gold, an effect that he could feel when he passed it over his flesh, a force that drew out his malignancies like a lodestone drawing out an iron needle from the sand. Without that force, he never would have been able to struggle this far. In the night, after Eleuthra had left him, it was the gold that had kept him warm in the chill spring wind without a coat or even a shirt.

And the healing and the warmth

were not superficial, but deep inside, a reordering. Something long dispersed, now coming together. No wonder he was weak. He had read of demons in the Nine Hells who, if you ripped or cut away one of their limbs, would regrow it from the stump. But it took time to nurse or heal such a wound, and doubtless the demon would feel weak and nauseated—they did have feelings, didn't they? Perhaps he would find out.

And if not, perhaps that was just as well, because feelings were killing him, and he was sick of love. How many years had it been

since he had felt like this, felt this tingling on his skin, this new sensitivity to every stimulation? Over the decades he had been with many women, too many to count or remember. But now he was like a boy again, and the sensation was both pleasurable and painful, like the feeling of blood returning to a sleeping limb, or of awakening from a long dream. Now this was real. The wolf had disappeared into the marsh.

Up to his shins in the black water, he stood up straight and lifted his sword. The sun shone overhead through the slender trees,

the nets of vines. He clenched the demon-eye ruby in his left fist, and for a moment he thought of Marikke and Kip, for whose sake he had entered Malar's tomb, fought Malar's angel. Disoriented, head throbbing, he imagined their faces—red-cheeked Marikke, little Kip.

He imagined their faces, but he couldn't see them. Instead, he saw where he was going, a dry place in the middle of the marsh, a grove of beeches, and a circular pool of water. The jewel showed him. The loregem, Eleuthra had called it. It did not show him scenes from his

own memory. It did not show him what was happening elsewhere. It did not prophesize what was to come. Instead, he thought it was like a book of knowledge or of spells, a book that was in sympathy with himself, which was why his palm thrilled with electricity and why his head ached and throbbed. The gem knew what he wanted or what he needed. The gem showed him the way. The gem allowed him to follow the wolf, and in his mind's eye that morning he had seen her squat and piss on a fallen gatepost in the abandoned town beside the river. When he

arrived, the stone was dry, and he could read the inscription with the loregem's help. The soft flesh of the ruby thrilled under his fingers, and what had been indecipherable was now suddenly plain:

This is not the way forward.

And on the other side of the empty town—it was called Horsa, he realized suddenly—he had found traces of the wolf, a mound of scat. There was the bridge, the single span over the river. The wolf had ripped away the moss from a stone, revealing a column of runes carved in a language he had not known until that instant:

Do not follow me.

And beyond the causeway in the marsh where he was now—Breasal Marsh, he knew its name—he saw the wolf pause half a mile ahead, and cough or vomit up the fragments of bone from some unlucky small animal over a stone tablet just submerged. Inspired now, granted new energy despite his aching arms and head—the mental images, so clear, so sharp, were like an irritant, he thought, like shards of rock or glass inside his brain—he stumbled forward on Eleuthra's trail, looking also for the broken twigs or wet prints that

marked her passage. Again he thought he was reminded for the first time in many years what love felt like, a hidden, urgent communication, a synchronicity in his and the druid's vision of the world, a shared experience that was painful and disorienting, but also welcoming and addictive. He needed her, and the gem knew it, and knew other things as well, like the location of the black, circular pool in Breasal Marsh, a portal before the Spellplague, when all this country had been full of fey, dead now, annihilated, as Eleuthra had told him, the water and the

mud full of old and broken bones.

He splashed his way to the submerged tablet, tried to push the water away. Then he bent down, and with sensitive new fingers read the incised letters like a blind man:

You disgust me, ugly creature.

Do not chase me.

I will break your demon heart.

These words were like food to him, nourishment to keep him going. And so he came to the place in time, as the land rose and dried out in the center of the marsh, and the trees grew straight and big, silver, smooth-barked beeches with their leaves like the blades of little

knives, like the knife Marikke had left for him in the king's barrow below Scourtop, where he had broken his chains. And in the middle of a secret grove among the green, yellow, and copper-colored leaves, he found the pool, and the wolf waiting.

No, not the wolf. He saw Eleuthra in her human shape, the wolf skin and the king's thighbone cast upon the bank. But she was washing the muck and sweat off her body in the clean water, the clean light of the afternoon, clothed only in the dappled shadows as the leaves turned and stirred above her head.

Bent over in pain, leaning on his sword, he watched her from the deeper trees, watched the language of her gestures change as she became aware of his presence. Nor did she try to hide the treasures of her body, but instead displayed them more openly. The water was cold, he could tell by the gooseflesh on her arms, the color in her cheeks. But a woman does not hide herself from the gaze of an animal. And as he watched, he felt more and more distorted and deformed, as if from the inside out. This also the loregem was showing him as he squeezed it and it slipped and

throbbed between his fingers: a vision of himself, the barbed tail hanging down between his legs, the high leather wings arching from his back, the row of sharp spines between them—a monster, a daemonfey from House Dlardrageth itself. The loregem was showing him, and the king's gold was healing him, and the love knot with Eleuthra was binding him to her knowledge of what he was, awakening his nature, bringing it out of him, breaking down the walls that hid him from the world, cunningly constructed by his father and himself over many, many

years—that's what love is, isn't it?

She ran her hands through her wet hair, elbows back. Then she turned around and bent down to examine a cut along the outside of her thigh, a beaded line of blood. "Don't touch me," she said as he came close. But he didn't pay any attention.

"It's strange," she said later, turned away from him, lying on her side on the green turf. "I knew this place, but I didn't know how to find it. I thought I was following you, even though you were behind me."

He grunted.

“It’s a gate to something,” she continued. “That I know. But the door is closed. You cannot open it. And even if you could, I wouldn’t go inside it. Not with you.”

She turned over onto her back and pointed up at the sky. There were clouds overhead and as the Savage watched they gathered and combined into a knot of darkness overhead, which blocked the sun. And it began to rain, a soft, cleansing shower that drifted down, he suspected, onto themselves alone. The raindrops almost looked like flecks of gold, he thought, as they filtered down

through the leaves.

Then she turned toward him. “What is your name?” she asked. “Your real name?”

But he wouldn’t tell her. Later the shower dissipated as she fell asleep, lying naked on her wolf skin, while he looked for the gate. He laid his sword next to the sleeping girl but gathered up his other treasures, which he thought would help him. He held the loregem in his left hand. Without it he felt naked.

The pool was as round as a drain. He knew it wasn’t natural, a plug of water perhaps a dozen feet in

diameter, much smaller than he had thought when he had seen it in his mind. At first the slope was gentle, a circle of gray sand then it dropped away until the water was black at the center of the pool.

He walked around it on the circular strand, his head hurting. When he was with Eleuthra, near her, he felt better, healed, but now the pain was back. He felt swollen, as if some new growth inside his body were displacing the old, or as if his brain were too big for his skull, as if the loregem, squeezed in his left hand, had given him too much, too fast, too soon.

“In the old days,” he said, “the Kendricks had a way to move between the islands, a charmed circle in each of the Moonshaes, in private shrines and antechambers in the palaces and temples. There was one in Norland and Oman, and in Caer Westphal in Snowdown, and Caer Callidyrr, and Caer Corwell on Gwynneth Island. I believe when I saw the High Lady Ordalf on the terrace of the moon, that she had come from there. Those ways have been blocked for eighty years. But I know a way.”

He spoke loudly, as if to

overcome the buzzing in his head. Loudly enough to wake Eleuthra, who sat up to watch him from across the water, scratching herself idly and softly. She wrapped the wolf's skin around her body. She yawned, sticking out her tongue.

"I know how to open the door," said the Savage, his head bursting, his heart swollen with the sight of her, the way she moved. "There are signs along this shore—look," he said, squatting down. He took the knife Marikke had left him, and used it to cut away the leg of an old stump, half submerged in the water. "Look, here." In a minute he

had uncovered what he sought, a buried hunk of volcanic rock, a hexagonal slice of black basalt not native to that place or time, and with the sigil incised in it. He couldn't read it, but once again he touched it with his fingertips and the meaning came clear:

I regret what you have made me do.

He rose to his feet and staggered drunkenly along the shore until he found the place. He knelt, and in the hard sand and gravel he uncovered it, the hideous face of a demon carved into the black basalt, lips stretched wide, and the sigil cut into his tongue:

I hate the feeling of your hands on me.

And then another and another, each one a sixth of the way around the circle, each one carved into a block of basalt:

I regret the taste of your lips.

It is bitter in my mouth.

You will never have me.

Only my heart is pure.

This had brought him around the entire circle. Now he was on the shore below her where she lay on the grass under the beech trees, watching him, an unreadable expression on her face. She had wrapped the wolf skin around her

upper body, but her legs were still uncovered. Ah, he thought, there is a sign or sigil in her body, which I can read with my fingers.

"The way is open," he said, as the loregem had taught him, "in the mark of the Black Blood. It's hidden now, but the water will clear. And we'll see the one in Corwell, see right through to the other side, the circle there."

She shrugged, scratching at her armpits and the outside of her thighs, sniffing at her fingers. "Sarifal," she said. "The country of the fey."

"Come with me," he said, his

voice harsh and pleading even in his own ears. “Malar is hunting us. You saw him.”

“He’s hunting you,” she said. “Not me.” Then she turned her head away from him, staring into the trees, entirely focused on a noise he couldn’t hear, a smell he couldn’t catch, until the bracken parted and another wolf loped into the grove, paused, lifted his leg against an old stump.

He was a heavy brute with reddish fur, and a black mark on his forehead. He drew his lips back from his teeth. The Savage got up from his knees, his knife in his

right hand, the loregem in his left. Hating the wolf, he did not see or even predict Eleuthra's transformation, until the female stepped delicately into his line of vision, hesitant and unsure, he thought, a beautiful brindled creature as if from a different species than the squat and heavy lycanthrope—oh, how his head ached to see them move under the trees, circling around each other nose to tail. Eleuthra squatted to urinate, and the Savage wondered if she had come suddenly into estrus, perhaps that same day, perhaps an hour before as he lay

with her on the bank; the stink of it still lingered. And now it was as if the wolves were playing with each other, running under the trees, chasing each other and then doubling back, sinking down onto their forelegs and then bounding up—she was doing this to spite him, hurt him. He gripped the leaf-shaped knife in his right hand. The Black Blood. He needed the Black Blood. The Black Blood would save them. It would open the gate.

Stung with jealousy, he blundered up the bank between the leaping wolves.

Lukas had seen the knot of clouds from miles away, above and ahead of them as they clambered through the Breasal Marsh. It was the last sign the goddess showed them, the last they needed. Coal had run ahead, Lady Amaranth's lycanthropic brother, and they followed wearily, he, Gaspar-shen, and the eladrin princess. "Some day," she said, "I would request for you to play more music, when I am home in Karador."

She meant it kindly, Lukas imagined as they struggled through the oleander bushes, the small branches whipping back. Still, he

could not help but picture himself dressed in a servant's motley, sawing away, perhaps one of a quartet of tame humans in Lady Ordalf's court, while others, dancers or gymnasts, capered before the grave-faced, beautiful, ageless fey.

"It will be my pleasure," he murmured, teeth set, meaning the opposite. It was his intention to gather together his small crew, find the gnome, take whatever gold was due to them and then be gone, back to Alaron. There were packet boats, he knew, that left from Borth and Kingsbay, the free-Ffolk

ports on the east coast of Gwynneth Island. Then he would build a new boat and sail north or south or east or west, anywhere out of the Moonshaes, where he had not been happy for a long time. He imagined the salt drying his skin as he tacked away from Callidyrr, Marikke at the foremast, Kip in the bilge, miserable, covered in tarpaulins. They were not dead. He could not believe that they were dead. The black cloud was above him now, and he heard Coal yowling and snarling, and the smash of heavy bodies through the bushes. Then they had reached the

dry land, and they were underneath the beech trees. They came up the slope above the pool, and when he saw the Savage on the gravel shore, up to his shins in the black water, he knew that it was so, and everything the dead or dying old man had told him was true, and great Chauntea had not lied.

The golden elf was stripped to the waist. What had the goddess called him? Daemonfey? Bishtek Dlardrageth? He stood with a shining, glowing stone in one hand, a knife in the other, while the red wolf jumped at him from

the bank, rising up on his hind legs and scratching at his shoulders with his forepaws, biting at his face. The Savage turned to him, and Lukas could see the red slits down the centers of his eyes, see the sharp, predatory teeth as he sank them into the wolf's throat, the muscles of his back straining, his skin covered with scabs. Lukas could see amid the wreck of scar tissue on his shoulders and down his spine, the fresh growth there, the pinnacles of bone that had broken from the skin. He had a new circlet of gold around his neck.

Lukas saw him drop the glowing

jewel into the water. He saw him reach down with his knife and open up the belly of the wolf, while with his other hand he seized hold of the viscera and pulled it out, so that a cascade of blood fell into the pool, and the red wolf staggered and fell. Lady Amaranth cried out, her bow already in her hand, while a tide of blood washed away from the dying wolf, spreading around the shore as if drawn by a strange current. There was a black stone in the gravel at the water's edge, and when the blood touched it, it began to glow.

Amaranth drew her arrow to her

ear. Loyalties split, Lukas hesitated, and her bowstring sang. His face twisted with rage, the Savage ducked his head, and the arrow passed over his shoulder. At the same time, Lukas saw another woman on the shore, kneeling as if out of breath, dressed only in a brindled wolf skin. She rose to her feet, holding a strange, curved sword. Gaspar-shen had drawn his, and the blade glowed with emerald fire. But she paid no attention. She stood on the grass bank, and as another black stone showed its glowing sigil, and then another farther along the circle of the

shore, she cried out, “I hate what you have made me do. I hate the feeling of your hands. Your taste is bitter in my mouth.”

As she spoke, the entire surface of the water started to turn in a counterclockwise direction. Touched by the wolf’s blood, the six stones came alight. The Savage stood up to his shins in the little pool. At any moment he expected to see the water clear, the opaque surface open, and the other side of the portal reveal itself, the circle of lamps on a stone floor, perhaps, in

a temple of the gods—anywhere but here. He didn't have the ears of a wolf, but even he could hear the baying of the hounds, the hunt approaching through the marsh. The afternoon light slanted down through the beech trees, and among the silver trunks he could see his friends Lukas and the genasi. He almost didn't recognize them, not because they'd changed, but because he had. His eyes saw differently, the sound of his voice was foreign to him, and the pain in his shoulders and down his back was hard to tolerate. His chest and hands were greasy with the wolf's

blood. He looked up into the eyes of a pale eladrin maiden with red hair, a bow in her hand, a second arrow pulled back to her ear, a tattooed line of thorns below her jaw—he knew who she was, the Lady Amaranth, the Rose of Sarifal. Lukas had found her, and if he could keep her from shooting him, then together they would bring her back to Caer Corwell as her sister had demanded, and they would unlock the gnome from her cage, and accomplish good, pure, right things to change the world, and perhaps save the lady also, and depose or destroy the leShay

queen, who had hurt the mortal realm for far, far, far too long. The Savage's thought branched into the future like a sudden bolt of lightning, breaking it apart—there were kingdoms to be saved or overturned. There was a treasure to be won. Eleuthra stood above him with his sword in her hands, the king's sword he had taken from the tomb. With his new eyes he couldn't read the expression on her face. The world, the light, seemed tinged with blood. With his new ears he couldn't understand what she was saying. The lycanthropes came running up the slope under

the trees, and the eladrin girl had turned her arrow that way, had shot one of the slavering great brutes. Lukas had drawn his sword, and the genasi, also, was hacking at the wolves—why wouldn't the water clear? The sigils were alight. The circle was made. His friends had turned away from him and only Eleuthra was left, the Ffolk druid, King Kendrick's spy, who stepped down from the bank into the water, an unreadable expression on her face. No—she was bringing his sword to him. But why had she raised it above her head as if to cut him down? The

pain in his head could not be tolerated, the buzzing in his ears. The dogs were barking, and now there were new beasts among the trees, and then Great Malar himself came up the slope in his panther shape, his black shoulders mangy and streaked with scabs. Still joined to his haunches were the dry and withered remnants of the boy Kip, attached like remnants of a skin that a serpent was sloughing off. A boneless hand hung down between his legs. The god rose up on his hind legs, transforming as they watched. Lukas, Amaranth, and Gaspar-shen had stumbled

down into the water now, still black as ink—why wouldn't it clear? The lamps were lit. Eleuthra had come to him, whether to kill him or stand with him, he couldn't tell. As the god towered above them, losing his panther shape and metamorphosing instead into an enormous bear, the girl came to embrace him, kiss him, while at the last moment he wrested the sword from her, kicked aside the floating body of the dead wolf, and pushed her down into the bloody water. And with the king's sword in his hand he left the turning circle to do battle, Bishtek Dlardrageth the

Savage. He climbed up out of the water to do battle with the god. The loregem was already lost. He wrenched the gold circlet from his neck and threw it into the pool, and his headache was immediately gone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Poke Is Dead

Suka rode uncomfortably on Captain Rurik's saddlebow as they plodded along the highland trail into the mountains. She was making conversation. "Lord Mindarion says he will not fight for causes, none of the eladrin will. But they'll fight for Lady Amaranth. I wonder what you think about that."

The grim captain smiled, showing the livid scar that bisected his lips, and the steel teeth under it. "I like

you," he said. "And I don't think you're stupid. I don't think I have to tell you what I think."

"If I were you," the gnome continued. "I'm guessing I wouldn't trade two pounds of dog shit for the lost princess of the leShays."

Rurik appeared to consider this. "Two pounds of dog shit are worth less than one," he objected. "But I take your point. Who wants a tyrant to live forever? The Kendricks are bad enough, and they die every fifty years or so. Quicker, if you let them."

"Or if you make them."

Rurik scratched his beard. He

stared moodily up ahead, at the back of the horse in front of them. “Treacherous fey,” he said. “Why should I tell you anything? But you know what I’m talking about. You left this place and came to live with us, with men and women. Why was that?

“I wanted a change. You can keep your women, though.”

“Exactly.” Rurik gestured with his chin at the back of the eladrin knight in front of them, a beautiful creature, the scales of his armor shining like a fish’s belly. “Nothing changes here. No one builds anything or makes anything or

does anything new. You need people for that. The Ffolk on Gwynneth Island, their lives are the same as when Karador rose out of the lake, the same wooden plows, the same boats, the same charcoal stoves, because of the fey. Everything's preserved in amber for them, because they live so long.

"You need some urgency," he murmured after a pause. "Break a few skulls. Die, a little bit. Nobody dies in this stupid country. That's why no one really lives."

"How philosophical." In fact, he was full of shit. By being sarcastic, Suka tried to hide the depth of her

disagreement, a type of misdirection that came easily to her. Out of a kind of inner perversity, she told herself she didn't believe in gods. Ah, gods, she thought. Plenty of people die on Gwynneth Island—too many. Not twenty hours before, Borgol the cyclops had died defending his mistress. Then the drow had attacked them in their forest dell, and Rurik had lost six of his Northlanders and three of the eladrin. And Poke the pig had gone down, shattered by the darkwalker's cold spear, though she was not dead yet. Marabaldia had

her on a stretcher, a canvas sling over two cut saplings. She pulled the front of it herself between her enormous purple fists, while pairs of the remaining Northlanders took turns behind her, staggering under the weight.

They had left the dell while it was still dark, fearing attack at any moment, but the drow were gone. Mindarion's explosion had spread outward, and as they came down the slope into the thicker woods they had seen many fallen trees, struck down by the blast, and the corpses of several of their enemies. Suka had been knocked

unconscious, but the rest, cowering together, had escaped the full force of the detonation. Later, climbing gingerly among the tree trunks, before they'd found the trail again, she had looked for the drow captain, hoping to find her dead or dying, but no dice. Once she had even left the others, because she had caught sight of something in the half darkness, a plume of white that could have been the darkwalker's hair, and she imagined slipping the knife into her throat and turning it—she knew the creature would not beg. What she found was a family of

owlbears, slaughtered for no reason—ungainly, irritable, dangerous beasts, but even so, they did not have to die like that, the young cubs cut apart for sport.

Knife in hand, Suka had rejoined the others. She was thinking about Poke the lycanthrope, slowly and with every twist of the crude stretcher losing a small bit of her humanity, or at least her human shape. Dead, no one would know she had not always been a pig. Not that there was anything wrong with that. Intelligent, moral, clean (when given the choice), loyal creatures, pigs were, or so Suka

had always heard.

When at dawn they reached the trail that would lead them north into the highlands, she accepted Rurik's offer to ride with him near the head of their little column. Now, sick of his heartlessness, she asked him to dismount then slipped down from his boot while it was still in the stirrup, and ran back down the line. Marabaldia was there. Marabaldia would understand. Marabaldia knew that life was precious. She had refused all attempts to abandon the lycanthrope in order to save time, or at the very least to leave her to

others and ride on ahead.

Suka found her at the back of the company. Steadfastly she blundered up the trail, her iron bar slung behind her back, her massive shoulders hunched—Poke probably weighed close to three hundred pounds, more now than when they started, as she gathered mass out of the air. But the princess wasn't even breathing hard.

"Little friend," she said when she saw Suka, "I used to feel such pity for myself during the years when I was in chains. But then bright Selûne, goddess of our sex, granted me a companion in my time of

trial, this noble pig to share my loneliness and make it disappear. I, who had lost everything, now found myself rich again, and when you came, rich beyond measure—”

This sentiment, touching in itself, reminded the gnome also of something Lukas, the only other absolute romantic she’d ever met, had once said. Suka burst into tears, partly for memory’s sake.

Marabaldia released the stretcher’s crude legs, still with their leaves and branches, kicked them solid, and laid down her burden so she could embrace the gnome, whose head scarcely

reached her waist. She bent down over her, so that Suka had an impression less of receiving a hug than of entering a safe, warm house. She looked up and again encountered the fomorian's right eye, as if it were a framed picture or a mirror in that house, or else a doorway or (heck, why not?) a porthole into a little tiny upstairs room, where a miniature version of Lukas sat at a table watching her, a smile on his funny-looking face, handsome enough for a human, but please. Did it say something about her that she didn't know a single member of her own race?

Sobs redoubled, she put her arms around Marabaldia's enormous neck, and together they turned to look at Poke, who lay unconscious, smeared with blood. Suka reached to run her hand along the rose tattoo, and they both took hold of her hands, one on each side, stroking her cramped, sharp, cloven palms. In time Marabaldia took up her burden again, but Suka stayed alongside, holding Poke's hand until it had entirely transformed, hardened, and grown cold.

By that time it was afternoon, and they had crossed the ridge. To

the west Suka could see the land slope down toward Myrloch and the lake, and the fens surrounding it. To the east a thick mist hid the pass into Synnoria and the vale of the Llewyrr. Northward, straight ahead rose the Cambro Mountains, shattered pinnacles of granite streaked with glaciers and high chains of lakes. Underneath, the rock was full of holes, shafts and caverns dug by generations of miners, now abandoned. They climbed through valleys full of the heaped tailings below worm-eaten cliffs, red hills of the exhausted ore.

They were approaching the

stronghold of Harrowfast, a fortified enclave in the mountains, built by dwarves, now overtaken by the fey on the marches of Synnoria. Here were the entrances into a world of caves and mining tunnels, now mostly disused. But over the course of generations, two miles down beneath the ridge of peaks, the fomorians and their slaves had dug a roadway all the way to Cambrent Gap, and then a spur to Citadel Umbra in Winterglen, an immense tunnel through the dark. The entrance to that road approached the surface near to where they were, a narrow

chasm on the eastern side, where the wide black walls were covered with eroded reliefs, carved figures from the ancient times, gods and goddesses, kings and queens. Emissaries waited for them near a massive stone gateway leading down into the dark, a company of cyclopses dressed in burnished armor, carrying long lances with pennants hanging from the crossbars, flags as black as night, embroidered with the sign of the red torch clasped in a purple hand, now snapping and rattling in the fresh breeze. Captain Rurik and the eladrin had reached the place

already on their horses, but when Marabaldia saw the flags she laid the stretcher down for the last time, and after combing her hair back between her fingers, pulled out her iron bar and marched forward, the grimace on her face transforming as she saw a fomorian warrior standing by himself. Suka, beside her, saw a look of indecision pass over Marabaldia's big face, and then a new determination. Marabaldia recognized this man. And another, and another, as the great giants rose out of the shadows of the rocks.

The cyclopses had started with a wailing cry that was half random howling and half music—Suka could hear traces of a wavering melody and traces of harmony, also, between the high voices and the low. Now they settled to their knees, prostrating themselves just as Borgol had in the prison at Caer Corwell; they closed their eyes and pressed their foreheads into the stones. The fomorians bowed low, except for one, a giant of what was for them, Suka estimated, middle height, and the only one of them not wearing armor, or grasping clubs or battle-axes. He was a

handsome fellow, Suka thought—astonished at herself for making these distinctions between members of a race of grotesque and tyrannical barbarians—with his black hair in a braid, and his eyes almost the same size, the right one slightly larger, of course, and shining now as if it itself were a source of light. Marabaldia gasped. She reached down to take Suka's hand between her forefinger and thumb, which the gnome squeezed reassuringly—she knew who this was. Against all hope and reason, just as the world had turned irrevocably into shit, here was a

gift from bright Selûne's hands, a bridegroom who had waited ten years for his bride. Hurt and made brittle by the lycanthrope's slow death, Suka found herself, again, on a thin edge of tears, yet happy this time to see her friend walk forward into the circle of bowing, prostrating giants, and this one fellow in the midst of them, smiling now, dressed in his long, rich, fur-lined robes.

Because maybe there was hope for all of them, and Suka's friends were also still alive, and she would see them again on a bright, clear day like this, when the wind was in

her face. Thinking somehow this was a gift for her as well, she stepped forward with the princess, reaching up to hold her hand, as if she were (she imagined later) a servant or a slave. She didn't think about that now. She looked up at her friend's shining face. Marabaldia was too shy to speak. Ughoth (that was the fellow's name, Suka subsequently learned) held his hand out, but she did not take it. She'd been staring at the ground, but now she looked up, and Suka saw a beam as if of light or comprehension pass between their eyes—she didn't have to talk.

Everything, Suka imagined, was now revealed, or at least everything important. The rest were just details.

Ughoth cleared his throat—a grunting, burbling, disgusting noise—and said, “Madam, I have the unfortunate duty of telling you your royal father has now passed away, and my father too has joined him in the Deep Wilds, friends now where they were enemies. Because of this my circumstances are now changed, and I am able to welcome you—no, I rejoice to welcome you home, to … my home. I know I must not presume now on past

intimacies, so I am here to offer you my service in whatever decision you must undertake. I must tell you—all of us, all of your subjects have never given up hope. But I especially have waited for you, picturing in my eye some version of a moment just like this, though always a pale shadow of reality, and with no understanding of the happiness I feel at this moment, and my joy and relief in your safety …" et cetera, et cetera, Suka thought, slightly startled at the personal, private tone his speech had taken at the end ("intimacies," she thought—that's

one word for it), especially in this public space. But he had lowered his voice, and maybe no one else could hear except for her, Suka guessed—but what was she? Chopped liver? Ugh. She didn't even want to think about that. But she imagined she was probably beneath the level of his notice—quite literally, as it happened, because his head was six or seven feet above her own.

But Marabaldia was aware of her, at least enough to be embarrassed. She turned her face away from him, her eye shining like a star. "We will talk about these things

together," she said, brushing his fingers with her own. "When we are alone." She made a gesture, and the cyclopses rose to their feet, and the rest of the fomorians ceased from bowing. "I have brought up from the plain the bodies of my friends, slain in my service, human and fey—there, you can see the horses. When we have laid them to rest, there will be time to speak."

And then more like this, ceremonial talk that tended to obscure feeling as a cloud did the moon. Other assorted dignitaries now stepped forward, and all

privacy was lost. Representatives of the various factions made preliminary speeches, here in the stone agora of Harrowfast, among the snapping banners.

But all this ceremonial talk, in Suka's opinion, took too much time. This was a gathering of opposite forces, brought together in a common goal, the first such congress in the history of the world. So blah, blah, blah. Perhaps the verbiage was necessary to obscure what everyone suspected: There was no way.

Some differences are impossible to overcome. Suka already could

guess the sequence. She felt she didn't have to sit with them or listen. The fomorians and Captain Rurik's men would be eager to move forward, and Lord Mindarion (much exhausted and reduced since his encounter with the darkwalker) would be tentative and unsure, unable to promise anything until he knew the whereabouts of Lady Amaranth the ginger slut (Suka was extemporizing here), who probably already had her hooks in Lukas, and the Savage, and heck, probably Kip and Gaspar-shen as well, if that were possible. Probably even Marikke was hot for

her. A pound of dog shit, that's what she was worth. Or two. Or three. A big, smoking pile of dog shit on the crystal throne of Karador.

Amused by the mental image, she smiled, which was completely inappropriate to the solemnity of the occasion—it was a good thing no one was paying attention. But what could she do? What she really wanted was a bath and a change of clothes. During the speeches, she found herself salivating with anticipation. She stared up at Marabaldia, and crossed her eyes with mock boredom.

Later, they descended underground down one of the stairways in the rock, through a gate carved in the shape of a demon's open mouth. The lamps were lit, and it was stuffy and warm in the small chamber near the bathhouse. The walls were lined with wooden panels with quilted fabric over them, and the floor was covered with mats of woven reeds. Suka lay on pillows, happy to be out of her leather doublet, her jailhouse shirt, and especially her underwear, which (let's face it) had not worn well during her captivity, and had been

chafing her unmercifully. Now she wore a tangerine-colored cotton shift. One of the fomorians had something just her size—no, no, don't ask questions, don't even think about it—and was drinking wine from a crystal goblet so immense she had to lift it in both hands. And Marabaldia was with her, her own big limbs asprawl, also drinking, also at her ease indulging in what Suka realized was the royal fomorian equivalent of girl talk. The gnome smiled, and then, worried the expression might appear too bright and unmixed, allowed a shadow of sympathy to

creep across it. Boy, she was happy about the wine, a sweet, amber wine. Her tongue felt swollen in her mouth, and she ran it back and forth under her teeth, playing with the stud through the middle of it, the dog's bone in the dog's mouth. She found herself fingering the rings along the ridge of her left ear, and examining the blue-flame tattoo that covered her right forearm, all the distinguishing marks if someone had to identify her body. Screw it, she thought. You're a nervous wreck. You've got to stop thinking like this.

"I just don't know if we have

anything in common any more," said Marabaldia, rubbing her nose. "How can I know? I mean, it's as if my life just stopped. All that time, just stolen away. He's been busy, working his father's estates."

Suka pictured an enormous cavern with pale white cows contentedly grazing in the dark, licking the mossy rocks. She leaned back on the silk pillows. "I mean," continued Marabaldia, "I was so worried about him. I thought he might be dead. Now I find out he's been happy all that time. I mean, he claims he was miserable, but why should that be? I'm so

relieved, and yet so angry at the same time, as if I'd wasted all that hurt."

"But what do you feel?" said Suka, mentally crossing her eyes again. "I mean, we don't do things because of reasons. But what does your heart tell you?"

Et cetera, et cetera—it was all a waste of time. But pleasant, what with the fine wine. And it wasn't as if Suka had a whole lot else going on. Eventually they turned to other subjects, a solemn toast to Poke, now lying in state in some refrigerated alcove. Suka had almost had to smile to see the

expressions on the faces of the fomorian honor guard, laying out the body of a pig among the marble sepulchers of the slain. Dwarves had cut these passages and rooms, generations before.

"I must have faith," Marabaldia said. "I must have faith my friend didn't die for nothing." And then she went on to explain how Ughoth had brought the tribes together to punish Prince Araithe for his insult to one of the nine ruling families. For ten years the leShay had held Marabaldia hostage, in return for certain vague concessions, mostly connected with the dark elves, the

cyclopses, and the Pact of Eschatos. But now a fomorian army had mustered under the nine flags. If they could unite with the eladrin of Synnoria and with Rurik's men, they would be unstoppable. The leShay would fall. Flowers would bloom on every hillside, and brass bands would play in every town. Ice cream would be served at every meal. Again, Suka was extemporizing: Pigs would shit gold in long, yellow streams, and chickens would grow lips. Parents would love their children and would never drink too much—it was ridiculous, she decided. She

didn’t know what Lord Mindarion was smoking, but she wanted some. The knights of Synnoria would never fight with Ughoth; they were too proud. And you could never build an alliance among people with such disparate goals, united only in what they hated and despised. Besides, Marabaldia herself had no interest in revenge. Her heart was too pure. Halfway through her explanation she asked Suka to admire the jeweled brooch Ughoth had given her, pretty, but less symbolic than a ring—what did that mean? She wanted Suka to explain it to her.

Instead, the gnome had examined the fine work, the pearls set in circles of braided gold. No fomorian could have made such a thing, with his huge, clumsy, brutal hands. No, this had been made by slaves.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Don't read too much into it."

Later, in their comfortable, quilted chamber, Marabaldia fell asleep. The gnome sang her a lullaby:

Oh, father dear, don't curse and sigh when I am dead and gone, / I'm going to a better place that I will call my own.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Darkness Clear

They came to themselves in shadow, except for six dim lamps that formed the circumference of a rough circle around them. And soon even these lamps guttered out, leaving them in purest darkness. The floor was made of polished tile, Lukas decided. It was warm here. The air was stuffy, rich, and fragrant, with too much oxygen to comfortably draw breath.

He wondered who was there with him and whether he was the only

one awake. He wondered where they were, and he breathed in through his nose, searching for clues. He smelled dirt, and cobwebs, and lemon grease, and incense, and wet, growing things, and blood. Hmmm. A poser. He listened to the others' soft, hesitant breath. Who was there with him? Someone was in tears.

"In Al Qahara at the desert's edge," said Gaspar-shen in his high, calm voice, "They make a concoction out of flour, chicken's eggs, sugar, and cow's butter, which they mix together into a sort of paste. Then they add small

pieces of chocolate, which they bring on camel-back from ancient Okoth. They bake small circles of this paste on an ungreased pan. They call this a ‘cookie,’ I’ve been told. Because you cook it, I suppose. Things you boil, perhaps they are called ‘boilies’ in that language.”

“Who told you this? Perhaps your head could be considered a ‘boilie,’ if it were properly prepared.”

“A traveler from a far country …”

“… Or maybe a ‘soakie,’ ” Lukas mused.

“… related this strange narrative. He told me people eat

these things by dunking them into cow's milk."

"Bullshit," said Lukas indulgently. "Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"In distant Al Qahara, this is considered normal. What is happening now, perhaps they would find difficult to believe."

"Then they're not so stupid as they sound," Lukas grumbled. "Are your clothes wet?"

"Yes. It is a pleasant feeling."

Amaranth said, "You are talking about the desert of Ruarin. I have heard of this place in my lessons when I was young. There are ruined cities in the sand, which are

full of efreet and devils and djinn of all kinds. So I was told by my professor, the same wise man who explained to me why the fey can't set their hearts on mortal creatures, because their lives are short and full of suffering."

She was talking about her brother Coal, Lukas guessed. But she was not the one who was weeping in the darkness. That must be the girl dressed in the wolf's skin, whose name he didn't know. The Savage had not crossed the portal with them.

"And what about the opposite?" this girl now said, when she was

able to speak. “What about a mortal woman … if she sets her heart …?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Amaranth primly. And then in a moment, “Oh, but I know where we are. The Earthmother told me about a gateway in the marsh. A gateway that would bring me home.”

Lukas, resting comfortably for the moment, felt her sit up next to him. She rummaged for something in her clothes. Then she held out her hand, and something glowed in it, a blue light that slowly gathered strength. “Someone gave this to me

when I was nine years old," she said. "A final gift."

She stood up, and raised her arm above her head. "Something to lighten the darkness," she said, and as she spoke the light got brighter, glowing from between her fingers, making her entire hand transparent, and showing them the place where they now found themselves, a high, square chamber full of pale vegetation and pale blooms of every kind, colossal succulents and bloated flowers. The four of them were on a circular stone dais about twelve feet across, with the humid earth beneath it,

thick with vines. In each corner of the chamber stood an elaborate wooden screen carved to resemble a spider's web. The work was intricate and fine. And in front of each screen stood a statue of a single female deity in four incarnations, one fashioned out of gold, one of ebony, one of bronze, and one of stone. Closest to Lady Amaranth, the ebony statue showed an image of the Spider Queen, personified as a maiden of the dark elves, her cap of white hair carved in ivory, and balls of ivory in her eyes. Slim and graceful, she carried a spear in her

right hand and a net in her left.

The other images were different. The one closest to Lukas was carved from sweating bloodstone, as if permanently greased. The goddess was human and hypersexed, with bloated, glistening breasts and a bulbous ass. With a seductive leer on her beautiful face, she squatted over some vanquished adversary, humbled through another force than violence. The wooden image was half spider and half woman, and the golden one, the smallest, was a spider only, its egg sac full to bursting.

“This is not good,” said Gaspar-shen. The strange patterns underneath his skin, like living tattoos, began to pulse with sea-green light.

“No,” Lukas agreed.

They had no sense of a ceiling above them. The walls ascended into obscurity. There was one doorway, which seemed to lead into a tunnel, and as they watched, a light started to flicker there.

They clambered to their feet. Lukas had lost his bow and quiver, but still kept his sword, and Gaspar-shen raised his scimitar. They were caught in the drow’s

web—Lukas could see that now—a shrine to the dark elves' loathsome deity. He wondered, though, why he could feel no sense of menace. The wolf-girl sobbed quietly to herself, and Lady Amaranth, the bulb of light in her left hand, stared at the carvings and the heavy, hanging plants with wonder and delight. No doubt in her sequestered life on Moray she had heard nothing of the Spider Queen, full of venom and deceit, dragging her distended body through the bottomless layers of the Abyss and then up through the burrows of the Underdark, spinning her

stratagems and nursing her regrets.

"Ware," said Gaspar-shen.

But there was nothing to fight or be afraid of. Breathless, a girl slipped into the chamber, holding a lantern that swung from a small chain, a pierced-metal cylinder that cast a crazy swarm of lights. "Ah, so it's true," she said. She pressed through the pallid stalks of undergrowth until she stood next to the dais looking up, an elf maiden who in human terms looked to be between fourteen and nineteen years, dressed in a simple linen shift, fastened at the waist with a red cord. The white linen and her

cropped white hair contrasted with the utter blackness of her skin. Lukas got a quick impression of a wide mouth and heavy lips, an arched, proud nose and wide eyes. She made a circuit of the dais, the light from her lantern scattering like a swarm of bees. “I saw the green-eyed white girl chasing a black kitten through the grass. And my sister saw the golden spider hanging from its branch, struck with a burning arrow of sunshine that lit her web on fire. We all saw it. And the green-eyed girl is Chauntea the Earthmother in her human shape, and the kitten is the

king of beasts. And Chauntea told us that this portal would be open for a moment, from Moray to the citadel—no one has come this way in oh-so-many years!”

As she spoke, breathless with excitement, three others had come in to join her, drow maidens dressed in the same fashion, all carrying their little swinging lamps. And they also started chattering as they rushed around the chamber, bowing as they did so to the four altars, and reaching up to touch and push apart the masses of white and yellow leaves. Soon Lukas could no longer tell which of

them had spoken first, or distinguish which of them was speaking now. Their voices rose together, sometimes in unison, sometimes breaking apart into conflicting stories: “My sisters and I had the same dream—not the same, exactly. It was looking down into the well of paradise where the gods live. And … the girl had the kitten in her lap. No, he was bad and scratched her, and she swatted at his nose. No, but the spider was in the moonlight, and her web shone with it.”

Then they stopped moving. Each had found a corner of the room,

and their voices fell into a kind of unison, as if they were reciting a catechism they all knew by heart: “Of all insects, she is the most industrious, the thriftiest, and the most useful, a model for all mothers at their looms, and fathers at their nets in the dark water. All storytellers owe a debt to her, all musicians and artists, and all kings and queens who strive to weave a pattern in the world’s fabric. Cruelly abandoned and cast into the Abyss, despised by Corellon Larethian, her children’s father, still she was able to redeem herself, because of the thousand female

virtues that we celebrate in our lives …”

All this was part of Araushnee’s lament, Lukas guessed, the Spider Queen’s self-serving liturgy. Other races had different ways of spinning this same narrative. He was interested, though, in the language of redemption, which seemed fresh to him, a fresh motif in the goddess’s history. Cast into the Abyss, given a new disgusting name and shape, she had dragged anyone who worshiped her down into darkness, away from the light. Thousands of years before, the dark elves had left their forest halls to

migrate downward to the Underdark, drawn into a web of lies. But perhaps they had dreams now of returning to the surface, which were echoed and reflected in the goddess's prayers: "Soon she will come back," the elf maidens chanted. "The Earthmother has permitted it. She will guide her to her rightful place among the Seldarine, just as she raised Malar the Beastlord out of the Abyss …"

This sounded delusional to Lukas. But there is no creature so debased that she cannot dream of rehabilitation, and in any case he wondered if this new story was

connected to the mystery he'd been untying and retying in his mind since Lady Amaranth had told him the story of her flight to Moray on the hippogriff's back. Not the spite of her leShay relatives, which was only to be expected, so much as their association with the drow, because it was the dark elves who had ambushed the princess and her dragonborn guards in the highlands above Myrloch Vale ten years before.

As he watched Amaranth now, entranced, her face pretty with delight, holding her own light source above her head, Lukas felt

his regrets overtake him and confuse his way forward. He stood, sword in hand, on a raised dais in a shrine to Lolth—he didn't know where. But if Lady Amaranth was correct, and if her vision had been a true moment of transcendence and not some illusion perpetrated by her enemies, then they had found their way to Gwynneth Island, perhaps through some tunnel in the Underdark. In the dumb luck that sometimes smiled upon him, perhaps, he had succeeded in bringing her to Sarifal, to the kingdom of the fey, as Lady Ordalf had asked of him.

In which case he might win Suka's freedom from the dungeon where she rotted with the others, the disgusting fomorian giantess and the lycanthropic pig.

But how could he feel happy about delivering the princess to her enemies? And even if he had warned her against them, still his responsibility could not end there, because she had been raised in innocence. Her memory of Karador was tinted with nostalgia, nor could she have any understanding of the treacherous whims and stratagems that moved like weather through the beautiful

landscape of Sarifal. Her sister had required her death, had been willing to pay a hoard of gold for it, for reasons she had not bothered to explain. But that was tendays ago, and Lukas could only hope she had forgotten, or the caprice had left her—almost immortal, the leShays' memories must be made of cheesecloth, doddering intellects preserved in perfect bodies, and it was no wonder if their wishes and commands were senseless, or changed from hour to hour. Whoever sent these girls to welcome Amaranth back home meant her no harm.

“Where are we?” he said.

Near him the wolf-maiden had risen to her feet, a dark-haired girl with high cheekbones and blue eyes. She stared at him, her face still streaked with tears, and he felt another quick surge of regret—where was the Savage now? Where was the daemonfey, his friend, who had fought against the Beastlord to cover their escape?

“You are in Citadel Umbra,” said the leader of the drow priestesses. “I am Amaka, and these are my sisters, Onyiye, Chinedu, and Kemdelime—” the others curtseyed. “We are the handmaidens of

Araushnee, whom you call Lolth, the Spider Queen. We are in search of Lady Amaranth leShay, to bring her to her rightful place in the house of her ancestors, where a masquerade has been commanded in her honor, a festival of lights, prepared for the spring solstice by Prince Araithe, her nephew, the ruler of this land …" They chattered on and on, a circle of high, laughing voices. Amaka raised her lantern. "I recognize you," she said to the wolf-girl. "The beauty of the leShays is legendary in all of Faerûn."

"No doubt," said Lady Amaranth,

stepping down from the stone dais onto the temple floor among the blooms and vines. She looked back and smiled uncertainly. “I am Amaranth,” she said.

“My name is Eleuthra Davos,” returned the wolf-girl. “I am an emissary of Derid Kendrick, the Ffolk king of Alaron, sent to—”

“The Ffolk king, the Ffolk king,” chattered Amaka and the rest, oblivious to their mistake. “Perhaps he will come to our masquerade.”

Lukas thought it was unlikely. Nevertheless, there was something touching about these misplaced hopes.

“Oh,” the drow girl went on, “perhaps besides the solstice and Lady Amaranth’s return we might celebrate for one night only the end of fighting in these islands, when the elves and the fomorians, all of us, will dance under the moon. When Queen Araushnee takes her place among the Seldarine, and the family of gods comes together, just as this family, here, has woven itself together with a spider’s silk. At long last the dark elves will see the morning come—” on and on, until Lukas had to wonder if they were drugged or drunk, stung with some

enchanting spider's venom. He himself felt his heart rising as he stepped down to the ground, and allowed one of the priestesses (Chinedu? Kemdelime? He had already forgotten the rest of their names) to guide him toward the tunnel's mouth. Surrounded with such pretty women, who could feel sad, and who could dread the future? He had sheathed his sword. He looked back for Gaspar-shen who stalked behind, unaffected and bemused.

"Citadel Umbra—I remember my uncle," said Lady Amaranth, drawn on by Amaka ahead of Lukas. "I

think I was seven years old when I came here. I remember combing his gray hair, even though he was my nephew, thinking how handsome he was …”

The tunnel was carved through living rock, and the light from the lanterns caught at seams of glistening minerals along the raw, unfinished surface. They passed the black, gaping holes of many side corridors and caves. Amaranth had put her light aside, but up ahead, a new source of illumination burst from the tunnel’s end, and there was music up there too, a dancing jig that nevertheless managed to

maintain the haunting sadness of all eladrin melodies. Finally they stepped out into a larger grotto, through whose entrance they could see the firelight outside in the open air under the night sky—how long had they lain, dazed, in Lolth's shrine? Lukas had thought these transformations to be instantaneous.

He guessed the tunnels they'd traversed had once been mines, cut by the shield dwarves and then enlarged, perhaps, by the drow, a route below Winterglen into the Underdark. The grotto looked natural to him, its roof gleaming

with semiprecious crystals, green and yellow, peridot and citrine. A small cliff, perhaps thirty feet tall, formed the curved edge of a clearing in a forest of evergreens, a deep grassy glade with a stream running through it. On the other side, along the border of the forest, stood a half circle of silk pavilions, richly colored, and lit from the inside with charcoal braziers. By the banks of the stream there was a bonfire, and around it a small crowd of elves of all colors, eladrin and other fey, and nearby a small orchestra of a dozen human musicians, Ffolk slaves playing a

tune Lukas recognized. It was a reel composed by Cymon the False, but tarted up in this performance with timbrels and bells. Better would have been a simpler arrangement of woodwinds and strings, played to a faster tempo. Better would have been a little joy. Instead, as often with the fey, you got a kind of brittle, frantic, melancholy gaiety—lords and ladies, dressed in silks and velvets, capered on the grass, their faces hidden behind leather masks fringed in ostrich feathers. Painted and bejeweled, spotted and discolored, with witchlike noses

and leering mouths, these masks concealed or else at least attempted to conceal the dancers' endless beauty and eternal health, boring and tragic even to themselves.

This was not the first time it had occurred to Lukas to thank the gods for his mortality. Lady Amaranth was behind him, and she touched his sleeve. He paused to take her hand, but she didn't want anything like that. Instead she pushed past him, murmuring excitedly, for she had seen a gray-haired man in a golden mask and a long velvet cloak, untied and open down the

front. He stood near the fire. Turning, he reached out his hands then came toward them while the handmaidens of Lolth spun out into the field, chattering and singing.

Lukas guessed this was Prince Araithe, the son of Lady Ordalf, whom he had last seen in Caer Corwell. He was of medium height, and his cloak, when it flapped open, revealed a silver doublet, plum-colored hose, and a silver, tasseled codpiece, a style both ugly and pathetic, in Lukas's opinion. Lukas was not disposed to like Araithe anyway, but was surprised by the violence of his own reaction

as the man approached. Araithe lifted his mask with a right hand that also seemed fashioned entirely of gold, with the elegant, contrived fingers of a clockwork mannequin.

"Is it really you?" he asked. "When the priestesses told me of their dream, I thought it was too much to ask."

And Lady Amaranth, because of her vulnerability and the blindness of her need, never hesitated. Lukas watched the two of them come together as if partners in a different dance, to a different rhythm. "I've prayed for this," said Prince Araithe, his voice soft and

pretty. “A long time—there are too few of us to keep apart. Whatever reason you had for leaving us—all is forgiven now.”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “The price you have paid, the hardships you have endured, let us not speak of them. Or if we must, imagine them as a test to bring you to this place. Your mother and father are dead now. But I am guardian of this tower, and I will be everything to you—mother, father, brother, sister, nephew, uncle, and more besides. There are too few of us to make distinctions, and we will be

together for a long time. Everything I have is yours, and I will share it with you equally, for the sake of our shared blood. The world is vast, but we will find shelter …”

She laid her cheek against his breast. Lukas stayed near enough to listen to the prince’s murmurings, and now he caught his eye above her hair. Araithe’s golden fingers made a little gesture of dismissal. But Lukas persevered until a crease of anger marred the perfection of the prince’s forehead, and he moved away from the girl’s embrace. “Make yourself useful,”

he said. “Bring my lady something to drink.”

Hogsheads of wine were open on the turf, and Amaka came toward them, a goblet in each hand. She herself had had enough to drink, Lukas decided, judging from the unsteadiness of her little dance, the way the wine slopped from the crystal cups, the delirious sparkle in her eye.

Lukas put up his palm to forestall her. “Sir,” he said, “your mother promised me three hundred thalers to bring your aunt to Gwynneth Island. In addition, she was keeping a friend of mine in Caer

Corwell as her guest, in security—”

The prince interrupted him. “My mother promised you more gold than she had, and paid you more than you are worth. I encourage you to drink a glass of wine then take your leave of us—in safety, with your friends.” He glanced at Gaspar-shen. “As for the person you speak of, I’m afraid I have bad news. She endeavored to escape from my mother’s hospitality, and was killed in the attempt, not by any force of ours, but by a treacherous lycanthrope, a pig from Moray Island.”

He was not clever, Lukas decided,

this prince who lived for thousands of years. Time had robbed him of that. Lady Amaranth stiffened, and with her forefinger she touched the climbing rose tattoo under her jaw. She looked toward Lukas and he turned away, wanting to let her think about the possibility of spending eternity in this place, with its bad music and bad company and wine that, he guessed, would have been eighth rate even if it hadn't been poisoned or full of magic—the fey were no good at ephemera, which was after all what most of civilization was. He waved to her without looking,

as if he were washing his hands of the whole business—job well done—cut his losses—Suka was dead; he doubted that. This lump of leShay shit wasn't capable of telling the truth. If he said she was alive and well, then Lukas might worry. He affected a frown, as if he were afraid the prince might possibly rescind his offer of safe conduct and, nodding to Gaspar-shen, he went in search of the wolf-girl, whom he found squatting near the border of the trees, head in her hands. He went down on one knee beside her.

"Tell me," he said.

And so she told him about Bishtek Dlardrageth—strange to call him that. The Dlardrageth had mixed their elf blood with demons out of the Abyss millennia before. More recently, in Spellplague times, Sarya Dlardrageth had gotten loose from prison and had fought some stupid war. From her defeat, Lukas guessed, his friend's father had escaped and hid himself, had tried to cleanse his son of all demonic traces, and had failed.

These thoughts went through him in a moment. They occupied one part of his attention, while with the other he listened to the druid; how

she had fought in Malar's temple below Scourtop, where the Savage had gone to help his friends—she gave him that much credit, though he had failed, of course; they had both failed, and Malar had been hauled out of the pit, and Chauntea's priestess and the boy were dead.

Lukas didn't look at her. He stared out toward the bonfire where the elves danced, dark elves, mostly. Two others drew his attention, one a tiny, emaciated, gossamer-boned fey, scarcely taller than a gnome, but with enormous feathered wings that rose over his

head, his jeweled cap. His face was scrunched up like a monkey's as he admired the dancers.

He was one of the avariel, the winged elves from the mountain peaks above Cambrent Gap. The other stood apart, a drow captain in black steel half armor, out of place among the revelers, his white hair fastened down his back. And he was staring at Lukas with a dyspeptic, fierce expression, a hand on his sword hilt. Lukas dropped his eyes and listened to Eleuthra Davos tell him about the king's tomb, and the loregem that had opened the pool among the beech

trees and brought them here to safety.

"The king's gold," she said, "maybe had begun to heal him where he'd been maimed. I felt the spines that had broken through the skin along his vertebrae, and his shoulder blades blossoming where his father had torn away his wings. I was afraid of him. Gods help me. I didn't know how long it would take to feel his dragon's tail curl around me. Oh, but he has broken my heart."

The drow soldier, a warlock or a swordmage, Lukas guessed, was still looking at them from across

the clearing, his lips twisted in an expression Lukas couldn't read—nothing good, though. Contempt, anger, whatever. As Lukas watched, the dark elf spat at the ground between his boots.

"I heard what you said to him," Lukas told the druid. "It didn't sound to me like heartbreak."

He found himself mimicking the drow, pulling his lips back, spitting. He watched Gaspar-shen take a crystal goblet from one of Lolth's handmaidens. He sniffed at it, a pensive expression on his face. He wouldn't drink it. His interest in food and drink was abstract,

metaphorical.

The half moon rose above them, breaking through the curtain of the trees. By its light Lukas saw the tower of the citadel as if conjured into being, a stone spire that appeared and disappeared according to the pattern of the mythal that protected it. Some of the dancers stopped what they were doing and applauded the sight with more politeness than enthusiasm, Lukas thought. He watched Prince Araithe, one arm around Amaranth's waist, gesture modestly toward the tower as if claiming credit for a magic trick.

Lukas despised him.

"I didn't hear much love in what you said to him."

"What do you know about it?" said the druid girl.

Good point, Lukas conceded. He could not but remember Marikke and the boy, whom he had found in Caer Callidyrr mired in courthouse bureaucracy, impoverished and without hope. He had taken them in, telling himself he would protect them, at which task he had failed, and the Savage had failed also.

"Where will you go now?"

"Back," Eleuthra said. "King Derid will need eyes in Moray now

the Beastlord has returned."

Her own eyes were red with tears. Gaspar-shen stalked toward them, a smile on his face. "What did you think of the wine?" Lukas asked.

"I detected hints of blackberry and smoke. A high glycerin content. You can tell from the streaks along the glass. Perhaps we should go."

Lady Amaranth had lost her brother, Coal. She also had a distinctive way of showing her grief, which was to simper adoringly with her hand on Prince Araithe's arm as she approached

them. “My nephew has consented to let you stay. He said you could play in his orchestra.”

Lukas glanced up at Gaspar-shen. What did I tell you? he thought. “The prince does me too much honor,” he said without rising to his feet.

“Then you accept?” Her eyes maintained a wistful, pleading look, at odds with the rest of her expression.

“My dear, I think it best to take the captain at his word,” said Prince Araithe.

Lukas looked beyond them toward where another figure had

entered the circle of firelight, a woman in a long, flowing gown that, like the prince's raiment, seemed to project a kind of desperate sensuality. The velvet clung to her breasts like a layer of skin. Despite her witch's mask, Lukas recognized her. For reasons he couldn't decipher, he'd been expecting her.

"Ware," said Gaspar-shen.

Lukas stood up. The lines on his friend's forehead pulsed dimly, red and gold. Which meant—what, exactly? You'd think he'd know by now. People were like undiscovered continents, what they

did, what they said, what they meant. As the leShay queen moved toward them, tripping lightly over the grass, as you might say, he allowed himself a small, sweet moment of sadness, and in his mind he captured three small images from the past, because he guessed there'd be no time for contemplation once High Lady Ordalf opened her mouth—first, Marikke, her stiff yellow hair hanging down over a face flushed with concentration—she was performing some ritual in Chauntea's honor, some brimming liquid in a bowl of light. Second,

the calico-haired boy, his fingernails extended in surprise. Third, the Savage, but not wrecked to pieces the last time he'd seen him, a new self erupting out of him, but at his ease in his black clothes, his dark face shining, a gold coin in his outstretched hand.

"My dear boy," said the queen. "My love, how could you invite so many to your party, and not me? Who is this … whore?" she said, not deigning to look at anyone except her son, peering up into his face, so close to him now that he was obliged to take a step backward and let go of Lady

Amaranth's arm. "Who is this … diseased slut? Does a mother's advice mean nothing to you? Your father died of a venereal infection, as you know. And he was in his … prime."

Well, that should get the ball rolling, Lukas imagined.

At first he'd thought Lady Ordalf, not to be outdone, had assumed a mask that was the ugliest in the entire citadel, a grotesque apparition of white skin patched with scabs, a long, beaked, unblown nose, and broken teeth. But now he saw her mask was actual flesh, a small piece of

illusion that was now undone, melted away, revealing the golden eyes, sweet features, and laughing, purple mouth of the leShay queen.

Really, Prince Araithe was not clever. “Madam,” he said, his face stiff with shock, “may I present to you my aunt—”

Ordalf whipped her head around, and any thought Lukas might have had that she’d relaxed or forgotten her malice toward her younger half sister was immediately dispelled. But then her face again reformed into beauty, and she held out her hand, displaying a ring on her right forefinger that, Lukas

imagined, she wanted Amaranth to kiss.

Or maybe not. Amaranth, also, had taken a step backward. The queen spoke again, her voice lovely and melodious. “Captain, I believed we had a bargain, and that you were to deliver to me one small spherical part of this merchandise, and not, as I see now before me, the entire shipment. Was it too much to ask, that my wishes be fulfilled? Here you’ve given me too much of a good thing, which is worse than nothing at all. I believe that voids our contract, and that you can expect nothing

more from me, and the matter of three hundred gold pieces …”

Of all the world’s races, Lukas decided, the eladrin and elves cared the most about coin, perhaps because they lived so long. Still, it astonished him that she could not refrain from haggling, even at a moment like this one.

“Of course,” she said, “I also was unable to keep my side of the bargain, to keep your gnome on this side of the Nine Hells. The giantess I showed you, she separated her torso from her legs without even the benefit of a knife and fork.”

These words were worth more than any of the gold she owed, Lukas thought, because they showed both she and her son were lying, and Suka might be alive for all they knew.

“Thank you,” he said, and she glanced at him briefly, stuffed with contempt for his sincerity, which she could not hope to understand.

“Sister?” Lady Amaranth began.

The music was silent now, as if everyone in the clearing had become aware of this knot of difficulty under the tall trees. Ordalf held out her hand. The ring on her forefinger began to glow,

an amethyst.

And as if it had been pushed out from its center, Lukas felt an odd sensation travel through his body and then beyond him out into the clearing, a wave of inertia that dulled and numbed his senses and made it hard to move, hard to think. He imagined the synapses and ganglia of his body set alight as with a gentle electricity, impeding his control. Or it was as if time had slowed for him and all the others whom the wave had touched, the force out of the jewel. Only Lady Ordalf was unaffected, the author of the spell. She

sauntered easily to stand next to her sister, immobile and, as Lukas could see, petrified with fear. The leShay queen reached out with her left hand, and with a cruel familiarity she moved her fingers over Amaranth's face, brushing her cheek, pulling at her hair, tweaking her ear then moving down her neck over the yellow rose tattoo, while at the same time murmuring as if to herself a soft commentary on her sister's plainness and defects, her unpleasant pallor, her red freckles and red hair, filthy and unbrushed, and was this a twig in it? You must

have gotten your complexion from your father. And what are you wearing? She moved her hand down the front of Lady Amaranth's shirt, modest and androgynous, homespun in her Moray workshop, dyed in earth colors—Lukas could scarcely move a muscle. His body trembled, and with great difficulty he turned his face an inch or so to see if Gaspar-shen was having any luck, but the genasi stood beside him like a statue. Eleuthra was no better. The musicians, instruments still raised, had stopped their playing. Time itself had stopped, or almost stopped, for all but the

night birds that still passed over head, and for the drow captain, who had come closer, sword drawn, a puzzled expression on his face—a warlock, then. Lukas had been right.

"Mother," admonished Prince Araithe. He also was unaffected, because this demonstration was for him.

Full of anger and distress, Lukas watched the queen hesitate at the collar of her sister's shirt then find the hidden buttons and undo them one by one, whispering all the time, "Let's see what you have under there. Ooh, gooseflesh. Is my

hand cold? Now tell me, do they have baths on Moray Island? Or I suppose when you lie down with your wolves, you can expect some fleas—my son, are you listening? If you feel some itching down below, you'll get no sympathy from me. No soothing liniment. You'll have to work on that yourself. Look here, an undershirt. She's playing hard to get. Look at her bosom, do you like that? So pert and fresh. It's because she's never borne a child."

She's going to strip her bare, Lukas realized. She's going to strip her naked in the middle of a crowd of strangers. Frustrated, he tried to

raise his hand. With his utmost strength, he turned his head to look at Amaranth, and saw that she was staring not at her tormentor, but at him, her cheeks on fire, a pleading look that animated every feature of her beautiful face. And so he did not allow his eyes to shift from hers, as he listened to the leShay queen continue her repetitive litany: waist and hips too narrow, unsightly and disgusting hair, thighs too bony and muscular—don't you see?

Lukas did not see.

"Mother," said Prince Araithe, his voice petulant and sharp, and

Lukas tried to guess its tone. Certainly there was no pity in it. As Gaspar-shen had tried to analyze a glass of wine without tasting it, so the ranger followed the music of the prince's voice, until he knew the melody: irritation. Hurt pride. And that was all.

And so suddenly, with the force of a blow, Lukas understood what they were talking about, the mother and the son. And Amaranth also understood. He'd seen her weep on several occasions, and now he waited for the tears to form, and overflow her eyelids,

and drip down her motionless cheeks—she was too horrified for that.

"Mother, stop." The prince was humiliated to see his property displayed like this, ruined for him.

"No, my son. This is how it must be. Look where my hand is. Over her womb. Oh, but I will twist her up inside. I have the power to do that. I can make her worse than barren. She will breed monsters. You have not seen such monsters yet."

Lady Ordalf had gone too far. Enraged, the prince struck at her with his golden hand, knocked her

to her knees, cutting her cheek so that the amber blood flowed out. He reached down, grabbed hold of her right hand and dragged the ring from it, threw it off into the shadows, and at that moment everybody staggered free. But nothing could be the same. The musicians rose to their feet, kicked over their stools, threw down their fiddles and guitars—they knew they'd be punished for what they had seen. The drow priestesses cowered in the entrance to the cave, then disappeared inside. By the time Lukas reached Amaranth she had covered herself, but when

he tried to touch her and comfort her, she struck at him wildly—stupid, he thought. Stupid, stupid. Eleuthra Davos was with him, and Gaspar-shen.

"Come," Lukas said, and led them out of the circle of torchlight. Lady Ordalf had collapsed onto the grass, and now her son knelt over her, sobbing, his golden fist clenched. Lukas imagined they might have a few minutes, and he led the way out of the clearing, into the dark, sticky forest of evergreens. "This way," he said, not knowing where to go. "Come this way."

Not wanting, for sentimental reasons, to leave the shape in which she'd last seen the daemonfey, Eleuthra held out as long as she could. These were the lips that he had kissed. When the red wolf with the black mark had come into the clearing, she had climbed down into her bestial self to goad him, to signal her regret, if only for a moment—he was disgusting to her, after all. But when the Savage had wrestled with the wolf in the pool, had slit his stomach and dyed the water red just at the moment the gate began

to swirl, she felt he had penetrated with his knife the wolfish part of her, cut her to the heart. In Callidyrr, in her druidic studies and devotions she'd discovered her animal nature, had rejoiced in it for years, but at a cost. Two creatures in one body—how could she expect to feel unmixed emotions? One part hated what the other part loved.

So as she squatted listening to the music in the clearing, she had resolved to hold onto her human shape, for the sake of the music, the dancing, the fine clothes, the wine, and the memory of the

daemonfey. But like an addict she had become more nervous and distracted as the moments passed, particularly as the knot that tied Lady Amaranth to her family grew more twisted and strained, and finally burst apart. She had found herself scratching her armpits and rubbing her lips, itching beneath her uncured wolf skin until she could scarcely tolerate her own humanity. And so when the ranger brought them in under the trees, she found herself subsiding gratefully into her lupine form, a drunkard forgetting her own promise of sobriety, happy to see

the bright colors grow dim, at the same time that the darkness brightened. She leaped away into the night forest, and immediately forgot the lover she had left to die.

Forgot him even though, as her senses sharpened, she caught the stink of other fey and realized the danger they were in. Doubtless the ranger knew it also: These pines and fir trees had kept down the undergrowth, and they could make good time along the woodland paths, over a turf of silver needles that deadened their footsteps. But among the heavy tree trunks she could see the fugitive shadows of

other creatures, fell denizens of Winterglen, who had gathered in around the citadel to listen to the music, the human music the fey loved, because it spoke of transience to eternal creatures, and passion to the passionless. And so they had come like moths to a flame, night hags and feygrove chokers.

But the music was over now. Released from its power, they looked about themselves, their anger and their spite redoubled, because they'd been forgotten for a little while. Caught and released, now they looked to enslave others.

And as the druid, the genasi, the princess, and the ranger made what speed they could, they picked up stragglers behind them, and on either side, and now in front. Where the largest trees were choked with vines, long sinewy arms with three-fingered hands reached down to snatch at them. The ranger had lost his bow in the gate but had retained his sword. He and the genasi slashed at them while Eleuthra hung back. A dusk unicorn, blood flanked and grotesque, loomed out of the shadow and she swiped at it with her claws, while all around them

she heard yelps of pain out of the howling hags that shambled toward them through the trees, their hands held out, their bodies stinking of rot.

The ranger didn't know where he was going. How could he know? His only thought was to bring the g i r l away. But now Eleuthra wondered if in the minutes that had already passed since they had left the clearing, Prince Araithe had forgotten his distractions and was weaving a spell out of Citadel Umbra, a web of Feywild creatures to disarm them and bring them back. She leaped after the unicorn,

chased it away. But beyond it, back they way they'd come, she saw the moving shadows of a pack of hounds, saw their yellow eyes as if reflected in a fire. Had the princess lit her beacon again? That would have been foolish. No, the light was from elsewhere, up ahead. She turned and ran back to the others, who had paused in a boggy open space, where the pines gave out into the softer, deciduous trees. There in the middle burned a bonfire, which had not been there even a minute before, and around it turned, as if following the steps of some simple dance, a circle of

figures—eladrin, the druid guessed at first. That would have been a welcome sight, and doubtless that was what had drawn Lukas out of the trees. But then she saw him raise his sword, and saw also the faces of the graceful creatures illuminated in the firelight—fey lingerers, knights and ladies who, zombielike, refused to die. Still animated by hate, or malice, or thoughts of vengeance against those who had stolen their enormous lives away, they had gathered near their living brethren, a pack of ruined ghosts. Only in the darkness did their skull-like

features retain even a shadow of their beauty, and now the darkness had fled. Bowing and turning, they circled forward, clad in moldy, slimy armor, though their swords were bright.

"Shit," said Lukas. "Fall back."

In her wolf's shape, complicated human speech was hard to care about, hard to listen to, hard to understand. But she could handle "shit, fall back." So where? Behind them were the chokers and the hags and the hounds now spreading out around them, weaving back and forth among the trees. Eleuthra wondered if this

was still her fight, and what would happen if she slunk away into the trees, protected by her beast's shape—no. These were the daemonfey's friends, and she would fight for them. She'd left him to die facing Malar the Beastlord.

They hung together in a knot, the four of them. But now others were converging out of the shadows: drow soldiers. And to Eleuthra's astonishment they cut and hacked through the whimpering fey. A choker, its arm severed, howled from a bole of vines. The lingerers, undaunted, still moved forward, but Eleuthra could see there was

some magic with the drow, a warlock or other conjurer. Snarling, his lips drawn back, she could feel the electric thrill of magic in her heavy teeth. The bonfire snuffed out as if the gods had pissed on it, and in the stinking smoke she could see a drow captain in black armor, the same one from the clearing at the citadel, his white sword burning with a lambent flame. Lukas was with him, and the fire-striped genasi, and she also bounded forward, seizing a dead knight by the arm, dragging him down into the mud, trying to kill him once

again. Above them, lightning flashed out of a cloudless sky, and it began to rain.

The drow's ears were full of iron rings. His white hair was fastened behind his neck with an iron pin in the shape of a crab. His voice was high and soft and unpleasant, a sound like the rushing of the wind. "Come," he whispered. "Come with me."

There were seven drow soldiers, and also one of the priestesses or handmaidens of Lolth, the first one who had spoken to them in the temple of the Spider Queen—Amaka, she had called herself. Her

eyes were wide with fright, but she ran with them under the trees, barefoot, her pretty white dress stained and ruined, the red cord missing from around her waist. The drow captain led them onward, still away from the citadel, and once again into the pine forest. In time Eleuthra could see they followed a stone road that had risen out of the accumulated needles. Now there was a low stone wall on either side, and a series of carved bas-reliefs. Still they hurried, and the wall rose higher, and Eleuthra realized it was because the road was sinking, a

tunnel now, as the wall closed over their heads.

There was a light up ahead, a thin light spilling from a doorway, which the captain pulled open to reveal a guardroom lit by a smoldering brazier, and a couple of astonished guards. He swore at them, pulled them from their chairs, chased them out into the tunnel to wait with the rest of the drow, while he brought Lukas and the others into the room. His sword was still drawn, still smeared and smoking with the slimy yellow blood of the lingerers.

He threw it across the stone floor,

wiped his fingers, then turned to look at them, his lips drawn back to show his filed teeth, his dark face simmering with suppressed rage. “Wearily, wearily,” he whispered, scarcely out of breath, “we would think it best for you to die, all die, all of you, die in the darkness, except for one of you, except for her, that one, dead in the swamp, red blood on my blade, except for that one, except for you.” He extended his long black arm, black hand, black forefinger, and stretched it out toward Lady Amaranth, and did not let it drop.

Eleuthra sat down on her haunches, licked her teeth, and let her tongue protrude. She let the sense of the drow's words flow over her, and focused instead on the sharpened black nail that reached out toward the princess's face. She swallowed, and let her tongue slide out again between her teeth.

But Lady Amaranth flinched as if from a blow. Though he had intervened to help her and had brought her here, had rescued her, partly, from her sister's hate, still the malevolence in his red eyes was hard for her to tolerate. As in the clearing below Citadel Umbra, she

felt powerless to move, and the fingernail, as it descended from her face, seemed once again to uncover her and leave her bare.

"All die," he whispered. "Hot blood mixing in shadow and black mud, except for you. This is what Araithe tells me. Why is that? Tell me why."

On one side of the smoky guardroom, lit only by a plate of charcoal on an iron tripod, the drow captain stood with the priestess behind him, the young handmaiden of Lolth. With his left hand he held her by the forearm. On the other side of the stone

room, Amaranth and the wolf and the watersoul genasi, and Lukas also holding onto her forearm, until she drew her arm away.

"Too late," whispered the drow. "Araithe sent me to bring you back. To bring you back and kill the rest, press their blood out in the dark. Because I have not done this, do not think I pity you."

The little room was full, but he spoke as if it were empty save for him and her, as if even the whimpering girl he held fast by the forearm did not exist. "Let their blood flow in the dark," he repeated. Then he smiled. Or at

least, he twisted his black, thin lips in an approximation. “Lady, the citadel is not a bright or healthy place for you. I believe you will not thrive there or be glad. You would not shine there like a jewel or a seam of silver.”

Over the past hour, Amaranth had come to much the same conclusion. Standing erect in the low, smoky room, she felt too exhausted to be frightened. She had left her refuge on Moray Island with mixed feelings; part anger and sulky spite, to see her work there disparaged and destroyed. Part longing for home, and to be

with her own kind. Part heartsick with the transience of mortal creatures. And partly from a sense of frustrated destiny, which she had used to muffle any fears she had for her reception.

Now her fears were more than realized, and now she had felt the sting of her sister's malice, her nephew's selfishness and bloated arrogance. Yes, they had humiliated her and shamed her, and she had found the experience … exhilarating. Frozen in place, she had willed Lukas to look at her, and he had turned his stupid mortal eyes away. But

maybe it took shame to set her free. Cheeks burning, she had willed them all to look at her, while at the same time she was thinking: Is this all you have for me? I am Princess Amaranth leShay, the Yellow Rose of Sarifal, untouched by mortal laws.

In this way and in this way only she was like the other members of her family. When they were struggling and scrounging in the grass under her feet, she had felt her power over them. For ten years in the wilderness she had built a fortress of virtue and rectitude, and the gods had plundered it, knocked

down her walls. Now she was home.

She said nothing, but she raised her chin, staring down the drow captain, her cheeks red with shame. For the first time she felt the permanence of her endless life, in which one day or ten years was as nothing. These other creatures in the room with her, they were as shadows in the smoky air.

If the drow understood anything of what she was thinking, he gave no sign. He grimaced, hissed, and expelled his breath as if in pain. “By the black Lady Araushnee, I fear you. Weak as you are, weak as

dry dust, I believe I see in you the fall of leShay. Already the knights of the Llewyrr have left the boundaries of Synnoria. They are riding through the darkness and the light, hoping to find you and put you on the crystal throne in Karador. But my pact is not with you. It is with your sister and Prince Araithe. Tell me, if you were queen of Sarifal, would you let me bring my people from the Underdark, my daughters and my sons, to walk under the night sky? Would you let us build a temple to our goddess here in Winterglen?”

The princess did not lie. For half

a minute the drow captain studied her face, before he stuck out his black tongue. “I did not think so. Ten years ago Araithe sent me to bring you back, because you had almost come of age to serve his purpose. I lost you in the highlands at Crane Point. Too late to fix that. If I give you to the prince, if I give you to the queen, they will kill each other—no mistake. Same result. And then what happens to me? Araithe has promised me Winterglen and the citadel, all of it, when he moves to Karador after his mother’s death.

“Not that he longs for that,” he

continued moodily, lowering his head, staring into the glowing brazier. “He would destroy anyone who touched a hair of her head. He is a dutiful … son, that way.”

His voice, despite its harshness, was so soft that Amaranth had to strain to hear. In these last murmurings, she imagined it had passed beyond the range of human ears, and that he spoke to her only or to the wolf. Now he spoke a little louder, “Aah, I must send you away. Or I will take back the head of one of you and say the rest escaped. No, but what a failure that would be. Ah—no.” His face

twisted with frustration. “All of you must leave me. All of you must go. My daughter will show you—Amaka will show you the way. Go to Synnoria, to Chrysalis, and find your knights, and raise your rebellion. That is the only chance for you. Mark you, when I meet you again, and lead the dark elves into battle, I will do your family’s bidding, I will promise you. Whatever they ask, I will do it. If they want you cut apart so they can share you, that is what I will do. Heart on one side, bowels on the other. Living head on one side, living womb on the other. I will

avenge years of failure. Remember that. Remember what I say, if in the future you are tempted to hope for better things. The drow will always choose the winning side."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In Synnoria

But in Harrowfast, in the mountains above Synnoria, in a council chamber cut out of the rock, things weren't going well. Irritated and distracted, Suka lounged on a stone seat that had been carved for someone many times her size, one of a semicircular row that ran along the west side of the chamber, away from the action, yet not so far away that she felt comfortable falling asleep on the yellow

cushions, or picking her nose, or anything like that. Below her, at the bottom of the stepped floor, Ughoth and Marabaldia sat at a stone table, side by side, representing the fomorians. Opposite them were Lord Mindarion and several other knights from Chrysalis. Mindarion himself, though he occupied the seat of honor, was scarcely part of the proceedings, because of the damage he had sustained in the fight with the darkwalker; he slumped in his chair with his eyes closed, a pained expression on his face. In Suka's opinion this was less

a product of his wound, and more of a reaction to the absurdity of the eladrin representatives who spoke for him, or claimed to. From time to time he raised his long, pale fingers to his cheek and pushed away a lock of his pale hair, struck now with gray, Suka perceived for the first time.

His wound was not visible. It showed itself in weakness and lassitude, as if he no longer cared about the project for which, after all, he had committed his life, and betrayed his sovereign, and entered into these negotiations with the ancient enemies of his race. He no

longer looked as if he gave two shits about any of that, in Suka's opinion. No, she guessed, his thoughts were far away, trembling upon some leafy bow in Synnoria, overlooking the sweet waters of the lake, while up here in the rocks these other morons made a mess of things.

Of all races in the mortal realm, the eladrin were the worst diplomats. No one else even came close. Orcs would have been more successful. But the eladrin were incapable of hiding the contempt they felt for everyone unlucky enough not to be one of them. They

treated Captain Rurik as men might treat a chimpanzee with whom they'd had to share a meal. With the fomorians they were even worse, forever rolling their eyes, fanning their noses, or holding up their scented handkerchiefs, while at the same time fumbling with each other for the farthest seat, and mumbling about the lack of fresh air. Lord Askepel, who had taken over the negotiations, seemed incapable of grasping his own position—that he had embarked on a revolt that had no hope of succeeding without help. Nor had he grasped that of his potential

allies, the fomorians were motivated only by a sense of grievance, because of the injury done to their noble and generous and sentimental princess. As for Captain Rurik and the Ffolk, there was no reason for them to be part of this without significant concessions, and freedom from the bondage of a hundred years.

No—Lord Askepel thought it was their duty to help him. He thought they would rejoice at the chance, as lesser beings who had been given an opportunity to improve themselves. It would be unnatural and perverse for them to expect

anything in return.

Bored and uncomfortable, Suka hugged her shins, nearly toppling out of her stone niche—her feet didn't reach the floor. The room was vaguely circular, lit and ventilated through long shafts to the outside air, which was not enough to dispel a damp, dim chill. She rubbed her hands together, peering down at the four eladrin on one side of the table, dressed in their ornate armor of gilded scales, expressions of haughty disdain poisoning their regular yet vacant features, coloring their beardless cheeks, while Captain Rurik

walked back and forth along one side of the chamber, hands behind his back. Unarmed, he wore his battered mail and leather jerkin, strode in his seaboots, and showed every sign of impatience, an emotion the eladrin maybe couldn't even feel. Maybe you lose that capacity after all those years of contemplating … whatever—other people's labor and invention, mostly, she supposed.

Now Askepel was talking about Princess Amaranth, a subject Suka, if she'd been consulted, would have advised him to avoid like the plague—don't even bring it up.

Was he stupid, or just utterly without a clue? That was a question too deep to resolve here.

"It gives me pain to admit it," he persevered, "especially to outsiders, and to the … people gathered here together in … fellowship. But I myself have noticed over the past sixty years that the current situation is intolerable, and the leShay, the proudest, most ancient race on Gwynneth Island, the tree, so to speak, from which we all have sprung, is now increasingly infirm. It must be pruned in order to regain its health. Fortunately, there

is a perfect flower.”

Translation (thought Suka): Ordalf is a whack job, and her son is worse, and they both have to be put down like rabid rats before they wreck the whole joint. But luckily, this demonic family of degenerate psychotics has managed to push out one final diseased excrescence, to whom I’m hoping you’ll swear loyalty for the next thousand years.

Good luck with that, Suka thought. She watched the muscles work in Captain Rurik’s jaw under his gray beard. She watched the livid scar that split his lips and

made him ugly. “She is not my queen,” he said. “Some of the Ffolk will go with King Derid in Alaron. Some already have. I have no love for him, and neither do any of the Northlanders who fight with me. But I’d prefer ten thousand of him to another one of the leShay. Let her be queen of Moray Island and the wild beasts. If she sets foot on Gwynneth Island, then she is my enemy, no less than her sister …”

A short man, he was scarcely taller standing up than Askepel sitting down. But he glowered at him and put his fist on the stone table, where there were documents

waiting for his signature—they would wait a long time, Suka decided. The only hope was to defer the whole problem, as long as Lady Amaranth was stuck on Moray with no one to bring her home. For the first time she wished that Lukas might fail, and that the *Sphinx* was at the bottom of the sea, though all her crew, of course, safe and sound—of course. No, but with all her heart she wished Lukas was sitting next to her, his long legs outstretched, and she could lean over and whisper how Lord Askepel, as he wrinkled his fine nose, looked very much as if the

Northlander captain had farted in his face, and he was trying to overlook the insult, because of his superior ancestry and breeding and long experience. Marabaldia was speaking now, her voice soft and melodious—no one was listening. At that same moment, as if on cue, two more eladrin knights appeared at the entrance to the chamber, supporting between them a creature Suka had heard of but never seen—a winged elf, a hairless, wizened creature with a torso scarcely larger than a baby's, who chose that moment to announce, as his escort brought

him down over the shallow tiers of steps and through the double line of solemn marble figures, that Lady Amaranth had been seen in Winterglen with several other refugees from Moray Island, at Citadel Umbra in the presence of the queen and prince. This was supposed to be good news, Suka guessed, or at least all the eladrin thought so. A melancholy bunch, they rarely smiled, but they were smiling now. Finding herself ignored, Marabaldia had stopped speaking. Ughoth had risen to his feet, an angry expression on his face. And when Suka looked

around, she saw Rurik had gone.

Suka jumped down from her seat. “Who was with her?” she cried, not because she thought anyone would answer her. None of the eladrin had said a word to her since Mindarion had been struck down. Tall creatures, they could not bend their necks to look. “Was Captain Lukas there with her, and a genasi water-soul?” she said, as if to herself.

Marabaldia heard her, or at least she turned, and gave her such a sweet, sad expression, and shot her such a beam of pure light out of her eye, that Suka couldn’t bear it.

With her closed fist she pounded on the head of a marble monkey that guarded the steps out of the chamber.

"Was there a man?" Suka asked, running the comb of her fingers through her pink hair. "Was there a golden elf?" Then she ran up the steps and out into the air.

Soon it would be evening. In the rocky bowl in the mountains, Ffolk slaves were lighting the oil lamps in their alabaster lanterns, hung suspended from iron chains in the hands of stone giants standing at intervals around the rim—dwarfwork, like all of this high

perch, hacked out of the mountain by a race now lost, or vanished, or dispersed. In the light of the setting sun, Suka clambered up the steps to the lookout point, a causeway leading to a pinnacle of rock with a view south over Synnoria, or where Synnoria must be, hidden underneath a layer of mist and cloud so thick the red sunlight seemed to reflect from it as if from something solid, the bottom of a copper pot, perhaps.

Once only, at dawn, had the mist split and allowed her to peer down into the valley, steep slopes and enormous trees that, still in

shadow, were pricked with lights too diamond-hard to be from fire. The woodlands fell away south, and at their edge Suka could see the lakeshore, and the lake water like another layer of milky cloud, and the crag in the middle with the city on its crest, a murmuring of light, and then the mist had covered everything again.

Suka climbed up onto the parapet. Rurik was there. She had seen his broad back, covered in black, seamed hide and mail, as he bent over the rock to spit. Now he kept his place, his beard jutting out over the abyss, not turning as she

sat down cross-legged on the outer edge of the parapet. She felt agitated and despondent at the same time.

"Why are you here?" grunted the captain.

"I'm sorry."

"Why? For the collapse of my hopes? I had a deal with Mindarion. We had a deal."

Suka wondered if that was going too far. Mindarion also, as she remembered, had been interested in the lost princess of the leShay.

"Together," continued Rurik, "we could be in Karador in four days. Who would resist us? Men and

fomorians, and the knights of Synnoria, of Llewyrr. Ten thousand or more all together—who would resist us? A few hundred eladrin still loyal to the leShay. A few thousand of the drow. They could never face us—we would drive them back into their holes. And then my people would be free."

How long, Suka asked herself, had he been fighting for this, only to have it fall apart at the last moment? "But …?" she prompted.

"But they won't take our help." Rurik scratched angrily at his beard. From this distance Suka could see the rash over his cheeks,

and the ingrown hairs along his neck. “Finally, Askepel won’t fight with us, or the fomorians either. Because if he did, he would have to admit we were his equals, that he needed us, and he would rather die. He would rather fail—that’s the strange thing. He would rather ride over the Cambro Ridge, and down through the sacred grove, all of them in their gilded armor, riding their white stallions, the sunset glinting on their lances, all of it. They’d rather ride down to the lakeshore and be cut to pieces by the drow, as if life were a poem or a ballad or a play—the last ride of

the Llewyrr. They'd rather do that than succeed. Why is that, do you think?"

Cross-legged on her perch, in the last of the light, Suka reached her cupped hand over the edge of the stone parapet, as if she could drink the cloud below her, or stir it into a whirlpool. Search me, she thought. But in fact she had a theory, which coincided, in part, with what the captain said next.

"It's because they live too long," he murmured into his beard. "It puts them three-quarters in love with their own deaths. In the middle of their lives, it's the only

romance they have left. They flirt with it, reach out to kiss it and pull back. The gods only know what it feels like to be them, alive for centuries." Again he spat over the side, then stood up straight and shrugged. "Are you coming? I'll speak to Mindarion once more, or try to. Then at first light I'm for the coast—no one will stop me. You'll see. They'll be glad to see me go. It will be a relief to them, even if it costs them their victory. You?"

"I have no choice," she said, meaning she would follow whatever trace or rumor she could find of Captain Lukas and the rest,

to Citadel Umbra now. Perhaps Marabaldia would help her.

Rurik shrugged. “Or else they will do nothing at all,” he said, still talking about the knights of Synnoria. He was no longer interested in her. She looked out over the surface of the clouds.

South and east, about a mile away, a winged shadow made its turn, a bird, she thought. It skimmed toward them like a skipping stone, diving sometimes into the first layer of the clouds. As it approached, Suka wondered vaguely if perhaps it was much larger than a bird, much farther

away. Her mind was on other things. It wasn't until she heard a sharp profanity from Rurik that she turned and saw the creature had shot up from underneath the clouds and now hovered above them, a wyvern—pale belly, whiplike tail, night wings, long snatching jaws. It drove them back along the narrow causeway into the deserted stone piazza. Everyone was at supper in the great hall, where the Ffolk slaves were playing music. Incongruously, Suka heard a piece of it, a little wisp of delicate cadences, just as the beast rose to dive at them again. On the exposed

stones of the courtyard, flickering with lantern light, they were sitting ducks. The wyvern, neck outstretched, rounded a stone column and dived toward them, screaming its harsh, airless cry.

"This way," said Rurik. A narrow gate led to the side, and a stone staircase covered with moss and crumbling with age. It was different from the shaped blocks of the dwarf ramparts; shoddy, broken steps that nevertheless led quickly down, first through an almost vertical cascade of granite boulders, then through a landscape of clinging vines and rhododendron

trees, their pink flowers wet with mist, which soon drenched Suka as she labored down, pausing finally under the knotted trunks of the cloud forest, while the baffled reptile screamed overhead.

"What is this place?" breathed Suka, though she knew. The mist beaded on her skin. The air smelled sweet, a cloying fragrance. Fireflies the size of Suka's fist blundered through the canopy, each one followed by a trail of glowing mirror-moths. "Oh—shit."

"Just the border," Rurik whispered. They stood in the middle of the leaf-meal path, which

wound away southward into the thicker woods. “We’re here for a minute, and then we’ll climb back up,” he said, as if for someone else’s benefit—it was too late. Three eladrin stepped out of the trees, blocking their way back. They were dressed in silver caps and silver-scale armor, and they carried swords. The long, straight blades glowed in the shadow.

“Slaves,” said one, his voice melodious, and full of gentle melancholy. “I am Lord Talos-claere. You have come into the land of Synnoria. Who is your master? Does he follow you? Or

has he gone ahead?”

“We came by accident,” murmured Rurik. “We’ll be going now, if you stand aside.”

“Alas,” said Talos–claere, his voice genuinely sorrowful. “I cannot allow it. Our land is tainted now. These things take but a moment, a single misstep to insult and corrupt the spirits of this wood. As you walked under the sacred trees, we heard them crying out. How can you make amends? It is not possible. Not for such as you. Not through words or deeds. I am so sorry. It is not possible.”

Captain Rurik stood, feet spread,

grinding his teeth from side to side, a murderous expression on his face. The livid scar bisected his lips. “How, then?”

He should tell them who he was, Suka thought. He should say he is Mindarion’s friend, in negotiation with Lord Askepel, that all this was a misunderstanding. But then she realized he had no desire to make excuses for himself.

“My lords,” he said, “from what you say, and from your stern demeanor, I can only assume my life is forfeit, because as you say my foul breath has polluted this holy air, and my disgusting

footsteps have polluted this sacred ground, just as surely as if I had defecated onto Corellon Larethian's shining hair, or pissed into his open mouth, or wiped my arse upon his beard. If we have inadvertently strayed across your border a few yards so as to save our worthless lives—it is no excuse. Whatever I must give, I give it gladly. Perhaps my blood will offer some small recompense." He held out his empty hands.

Talos-claere blinked. "The speech of your people is vulgar and uncouth," he said. "What's done is done. The harmony of this forest,

the fabric of this threatened space you have both touched and marred. I honor you for your self-sacrifice, but I fear it will not accomplish what we hope." He stepped forward, his handsome face empty of expression, and if he were capable of hearing any irony or sarcasm in Rurik's words, he showed no sign. Just as soon try to decipher the jokes of a dog, or a frog on a lily pad, Suka imagined, though even a child could tell when a dog was growling or might spring, or that Captain Rurik, frustrated over the failure of his hopes, was going to kill them if he

could, these strange, apologetic, contemptuous, glittering fey.

As guests of the council, they had had to give up their weapons at the door. But Suka, as was her custom, had retained several small knives that she kept secreted around her body. One of these, now, she grasped behind her back.

“Your blood will pollute our glade the more,” continued Talos-claere. “If you had come properly with your master, under his protection, then perhaps I could have overlooked your crime. But come. It is nothing. I only mean to mark you, to cut my mark into your

cheek, so all men might recognize what you have done. Then I will lead you to the signal oak to send a message to your lord, so as to reclaim his errant property. He also will be punished, because of the freedom he has granted you. What is his name?”

He had sheathed his sword, but had his own knife out, a long, slender, curving blade. He beckoned with his other hand, and his fingernails also, Suka noticed, were long and curved. He had no chance. He pointed south along the leaf-meal path, and Suka imagined a place of ritual punishment

among the smooth silver trunks of the aspens, their leaves trembling in sympathy, although she felt no wind. She imagined a glade among the trees, and wildflowers winking in the soft grass, and a spring of fresh, laughing water, coiling over an ancient block of stone that was itself carved with runes of (doubtless) mystic but inscrutable significance—he had no chance. Rurik also had kept a hidden blade, and as he passed the eladrin lord he gave a little cry, and stumbled against him. Horrified by his polluting touch, Talos-claere pulled back. A shadow of suspicion

clouded his beautiful face, and he looked down to see the knife inserted upward through the scales of his armor and pressed in to the hilt. Puzzled, he turned away, his hand drifting downward as if to stem the trickle of his golden blood. In the meantime Rurik had seized hold of his sword and dragged it from its scabbard, and when the second lord—slowly, delicately—moved to confront him, Rurik stabbed him through the groin then dragged the blade upward into his belly. The third, Suka cut down from behind.

They left the lords subsiding

there, expressions of astonishment disturbing their faces as they sank to their knees. They found the path upward, and Rurik threw the smoking sword among the rocks. “It hurts,” he said in explanation as they climbed up through the mist of the cloud forest. “Some kind of an electric charge.” Then they stood panting, out of breath. “Ah, that feels good,” he said. “I had forgotten. I hate killing a man, but the fey, it’s like stealing from the rich.” His eyes glittered with excitement, and Suka watched a flush appear along his weathered cheeks. “You’ve taken all they were

and all they'll be. A hundred thousand days apiece—as much as an entire company of men. Time's wasted—I've changed my plans. I'm gone tonight. Give them my regrets," he said, as they clambered up through the boulders to the gate.

Above the clouds the sky was dark, the sun had set, the wyvern had flown away. The lamps burned bright in their suspended lanterns. Suka saw no need to remind the captain she was also a fey, and would still be able to bear children when his bones were ash. "Are you coming with me?" he asked, wiping

the blood from his hands. “I’m for the coast. Me and my crew. We’ll ride through the night.”

She shook her head.

“That’s good. Suit yourself. There’ll be some consequences here. Blame me.”

She intended to, if it came to that. She shrugged, and shook her head. He turned, then stiff-walked over the open stones, still rubbing his hands.

Night had fallen, and there were stars. Hunching her shoulders against the chill, hands in her pockets, Suka found again the entrance to the council hall.

Torchlight cascaded through the open door. She paused at the cloakroom, washed her hands and face in the stone basin, and peered into the glass. She poked her tongue out at herself, flexed the dog's head tattoo, and scraped her teeth against the silver stud. She relieved herself in one of the stone stalls, left the cloakroom, and walked down the steps of the hall to where the dignitaries were still milling around, Marabaldia and Prince Ughoth among them. Hands in her pockets, pretending a casualness she didn't feel, the gnome sidled up to her stone seat,

and peered up at her broad, beaming face. “What’s going on?”

“I have news of your friends at Citadel Umbra,” Marabaldia told her. “I mean the man I saw with you at Caer Corwell, when they locked you up.”

Suka breathed deep. “That’s good,” she said. “But I don’t want to talk about it now.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Unquiet Dreams

They had gone on for hours, following the drow priestess Amaka until Lukas called a halt. Chilled, they lay down to rest in a dark cavern half a mile below the surface, and huddled together for warmth.

Or else that's what they should have done. Instead, each lay apart with his or her own thoughts. Gaspar-shen was the most comfortable because he did not feel the cold. He lay on his back, his

scimitar beside him, the energy lines throbbing blue and green across his chest. This is what he dreamed:

He had dived down deep below the surface of a black sea. Stroking through the inky dark, for a long time it made no difference if his eyes were open or shut. The water had a soft, creamy feel, such as he had felt in various southern seas, diving down into the pearl beds of Alamir, for example, through crusts of water always and ever more sweet, and differing from each other also in the minute fluctuations of texture and

temperature. But in his dream, as the water thickened around him, he saw deep below him a slash of light, a red fire burning at the bottom of the sea, like a vent or fissure to the center of Toril, though the water was still cool and getting colder. But when he reached that place he felt the world invert, and instead of descending he was now swimming up into the light, until he burst onto the surface in a shock of red spray and foam. And there was the light all around him, because he found himself in the harbor of a great city on fire, as perhaps Caer Corwell or

Caer Moray had burned in the old days, the barges set alight, the ships on fire at their docks, the air full of soot and smoke and sparks. In his dream he imagined the burning streets, the wooden houses on fire, and in the street of the pastry chefs the long bazaar with its canvas roofs blistering upward, and all the delicacies ruined, the marzipan melting, and the candied orange dripping from the charred tabletops into the gutters.

Amaka sat near him, hugging her knees and weeping. In an alcove

cut and shaped in the living rock, Lukas and Amaranth lay side by side, not touching. Before they had lain down, Lukas had imagined a moment of privacy, in the tender space of which he could have leaned toward her and reminded her of the battlements at Caer Moray, when they had stood together above the gate and watched Malar the Beastlord shamble toward them down the causeway. That night he had kissed her, and she had responded to his kiss, but if she remembered it she gave no sign.

She was not thinking of that

night. She turned onto her back. “Why did he let us go?” she asked, meaning the drow captain.

Lukas rolled onto his stomach, laid his cheek against the dry, cold sand. “It’s because you weaken any side you’re on,” he said, choosing his words. “Here, at Umbra, you divide Lady Ordalf and Prince Araithe, because they want you for different purposes. And you make their enemies strong, because they seek to free you. If the knights of Synnoria march on Karador, if they hope to succeed, it is because they’ve promised Captain Rurik they will put an end to the leShay,

and to human slavery on Gwynneth Island, in Sarifal. But Rurik will not fight for you.

"Lady," he continued, "This is your home, but there is nothing for you here. I will protect you if I can, but you must find a way to help yourself. What is it you desire, here?"

To Amaranth, his language and his voice sounded stilted and unreal. And what the drow captain had told her, that she should travel south through the Cambro Mountains, and meet the knights of Llewyrr, and fight with them against her sister and her nephew

(if it made sense to call him that) for the sake of the Yellow Rose of Sarifal—none of that sounded real either. But if not that, what then? Nothing was real in this underground cavern, where at the limit of her senses she could hear the drop of water upon stone. She had sacrificed her brother Coal, she had abandoned Moray to the Beastlord, and for what?

But at the same time that, full of despair, she asked herself this question, she remembered standing in the open glade below the tower while her sister and her nephew fought over her like dogs over a

bone—the exhilaration she had felt. On Moray Island the wolves and pigs had grown old and left her. And Lukas would grow old and leave her, in the blink of an eye. And even the elves and eladrin of Winterglen and Karador would grow old and frail and leave her. Only her family would be left, the ageless leShay, as permanent as the rocks and stones of Faerûn, speaking a language of emotion no one else, perhaps, could understand. What had her sister said? She had sent Captain Lukas to Moray to bring back not her, not Amaranth, but something spherical,

part of the whole. What could that be, if not some magic essence of herself, her own inviolable soul, caught as if in an alchemist's orb, as she had heard described by her professors when she was a child in the crystal city, in the lake? And perhaps her sister, tearing Amaranth's clothes away, only meant to remind her that the small moralities of men were not for her. And perhaps that was a hard lesson, unnatural, yet she must learn it if she truly hoped to find her path.

Farther away down the tunnel, beneath an outcropping of quartz, Eleuthra lay in her wolf's shape at first, comfortable and warm. But as she dreamed, she regained her humanity, and her wolf's skin pulled away from her until she shivered and rubbed her naked arms. In her dream she saw the daemonfey above her, not stunted and maimed as when she had last seen him, but in his glory, his high-arched, sharp-spined leather wings curling above him, his fat tail hanging down between his legs, his skin shining and golden, his eyes black and red. Fire and blood in

the black pool.

Come to me, he said, his voice rich and commanding and seeming to come from somewhere inside her—she was looking at his ridged black lips, and they didn't move.

She woke with the image in her mind. But how could she go to him? He was dead. He had died saving the lives of his companions. Miserable, she let herself sink down again into her beast's body. Curling her spine into a circle, laying her face onto her thigh, she tried to discover a little warmth and comfort, and chase after a beast's furtive dreams, run them down like

prey. But they eluded her, scattered away, and even the one she succeeded in cornering turned on her at the last, desperate, its eyes black and red.

Lukas sat up, stretched his arms, rubbed the crick out of his neck, and buckled on his sword. “We must go,” he said. He had no doubt the leShay would chase them for Amaranth’s sake, and if they could not use the drow, then they would use others to come after them, Ffolk slaves or else the fey.

“Show us the way,” he said.

Shivering, Amaka got to her feet. Little was left of the thoughtless, delighted girl who had roused them in the temple of Lolth the evening before. She scratched her arms and sniffed at the black air.

"Bring us south through Cambro to the surface," he said. "Once out of Winterglen you can leave us and go back. Three days and you'll be home. Is there food along the way?"

"There is food," she said, her eyes wide and nervous.

The others had roused themselves. Lady Amaranth held up her lamp, and by its light they could see the

walls of the cavern rise above them, the smooth, shaped blocks of stone, quarried by dwarves in the old days. Over time, some of the masonry had fallen, and rivulets of water had stained the limestone face and carved it into copper, bronze, and mud-colored stripes, tinged now in the blue glow.

Lukas watched Gaspar-shen returning to the circle of light, the energy lines snaking over his chest and shoulders—he had gone to relieve himself in a corner of the wall. The wolf arched her back and thrust out her forelegs. She curled her lips and growled softly as the

genasi swaggered up. “Yes, Captain?”

“You’ll take the leShay princess southeast to the far coast, to Kingsbay. From there to Snowdown across the straits, and then to Alaron. The druid will go with you. She is an emissary of the king.”

“And you?”

“I’ll leave you at the sacred grove. I’ll go find the gnome at Corwell, if I can.”

Gaspar-shen wrinkled his forehead. If he’d had eyebrows, he would have drawn them together. From long exposure to human beings, he had begun to mimic

their expressions. He was not happy, clearly.

He said: “On the island of Xxiphu, in the Sea of Fallen Stars, they make a pastry in the shape of a bug. The wings are spun sugar. But inside, if you split the mille-feuille thorax, there is nothing but a nauseating greenish goo.”

Lukas turned his head. He watched Lady Amaranth push the red hair from her face. “I don’t want to hear it. You’ll do as I say.”

They had miles to argue, and had best be started. He turned to the drow priestess. “Bring us to the gap. To Cambrent Gap.”

She stared at him. All the light was gone from her face, except where the whites of her eyes were touched with pink. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, come with me.”

As if dazed, she staggered to the south end of the cavern, where the ceiling slanted down. Where they had camped, it was too high to see. But now, cracked and fissured, it bulged down until its wet, rough, uneven surface was only a few feet above Lukas’s head. By contrast, the floor was laid with hexagonal stone tiles, polished and discolored by the tramp of many feet.

“What about there?” Lukas said.

“That looks more direct.” He indicated another way, an arched tunnel at the cavern’s southern end, higher and broader and straighter than the path Amaka had chosen. An army could have passed under the brick vault.

Amaka shuddered. “That’s the fomorian road, now. Have you seen them? Giants—grease-colored skins, and they make a stink. A hundred of them together could come through here. And their eyes …”

“What?”

“They kill you with a look, if they come close.”

Her step was unsteady, her speech slurred and halting—Lukas wondered if her own father had somehow poisoned her. But then she glanced at him and glanced away, and he thought that she was merely afraid, too afraid to function. What sense did that make? She was a drow. These corridors should have no power over her. The Underdark had been her home.

If anything they were too shallow still. The way she led them, the tiles continued for a quarter mile or so then gave out. The path sloped down precipitously, a curling spiral

of rough steps hacked out of the rock. No dwarf had shaped this stone. Lady Amaranth lit the way, but even without her the passage would not have been completely dark, because of the phosphorescent fungus on many of the rocks, where the drow had cultivated a pale glow to steer them up and down.

It occurred to Lukas how foolish they were being, to trust in this uncertain guide. “This goes too deep,” he said. “We’ll take the other way. We’ll take our chances with the fomorians. Anyway, I saw no one—”

“No,” said Amaka, seizing him by the wrist. She was in front, leading the way down, but now she turned and grabbed hold of both his hands, as if in supplication. “The leShay will catch you there. Already they will have sent their soldiers. But they’ll never dare to follow you down here. And if they did, one man could hold the passage. It’s so narrow.”

Lukas hesitated.

“They go to the same place!” she said. “Cambrent Gap, just as you wanted. I swear to you on the Shrine of Araushnee’s Virginity, before she was abandoned long

ago.”

What kind of oath was that? Lukas thought. The dark elves’ goddess was the biggest slut in the entire pantheon, and that was saying a great deal. This curving staircase reeked of them, a sweet yet poisonous scent that reminded him of night-blooming jasmine, which his stepmother had grown in her kitchen garden.

And yet he still found himself climbing downward through the rocks. Why was that? Simple—the girl begged him. Her beautiful dark face was streaked with tears, impossible to resist. She needed his

help. It would have been cowardly to turn away, abandon her for something as ephemeral and uncertain as rational decisions or good sense. This was why, Lukas told himself, it was absurd for him to be or to ever have been captain of this crew. This was why the *Sphinx* was at the bottom of the sea. And yet it was why the others followed him without a murmur of dissent, why they clambered single file after him; first Amaranth, holding up her lamp, then Gaspar-shen, and finally the druid, now in her human shape, barefoot, dressed in her wolf skin.

Besides, he told himself. There was another reason he allowed the girl to pull him downward. All his life he had heard stories of the Underdark, the system of enormous caverns and limitless tunnels that founded the entire continent of Faerûn, puncturing the rotten rock and causing sinkholes, cave-ins, and whirlpools on the surface—a system part excavated and part natural, inhabited by hundreds of thousands of creatures who never saw the light, entire races and civilizations. Lower down, Lukas imagined, he might find dark cities and monstrous farms of bloated

vegetables and pale livestock. He might find subterraneous rivers and even seas, where the fishermen lit torches to lure enormous purblind creatures from the deep.

For a moment he had a crazy notion that he could raise up Lady Amaranth to rule here as a queen, in a black and shadow palace lit with crystal lanterns. What else? Did it really make sense to bring her penniless to Alaron? To do what—work in a shop for a thousand years and more? Perhaps she and Suka could open a tattoo parlor in Llewellyn Harbor or Callidyrr: *Feywild Dreaming*, or

m a y b e *Madame leShay's Skin Boutique & Body Shoppe*, or maybe even *The Rose of Sarifal*—whatever, as Suka herself might say. She wouldn't want to spend even remotely that much time with another female, in any case. Two weeks was about her limit, as Lukas had learned on board the *Sphinx*. Though of course Lukas himself would be long dead, a pleasant thought under those circumstances.

The way broadened and the ceiling rose above them, beyond the princess's light. Every step they took, Amaka seemed more

terrified. She had her hand on Lukas's wrist, and she pulled him onward, while at the same time she muttered words that seemed ridiculous to him for a drow priestess, a handmaid of the Queen of the Demonweb Pits, "Ah, Goddess, never to see the sun again or walk under the stars, never to feel the wind on my face or the grass under my feet …"

As they moved farther into this new cavern, Lukas would have welcomed a little less wind in his face. He didn't know what she was complaining about. They had climbed down into a new circle

where the air was hot and humid and full of grit. Up ahead, fire burned at the entrance to another tunnel, a line of flickering red flame on the surface of the rock. Sulfurous gas escaped from a wide vent.

Beside the entrance to this farther tunnel, the stone had been worked—a statue, one collapsed and broken, one whole, on either side of the red entrance. Amaka pulled Lukas forward, but he resisted, and freed his hand with a twist. He looked back toward the narrow defile behind him, where Gaspar-shen stood with his scimitar drawn,

and then to the other dark niches in the cavern's walls—grottoes, or else the entrances to other tunnels in the porous rock. Flames flickered in some of them, or else a faintly glowing haze.

Lukas smiled and shook his head. "I'm not going in there."

The statue on one side was a knight in armor, his head bowed, his back against the living rock, his sword held like a cross in front of him, the blade between his hands. He was bareheaded, and his features were noble, though eroded, perhaps, by the same constant wind that filled Lukas's

nose with powdery sand. On the other side only the base was left, a reptilian shape with powerful legs and claws, perhaps a dragon or a basilisk.

Lukas put up his hands. “I’m not going in there,” he said again. “We’ll go back up, take the fomorian road.”

He already knew he had been played. It wasn’t the first time. But as he looked at Amaka’s desperate face, he wondered if she’d done this thing against her will. “Please …” she faltered, as her red eyes darted wildly from one entrance to another. Lukas drew his sword.

Lady Amaranth and Eleuthra stood behind him, the druid still in her human shape. The princess was holding her lamp high. “Douse the light,” he said, too late. They were surrounded by the drow swordsmen, who had stepped forward from the niches and wormholes in the rock.

He held up his own sword, wishing for a moment that the Savage stood with him. Then they’d have had a chance. He smiled, held out his hand toward Amaka, and made a little bow, while at the same time he looked past her toward the tunnel’s mouth, where a

dark figure stepped forward from between the statues, an unarmed woman, her white hair glistening pink in the red light. “Give your father my thanks,” she said to Amaka. “I knew he would not disappoint us.”

Now she came out into the brighter glow, and he could see her face. She was smaller than many of her race. She was beautiful, like all the dark elves, but with a haunted, used, imperious expression—she had none of Amaka’s freshness even in despair. Her pink hair was streaked with black and gray and rust. Lukas imagined she held some

kind of cold magic in her hands, as she moved her fingers in a practiced gesture. “I am—no, you don’t need to know my name. I am the guardian of this sacred place.” Then she threw back her head in a false, simpering laugh. “Lady,” she said to Amaranth, “we are pleased we have been chosen to receive you. Almost we had given up hope.”

Another gesture with her long, painted fingernails, and seven of the drow stood away from the others.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Knights of Llewyrr

In the council chamber at Harrowfast, Suka said to Marabaldia, “I think we should get away from here. Captain Rurik has already escaped with all his Ffolk. He rode away while you were talking because there is no point to these negotiations. And without Rurik, this is not your fight.”

This was measured speech, for her. Inside she felt a certain urgency.

There was a circular open space at the bottom of the council chamber's sloping well, a raised stone dais, and on top of it a long stone table. Suka stood by Marabaldia's heavy chair, her head below the level of the table's surface. Doubtless it was strewn with important papers, which were out of sight to her. "Let the knights of Llewyrr retake Karador. Let them put their lost princess on the throne. They will not welcome you there when it is done, or thank you for your help."

The fomorian princess and Lord Ughoth had been speaking

privately, their heads together across the table, their whispering voices inaudible. Suka felt like a child at her friend's knee, or perhaps a little dog jumping up and down. She heard her bark turn frantic. "We've got to leave," she said.

Eladrin soldiers had come into the hall. They were nosing around the entrance. Suka saw Marabaldia's hand come down—the princess, lately, had gotten into the habit of touching her, stroking her hair, which was soft and fine in comparison to her own. I swear to the gods I'll bite her thumb, Suka

thought. Then she ducked under the stone tabletop and crossed to where Lord Mindarion was sitting unacknowledged by the others, slumped back in his chair. His eyes were closed, and a yellow-haired eladrin woman sat with him, fussing over him, rubbing some kind of cream into his beardless cheek. Her name was Altaira, and she was his daughter, or granddaughter, or great-granddaughter.

"My lord," said Suka in her least impudent and most servile tone, but the woman—clothed all in white and yet with embroidered

patterns on her collar in rainbow-colored thread (gnomes' work, Suka suggested to herself, gnome *slaves'* work, because these people were too lazy and spoiled to lift a gods-damned finger)—interrupted.

"Hush," she said, in a tone both fragile and superior, "don't disturb him. He is far away."

I would so like to join him, Suka thought, flicking her dog bone stud against her front teeth, while at the same time glancing behind her at the soldiers talking together along the upper circle of the hall. "The shadow walker hurt him," said Altaira, her hand fluttering over

Mindarion's fine, high, effeminate cheeks, which were (it was true) ashen and gray, even in the light of the oil lanterns and the candles flickering behind their alabaster screens. "He has turned inward. He will linger like this for many years. He will not talk to us again, if I know anything."

"Well, then, we're done," said Suka, this time to Marabaldia and Ughoth who had gotten up from their stone chairs to stand over her, expressions of indulgence on their enormous faces. "Princess," she said, "please let us leave this place. We can go north on our own, to

Cambrent Gap and then beyond, below Citadel Umbra—that's the way, isn't it, to your own kingdom?"

"Kingdom …" said Marabaldia, smiling at her prince. "I suppose you could call it that. But—"

"Please," interrupted Suka. "I don't think there's time." She glanced behind her, where Lord Askepel and a few of the others were talking with the soldiers, their faces grave and severe, and as easy to read as children's primers. "We must go," she said. "Please, come with me."

Again she imagined Marabaldia

might bring her hand down and run her fingers through her hair. Something had happened between the fomorian princess and her boyfriend. Something had changed in the last day, as a result of which Marabaldia had become less able to focus on the task at hand, and tended to treat Suka as if she were a child or a pet, scratching at her head, admiring the rosiness of her complexion and the delicacy of her porcelain skin, et cetera—screw that. If the fomorian was feeling so maternal now, maybe it had to do with her own change of circumstances. Her distorted,

bloodshot, golden eye beamed down like a searchlight, or like a fumbling, gathering hand that was trying to comfort the little gnome and calm her down. But Suka would not be consoled, because, objectively, they were completely reamed—she twisted under the descending palm and took off across the translucent tiles of the central dais, lit from below now that it was night. She ran up through the tiers of cushioned stone banquettes and statues of griffons and other beasts even more exotic and extinct, trying to reach the door before Lord Askepel forbade

it.

Too late. Below them in the guardhouses under Harrowfast, a company of fomorian soldiers were doubtless drinking and playing knucklebones, bored to tears, together with an honor guard of cyclopses, which Lord Ughoth had brought up from the Underdark. Here in the council chamber no weapons were permitted. Six fomorian knights sat dozing among the seats, but now they roused themselves as a dozen or so armed eladrin came down the graded steps toward the stone table. Askepel was with them.

Immediately Suka turned and, hands in pockets, sauntered down toward Marabaldia again, whistling the refrain of *Oh, Father Dear* as a kind of distress signal that she hoped the princess would recognize.

And sure enough, Marabaldia came to join her, and Ughoth came with Marabaldia, and the three of them watched uneasily as the eladrin stamped down, hands on their sword hilts, and some of them carrying heavy lances of the type known as giant-spits—a violation of etiquette and the clear protocol of the council chamber. Ughoth

raised his hand, and five of the fomorian guards retreated toward them down one of the empty side aisles, while the sixth (Suka was glad to see) stumbled upward toward the doors. They'd need the cyclopses, she guessed, before this was through.

Standing on the steps, where his head was not far below Ughoth's, Askepel began speaking. Immediately he confirmed Suka's fears. "Large sir and powerful madam, I bring you sour news, which could not fail to touch even a brute. Perhaps in your languages you do not easily possess such

abstract concepts as treachery or even loss, because you have so little. I do not say this is your fault. But with my kind it is not like that, because every pebble of Synnoria is as costly as one of your jewels. Every moment of every day contains experiences and sensations you could not even recognize, and for this reason foul murder is a crime among us, which is something you might not instinctively understand. Let me explain. Not one hour ago, not one mile from this place, and yet within the sacred border of Synnoria, three of our kin were

struck down and killed as they pursued their duties. Among them was the Marchlord Oemeril Talos–claere, my father's sister's son. Their perfumed blood was spilt upon the grass, yet even so my soldiers could detect another odor, or else a mix of odors: a Northlander and a gnome. The Northlander has already fled, which confirms his guilt. It only remains for you to surrender up this … person whom you have brought into our midst, to stand before the high wardens of Synnoria and answer for her crimes. If you had the noses for it,

you would be able to perceive, as I do now, the attar of my cousin's blood above her own rank smell."

Suka could see the eladrin's delicate nostrils flare as she stepped backward to Marabaldia's side. Not ten minutes before she had been irritated and frustrated at the giantess's condescension, her increasing habit to treat the gnome as if she were a child or a toy. But now she reached up to grab hold of Marabaldia's blue dress. She yanked importunately on the rich cloth, and then peered up into her friend's noble face, its pale purple skin touched with an angry cast of

red.

Marabaldia reached down to touch Suka's shoulder, a comforting, encompassing gesture, while at the same time the membrane over her evil eye slid open, and the surface of the eye itself bulged from the plane of her flat cheek.

Askepel put up his hand. "You will not coerce me with your sorcery," he said, and nothing more.

Whatever image Marabaldia had conjured to disarm him, the effect was instantaneous. He stood immobile, an expression of

disgusted rage on his smooth face. The rest of the eladrin drew their swords, and some had carried double-bladed axes down the steps, along with the giant spits; a dozen or so knights of Llewyrr, in silver fish-scale armor, white capes, and spiked helmets. Ughoth lifted up his hands palm out, as if in a gesture of surrender, then drove his naked fist into the face of one of the eladrin and knocked the lance out of his grasp. The others grabbed at him. Eleven feet tall, he looked like a man wrestling or playing with a knot of boys, buffeting them about their heads

with slaps of his great hands. Even now he wasn't trying to kill them.

The hall filled up with soldiers. Marabaldia had slipped Askepel's sword out of its sheath. It looked slight as a poker in her big fist. Two fomorians had already fallen, hewn down on the steps before they could reach the dais. Their dark blood exploded out of them. At the top of the hall, a third was on his knees.

Suka kept one of her secret knives in the crease of each hand. Standing in back of him, for a moment she considered whether she should cut down Askepel as he

stood helpless, cut him across his hamstrings—no, she wouldn't. She wouldn't do that again. Already she'd disgusted herself by what she'd done in Synnoria, the unnecessary foolishness that had started all this, and that now seemed likely to get them killed, regardless of how she punished Askepel for insulting her. It wasn't as if he'd had no cause.

The three remaining guardsmen had come down to stand together with Ughoth and Marabaldia, and it was possible, Suka thought, that something could be done to save them all. She turned toward Lord

Mindarion, still slumped in his chair, and the Lady Altaira stood beside him, a horrified expression on her face, her almond-shaped eyes wide with terror and distress. Suka climbed onto the tabletop and ran down to stand on the useless documents in front of the old lord. She kicked some of the parchments off of the marble surface then leaned forward and grabbed hold of Mindarion's long nose, and forced her fingernails into his nostrils—not to hurt him, but only to wake him. The lady scarcely glanced at what she did. She stood leaning on the tabletop, her yellow

hair around her face. All around her there was chaos and fighting as the eladrin pushed down the steps, but Suka pushed her fingers into Mindarion's nose until he came awake under her hands.

A puzzled frown knotted his white brow, and he opened his bright eyes, blinked, and sat up, a smile of happy recognition on his lips—she'd let go of his nose by this time, and squatted back on her heels.

"My small friend," he murmured, "how I am happy to see your face. These others were boring me—" which was as far as he got before

he realized something terrible was happening. “Stop!” he shouted, leaping from his chair.

Ughoth was wounded, his shoulders drenched in his blue blood, but he had gotten hold of two of the giant-spits, one in each hand, and with them he did deadly damage to his attackers, his yellow eye blazing fire. Marabaldia, also, had skewered several of the Llewyrr knights, though Askepel unfortunately (in Suka’s modest opinion) had escaped.

“Stop!” shouted Mindarion again, as another of the unarmed fomorians went down. No one

heard him or paid attention. But he lifted up his hand and grabbed the gnome's shoulder, pulled her toward him, and told her to jump down and close the eyes of the sun, words which would have made no sense if Suka had not passed under the table earlier and seen its etched and painted twenty-foot-long underside, in contrast to its smooth marble top. She did as she was told, and had to duck to see the pattern that ran along the narrow ceiling; constellations, individual stars, the phases of the moon, and at the far end the likeness of the sun, its rays inset with gold, its

face a human face surrounded by shaggy yellow hair and a shaggy beard, its eyes wide and deranged. Suka jammed her fingers into them, and pulled down the clockwork metal lids, which shut with a click that was audible to her even in the noise of the assault.

One of the fomorians lay full length beside the dais, his purple face turned toward her, his lips wet with blood and distorted with death. He looked not so much like a creature who had ever been alive, but like a leather mask that had been painted to scare children at the solstice festival or the Feast

of the Moon—Suka closed her eyes. She was without hope. All of this was her fault.

But then she felt some movement, and opened her eyes to see the dais underneath the table start to turn, and the whole circular bottom of the council hall of Harrowfast turn like a screw, and sink down along a sloping, cylindrical shaft—slowly at first, and then at an increasing speed. Supported on iron wheels, revolving along a greased iron rail, the entire stone structure made a screeching noise and threw up sparks as it slid out of sight, away from the ring of enraged knights

and down into the darkness. Lord Mindarion stood by the spinning table as if directing the descent, Altaira by his side. Marabaldia and Ughoth, also, had retreated to the table as it began to sink, and the two remaining fomorian guardsmen, all of them protected by the dark. As they slid down the long decline, they looked up to see the faces of the eladrin peering down at them. The air was full of dust and cobwebs and the screech of iron brakes.

They slid down into the guts of Harrowfast, coming to rest finally on a bed of wrecked and rusted

machinery, a system of clockwork pistons and counterweights, which Suka imagined had once driven the stone plug up and down its screw-shaped track, unused, perhaps, since the dwarves had fled more than a hundred years before. Light had followed them down the shaft, but the fomorians' evil eyes were glowing now, spreading beams of yellow light around the chamber at the bottom of the track. They climbed down an iron ladder, Mindarion last of all.

"Sir," said Marabaldia, "once again you have saved our lives."

The old eladrin raised his hand to

silence her. “Come,” he said, and led the way into the darkness down a sloping tunnel that led northeast, as far as Suka could tell after turning in so many circles.

Ughoth carried the dead guardsman, but after a few minutes he laid him down by the side of the passage, then took his time in getting up, because he was hurt. The guardsmen were carrying the giant-spits. Ughoth was on his hands and knees, and then with a shake of his great head he pushed himself upright and rose unsteadily, supporting himself on the brick wall. Marabaldia watched

him, but there was nothing to be done; they had to move.

"Will they chase us?" she asked.

Mindarion smiled. "Eventually, but they hate the dark."

No lie. White-faced, Altaira looked around, not reassured, Suka guessed, by the fomorians' glowing eyes. Down here, the air was warm and stale and hard to breathe.

"We'll have to continue," said Marabaldia. "What about the others?" Meaning, Suka supposed, the company they had left in Harrowfast.

Out of breath, Ughoth smiled. Sweat dripped from his broad face.

“Give me a moment,” he insisted.

His cream-colored shirt was cut to ribbons over his enormous shoulders, but Suka suspected a deeper injury where he’d clasped his hand over his stomach, and his dark blood made a deeper stain. She wondered why Marabaldia didn’t go to him, didn’t touch him or ask him whether he was well, or make any of the small, useless, comforting gestures smaller folk might have made. Only she stood watching him with an unbearably rich expression on her face, heart-struck and proud, and hopeful and resigned all at the same time. And

the gnome realized also, inconsequentially, that they were still virgins to each other, even after all this time, and the extreme delicacy of the way they treated one another was evidence of a connection too deep for her to understand.

"Give me a moment," Ughoth said, and, gathering strength, he inflated his great lungs to their fullest, and pressed out a shuddering low note that rose in volume and resonance until the walls started to throb, and Suka and Altaira clasped their hands over their ears. It went on and on,

growing in power until Suka imagined it might dislodge the bricks above their heads, imagined also, far above, the cyclopses pausing and gathering and conferring, not because they had actually heard the sound, but because it had caused a motion in the dark, secret, interior tunnels of their brains.

It gave out finally in a series of grunting coughs. Ughoth had blood on his lips. “Come,” Marabaldia said gently, and without touching him she granted him some of her strength, enough to push himself away from the wall and walk with

her, side by side, forward into the darkness, pierced by their yellow, evil eyes.

The guardsmen followed them, and only Altaira hung back. “Courage, daughter,” said Mindarion. “Surely you can recognize courage, even if you can’t feel it,” he said, which seemed to Suka unduly harsh given the circumstances. The three of them lagged behind as if from some unspoken decision. “I am disgusted by my own kind,” murmured the old eladrin. “It is a curse to live so long. The curse of the fey, and my people are the worst, because we

live the longest. After these centuries, we lose so much of what it means to be alive—not just love, and friendship, and suffering, and kindness, but also art and music. Instead it is the mere shell that persists, by which I mean pride, and snobbery, and self-interest, and cold intelligence—even that will dwindle over time. In Lord Askepel's case it is almost gone, I fear. So I apologize for him."

No need, thought Suka. I also apologize, she thought, looking miserably up ahead after the fomorians, after the lumbering dance of light in the black tunnel.

“Is it any wonder, finally, that we search out darkness?” continued the old fey. “We turn inward to ourselves, chase death through the corridors of our bodies—it is too quick for us to catch. Even beyond death sometimes we search for it.”

“I’ve heard,” murmured Suka.

“Yes! But that will not be my fate. Many thanks, my little friend, for what you did inside my nose, though the scratches already have begun to heal. In the woods above Caer Corwell, when I fought with the darkwalker, she showed me the empty spaces within myself, and that was what terrified me. But this

is what I will do: I will walk away from Synnoria, walk away from Karador, walk away from Sarifal, and I will find something."

"Father—" began Altaira.

"You need not accompany me," he continued, "if you are afraid."

She was afraid, Suka thought. Tears dripped down her cheeks. And Suka imagined, though she was weeping for herself, that she was also the outlet or opening or vent for Marabaldia's tears, which otherwise could not show themselves. Up ahead, the two royal fomorians strolled side by side, though Ughoth moved slower

and slower as he weakened, and she slowed with him, and all the others slowed as well, to leave them space. Finally, they were barely moving.

And then they stopped. Under the brick vault, Marabaldia helped Ughoth to lie down. Even now she didn't hug him or embrace him, but sat holding his hand while the lights that had been separate, and the yellow beams that had been parallel, now glowed as one, as their evil eyes combined. They were looking at each other, and Marabaldia bent down, as if to get a closer look. As Suka watched, the

light that had redoubled now redimmed to one, as Ughoth closed his eye.

In time, Suka moved up between the two soldiers, who stood on each side of the passageway, facing each other as if on guard, their spears extended at an angle. Behind her she could hear the iron-shod tramp of the cyclopses as they marched down from Harrowfast. Suka squatted beside Marabaldia, whose face was calm and placid. Together they watched the bright lights of the arriving company, their banner limp in the flat air—the torch in the purple fist, the sign of Ughoth's

house.

"I wonder if you might sing for me … a couple of verses of *Oh, Father Dear*," said Marabaldia.

"Heck," muttered the gnome. "I'll sing you the whole thing."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Reunion

There are many different ways for a druid to move back and forth between her animal and human shapes, depending on her circumstances and her state of mind. These skills are studied as a science, but mastered as an art, and like all arts, this one grew out of an inner soil of fears, desires, and needs. When Eleuthra was learning, back when it was painful to transform, to feel her bones reknit, her skin stretch and sag,

sometimes she would isolate a single part of her body, a finger, first, and then a hand. She'd feel that she had thrust her hand into a fire. When she looked down to see the hair sprout and grow, she imagined that her skin was burning with a black flame. Later on, she learned to love the feeling, too intense almost to bear. Later on she'd feel a shudder in her flesh, and the hair would spread like a wave out of an underwater quake. An abrupt shock, and she would change all at once, as if from the inside out, in an ecstasy that was almost sexual. Sometimes she'd lose

consciousness just for a moment. When she was frightened or in urgent need, then she'd lose consciousness, or else enter a peculiar fugue in which quick intervals of oblivion were mixed with intervals of hyperfocused awareness, the more surreal for being interrupted. And in the unconscious moments she would dream, and her dream, also, would suffer from the same sequence of interruptions.

Now in extremity, with the drow closing in, her wolf's shape erupted out of her and she fell down on all fours into a crouch. But at the same

time she dreamed a series of tiny, encapsulated dreams, each one large on the inside, tiny on the outside. She saw the daemonfey above her as if lit by intermittent flashes of lighting, now in one place, now in another, now naked, now clothed, now as she remembered him on Moray Island where they had found shelter, now as she imagined him in dreams or fantasies. Sometimes he spoke to her, though the movement of his lips did not conform to the words she heard, which were always versions of what he'd said to her earlier, when she'd been asleep:

“Come to me. Give up and come to me. Dare to leave this place and come to me.” At the same time, even in the moments she was conscious and aware, then also she remembered him as if in a series of afterimages, which enabled her to superimpose him on the surface of the real world, almost as if he hovered above her in the dark cavern where they were surrounded by drow, and where the hierophant of Lolth conjured her magic, silhouetted by the fire burning in the entrance of her shrine, between the broken statues of the knight at the basilisk, and

the curtain of flame that moved across the surface of the rock.

Eleuthra's body changed rapidly and completely, as if in a series of orgasmic shudders, and as she looked up from her wolf's crouch she saw the daemonfey as if suspended above the hierophant, his barbed tail hanging down as if to touch the dark elf's black and white streaked hair, which writhed and twisted around her delicate, small head as if it had an independent life, a trick, perhaps, of the lashing wind. Eleuthra heard a roaring in her ears: "Come to me."

Gaspar-shen, his scimitar in his right hand, a short sword in his left, his bare torso glowing with a lambent, frustrated energy that snaked around his chest and arms and belly in blue lines, watched the she-wolf in the moment of her spring, watched her dig her claws into the rocks, watched the hair rise on her body and the thick ridge of her spine as if charged with static. He himself found it hard to move, because the drow witch had conjured away his strength and Lukas's also. Swords drawn, they also stood like stones, waiting for

the seven warriors to surround them and conquer them, while the rest of the dark elves waited behind. But the wolf felt nothing of that conjuring, designed to immobilize more complicated brains, and as she broke across the rocky, uneven floor, he also felt the magic strain and snap—the witch could not sustain it and defend herself at the same time. Lukas also jerked alive, as if suddenly released from the constraints of an invisible net, and with his sword raised he leaped upon the closest of the drow, insolently sauntering toward him, protected—so he must have

thought—by the hierophant's spell. The blade bit into his skull. He dropped like a bag of sand, and Lukas, spinning, caught the warrior next to him with a back-handed slash across his throat then drove his sword's point through someone else's eye.

Someone must tell him, the genasi thought, of the benefits of striking below the neck, where the target was larger and softer. His own scimitar, he noticed, had punctured the belly of one of these treacherous creatures, popped it like an inflated bladder, and now he turned to the next. These drow

had no culture, he thought grimly, as he severed one dark elf's arm from his body—they overcooked their vegetables and undercooked their meat, and boiled too many pale tubers, and relied too heavily on spiced sauces and hot oil, or so he'd heard. They baked no bread, made no pastry. There was no lightness to their cuisine, and now, by the gods, they'd pay for it.

Amaranth threw down her lamp. It shattered on the rocks and spattered a blue, glowing liquid. Likewise released from the magic,

she drew the short sword she had carried from Caer Moray, and as the drow raged close she struck then jumped back. Surprised, she saw Amaka was still with her and, though unarmed, had seized one of the drow's arms as she pressed her blade between his ribs, watched the hot blood flow down. Under the hierophant's spell, all time seemed to have slowed and thickened. Now, released from it, she felt a burst of frantic energy, as if gravity were weak, as if the air were thin and offered no resistance, and as if all the processes of her body were quick

beyond control. It could not last. Lukas was cutting through the drow as if through scarecrows, and the genasi had raised a barrier of murdered corpses, some of which still twitched erratically. There were several dozen drow at least, but they fell back from the onslaught of the blades. It could not last.

Eleuthra had reached the creature, drawn her claws down her face and neck, opened up her flesh and then sprung for her throat, and missed. Instead her

jaws had closed on the hierophant's shoulder, cracking her collarbone and her upper arm, such was the fury of the wolf's assault. She'd fallen on her prey like a crashing wave, but like a wave, now, she drew back after marking her high tide. As she did, she felt the hierophant's magic reinvest itself, flow into the spaces she had left, fasten itself around her like a living chain, squeeze her chest so she couldn't breathe, and all her struggles drew it closer. Desperate, she struck again, cutting with her heavy paws, and this time she felt the softness of the drow's breast,

and tried to cut through that and through her ribs and through the plastron of her chest to reach her heart. But the wolf could no longer breathe. She released her grip on the hierophant's arm so she could strike again, and miss again, and now her jaws closed upon nothing, and instead she felt a coldness overtake her lungs, like a cold liquid poison injected in her viscera, causing the failure of her organs one by one, and the closing of her body processes until only her heart was left, fluttering in a bath of ice.

"Come to me," said the

daemonfey, and she saw him spread his leather wings until he filled the entire vault of the cavern, his red eyes diabolical, his gold skin and body perfect in her mind. “Come to me.”

And she went.

The hierophant stepped back from the wolf’s corpse. Staggering, she fell against the statue of the knight, seizing the haft of its stone sword to stay upright. The blood flowed down her arms and face. But she was in a rage. She lifted her uninjured arm, and Gaspar-

shen felt the air congeal around him, slowing his weapon and offering resistance as he drew it back and raised it up to strike. It seemed too heavy for his strength. One of the drow caught him by the arm and pulled him forward, and he realized suddenly they were not trying to kill him but disarm him, capture him alive. Again he struck at them, the circle of black faces which were close enough for him to see the silver rings in their nostrils and lips and in the ridges of their ears, even the scarified, raised patterns on their cheeks, even their filed and pointed teeth as they

grinned at him in fury and drew him down.

After a moment he flopped helpless as if resting on a bed of slaughtered bodies, pinioned at his wrists, while at the same time he heard the noise of the hierophant's harsh breath next to his ear, and he felt her hands fumbling over his chest, and smelled her blood dripping over him. Nor did he have to hear her tell him that a spider must immobilize her prey with a cold bite, before wrapping it in pale cords to save for later, when she is hungry. The eating habits of spiders, he had always thought,

should not be emulated by any higher being with a claim to civilization.

Far above, in the fomorian highway that ran under the Cambro Mountains from Harrowfast in the south and all the way to Winterglen, Suka rode on Marabaldia's shoulder. Sixty miles they had come in just a day. The princess seemed to gather and grow in strength as time progressed. Suka was exhausted even so. She had not wanted to be carried like a sack of potatoes, but

every stride of the giantess was four of hers. And she had not expected they would never stop, or pause, or rest, or eat, or drink, hour after hour. Irritated, she had never complained, which was unlike her. But the mystery was easy to solve.

Suka felt the weight of Ughoth's death, caused, she imagined, by her own clumsiness on the borders of Synnoria. And she imagined, in this punishing pace, that Marabaldia was working something out, expressing some profound emotion. Suka didn't blame her for wanting to move quickly, leave the surface

of Gwynneth Island, and burrow down deep into the Underdark. She would deny the princess nothing for the sake of her own dignity, so grateful she was that Marabaldia hadn't punished her, or even questioned her about what had happened between her and Captain Rurik and the Marchlord Talos-claere in Synnoria. She could only remember how her friend, and Ughoth too, had backed her without question in the council hall, supported her without hesitation when Lord Askepel had demanded that she stand trial, and answer for what she and Rurik

actually had done, the mistakes she actually had made. Even now, even after the price she'd paid, Marabaldia did not question her. It was as if the past were gone, and Suka were the only one still carrying its burden.

They had not paused, neither to draw breath nor drink some water from one of the subterranean streams. Long used to human beings, now Suka had grown accustomed to the heavy stamp of the cyclopses, though she could not hope to copy its rhythm. Their single eyes glowed like lanterns. She looked back to see Mindarion

and Altaira, similarly carried. Behind them, the tunnel was in darkness.

When the venom wore off and Lukas regained consciousness, he guessed the drow had taken him in through the cave mouth where he'd first seen the hierophant, in between the shattered statues where Amaka had first tried to lead them. And in this new cave he found himself bound to a stone pier, perched unsteadily atop a mound of architectural refuse; iron spars, chunks of fallen masonry,

loose bricks and coping stones, enormous wooden beams. All of this had been arranged around a hollow well, and the entire circular pile was alive with scurrying vermin, rats and lizards, but especially spiders, who wove their webs in the interstices, or else hung suspended from the pinnacles of stone. The mound of debris rose almost twenty feet from the cave floor, and the interior well descended through a crack or a crevice to a depth he could not guess, as it was choked with garbage and old bones, and layers of moon-white web as thick as

mats. Entire bricks were caught in them and did not fall. Light came from the gas vents in the burning rocks, and from the bottom of the well—a diffuse pale glow. Light came also from a makeshift altar at the top of the pile, an assortment of marble slabs, and urns and reliquaries that looked to have been looted from some other shrine, all surmounted by a cylinder of black, polished stone, which supported a circle of brass candlesticks, and fat, white, flickering tapers shedding beads of melted wax.

Gaspar-shen lay nearby, trussed

as he was in silken, sticky ropes. Lady Amaranth was below the altar, tied down by her wrists and ankles. It occurred to Lukas that he had been in this place before, or else this situation, and then he remembered the lush temple where they had all come to Gwynneth Island, the gate whose other side was in the Breasal Marsh. The druid—Eleuthra—had been with them, and here she was again. As Lukas watched, a detachment of the drow marched from the cave's mouth, carrying the bodies not just of the druid but of their fallen comrades. Unsteadily they climbed

the pile of rubble at its lowest point, and then tumbled the corpses down into the well, through a trap in the webs that looked as if it might have been woven for that purpose. Last of all they flung Eleuthra, dressed in her wolf skin, in her human shape.

She had scarcely known them, but she had given her life for theirs—in vain, as it turned out, because here they were, prisoners just the same. Why had she done this? It was for the Savage's sake, he guessed. It was for love.

The drow seemed eager to finish and be gone. One or two glanced

anxiously into the bottom of the well before they retreated to the cave's mouth. Lukas waited for the genasi to speak.

"In the desert realm of Calim," Gaspar-shen began diffidently after clearing his throat—the air was thick and humid and full of dust, "there is a town called Calimpest. But they have nothing to eat."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. They have nothing to eat."

"Surely they have bread."

"No bread. Only pieces of stone, which they suck until they are smooth."

“And … is there anything to drink?”

“Nothing. Only fine white sand.”

“And the inhabitants of Calim … are they happy?”

“No, they are not happy. They are very sad. All night long they howl and complain.”

“I don’t blame them.”

“No one blames them. It has been this way for many years.”

“How many years?”

“More than six years. Fewer than seven.”

Lady Amaranth was too far away to hear this nonsense, but someone else was not. Turning his head,

Lukas saw the handmaiden of Lolth sitting above him, hands clasped around her knees. It was Amaka, the girl who had betrayed them and led them to this place. Yet she looked disconsolate, soot in her close-cropped white hair, her face streaked with dirt, her white shift streaked and torn.

"Does he speak seriously?" she asked.

"No one knows."

"Yet I," she said, "would rather live in Calim than in Winterglen among my own kind. Calim is a paradise to me."

During their battle with the drow,

Lukas had seen this girl fighting beside Amaranth, hampering the drow soldiers who attacked her. Why was that?

She could not read minds, he knew. Yet she answered him as if she could. “I couldn’t bear to see her harried so, like that, like a hart inside a circle of dogs. That’s what I felt—the truth. But what I told that woman, the guardian of the shrine, I told her I was protecting the blood of the leShay. I didn’t want to see it spilled prematurely, see it sink into the dust. That is why I brought you to this place, isn’t it?”

For a moment she seemed unsure. “I wouldn’t know,” Lukas said. He looked up to see the eyes of his friend—tied down, helpless, away from him and to the left—watching him. In the mix of light, harsh and soft, dirty and clean, the genasi’s skin looked as pale and slick and unhealthy as a fish’s belly.

“It is the blood of the leShay,” confirmed the girl. “My father lied to you. He wouldn’t send her south to Synnoria. He wanted her brought here, because this is the place—this is the place …”

She paused for a moment, then went on, “This is the place where

he intends to raise my lady out of the Abyss." Then she laid her cheek upon her knees, hugging her shins within the circle of her black arms.

"Araushnee," Lukas murmured.

"Araushnee," she repeated. "They have tried and failed, tried and failed here for months. The guardian has worn through an entire circuit of the lady's rituals, over and over. But it was her idea —she could entice her with the rarest blood in Faerûn, and Araushnee would answer to the smell of it, as if she were some predatory creature and not a goddess or a queen."

“Silly,” Lukas murmured, too softly for the girl to hear.

“It’s so silly,” she continued without irony, as if she knew his thoughts but not his mind. “Her spider’s nature is the curse Corellon laid on her. She yearns to cast it away, reject it and be free. When we speak of our desire to live again on the surface in the forest of Winterglen, simple wood elves like our ancestors, it is so we also can share in a goddess’s aspiration, and be more than creatures fighting in a hole. This is why she did not come, not until now. We should be looking for her in the shrine I built

for her—you saw it—and not here in a pit of corpses and carrion, stinking of sulfur and decay. This is an insult."

Tears were in her eyes, Lukas saw, touched in spite of himself. He had heard different stories of Araushnee's fall and the emergence of Lolth from the Demonweb Pits. He wouldn't think about those stories now.

"It is so easy to fall back into old habits," said the girl. How beautiful her voice was—he had not noticed until now. "Creatures in a hole, hiding and fighting. But if we are to walk among the moon and stars,

surely we must change. Come back to what we were, long ago, in the simple time. Captain," she said, surprising Lukas, who had thought she was speaking mostly to herself. "Captain, that is why it hurts me so to see you like this, you and her. Among the drow, our men don't treat our women with affection, as you have treated her."

She meant the princess. "Is that what it is?" murmured Lukas, too low for her to hear. He was watching the genasi, who blinked once, slowly. Gentle mockery, Lukas guessed. Maybe that was also what Amaka was talking

about. She probably didn't see enough of that among the drow.

"Well, if it hurts you so," he said, "and if you're sure it's useless, you could let us go."

Her expression, when she looked at him, was so panicked he could not continue. "Where is the priestess now?" he said, meaning the hierophant.

"Hurt. Too hurt to conclude the ritual. Mauled by Eleuthra Davos, and by … someone else. Crouching in her own little pit, too hurt to come out."

"Like a spider," Lukas said.

"Like a spider."

Amaka rose to her feet. Unsteady on the shattered, uneven surface, she came a few steps closer. When he had first seen her up above, Lukas had wondered if she was drunk or drugged, her spirits were so high, but there was no trace of that now.

She stood above him then flopped down on a chunk of marble, part of the facing stone of some ornate structure, a cornice or a frieze carved in a pattern of birds in flight. But because it had been slaved up from some broken palace in the Underdark, the birds themselves were fantastical and

impossible, with tiny wings and long, curled bills and claws—mythical beasts carved by someone who had never seen the sky.

She bent down over him. “Do you think,” she said, “that if my sisters and I make our home … among the trees in Winterglen … above our heads, then we will find someone to treat us the way you treat … her?”

Lukas watched the genasi’s eyes. They blinked once, slowly.

“Free me,” Lukas muttered, though he found he could not lie to her, even though she had betrayed them. She had obeyed her father,

that was all. How could he find fault with her? Not that he had ever obeyed his own father much, come to think of it.

Still, he pitied her. He could not lie to her. “I haven’t kept her all that well,” he muttered, wondering first whether his connection to Amaranth looked different from the outside than it did from the inside, and second whether anyone who knew how he had lured her back to Gwynneth Island and then lured her down here, would still say he had done the best he could for her. What did it mean anyway to treat someone well, in what had been,

since he had known her, a series of disasters?

"Free me," he muttered as Amaka bent over him, her pretty face a few inches from his own—prettier, actually, than he remembered. The dirt was gone from her cheeks. Her eyes were closed. Again, thought Lukas, what this looked like was different from what it was. She was too innocent to know what she was talking about, and anyway he could scarcely move, so maybe none of it meant anything.

Besides, all of an instant, he got the distinct impression she was mocking him, and had been

mocking him all along, with her talk about drow, and her desire for better treatment. Now he noticed how her shift was held together—by a brooch or a needle on her right shoulder. He did not remember seeing it before. And now he could see the sharp end of it protruding from the fine white linen cloth—finer, actually, than he had thought. This part of it wasn't ripped or stained. Close to his mouth, the other end was fashioned in the shape of a spider, a beautiful ornament of silver chased with gold. He caught it between his teeth and pulled it away from her,

and the garment parted. Without opening her eyes, she reached up her hand to secure it over her breast.

But he didn’t pay any attention to that. Instead he pressed his chin against his neck and bent himself to the intricate task of picking apart the silken cord that bound his arms to the stone pier—little by little. He held the sharp silver needle between his teeth. He scarcely noticed when the light around them changed, became brighter and softer and less full of smoky fire. He had managed to loosen himself and sit forward a

little bit, pry himself upright, the needle hurting his mouth, when he heard a sound from Gaspar-shen, a whimper of amazement, a soft noise whistling through complicated nasal cavities, and he looked up.

Amaka had climbed up to the shrine where Amaranth was laid out. She stood on the topmost ridge of garbage with the rats around her feet. They did not seem alarmed. One went up on his hind legs, poked his little nose in the air, curled up his tail between his legs and around his fat, purselike body. Amaka brought her hand from her

right shoulder, stretched it palm up toward the candles, which burned now with a purer, bluer flame—the wind had died. Her garment—whether it was just a trick of the new light, Lukas didn't see any more rents or tears in it, or any dirt and filth. The cloth itself seemed transfigured—the garment wafted to the ground. "There was a time when I would gladly have accepted these gifts," she said. "These offerings. Not now. Not today. Not from these hands.

"Besides," she said, "I have already eaten. I have no more room."

She was not altogether naked. Silhouetted by the candlelight, she seemed made of darkness, a girl-shaped hole in the world's protective screen. Lukas watched her lean down over Lady Amaranth and run her forefinger over her forehead, her cheek, and down her neck. The princess, who had been unconscious or asleep, now roused herself, came awake under the black hand. Lukas saw Amaranth press against her bonds, heard her little moan. But she had not yet opened her eyes by the time Amaka turned from her, and stepped over the lip of the abyss, and climbed

down out of sight into the well.

Lukas said nothing, the needle between his teeth. Gaspar-shen blinked twice, in quick succession. Lady Amaranth struggled weakly against her restraints, cried out as if she had been hurt. Lukas bent down to his task again, worrying and picking at the pale strands. He worked faster now, hurting his mouth and not caring, because he wanted, once loose, to climb up to the rim of garbage and at least look down into the well, past where Amaka had descended, taking some of the radiance with her. The air was darker now. One

of the strands gave way, and then another. He pulled, and his hand was free.

Gaspar-shen watched him extricate himself then stand painfully erect, rubbing his shoulders and his hands, wiping the blood from his mouth. He himself felt comfortable and secure, because he couldn’t move. In the Elemental Chaos where he had been born, these moments of stasis formed small islands of bliss, even in memory. Traveling with Lukas, there was far too little of this, and

it was worth it to be hurt, sometimes, or imprisoned, or in danger of a terrible death, to enjoy a small bit of quietude sometimes. Closing his eyes, he could see the colors of the ocean, hear the roaring of the water.

It couldn't last. Lukas stood above him then knelt down as if to free him. But—and this was an astonishing thing, which made Gaspar-shen think with a surge of gratitude that sometimes his friend almost understood him—instead he whispered in his ear, his eyes on the leShay princess waking up. "Stay right here—" as if he had a

choice! “I’ll go see what I can see. We’ll need weapons to get out of this.”

Maybe. Gaspar-shen wondered if they had gone past the need for fighting. In his mind he pictured the tidal wave that had inundated the field at Caer Moray, that had broken against the curtain wall—ah, how beautiful. What passions it had washed away! And he imagined this place, also, flooded, the salt water rushing through the tunnels and caverns like the blood pushing through a human body then receding. He imagined the pressure building until the water

found a vent onto the land, and it would wash them out into the sunlight and tumble them down into Cambrent Gap, and down to the ruins of Caervu on the Straits of Alaron, and down into the sea. What would he give, he thought, to set his course out of the Moonshaes and never return?

Feeling his constraints, he opened his eyes. Lukas had clambered down into the tunnel's mouth, and he disappeared between the burning rocks. The genasi, as if gifted by the goddess with a vision of the future, imagined himself walking after him, but not into

some dark, desiccated passage underground, but into the open air above the sea. He watched himself stumbling down a stony beach, and falling on his knees in the shallow water, and allowing the surf to knock him backward, the seagulls above him, and a rainbow in the spray.

His experience was not the same as Amaranth's as she woke up. And yet there was a point of similarity: She had retained a small sharp fragment of her dream, a vestige of a feeling that was comforting for a

single moment. She saw herself in her bedroom in Karador when she was a little girl, before her mother had died and Mistress Valeanne had come to take her away, had woken her in darkness. Someone in her dream, perhaps her mother—no, but her mother's skin was not as dark as that, her hair not as pale—had touched her cheek and neck, had put her lips next to her ear and whispered something she was able to remember when she had come up to the surface of the world and looked around, and vainly tried to struggle against the suffocating ropes. In a moment of

claustrophobic panic, she heard a voice whisper to her: “You are as different to these creatures as a man is to a stone. You are like a goddess on this world. Do not let them judge you, for their ideas mean nothing. A thousand years will not wash you away. Your life is not with them. Do not be fooled by any chance resemblance or feeling. Remember this if nothing else.”

As it happened, she remembered the whole thing. She was able to lift her head. Lukas was gone. His friend, however, lay close to her. “Ah,” she said.

Do not be fooled by any chance resemblance or feeling. Well, there was no likelihood of that. The genasi lay on his back. Depending on the light, his skin was blue or green. His body was hairless, and streaks of color moved across it, words in unknown languages. Wind whistled through the slits that formed his nose. “I have something to ask you,” he said. “If you could have one dish to eat right now, not to share, but just enough for you, what would it be?”

How hungry she was! In Moray she’d had simple things to eat, potatoes fried with onions, rabbit

stew. But the genasi's words brought her back farther than that. They opened a door back to the past, through which she could catch a glimpse of the great kitchen in Karador, and the chefs slaving over their brass cauldrons, and the stewards carrying the covered silver dishes up the stairs, and the steam rising from the plate, and the smell of ortolans, blinded, force fed, drowned in brandy, then roasted and eaten whole.

"Ortolans," she said. "It is a songbird from beyond the sea. My mother said you could taste its whole life in one bite, and your life

with it."

The whistle of the wind.

"Ortolans," repeated the genasi. Then, after a moment, "My friend and I will leave this island soon. The goddess showed me something when I was lying here, something far across the Sea of Swords, maybe in the country where the ortolans grow. You will not hurt him," said Gaspar-shen, "by pretending even for a little while that you could share his fate, or he could share yours."

She could not tell if he was asking her or telling her, or both. And there was no time to answer him,

even if she knew what she might say. Because Lukas had reappeared in the tunnel's mouth, and then was clambering up the pile, scattering the vermin. He carried weapons, the long, curved sabers of the drow. With one of them he slashed them free. Gaspar-shen closed his eyes and opened them. "Here we are," he said—unhappily, she thought, but it was hard to tell. She rubbed her wrists and ankles, labored to her feet, then sat down suddenly and waited for a spell of nausea to move away. The air was full of ash. She wiped her gritty lips then tried again.

“Look,” said Captain Lukas. He led them down the slope and out into the larger cavern where they had fought the drow. “There’s no one here,” he said, and showed them what he’d found, a few drow soldiers lying in contorted positions, as if they had been picked up and discarded, flung against the rocks. This was where Lukas had found the swords.

But in a smaller, adjoining cave, he showed them a pavilion of scarlet cloth, lit at the corners with flickering oil lamps. Inside, laid out on a padded cot, they found the hierophant lying dead. Her face

was bruised and torn, her arm and shoulder bound into a sling of spider silk. A wad of webbed silk, stained with blood, was laid upon her chest. But these wounds were not what had killed her. Her face was gray and bloodless, and there were marks upon her throat where the goddess had savaged her.

As they watched, one of the oil lanterns guttered and went out.

"We must be quick," said Lukas.

He found the way they'd come, the way Amaka had led them down, and they climbed up the narrow passage into cooler, cleaner air. They carried the

lanterns, but they were almost empty, and they blew out in the first breeze. After that they felt their way, for it was very dark, with just a trace of phosphorescence on the rocks. Lukas reached back for her hand. She would let him touch her for a little while more. Do not be fooled by any chance resemblance or feeling. She pressed her palm against his palm, laced their fingers together. It was easy in the dark. She remembered how she had kissed him on the battlements above the gate at Caer Moray. Soon she would kiss him again. She

was like a goddess on this world. No one could judge her. If her sister had despoiled her in the gardens of the citadel, maybe even that was a good thing. It was best to know your enemies. She would have her revenge. She had a thousand years to plan it.

They climbed the steep stairs. She trusted Captain Lukas. When they reached the wider ways of the second level, she felt a surge of gratitude. She would reward him. So at the entrance to the brick tunnel, the fomorian road that ran toward Synnoria in the south, and north descended deep into the

Underdark, she paused. She knew where she was. She recognized the smell. She held Lukas by his left hand, and with her other hand she took the sword from him and let it fall with a clatter. The tiles were smooth under her boots. She pressed him up against the flat wall and kissed him, and with none of her old uncertainty. Because this was the last time she would see him, she would enjoy this moment in all its melancholy power. The passageway was deep in darkness, and she pushed him back until she could not see his face. Instead she supplied in her mind's eye his short

brown hair, his blue eyes and thin lips. She touched his nose and cheek as the goddess had touched her.

Nearby, invisible except for a few dim, snaking lines of light, the genasi cleared his throat. “In the city of Uzbeg on the Golden Way, they make a confabulation of chocolate and nut cream, baked and then sealed in a layer of silver so thick and so hard, it must be opened with a lock and key.”

Lukas said: “Why don’t you climb up a little farther the way we came, and see if you can find some kind of light up here. We’ll wait for

you.”

A doubtful whistle in the darkness. “Yes, Captain,” he said, either humbly or else ironically, it seemed to Amaranth.

When he was gone, she bent back to the task at hand, kissing Lukas so fiercely, as if to leave the imprint of herself upon his mouth. She let him touch her more intimately also, let his hands move over her body, and he surprised her by the lightness and delicacy of his touch. But when he slid his fingers inside her clothes, she stopped him after a while, thinking how he would be dead when she was a

great queen. And when his children's children were dead, still she would reign in Karador.

She laid her forefinger against his lips and whispered like a simpering, flighty, wavering human girl, "No—I mean … not here. Not here—it stinks of cyclopses and purple giants. No, I want to see you," she said, though in fact the opposite was true, and she would never have allowed him to take such liberties in the light. "Take this as a promissory note," she said, kissing him again, and then she whispered near his ear: "Imagine a blanket spread upon

the dewy grass, and lanterns in the trees above our heads. Or else imagine us in the topmost tower of Karador, in my bedroom where I was a little girl, and the windows open, and the curtains of my bed drawn back, so we can look out over the waters of the lake. There are windows on every side."

Unless he was a fool, that should be enough to tell him she was lying to him, she thought, feeling something in her heart of hearts, a stab of ecstasy or guilt. Do not be misled by any chance resemblance or feeling, she thought, pulling him down onto the floor, propping up

in the corner of the wall. He stretched out his long legs and she sat on them, her knees spread wide. They kissed for a while more, and then they turned their heads to watch a glimmer of light along the tunnel, the opposite direction from where Gaspar-shen had gone. It was not torchlight, but something softer and more varied, beams of light that moved along the blood-red walls. They heard the tramp of marching feet.

In time, Lady Amaranth got up, and straightened her clothes. She had not seen cyclopses since she was a little girl, when they had

chased her and Mistress Valeanne on the way to Crane Point. Lukas got up too, and they joined hands and waited for a little while. But when she tried to pull away, or else pull him into some side passage, or else into some crack or crevice in the brick where they could hide, he would not come.

“Don’t worry,” Lukas said, for he had seen a little figure running out in front, backlit by the glare of the cyclopses’ eyes, tufts of pink hair standing out all over her head. Imagining that Gaspar-shen had

just gone down the tunnel a few hundred yards, Lukas called out his name, told him to come back. Then he walked forward into the light, holding out his hands, astonished to see the gnome accompanied by these creatures. He recognized Marabaldia from her prison cell in Caer Corwell, though she had changed. Perhaps he also had changed, though it hadn't been so long, after all. Less than a month, he thought—he scarcely knew. He reached down for Suka's hand. "Captain," she said, "what a surprise."

She looked Lady Amaranth up

and down. He didn't introduce them. There was no point. She stuck her tongue out, showed her silver stud. "I'll tell you all that's happened once we've stopped," she said.

But Amaranth couldn't hear her, wasn't paying attention. While Lukas bent down to listen, while he squeezed the little gnome's hands, Amaranth found herself staring up into the round, heavy-featured face of the fomorian, its right eye large and bright. Though in Karador she had heard of these grotesque and

misshapen creatures, she had never seen one, and she found herself fascinated by its eye, which reminded her for a wistful instant of the portal that had carried her from Moray, the way the surface of it seemed to swirl in a circle then slide open like the mechanical aperture in her professor's camera obscura, a device made of beaten copper, which she had last seen when she was a little girl.

And like that morning in Karador long before, she saw many things that had been hidden, or else only vaguely guessed at. She saw the forces of Citadel Umbra gathered

around them in a circle, while an army of drow approached from underneath. She saw a trap that would crush all of them and steal her away. She saw the cyclopses struck down, and Lukas tortured to death for the liberties she had granted him. Every detail was clear to her, as if these things had happened in the past and not some version of the future, and as if she were doomed to play them endlessly in memory. The fey stretched him out in one of their bright chambers, stretched and snipped his body in their delicate machines and made a game of him,

and the genasi too. They cocked their heads quizzically, unused to cries of pain.

"My lady, this is the Princess Marabaldia," said someone else, an old eladrin who had come up through the ranks of cyclopses, leaning on a woman's arm.

"It is my pleasure to encounter you," said the monster, her voice beautiful and low, her tone formal and polite. But Amaranth stared into her eye, and in its surface she saw a moving portrait of herself in her nephew's arms, dancing stiffly and correctly as if in a darkened room. She could see her own back,

the line of freckles underneath her shoulder blade, because her back was bare.

Oh, but one day she would be a queen, and the mother of kings and queens. As she watched herself, she heard with part of her mind the peculiar, airless voice of Gaspar-shen, as he came hurrying back. “I saw them,” he said. “Prince Araithe and his people. They have come from Winterglen—eladrin mostly, and a few drow. They are camped in the big cavern, a quarter mile from here. Many hundreds, it looks like. His mother is not with them.”

His voice was high and calm. Marabaldia had laid her spear against the wall. Now she picked it up. “I will be glad to see the prince again,” she said grimly.

“Captain,” said Gaspar-shen, “it is too many. There are warlocks and mages, and more than a hundred knights. Prince Araithe is very strong.”

“We’ve beaten him before,” said Marabaldia.

“That was Poke,” Suka reminded her. “And Poke is dead.”

Lukas felt Amaranth press his hand and then let go. He didn’t know who Poke was. But he felt

immensely tired. He remembered the recent fight, the mounds of corpses, and he felt their presence in the darkness around him, beyond the limit of all these glowing eyes. Nor did their spirits reassure him. But the air was stale with their breath, and thick, and hard to breathe.

Gaspar-shen was staring at Amaranth. “We can’t fight them,” he said. “If the prince wants what I think he wants.”

Lukas was too tired to argue. The dead hung close around them. “We have no choice,” he said, bending to pick up his drow saber. An

unfamiliar weapon, yet he would make it sing.

“Poke is dead?” asked Lady Amaranth. Slowly, as if unwillingly, she turned to him.

The gnome was looking at her as if she had two heads. “Ah, forgive me,” she said to Marabaldia. “It is the Yellow Rose of Sarifal.”

Amaranth put up her hands. “Let us make an end to all this fighting.”

The cyclopses had focused their regard. She stood in their eyes’ light as if on stage, her shadow stretching out behind her. And because she seemed to Lukas

suddenly like an actress on a stage, he made himself aware of every tiny gesture, aware of how she moved her fingers as if caressing the soft breeze, aware also of how the part she played was different from the person she had been not ten minutes before.

"There's another way," she said. "Let me speak to my nephew. He'll grant you safe passage. He'll do what I say."

Her red hair hung listless. Her freckled cheeks were chapped and preternaturally pale in that strange light. Her eyes were wide and determined, or else afraid. Later,

on board ship, his own gaze fixed deliberately on the horizon, he would remember how she didn't look at him as she stepped backward into the shadow. He would remember how no one spoke. He would remember how it seemed for a moment as if she had something more to say. But then maybe she thought better of whatever it was. After a moment she turned, and the darkness consumed her. They listened to her soft footsteps receding, and then nothing.

Later, on board ship, Suka would tell Gaspar-shen and him her entire

story, and he would tell her everything he knew. But now, they all stared at one another as if they were strangers. After twenty minutes, as they waited, Marabaldia called for a rest, for the first time on the march from Synnoria. She herself did not let go her spear. She sent some of the fomorians up ahead, and she posted a guard, but the rest of the cyclopses opened their packs and pulled out bottles of water, and loaves of bread, and links of sausages, and sat down or lay down, and they made camp.

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Home-schooled in Kansas by Chinese missionaries, Paulina Claiborne has eschewed all subsequent education. Between the prison terms that punctuate her life, she has worked as a cook, a hairdresser, a lifecoach, a toxicologist, a freelance letter-opener, and a private surgeon. She has won several prestigious literary awards, including the Warden's Special Prize for Model Servitude. She enjoys quilt-making, knife-fighting, and alcohol. For the past

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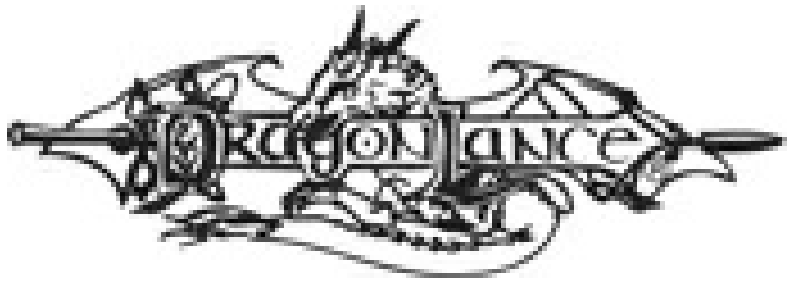

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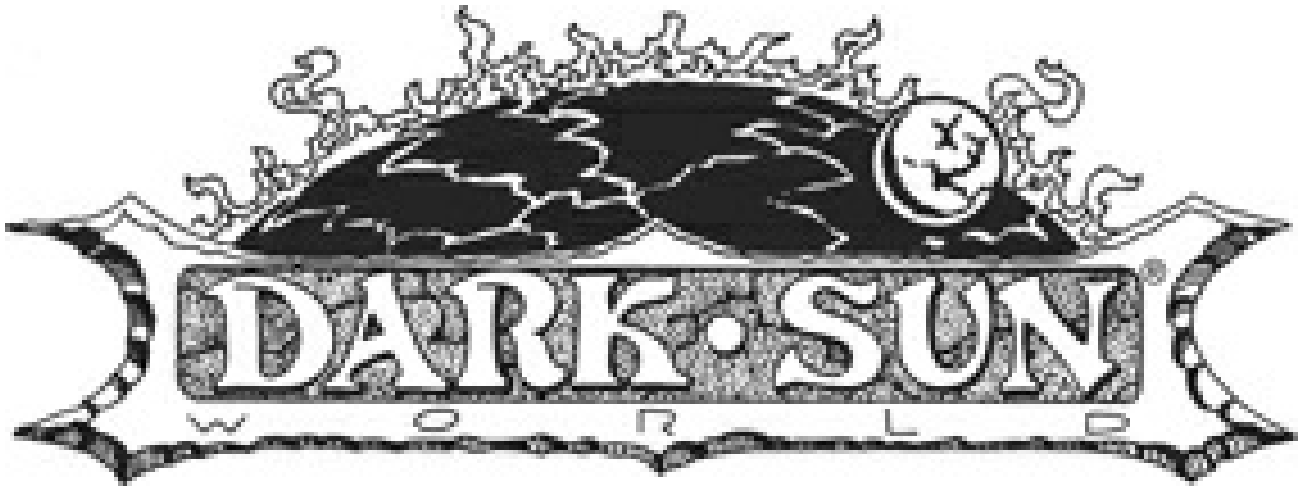

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