

Every Picture Tells A Story

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FOREWORD

Welcome to *Every Picture Tells A Story*. This was a concept that spoke for itself when I proposed it to my newsgroup and asked if any of the authors there would like to participate in a gift for you, the readers.

So, a dozen pictures were posted, and the authors came forth, each choosing an image that spoke to them in some way. What you have in front of you are the results of those stories that whispered from the pictures, hence our title.

Enjoy, and tell anyone who wants to read the collection where they can find it. Any comments you have will be appreciated and welcome.

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The Curse for Love

Brigit Aine

As Gretchen walked up the pathway to the only house for miles around she glanced nervously at the quickly darkening skies. Bad enough, she thought that the castle was on top of the hill, but now a storm has to blow in. Glancing back down towards the country road she had been traveling Gretchen noticed that her car was now a distant spot, she had gone further up the hill then she realized. In for a penny, she figured. Moving the final distance up the crumbly steps to the stone castle, Gretchen noticed it was a pretty brown and covered in beautiful vines and flowers. Not one to second guess herself she picked up the heavy knocker, glanced around her one more time and then up at the ever darkening skies, and knocked on the wooden door.

Carey heard the sounds of the door echo through the hallways of the big house. Never one for company, he especially didn't want any now, with the storm over head brewing unnaturally and the darkness in his soul trying to take over. Hoping whoever it

was would just go away if he ignored them he continued to sit in the study, legs crossed at the ankle, hands steepled together, and thinking about how he was going to rid himself of the curse that was trying to take over. How did one go about breaking a curse that your soul? He knew the one who could help him do so was out there somewhere, but he had no way of finding her, no way of explaining that she was destined to help him. So intent was he on watching the storm that he almost didn't hear the knock on the door again, or the voice shouting, "is anyone home?"

Gretchen knocked again and looked around her. Someone obviously lived here as it was well tended to and the walk had recently been swept. She looked up as the first raindrop landed on her head. A few more hit her cheeks when she tilted her face toward the blackening sky. Scrunching herself into the doorway she yelled, "Is anyone home? Hello". Not receiving an answer she stepped back a little, forgetting it was raining. Just as she stepped back thunder clapped, lightening flashed and a downpour began, before she could step back into the doorway she was soaked. Great, she thought, now I'm standing here soaking wet, looking like a drowned rat. I almost hope no one is home. Of course, just her luck, the door opened and there stood one of the most gorgeous men she had ever in her life seen. Tall, easily 6'2", with deep sea green eyes and tousled black hair he looked like he had just risen from the sea behind the house.

"Yes," his tone and words were curt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you but you are the only house within miles. I think I took a wrong turn and I am hopelessly lost. I tried to just turn around and go back the way I came in but I keep coming back to the same fork in the road that I left from."

Frowning at what she said Carey looked beyond her to the road. Squinting into the now dark air he tried to see her car where she had pointed at.

"There is no fork in the road down there," he said. A thought was beginning to form as he looked at her. Petite, no more than 5'3" with porcelain skin and a bevy of raven curls running down her back the woman at his door didn't look crazy. "Where did you say you were trying to go?"

"I was vacationing and thought to see the cove that is rumored to have belonged to a sea nymph. I don't really believe in the supernatural but sometimes I can pick up on vibrations that seem to belong to nothing and yet I can tell that something powerful had been through."

Pulling her into the house he quickly shut the door. Gretchen was startled by his sudden action and slipped on the tile under her wet feet. Wind milling wildly she grabbed the nearest thing she could which was the man's shirt. They both went tumbling down to the tile; she landed with an oomph on top of him and thought she heard him groan. Pushing up she smiled down. "Well now that we have managed to get into this position I suppose we should introduce ourselves. Then you can tell me why you grabbed me in here so fast when I thought you were going to send me away."

Carey couldn't move, the woman had landed on top of him and it was heaven. He hadn't felt any of the emotions or longings for companionship for so long that it almost hurt the depths of which he was feeling them now. He knew she was talking and he tried to focus on what she was saying but all he could do was feel her body, wet from the rain, lying on top of him. Reaching up he grabbed her head and pulled it to him. His lips touched hers and an electrical charge seemed to happen. She gasped as she pulled away from him and he could see that they were both slightly glowing.

"Okay," Gretchen said, trying to get a handle on what happened. "I want to know about the blue glowy thing but let's start with names and maybe a towel." Sitting up and away from him she used the wall to stand up and brace herself. She held her arm out in front of her and looked at it amazingly as the blue electrical glow slowly dimmed down. Looking up at the stranger that caused her to glow she noticed that the same thing was happening with him.

"Names, right," Carey shook his head, trying to get a grasp on what had just happened. His soul, that which the curse was supposed to be devouring, wasn't feeling as heavy and dark, but he could feel the curse pounding at him and yet it was entirely getting through. "I'm Carey Waterman."

"Ummm... speechless after that? No wait, Gretchen Metre. How could this have happened to us both? It is almost like we were destined to meet." A loud clap of thunder followed her statement and Gretchen looked around her. "Is the weather always weird like this?"

Trying to follow her conversation tangents was getting difficult, but Carey figured there was so much going on and his own brain wasn't really focusing well that it probably was him, not her. After all she was going to stop the curse; he just had to figure out how to tell her about it. "No usually the weather is pretty calm around here, there must be something going on." Starting with her last question first gave Carey a chance to formulate his responses to some of the other things she had said. "Let's get you a towel and in by the fire. I had spotted the dark clouds and started this just before you knocked on the door." Leading her into the sitting room where he had been before Carey set her down on the leather sofa. "I'll be right back." He sprinted out the door and up the stairs to get her a towel to dry off with.

Looking around her Gretchen decided this house was a place of power. She could feel the vibrations as if they came from the very ground that the house was built on. The room overlooked a beautiful cove and with the storm raging and the rain pounding down it seemed as if the sea itself was coming to life. Trying to forget about the weirdness of the kiss and what happened afterwards she closed her eyes and tried to see if she could figure out what types of vibrations she was feeling. As she settled back on the couch she realized that there were both dark and light powers at work here. Feeling as though she was being torn in two from the inside out Gretchen wrenched her eyes open to find Carey standing there staring at her. "What?"

“You are glowing all by yourself, but it isn’t the blue that it was when we kissed. It is a darker blue, like the deepest depths of a lagoon. “

Startled Gretchen looked down at herself, he was right. Jumping up from the couch she turned from side to side looking for something that would make her glow. “What is going on?”

“I don’t know,” Carey sighed. Giving her the towel he had brought in he sat down next to her on the couch and looked out of his picture window. Sighing he realized he was going to have to explain to her about the sea nymph and the cover and the curse. “Let me tell you a story. I think you will like the story for the most part. There are parts though that might not make sense.”

“Does this have to do with the Sea Nymph’s cove that I was looking for and why I couldn’t seem to get away from here?”

“It does.” Picking up her hand he began stroking his thumb along the back of it. She realized it was almost a soothing motion. She wasn’t sure who he was trying to soothe, but the blue tinge was lighter than when she was glowing on her own, which was still weird to think of. Waiting for him to start she turned slightly on the couch.

“When I was younger it was a different age. There was magic in the world and no war, and really no mortals. It was a time when creatures spoke to us in our minds and the entire world was a happy place. Slowly that changed, as the Gods began meddling in each other’s business and then in ours the happiness seemed to drain out. I have lived here for longer than your scientists say the earth has been alive. I have, for the most part, lived a peaceful life that has not much affected anyone. I am an elemental. My element is water. You, it seems may have some sort of electrical or magnetic elemental blood in your line.” He looked over to see Gretchen staring at him rapt with the story. It was a sure sign that she had elemental blood in her that she wasn’t questioning what he was saying.

“This sounds like something my grandmother used to talk about. She used to say that when there was magic in the world there were those who had control over the various elements, but that they weren’t divided the way the world divided them now.” Gretchen had a question in her eyes when she looked at him. “She knew about you, and about the world the “way it was when there was magic”, she used to say it so wistfully. She would talk about things like the trees telling her they were dying and the animals being sad that they had no place left to nest or burrow. We all thought she was crazy, but she wasn’t was she?”

“No, it doesn’t sound like it. It sounds like she was one of the last of the old ones to survive in today’s society. When the world stopped practicing magic and began burning witches we all lived in fear and had to hide who and what we were, this caused us to fade out and become reclusive or to try and fit in. We gave up practicing magic to be a part of something bigger.”

Gretchen settled back into the couch, trying to wrap her mind all that Carey had said. She wasn't completely surprised by it. She had figured, given how much her grandmother had been able to do with her mind, and the things she could do, that there had to be some truth to the stories. However, she didn't realize how much her grandmother hadn't told her, or how much truth there was. So she was something of a witch, and Carey was older than the dirt on the ground, and she supposed there was something to the blue glowy thing they kept doing. Time to ask about that she figured.

"So, given that I understand and even believe what it is you are saying, why don't you tell me about the blue thing that happens when we touch, or even when I am doing it by myself."

"Let me start by asking you a few questions, that will help me understand what is going on as well. I have never had this happen, although I have seen it happen before."

Gretchen nodded at him, allowing that some clarifying might be in order for both of them. After all it isn't everyday that you get to tell your story as fantastical as Carey's is and have someone believe you. Gretchen wasn't even sure why she believed him she just knew that she did. Somewhere between her Grandmother's stories and what she just felt, she knew that Carey was telling her the truth.

"When you were in here and you were glowing on your own what were you thinking?"

Gretchen cocked her head to one side and looked at him. "I was thinking that this was a house of power."

Carey's mouth crinkled on one side, "That's it? That is all you were thinking?"

"Sorry, that's it."

"Hmmm... well you are right about that. Tell me what you were feeling, maybe your magic doesn't happen based on thought, but rather on feel."

"I felt as if I was being torn in two. There is power here, more power then should be in one place because it isn't just good but also evil. I can feel the darkness down to the bone, the very foundation is steeped in it, and yet at the same time there is an equal amount of light here. It is as if there is a very precarious balance of good and evil right here, on this very spot and I could feel the struggle between the two."

"You felt all that, in the few short minutes you were by yourself?" Carey knew his tone was harsh and he was breathing fast but it seemed that she might be the answer that he had just been searching for.

"Hey, calm down. I know we have kissed and all, but do you think you might want to tell me what else is going on here?"

“I think, that after many years of praying to the Gods they have finally answered me with you. I believe you will be able to help me defeat the darkness that is tied to my soul.”

Gretchen just stared at the man in front of her. Okay, maybe he was crazier than she realized. Darkness and souls were not supposed to be tied to one another. “Explain yourself. Now.”

“It all ties back to the Sea Nymph, the one whose cave you were searching for. Before I go any further though can you explain to me a little more about how you feel the light and the dark, and how it came to you, after so many years of being gone.” Carey knew he was starting at Gretchen but she had just given him the answer to something he had long ago thought had none.

“Okay, I’ll go first, but then you have to explain all this soul stuff, and why you think I am the answer. I’ll admit that kiss was something,” Gretchen blushed thinking about it and Carey grinned, “but I don’t know that I can be your savior.”

Carey’s grin was like that of Alice’s Cheshire Cat but he didn’t care. She thought his kiss was something wait until they got to the good stuff, after she helped him clear his soul. Then he would show her something. He could wait to get his hands on the body he had felt earlier when she was on top of him. He knew what was there, but he also knew he couldn’t offer her anything until his soul was expunged of the darkness devouring it.

“When I was very young my Grandmother began telling me tales of magic and other abilities, being able to hear the animals, telepathy, energy transfer and of other creatures, Sea Nymphs, Ogres and other things that all lived peacefully with each other here on Earth. She talked about Gods that over saw the creations and that kept to themselves. I wanted so much to be a part of something as spectacular as what she was talking about. Who needed the everyday mundane when there were extraordinary places to visit and things to see in Grandma’s stories? When I was about 5 I realized that if I stood somewhere that was a happy or good place I could feel the actual good. And if I stood someplace that was unhappy or dark I could feel the darkness. Going to Grandma’s house fed my soul and my imagination. I told my mom but she just said I was being fanciful and listening too much to Grandma. When I told Grandma her stories just got more detailed and full of wonderful things. As I grew older I realized that it was much more than just happy and sad though. It was truly that I could feel good and evil. The deeper the root for the good or the evil the deeper it affected me. I would get cold or hot. I would feel happy or sad. I would feel as if there was a feeding of or a feasting on my soul.” Gretchen looked up at Carey to see if he understood what she was talking about. She was caught by the look in his eyes. He was staring at her as if he was starving, and yet she shivered because she wasn’t sure it was a good kind of starving.

Carey shook himself. Hearing her talk was like listening to a dream but he realized that he wasn’t radiating a positive look. He worked hard to check the darkness

that was trying to creep in. Reaching out he took her hand, just touching her seemed to keep some of the darkness at bay.

Looking down at the hand that he held, Gretchen realized that he really did see her as being able to save him. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and grabbed onto his hand.

Carey wasn't expecting her to just grab onto him, but when she did he watched her and prepared to help her however he could. He just wished she would have told him what she was doing.

Gretchen knew that there was evil beneath the house, but all of Carey's talking about the darkness taking over his soul made her wonder what was going on inside of him. Since she could feel the origins of evil she figured in for a penny in for a pound and decided to see what he thought was inside of him. What she felt was amazing. She could see the good in him, shining like a golden light, but the evil was starting to overshadow it, trying to take it over. She could see the light trying to fight back but not seeming to know how. As she moved her own senses closer to the light it seemed to fight stronger and call to her. She knew that he was right; they were destined to find one another. Letting go slowly, but keeping her hand in his Gretchen opened her eyes.

"Tell me about the darkness," her voice was low and urgent but she felt confident that she could help this man that she was destined to meet.

"About 500 years ago, before we had lost our magic, a Sea Nymph asked if she could live in the cove below the house. I saw no reason for her not to. I wasn't using the cove for anything and she had been kicked out of her coven. I wasn't into others at the time so I didn't inquire as to why she had been asked to leave her coven. I told her as long as she stayed to herself and didn't bother anyone I didn't see why she couldn't stay for as long as she wanted."

Gretchen watched Carey stroke her hand, the blue arcing between them a little bit darker than it had been a little while ago. She wondered if it had to do with the depth of emotion they were feeling, or if darkened as their connection strengthened? She looked up at him and realized he was staring at her; she blushed and looked back down. He put his hand beneath her chin and tilted it up until their eyes met.

"Know this Gretchen; I have always known that my destiny was you."

Gretchen was shocked. She didn't have an answer for that so leaned forward, placed a soft kiss on his lips and said, "Keep talking. We have to help you."

Carey took a deep breath and continued his story. "Ships began disappearing in the night, and I would receive gifts a few days later. Gold, gems, furniture, paintings. Things that I hadn't asked for and I had no idea where they were coming from. I didn't need them so I sent them back. I began to get uneasy so I contacted her coven to see why she had been asked to leave. It seems that she became obsessive about a gentleman

who was having an affair with one of her sisters. She couldn't leave him alone, to the point of almost killing her sister. I realized after speaking with them that this was not a good match, her living below me. I went down to talk with her; I could feel the change in the cove. It didn't feel light at all, but heavy and dark. Her influence was turning my lands and water evil. When I asked her to leave she declared undying love for me and said that I was the only thing that could save her. When I explained that I wasn't able to love her back, for she was not my destiny she became enraged and cursed me. She cursed me that when my destiny was born the darkness would eat my soul. She then threw herself into the fire pit." Tugging a bit on her hands Carey made Gretchen look up at him. "I knew the minute you were born, for the darkness flooded me and began to try and eat my soul. Had I not been stronger, or believed in you I would not be here."

Gretchen could feel the tears threatening to spill over in her eyes. She had no idea how she was going to save this man, but she knew that she was. She could feel herself already starting to love him, he had struggled so much and believed in her without knowing even who she was. Looking at the blue glow from their joined hands she concentrated on that. As she was concentrating she could see that the blue was slowly climbing up his arm, but that something else was pushing back at it.

"Let's think about this a minute," she said. "I was just concentrating on our hands, figuring out how I could help you, and I pushed the electrical current a little bit. It started to climb up your arm but then something dark started pushing it back. I think, if I can focus enough, and we can connect deep enough that pushing the energy we create together into your soul will push the darkness out."

Carey looked down at her. "I'm amazed at you. What a great idea. Now, we have to figure out how to connect on that level."

"I can't figure out if the connection is based on the nearness or the depth of emotion we feel. I think once we figure out where the connection stems from we will have a better idea of how to proceed."

Visions of the two of them in bed flashed through Carey's mind. He could see her hair pooled out on his silk sheets, running his fingers up and down her. Her eyes filled with love as she looked up at him and his with the same looking back at her. As he held her hand he could see the color begin to darken.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I was imagining you naked in my bed, but I was also imagining our eyes full of love. So I don't have an answer. I can't tell you if it was the idea of being able to make love to you or if it was the idea of being able to look at you with love and know that it was returned."

"Hmmm... while I like both of those ideas maybe we should try and separate them out a little bit. I don't know if I can separate the love during sex, but we might be able to focus on just the love and see if that creates a deeper connection on its own."

Smiling at her response Carey gazed down at her. “I think I can handle that, loving you is starting to come as easy and as necessary as taking the next breathe.”

Gretchen sucked in. She didn’t know how or why they were so connected, but she understood the sentiment he was saying and agreed with him. He had, in the past few hours, become her entire world, like, as he had said, they were created for each other. Focusing on that, on the love she had discovered she had for him and on how much she knew he loved her she began pushing the energy into him. The connection was stronger than it had been before and she could see the energy traveling up his arms in a deep blue.

Gazing down at his arms Carey was amazed to see that it was working. In an effort to help her clear his soul he began focusing even harder on the woman before him, his soul mate. The love he felt for her surpassed anything he had ever imagined and he knew that they would be together forever, that nothing would be able to come between them. As he concentrated more Carey could feel the connection between them deepen. The energy continued to deepen and push itself into him. It was now crawling over his entire body. All of a sudden he felt a jolt from deep inside. He knew what was coming. A war. A war for his soul. The curse was not going to give up so easily now that it had come to life. The evil inside of him wanted to live.

Gretchen felt the evil start to fight back. Pulling on her own feelings and energy even deeper she began trying to untangle the cords of darkness from the very center of Carey. Not yet sure what it was she was seeing, but trying to get through to the core of who Carey was. She was not going to let this evil win and take away her love just as she has discovered him. Pushing with all she had Gretchen realized that it was going to take more.

Looking down at her Carey could see she was beginning to tire from this. Just as he was going to pull away she looked up at him, rose on her tiptoes and kissed him. Carey deepened the kiss. The kiss started as something tentative but as Carey pushed into it and Gretchen fed energy not just through the bond of emotion, but the physical bond the kiss deepened into something that neither of them had ever experienced before.

Gretchen could feel herself getting lost in Carey. Between the energy she was pushing into him and the way the kiss was making her feel she was sure that she would never come out of it. Just as she was about to give in to the desire to get lost forever she realized that the blackness inside of him was pushing back at her. That is what was giving her the idea to give up; it was able to actually make her feel as if she should be lost in Carey and not fight back. Pulling away from him was the hardest things she had ever done but Gretchen stepped out of the kiss, continuing to hold his hands.

“It can influence how I feel when we kiss. So the sexual contact isn’t a great idea. What next?”

“What about just more physical contact, like cuddling on the couch. That way we

are touching, but it is about being together and not about the sex?”

Gretchen looked up at Carey like he had two heads. “You want to cuddle?”

Carey smiled down at her. “Gretchen, I love you. Cuddling is a perk that I can’t even begin to tell you how much I want to do.” Pulling her in close to him he just held her. As soon as their bodies touched the energy began to turn a midnight blue, almost humming with the force of it. Gretchen focused even more and pushed the energy into Carey, following the path it made until she came upon the tangle of darkness that was in his soul. I’m going to win, she thought, and pushed with everything she had at the pit. Slowly the energy started taking it over. She could see the darkness shrinking, but she also felt the pull of the evil and how it was fighting for him. I love him and I am going to win she told it. Stay away and leave him be. With that final thought she pushed with everything she had and the energy over took the darkness with a bang.

Carey looked down as Gretchen went limp in his arms. He knew that something was going on when they touched. He could feel the lightness of his soul and knew that she was fighting the darkness inside of him. He had held her tight, knowing she wasn’t even aware of it. Now she lay in his arms, limp and unconscious. Gently he laid her on the couch, checked her breathing and made sure that she was comfortable. He went into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. He didn’t even look the same. The lines and wrinkles were gone and his eyes no longer had shadows in them. Getting a washcloth and putting some warm water on it he went back out into the living room and laid it gently on Gretchen’s forehead. He pushed her hair off her forehead. Leaning down he whispered into her ear.

“Hey you, come back now. We have plans for the future to make.”

As if coming from deep within a fog Gretchen could hear his voice. Fighting her way through it she slowly opened her eyes. Looking up she barely recognized the eyes that were staring back down at her. “Carey?”

“I know. Look at what you did sweetheart. You brought me back. I love you so very much.” Carey carefully lifted her into his arms and hugged her.

“So now... about those plans for the future...” she whispered into his shirt.



Forest Of Secrets

Colleen Love

Kelzan clung to Issra as if his very life depended on it, and indeed, it did. Pain seared through his side with each step his faithful warhorse took. Nearly all of his men had perished at the hands of the Dark Creatures, and those surviving wished death's sweet embrace had claimed them. They had all scattered and Kelzan knew most of them wouldn't live out the night. But even as his trusted steed carried him over the remains of his fallen brethren, far and fast from the vile creatures hunting him, he felt the poison from the arrow coursing through his veins, knowing his time would come soon. He only hoped it would be swift and the Sidhe would be merciful in her claiming. With his last conscious thought, he called to Cernunos, god of warriors, and succumbed to the beckoning darkness, falling, falling, falling.

Savage dreams tore through Faile's sleep. Waking with a jolt, she sat up in the

early dawn bathed in sweat, her dampened nightdress emphasizing the early morning chill. She rose, knowing it was useless to wrestle against sleep. Climbing from the warmth of her bed, she made her way through the dark cottage to rekindle the fading fire as she pondered the disturbing nightmare. The dream's memory would always fade with the dawn of the new day, but the tears she shed for an unclaimed and lost love would haunt her until the day the Fates crossed their paths.

The fire had mellowed to glowing embers. Faile knelt and gently stirred the ashes, adding dry fir needles and kindling. She blew on the glowing coals, and shivered from the sudden warmth as the fire sprang to life. The flames gathered strength when she added wood and soon the tongues of flame were devouring her offering and returning warmth and comfort. As she washed and dressed by the light and heat of its glow, she found it curious that the urgency from the dream did not dissipate and leave her this morning. In fact, it weighed heavy in her heart and in her mind.

Breaking her fast with a simple meal of cheese, thick slices of bread and herbal tea, she considered her dwindling supplies, in much need of replenishing and found it reason enough to leave her little cottage and perhaps quell the ache in her heart. Pulling out the wicker basket she used for gathering herbs, berries and mushrooms she decided to see what bounty her forest home held for her today. She also found the added benefit of relieving her anxiety by wandering the forest and hoped it proved true today. Before leaving for her day's quest, she went to her most trusted companion and removed the hood from her beloved falcon named Finn. He eagerly mounted her outstretched forearm, knowing she would take him out to fly.

As she closed the door to her little cottage, she stood in the emerald clearing in the heart of the Forest of Secrets, her falcon resting on her arm with placid dignity. The rising sun stained the sky with hues of pink and lavender, slanting filtered sunlight through the dense evergreens. Fresh dew kissed the soft green floor and the echo of bird's songs rang through the trees. Finn stretched his wings and Faile examined the way the one had healed with pride before he took flight.

As she stepped onto the path leading deeper into the forest, the gnawing feeling to hurry pushed and pulled her along. Finn sensed her urgency, flying fast and steady before her, just under the thick boughs of towering fir trees. His flight stopped, he began circling around and shrieking his cries to hurry her. She rushed as quickly as she could at a near run before she came to another small meadow.

Faile froze with a gasp when she saw the large chestnut stallion. He stood tall and proud, head and shoulders above her, still wearing his saddle and armored breastplate, a long broad sword, still sheathed in its scabbard, hung from the pommel. When he saw Faile, he whickered impatiently, nodding for her to come, and lowered his head to the ground before him. Fear churned in her belly as she moved forward to see what he was guarding. Her heart knew even before her eyes did and she fell to her knees beside a giant of a man, still clad in his leather armor, lying still and lifeless on the ground. Her breath caught, even as her heart faltered and her hands trembled as she strained to roll his great bulk over and onto his back. Understanding her struggle, the giant warhorse

gave his nose in aide to her. She knew in an instant that it was the warrior in her dreams. He had shown himself to her as the conqueror, large and dark, strong and tall with his long, black hair drawn back and braided with strands of red. Both the color of the threads and length of his hair told of his high rank. Reaching out, she touched the soft, short-cropped beard spread over his firm set jaw, feeling beneath his sharp, slightly angled nose for any breath of life. There wasn't much force, but she felt the warmth coming in steady breaths.

Again, the urgency pulled at her, and she knew she must move quickly for there wasn't much time. She didn't know if the Dark Creatures had followed him through and she feared that they could be in mortal danger even now. Twisting around, she looked behind her nervously and summoned the horse. Creating a litter from two fallen, thin poles and the warrior's thin blanket, she managed to get him rolled onto it after much struggling. Tying the poles to the saddle's high pommel, she took the reins and led the giant horse along the path. Sending Finn ahead to scout, she slowly made her way back to the cottage, through the Forest of Secrets.

The little cottage was a welcome sight and the horse stood patiently as she helped the warrior stumble half-conscious into her little home. He slid and leaned heavily on her petite frame as she staggered under his weight. But, she managed and bore him inside and onto her bed. Stoking the fire to gain brighter light and more heat, she went to work unbuckling his leather scaled breastplate and worked it off him. His saturated, white tunic was caked with blood and the fabric had dried to his side. Carefully, she lifted it to inspect to wound and he groaned loudly under her inspection. She fetched her basin, filling it with warm water and soaked the spot until the fabric fell lose from his flesh. The crimson stain began to spread and the coppery scent filled her nose as she took the filthy tunic off him.

With nimble fingers, she inspected his large arms and thick chest muscles, dusted with dark curls of hair, a tight trail leading down his firmly muscled abdomen, disappearing into his trousers. She slid his trousers from his body and he lay before her, naked and helpless as a wee babe. Pouring fresh water into the basin, she dipped a soft cloth into its warmth, slowly bathing his face, his features etched into her mind as some ancient memory, as if she had known him an entire lifetime. Without even seeing his eyes, she knew they were a deep, piercing brown. Smoothing the warm cloth over chest, arms, and hands, she knew what it was to be clasped tightly and caressed by their roughness. Washing his legs and groin, she knew how he felt when she welcomed him into her body. Now, she knew the sickness and pain he felt as she washed the wound. The black poison oozed from the wound, invading his body. Closing her eyes, she focused her energy on the spot. The blackness boiled around the edges and down his pale flesh. The warrior's groan was weak as the wound faded to a pink scar. He fought well and with great strength, and she with him.

Three days she stood vigil, three nights she bathed his fevered brow before its final breaking, and he lay in the still silence of deep slumber. Faile lay next to him, a wave of exhaustion folding over her, blanketing her in blessed darkness. Her last conscious feeling was the warrior's large arm tucking and pulling her into the warmth of

his body. She slept.

Opening her eyes, she woke to the sharp penetrating stare of his brown eyes. With a stiff jerk, she awkwardly tried to sit upright, but the strong coil of his arm pinned her to his side. He rose up on one elbow.

“What have you done to me, Witch?” his strong voice masked his weakened body.

“I- I found you in the South Meadow and I healed you.”

“Issra, where is my horse, Issra,” he demanded.

“He is grazing in the meadow, just outside.”

Faile could see the confusion as his conscious mind was trying to overtake the illness and odd sensation of waking to an unknown place. Reaching out, she spoke to reassure him. “The meadow is being guarded by a creature, strong and true, my lord.”

He sank wearily back onto the pillow, keeping his arm where it was. “Who are you, and why do I know you?”

“I am Faile.” She fixed her tilted green eyes on him. “We have only met in our dreams.” She whispered, knowing he wouldn’t believe.

“I am Kelzan,” his voice was but a weak growl. Completely at her mercy, he sank wearily back, closing his eyes, drifting into a fitful sleep, dreaming of the tilted, penetrating green eyes so familiar to him.

Only when his strong grip loosened, did she struggle out from under the weight of his arm and take a deep breath.

Faile straightened the little cottage, filling her wood box and water pail. With her mundane chores finished and Kelzan still sleeping, she eyed the pond, falling to it’s beckoning to bathe. Standing on the bank, she slid out of her simple dress and stood nude, inhaling deeply as the cool breeze caressed her skin, lifting the fatigue from her. Stepping into the cool water, she felt the tiredness wash away as the depths enveloped her. Yet she was unaware she was being watched.

Kelzan woke, pulling himself from the seductive fog of the recurring dream that he now knew was him, loving Faile. He stood and was surprised to feel strong and new. Despite being naked and not knowing where his clothes were, he was going to find Faile and make her explain what manner of sorcery she implemented upon him. He looked around the one room cottage and easily surmised she wasn’t here. Stepping out the door, he saw her as she simply dropped the straight dress in a pool at her feet and drew in a sharp breath when she stretched, reaching for the sky. He knew he was alive, his

sleeping body began to awake from the sight of her and all that made him a man stirred. He felt the fire of possession rouse within him and he kept his eyes on her, floating head and shoulders above the lily pads. She disappeared for a moment, bobbing back to the surface with her hair sluiced to her head, among their numbers.

Kelzan was already ankle deep in the cool water before she noticed him and her emerald eyes grow wide in surprise, his direct approach startled her. She had let her guard down and her falcon knew him as no threat. He firmly grasped her arms holding her at arms length.

“Tell me what manner of sorcery you have used to bewitch me.” He purposely stepped deeper into the pond, beyond where she could reach, up to his shoulders. For a moment, she clutched and scraped with her feet and legs, trying to gain purchase on something solid, and then her kicking legs and feet found him and wrapped her legs firmly around his torso. It had been a very long time since any woman had wrapped her legs around him, let alone a naked one, and someone he owed his life and gratitude too. He let his gaze sweep from the look of desperation in her innocent eyes, to the puckered little pink buds crowning the small, white breasts. Desire and hunger stirred within him.

“I have done nothing to bewitch you!” Though being in a precarious position, she bravely raised her voice her voice in temper and outrage.

It dawned on him that she spoke the truth. He drew the rest of her into his body, letting her cling tightly to him as he moved to shallow water. Standing still for a moment let him savor the feel of her soft, supple coolness against his over heated body.

“I told you it was the dreams,” she gasped, fighting for her breath.

“What brings such dreams?” He demanded.

“The fates, we were together in a previous life and our energies are still connected allowing us to feel one another from a distance. Destined to find one another again when the time was right.”

“And this is what you believe.”

“Yes, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what I believe. What is here and now, is what I believe. What I know for certain is all I know.” He remained firmly planted where he stood.

Faile looked deep into the facets of his amber eyes, a kaleidoscope of emotion swirled through their depths in a single heartbeat. He was brave, fought for his passion, and for what was right. That small space of time opened the windows to his very soul and laid it out for her to see and feel. Faile caught a glimmer of what resided there, of

what haunted him and she wanted to give him some small comfort. A small breath choked from her, snapping his attention just before her lips melted onto his. She felt his body stiffen and changed her angle, drawing him in deeper. Parting her lips, she slid her tongue across his lips, tasting, inviting him the way she had done in her dreams, countless times. It was as if she had fit a key into a lock, and the realization of who she really had dawned upon Kelzan. Tension within him melted, and he softened the clasped fists around her arms, sliding his large open palms around her, holding and crushing her into him. His eyes closed as he opened to her, mating her tongue in a hungered and desperate frenzy. Time seemed to stop as the reunited lovers clung to one another. The passion between them ignited, fusing the rift of time and place. They had found each other and there was no telling how much precious time they had together.

Faile was relieved when Kelzan turned for shallow water. Taking her to the shore, he set her down. Bowing his head, he folded, clutching his side.

“You should not have come out here.” She looked deeply into Kelzan’s eyes when he stood and opened them. “Come, you need to be back in bed.”

“I am fine. Just a little tender is all.”

She offered her hand to him, he took it with a slight smile and she understood it was simply to connect with her again. Faile smiled and picked up her dress before starting to pull it on over her head again. But she didn’t get far. Kelzan plucked it easily from her hands and tucked it under his arm.

“I’m not done with you just yet.” He gave her a charming smile as he took her hand and strode to the house with long steps.

The sun was just beginning to set as Kelzan stoked the fire. He watched her as she fidgeted.

While Kelzan worked with the fire, it gave Faile the chance to anticipate what he meant by ‘not being done with her yet’. She felt the twist in her gut again, when he looked at her. Now he came to her on his knees, his height matching her own. He kissed her, with a soft mating of his mouth and tongue as he drew her body against his. Her soft skin brushing against all that was coarse on him. Taking his time, he slowly savored every part of her. Sliding his kisses aimlessly across her body, his beard brushed over her skin reddening it. She let out an agonizing sigh as he pleased her in ways that their dreams could never come close too. As he caressed her everywhere but where she desired, her sighs became pleas for him to end his teasing.

Kelzan knew his sweet torture was a tiny bit cruel, but he also knew it would bring her exquisite pleasure. He felt wicked for wanting to hear her beg for him, and at the same time hearing her say she needed him was nearly more than he could bear. Her fingers tangled in the blankets and her open mouth cries when he tasted her flesh drove

him to near madness. She said she was his and he knew in his hardened warrior's heart, that she was his mate. Maybe if he took his time, it would never end and the call to return to battle would never come. It had been so long since he had felt pleasure so genuine, if not ever. This woman loved him with all she had and he could feel that in the depths of his soul.

Sliding his body next to hers, he took her in his arms. "I am sorry if I hurt you earlier," he murmured. "I- You have to understand that I did not know..."

Faile placed her finger over his lips, stilling the unspoken words. "Shh, think nothing of it, my love. You were not yourself." She slid her arms around his neck, pulling him down to her, pressing her cool body to his aching, heated one once again.

Emotion filled his eyes, spilling down his weathered cheeks as passion ripped through his heart. Threading his fingers through her hair, he kissed her deeply, drinking from her giving spirit. Joining their bodies linked their souls, hearts and minds and there was nothing that could stop it. When their bodies were spent, they lay together, cheek to cheek, gazing into the dancing flames.

"Tell me what you have done to me," Kelzan whispered against her neck.

Turning her eyes to his, his breath caught and he found himself mesmerized by her beauty, still flushed from their love making as well as the fire's warmth and her hair tousled like spun gold.

She smiled and a soft laugh lilted from deep within. "I have done nothing but heal your wounds."

"And stolen my heart," he breathed, tasting her dewy flesh.

Faile's smile faded. "I stole nothing, only traded my heart for yours." She cupped his chin between her palms. "That is all I can offer and I give it freely to you."

"Then you have given me the most priceless treasure on earth."

Faile kissed him, full of the passion and promises she could not name and Kelzan knew he was truly lost to her forever.

Faile didn't know pleasure could sear through her like this. She tried to hold the edge. Relish the sensations coursing through her body, but all was lost and she fell into the abyss of pleasure, surrendering her heart to the man of her dreams. They made love throughout the night, dozing lightly between. She opened her eyes and found Kelzan face to face with her. He touched her soft skin, caressed her hair, nuzzled her ears and neck with his nose and tasted her mouth, all in an attempt to savor their time together and remember what he had here in the Forest of Secrets. They held each other until

dawn and for the first time ever, Faile felt regret at seeing the sun rise.

Getting out of bed, Kelzan silently assembled his armor on his body again. He stood strong, straight and true and Issra stood majestically beside him. Kelzan stood by the door of the little cottage and Faile held him tightly in her arms.

“I wish you didn’t have to leave me.”

“I wish the same, but I have a duty to queen and country.” He thumbed away the tear slipping down her cheek giving her one last kiss. He swung up onto Issra, turned and galloped down the path he had come in on just days before.

Kelzan rode at a canter for about an hour before the pain in his wound, in his heart and in his mind began to throb. He was near the edge of the forest before he saw the Dark Creatures coming toward the Forest of Secrets. Toward everything that was Faile and all that he had just fallen in love with. Without considering the consequences, he turned Issra sharply and galloped back over the path they had just trod, and Issra understood running faster down the trail. Back to the cottage and back to Faile.

The clearing stood strangely still and empty, no fire burned within the cottage and Finn flew freely in the treetops. For the first time, fear gripped his heart. Sliding from Issra, he banged inside. Faile lay still and quiet in bed.

He came to her. “Are you ill, my love?”

“No, just waiting for you to return to me.”

“The Dark Creatures are coming, we must leave.”

“No, as long as you are with me, we are safe. They cannot see us, for this is the Forest of Secrets.” She smiled at him with a mischievous air.

Kelzan smiled and dropped his armor, realizing his empty life was now full to overflowing. He was home forever.



Love's Epiphany

Vicki Gaia

Tendrils of mist rose from the deceptively calm ocean, giving the sky a gray, mystical haze. The day promised warmth as the sun peeked from the striated clouds hanging over the horizon. Nisroc stood very still and breathed in the salt air. He focused his mind on his task ahead.

Aware this mission was dangerous, possibly suicidal, he'd accepted it without question. The Almighty God, Ouranos, needed Poseidon on his side for this war. Nisroc would do whatever it took to convince the sea god to join them. If they controlled the oceans, then they controlled the earth. Simple as that. Yet, not so simple when Poseidon remained neutral.

Bah. Neutral. Nisroc did not believe in neutrality. Everyone chose sides.

He tugged his hood forward in a futile attempt to ward off the prickly cold. A

shiver of anticipation rustled the hairs on his arms and he let out a sigh. He longed for a moment of peace as he stared at the vast sky. Then the roar of water rushed in his ears.

A wall of sea arose, filtering the rising sun. Nisroc stood motionless on the shoreline, his breath almost at a stand-still, his ramrod posture threatening to snap. As he sharpened his sight toward the water, a shadowed figure emerged from the center; a woman backlit by the blue-green luminescent wave. His heart tapped hard against his chest at such a magnificent sight.

"Holy Hell," he muttered as he tightened his hold on the hilt of his sword. Poseidon's daughter momentarily bewitched him. Nisroc pushed down the stirring ache in his heart. It wasn't her lush hair he coveted, or those soulful eyes. Rather, this *feeling* burned deeper, stirring an emotion he longed never to feel again.

The goddess waded toward him in a wave she kept from breaking on the shore. Only until she was safely on the beach did the water crash and surge toward them, splashing his feet and legs. A harmonious laughter swirled around Nisroc. The goddess held herself with serene composure as if he were nothing more than a gnat. It gnawed at his masculine pride but pride had no place in diplomacy.

The smooth pale throat glistened with dew drops of water, and sea-green eyes opened wide and clear and fathomless. Her shrewd gaze never left his face. What did she see when she looked at him with such clarity?

"You must be the angel sent by Ouranos." She looked him up and down and rested her gaze on his lethal sword. "Why does your god send a warrior for a peaceful negotiation?"

"I assure you, milady, I come in peace." He bowed his head in reverence. When he looked up, although she still held a slight frown, he spoke as if she honored him with a smile. "I am Nisroc. And I want peace as well as you, but only with your father's aid can we hope to achieve it."

She squeezed out her abundant hair and let it fall in wet strands. It reached clear to the top of her slippers that laced up her slender legs. Nisroc tried for stoic reserve but her tight fitting gown showed off graceful curves and luscious secrets he longed to explore. He released the grip from his hilt and flexed his hand.

"You may call me Kalliste."

Kalliste glided uncomfortably close and touched the silver threaded insignia sewn on the right side of his cloak. He stood at military rest, hands behind his back, desperate not to flinch under the touch of her fingers on his cloak. She smelled of salt air and sunlight, the scent permeating beneath his skin, latching onto his heart.

Intelligent eyes pierced through him. "A Throne, I see." She kept her hand on his chest. "I've heard of your kind but have never met one. Or any angel for that matter."

She remained so near studying him with those wild sea glass eyes. He swore his heartbeat must be heard across the ocean, it beat so loud. Where in heavens was his stoic composure, his ability to push down emotions whenever it was convenient?

"You are known in my world. An angel who has lived through the Void must be very courageous." Her words were brushed with awe. She trailed her fingers along his muscular bicep outlined beneath his cloak, and stopped at his wrist, resting her hand there. "Or insane. How did you endure such torture?"

He felt her hand on him and shook it off. "I don't speak of it, think of it or explain it." The Void had sucked him dry. Suspended with nothing to touch, to hear, to sense, to see...it had slowly consumed his soul, piece by piece. Tore him apart until he felt nothing. Then Ouranos orchestrated his release which bound his loyalty forever.

"Does denying the experience serve you well?"

"I live for now, not the past," he spat out, then frowned at his outburst. This was no way to speak to a goddess, and especially one that would lead him to Poseidon.

Wariness lurked in her eyes now darkened to the hue of seaweed. She walked to a blackened lone tree, then turned to face him. "How do I know I can trust you? A Throne is one of heaven's most dangerous warriors. You carry a weapon when you come in good faith."

"My sword is an extension of myself." He quickly released it from its sheath and gently laid it by her feet. The sudden weightlessness made him feel vulnerable.

She flinched and stepped back. "No!"

Strange she should react so violently to his gesture of peace. "It is yours to keep until I return to the heavens."

Her gaze went to his sword. "I can't touch metal," she muttered and crossed her arms across her waist. "Get it away from me, at once!"

Holy Hell. Now he really made things worse than impossible. He'd just insulted Poseidon's daughter.

Nisroc picked up his sword and rested it on the tree trunk away from Kalliste. He circled the tree and walked back to where she waited. He refrained from speaking, waiting for her to make the first move.

"Remove your cloak." She commanded in a tone that stiffened the hairs on his nape, and made his hand flex for his sword.

Underneath he wore a leather tunic and breeches. He thanked the heavens he

wore no armor or she might have thought he indeed came to fight. He unclipped the brooch and flung his cloak across a low lying branch. A swift air current swooshed across his body. Not one muscle twitched as he kept the stoic mask firmly in place.

"I'm armed only with a sword."

Kalliste studied him under thick silvery lashes. As her gaze traveled down his body with such intensity, he saw a *knowing* in her eyes. The current died and he allowed a slight relaxation of his shoulders.

"Yes I see you speak the truth."

Kalliste wandered to the shore and let the tide wash over her feet. Nisroc joined her and they gazed out at the horizon watching as the sun rose and washed the landscape in its bright light, burning up the last strays of mist.

Nisroc glanced at Kalliste, mesmerized by the highlights dancing off her hair. He wanted to touch her but instead he asked, "Do you trust me?"

"I cannot put my trust on just your word." Kalliste's hand reached for his scarred cheek. "May I touch it?"

A shiver coursed through him at the thought of her pity, but no, her eyes only showed compassion. He gave her a curt nod.

Kalliste's gaze followed his movement, her posture alert, and yet her eyes sympathetic. Her fingertips felt warm as they skimmed across the ragged line. Her mere touch fired up his nerves. A surge of desire shot through his body, rippling over his skin.

No...impossible!

Moments slipped into eons then Kalliste cried out. The connection snapped between them. When she faced him again, her complexion was pale, her eyes moist. The twist of her lips made him uneasy. He reached for her hand, but she twirled around and escaped from his grasp. Against the backdrop of the sea with her silver blond hair waving in the breeze, she was beautiful and wild and free.

"Who are you really?" she trembled.

"I have told you the truth."

From the depth of his soul, he knew he'd found her at last. His Yikíri. Eons of searching, and wondering if he'd ever find his other half. Cursed he was for his Yikíri to be a daughter of Poseidon. Yet if she'd asked him to plunge his sword into his heart, he would.

She raised her voice above the crashing waves. "I sense no treachery in your heart

but when I touched you...I felt something beyond reasoning." She shook her head.

"Then you will escort me to your father?"

"I am not convinced."

He battled down his desire and allowed his frustration in his voice. "The renegade gods will not allow Poseidon his neutrality. They will take what they need. They will destroy your home, rape your people, enslave them until there's nothing left of the world as you know it."

Kalliste strode up to him shaking her fist at him. "Do not underestimate our power or our willingness to die for our god and our world. We are not easily overtaken."

Her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes unsettled him. How was he to perform with upmost dignity if his emotions kept sideswiping him in his way? "That is why it's imperative I speak with your father. To let him know the truth." As if Nisroc didn't know the back room dealings that took place with Poseidon filling his treasury from both sides. Still, his mission was clear. Get Poseidon on their side.

"Truth," she scoffed. "Truth is not black or white but murky...like you," she finished, a purse of her lips fading.

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward him. She struggled but he wrapped his arm around her waist and held her steady. It had been a very, very long time since he had embraced a woman.

He cleared his throat and gruffly spoke. "I wish for peace, milady." All he wanted was to embrace her, protect her, and this shook his warrior-soul.

"Do you? You're an angel bred for fighting." A veil of sadness marked her face. "War is horrible. You fight among yourselves, killing your brothers and sisters." Her hand cupped his chin. Their eyes locked in a battle of wills. "You are scarred from battle even though angels heal themselves."

Her voice carried a gentle, caring warmth. It wrapped and settled around his heart. A powerful magnetism lured him to her like the sirens who sang sailors into their watery graves. Certainly his Yikiri was going to need convincing that they shared more than attraction. But later, once he negotiated with Poseidon and won.

"I must have an audience with your father."

Her slender hand slid over his shoulder and he shivered despite the warmth. Kalliste smiled and kissed him. She tasted of sea, salt and sweet honey, an odd but endearing flavor, and he deepened the kiss. Hands roamed up his back and he flexed from the touch. It had been so long and felt so wonderful. He had thought all of this lost to him. Yes, this goddess would melt the frost around his heart.

Reluctantly he pulled away in order to catch a breath. Kalliste smiled and disentangled from his arms. She held out her hand, her gold bracelets clanging a sweet melody. "You kiss well, my warrior. And I sense no duplicity from you."

He lifted a brow. "That was a test?"

"Trust is never to be given lightly but I'm going with my instincts. Much can be perceived by how a man kisses."

The smile didn't mock, and Nisroc shook his head at such a strange deduction.

Kalliste tossed back her hair and let out a genuine laugh. "Take my hand, my Nisroc."

The ocean lapped around their feet as sea gulls circled overhead. The first steps into the frigid water made him pause. She stopped and caressed his face, her touch a comfort.

She would lead him beneath the sea and he would follow. He now had another, more important purpose than his mission. He'd fight to protect Kalliste and her world against the darkness shrouding the heavens.

He would never let go of her hand.



First Scream of Lightning

R.L. Stuemke

Genesis

On this dawn of pain and loss, the sunrise was welcomed only for the dubious comfort of light and warmth for the earthquake survivors on Eltenyah. On the fringes of the devastation, angry survivors pursued a few remaining priests through the ruins of the Temple of Guardianship, upset because the Temple had promised that the Guardians would never allow such a tragedy to happen.

Further north, in the Eltenyah Calling Grounds, the defeated faced their kindred, hoping at least for understanding. The stepping stone for Wind, the Swan, was now a pile of pebbles. On her stone, Snow, the Winter Fox, lay with her head resting on her paws, weary and grieving. Rain, the Wolf, sat beside her, his dark eyes empty with despair. Ice, the White Bear, defiantly faced those who would judge her. “We did not

fail! *You* failed! All of us together would have had the power to stop the ground from falling apart, but you ignored us. And where was the Creator, who put this weakness into the ground? When will you admit that our Creator is also a Destroyer?"

Across from her, on Aetor's row of circular stones, Earth, the Serpent, lifted his head. "I used the skills the Creator gave me, and warned you not to allow settlements along that coast. Then, I warned you to urge your people to leave, to save their lives even though we could not save their homes. You did nothing. In this, where is my failure, or the Creator's?"

Stars, the Winged Salamander from Okalish, many times larger than nature's living version of the species, spoke angrily. "We are not Gods! Yet, you allowed your people to worship you, to raise temples and pay tithes, to believe you could do *anything!* That was *your* failure!"

Winter Fox raised her sad head. "It was obvious they felt more comfortable thinking of us in that way. We saw no harm in it; we thought they would respond better if the words came from mortal priests. But then, the priests wouldn't listen! Instead, they told the people we would save them from destruction! We tried to hold the ground together. Wind sacrificed himself trying. It was the Priests who failed!"

Day, the Great Horse from Aetor, chided them all. "Blame does not help us. Address your thoughts to what we should do now."

Ice rose on her hind legs and roared back at all of them. "*We* will rebuild Eltenyah now! Our people do not understand guidance; they need a new Power to worship, and I know how to give it to them."

Rain and Snow stared at her in dismay. "No more worship," Wolf growled. "They must see us as we are."

"As you are now, you are Nothing! If I must, I will lead them by myself."

Rain howled in anger. "Have you learned nothing? We were not created to rule over them. I stood back and said nothing as they began call us Gods, but I will not make that mistake again."

The Wolf leapt forward, ignoring the Fox's scream and the other warning cries. He crouched in front of the white Bear, and then he jumped for her throat. He never made it. The Bear caught him with one swipe of her giant paw and threw him to the far side of the Calling Grounds. Already weak from trying to stop the earthquake and then saving as many mortals as he could, pulling them from the collapsing earth, Rain had no endurance left. There was one small whimper, a sudden rush of raindrops, and the Wolf was gone. A dead man fell to the ground, beyond all hope of resurrection, either human or guardian.

The other Guardians moved toward the Bear, but she disappeared in a swirl of

shattered icicles and cruel laughter.

Weeping tears of snow, the Fox assumed her woman's form, and limped over to Rain's body. She knelt down and lifted the man's head, covering his face with her distinctive long, white hair.

"Eltenyah is lost to us for now," the Winged Salamander said. All the others reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"You are welcome to stay here, Turalaitha." Day addressed the broken woman sitting on the ground with her friend's head in her lap. "If you go back to Eltenyah, she could destroy you."

"Not if she doesn't know where I am," she said. "I don't belong here. There will be a time when my people will need me, and I will be there. I will not fail again." She lifted her hands to raise a funnel of snow. When it was gone, both she and the body of her compatriot had vanished.

* * * * *

Resurrection

(115 years later)

High Commander Jothreven had been on the continent of Aetor for more than half a year now, at the head of the exploration force from Eltenyah, and it still surprised him to find desert less than a day's ride from the fertile coast. On this particular day, however, the geography didn't concern him.

His eyes searched the sandy area around him. Where were the children? As part of his efforts to convince the Aetorans to cooperate, to see the Eltenyahrs as allies rather than invaders or conquerors, he had personally assumed the guardianship of two children whose parents had died accidentally under Eltenyahr employ. Now, those children had been kidnapped, supposedly by a group of resistance fighters. That idea felt wrong to 'Reven, for there had been no direct opposition to his actions up to this point, but all that concerned him now were Tria and her little brother Bren. They were only 8 and 5 years old; he had bonded tightly with them in the last few months, and they with him.

Behind Reven, Royal Commander Jhirali and First Commander Ketenorah dismounted, handed their reins to the escorting troops, and moved up to either side of their respected commanding officer. Prince Jhirali was Reven's brother-sworn, after spending nine years in the same foster-clan. 'Norah and Reven had become casual lovers on the sea voyage to Aetor. Together, these three formed a tight command organization, something Reven was very proud of.

“Are you sure this is the right location?” Jhiri asked quietly.

“This has to be it. Nothing else fits both the drawing and the note,” Reven said. “But there’s nothing here to hide them from view!” He took another few steps forward. The Aetorans were used to desert living, and probably knew ways to hide in plain sight of people less familiar with the surroundings. The sand was beginning to look just as gray as the darkening sky, but nothing else seemed at all out of place.

Then there was movement to his left, and he turned slowly as two robed figures approached, each one pushing a child with a rope around its neck. “Told I was to come here,” he called out, using the clumsy native dialect. “What wanted from me is?”

The answer came in a much more familiar dialect, from behind Reven. “Dying would be most helpful,” Norah said. More of the escort troops moved up, their fighting knives out and level.

“Your working alliance doesn’t work,” Jhiri said. “We’ve told you that, but you just wouldn’t consider any other path. We’re not getting anywhere, Reven.”

“Our troops and laborers aren’t getting killed,” Jothreven said, turning to face his supposed friends. “And we’re not wasting time trying to build on uncertain ground. The Aetorans know their land, and they know where it’s safe to build. Letting them advise us on such matters ... “

“Is a waste of time!” Norah snapped. “We could be building much faster, and just as safely, by forcing them to do the building as well as giving us the information we need. We are stronger, we are more advanced, and we have more knowledge. We should be the leaders here! Reven, these pathetic people still follow the Pretenders; we cannot hold such as allies. They will only weaken us!”

“Join with us, Jothreven,” Prince Jhirali urged. “You get your little charges back, we return to our camp, and we begin planning our takeover. You lose nothing.”

“Or?” Reven asked. “Why threaten the children and lure me all the way out here, My Brother?”

“Not by blood!” Norah snapped. “You should not be the decision-maker here! The prince should have that authority.”

The troopers surrounding Reven all nodded in agreement with Ketonorah’s statements. Their knives raised a little higher, came a little closer to their target.

“We are brothers-sworn, nothing else,” Jhirali said. He was close enough now that, even in the approaching darkness, Reven could see a strange blankness in the man’s eyes, and it occurred to him that the prince’s voice seemed flat, hiding all emotion.

Ketenorah, on the other hand, was letting all her true feelings come out of hiding and display themselves, in her eyes, her facial expression, and her voice. In a detached way, Reven wondered how long she had been performing for him, hiding her hatred.

The two robed figures, now recognizable as Norah's long-time attendants, shoved the children toward him, and one of the troopers took advantage of the distraction to pull Reven's fighting knife and sword out of the scabbards, leaving him unarmed except for the dagger in his boot. The terrified children clung to him, making it impossible to reach that last weapon.

"It's time to choose. Become a strong supporter of our Royal Commander, and keep your little pets safe. Or, we use your deaths at the hands of your allies as justification for urging your stupidly loyal troops to attack them," Norah said, walking forward until her deceptively soft feminine features were just inches from Reven's face.

"And wonder when the children will be poisoned or I will be killed in my sleep? Associating with murderers is not how I want to spend my life."

"Very well." She signaled her robed attendants, who took knives out, and cut the children's throats, before Reven could even scream "No!" Ketenorah's hand swept up, and her sharp fighting knife struck swiftly, cutting his throat as though moving through nothing but air. Then she drove the blade into his heart, and as she pulled it back with her fighting arm, her defensive arm pushed him away from her. High Commander Jothreven crumbled to the ground, each hand still clasping five smaller fingers.

I should be dead, Reven thought. But he could still feel, not just the pain of his injuries, but also the touch of the dead children's hands, and the blood soaking into the sand. He *felt* the sand's revulsion, the earth's protest, even as it embraced what was left of three lives. And he cursed his old friends, without making a sound. Cursed his own failures, especially his inability to protect the children; his misjudgments, his stupidity – he could have pretended to agree with them, and then, when the children were safe, he could have had the traitors arrested. But there were probably many other traitors, and safety would have been no more than an illusion.

A different illusion embraced him now. He could feel anger in the air, which had gone completely still as though trying to pull away from the murderers standing above him, to suffocate them. Grief poured through him, grief, anger, and hatred, a futile desire to not only punish the murderers, but also save his troops and the people of Aetor from the horrors they now faced.

Out of the darkness, he heard Ketenorah giving orders: make sure he was dead, set his horse free, and then, as though it was only an after-thought, to behead the children. NOOOO, his soul screamed! Don't violate their poor bodies any further!

Beneath him, the earth rumbled. The air was alive again, a wind beginning to blow, and Reven knew a storm was building, with clouds growing in the sky above them. "I will not let this happen," he screamed silently. "Do not touch these children again!"

A new power began to grow in his violated chest, spreading throughout his body, and he felt his hands move. His eyes and mouth opened, his knees straightened, and lightning broke from him, from eyes, mouth, hands, and feet, tearing through the air, reaching up into the sky and then multiplying before screaming back to the ground.

Men and horses could be heard, terrified, bewildered. "GO!" Reven roared, his voice emerging as thunder to accompany the lightning. He realized that the actual word had come from Jhirali. He could feel their every step toward the struggling animals, and then the shudder in the ground as the frightened horses began to run.

He wanted to make the lightning pursue them, but he was getting weaker. Dead, he thought, I'm dead. Tria, Bren, I'm so sorry. I am so sorry.

And the sky went completely dark.

* * * * *

He was dead. Was he supposed to be hearing voices around him? If he was supposed to feel something, wouldn't it be pain? He felt ... just short of warm, settled on a firm but comfortable surface, with a gentle hand sweeping across his forehead, and he was completely free of pain. If this was death, he'd waited far too long!

Reven almost grinned at that thought, but then he remembered the feel of little fingers clutched tightly in his own hands, before abruptly going limp. He jerked himself awake, opening his eyes.

He was lying on a low-slung Aetoran bed, in a good-sized chamber that appeared to be carved out of a hillside, with a round door. Only, there hadn't been any hills near where he was attacked.

Two faces leaned over him, one female, one male, both with dark brown hair and eyes, and skin a few shades darker than his own, despite the tan he'd acquired riding in the desert so often in the last few months. They were very much Aetoran.

Raven stared at them, for some reason very aware of his own coloring: light blue eyes, dark blonde hair. Actually, he felt more aware of everything around him, like all his senses had improved two-fold.

He opened his mouth to speak, but an unnerving vision of Ketonorah's smile as she cut his throat flashed through his mind. He reached up with one hand, to feel his neck. All he could find was a slight scratch, something that would disappear completely in another day or two.

"What's happened to me?" he asked, surprised that his voice sounded perfectly normal.

“Relax,” the Aetoran woman smiled. “Miracles are still possible in our world, you know.”

With the male Aetoran’s arm around his shoulders, Reven pulled himself into a sitting position, and looked down at his chest. The light tunic he wore was open almost to his waist, and he could see that, once again, there was only a slight scratch where Norah’s blade had gone in. If he could be healed this completely ... “The children! Did your healer see them?”

“They were already gone when we got to you, sadly,” the other man said. “It was too late to do anything.” He handed Reven a mug. “Drink this, it may help you feel better.”

“Nothing can heal failure,” Reven muttered, but he took the mug. A few sips told him it was a kind of fruit beverage, slightly tart but refreshing. He continued to drink.

“You are Commander Jothreven, are you not?” the woman asked. She had a wide smile, and very sharp features, beautiful in their own way, but actually more warrior-like than Ketenorah’s soft face. Reven found himself grinning just a bit as he responded to her.

“No rank. I think you safely can say my prince has stripped me of that. And it’s just Reven. Right now, I don’t think my father would want me to use my parental name.”

“Don’t judge yourself so harshly,” she chided him. “I am Abrey, and this is Danrel. Here, try to eat something.” She took the empty mug, and handed him a stone bowl that contained a cool cream soup with various vegetables in it. He wasn’t aware of being hungry, but the soup did taste good, and he finished it rapidly.

“Now, try to stand up.” Danrel asked, relieving Reven of the empty bowl and placing one hand around his upper arm. Abrey folded down the light blanket that covered him, and then took his other arm. With their help, Reven stood. He stayed in place for a few minutes, until he was sure his legs would hold him, and then, with a new friend on either side, he started to walk.

Outside, he faced yet another surprise. They were definitely against a hillside, and there were trees and grass all around them. They weren’t in the desert anymore. Memories of maps swept through his brain. They had to be at least three days ride from where the children died. There was a corral off to one side, and one of the three horses there was his, but how could he have ridden that distance with his injuries? How long had he been here?

There were four other doors set into the hillside, and a well in the center of the cleared space in front of it. Along with a shelter for the horses, that appeared to be the extent of the settlement, if you could even call it that, but everything felt old, like it had been here for decades, at least.

Abrey and Danrel escorted him over to a shady spot beneath some trees, where another dark-haired woman was working with a loom, making a brightly colored blanket of a size a mother would use for a newborn infant. Sitting a short distance from her was another Aetoran man, expertly playing a tucambor, a round stringed instrument with a double neck. “This is Yevra,” Abrey said, “and our minstrel is Kali.”

“I trust you are feeling better?” Yevra asked him. “You seem stronger.”

“Remarkably well, thank you,” he answered, and then they moved on past the last door, toward a third woman, who knelt on the ground, surrounded by several glazed pots. Reven was surprised to see that each of the pots contained what appeared to be grains of sand dyed in bright colors. The woman was carefully pouring sand onto the ground in front of her, creating a vivid picture of a desert landscape, with clouds overhead and lightning crashing to the ground. It was familiar, a reproduction of the attack.

Danrel introduced the woman as Dorala, who looked up, nodded her head in greeting, and then returned to her unusual artwork, only to stop again when a very tall, thin man, looking older than all the others, with almost black hair and very green eyes, strode toward them. “We have to talk. Meet me in the circle.” His voice was very deep, and melodious, and got an immediate response.

“That was Kweret,” Danrel said. “Come, we must meet with him.”

Dorala spread a cloth over her sand art, and followed them back toward a fire pit. There were several curved benches forming a circle around it, and Kweret, Yevra and Kali were already taking their seats. Reven ended up sitting between Abrey and Danrel.

“The Eltenyahr commander tried to move on a Wanderer camp,” Kweret announced. “This is the second time. Although she has arrested a few farmers, she seems to be specifically targeting Wanderers.”

“Ketenorah was always suspicious of the Wanderers. She was certain that people who moved around all the time and claimed no settled home, had to be thieves and spies. She wanted me to force them into labor camps,” Reven said, with only a slight twinge of guilt as he betrayed his own people. After all, they had already betrayed him, and these new acquaintances had saved his life.

“This may have been her last chance,” Kweret said. “They’re sending word to all their kin to stay clear of the coastal regions.”

“Were there casualties?” Abrey asked, concerned.

“Not many. No deaths, anyway, just injuries, mostly minor.” The tall Aetoran glanced over at Reven, before continuing. “They used the same tactic as the first time – tethering their horses and sneaking up on the campsite, just before sunrise. Of course,

Wanderers always keep guard, and they have their great dogs, so they were warned in time. Once again, the Eltenyahrs met great resistance, while the rest of the Wanderers started moving the wagons and horses away. Then, the Desert Lion attacked the Eltenyahr horses, their fighters broke off to rescue their animals, and the Wanderers disappeared into the desert. But after this their tactics could change, and this is why the Wanderers are leaving the area.”

“The Desert Lion?” Reven asked? “I have seen drawings, always of a completely black lion. But I have never actually seen a living black lion. Surely, desert cats would be a much lighter color, to blend in with their surroundings.”

“This lion doesn’t want to blend in,” Danrel said, smiling broadly. “He wants to be seen.”

Dorala spoke up. “The Desert Lion is the Guardian of Night. His purpose was to spare his people from further harm, to give them a chance to escape.”

“He is Eltenyahr. To him, the Guardians are Pretenders,” Kweret growled.

“Not to me,” Jothreven said quietly. “My birth parents said I would make my own choice when the time came, and my foster clan never spoke of religion. I had to attend the temple, until I was 13 and could make a man’s choices.” He stood up, and turned away, looking past his companions. “I was never comfortable in temple. I couldn’t trust the two-faced Mother. And one of my teachers, Aunt Lai, she taught several of us about the Guardians, about what they really were.”

“What was her full name?” Abrey asked. “And her appearance?”

“I never heard her full name, but her parental name might have been Graith or possibly Tura. She was small, and wore the clothing of a grandmother, with her head always covered. I saw her hair once, though, and it was pure white. That was the last time I saw her, when she warned me never to speak openly of the Guardians, for it could mean my life. The next day, Temple Guards came to arrest her, but she was gone. They never found her.”

“She obviously was trying to teach the truth, and your false Mother Destroyer heard of it,” Danrel said.

“The Guardians have been watching your people here ever since they arrived. At first, they did not appear to be a threat,” Kali said. “Your enemies hide themselves well.”

“Jhirali may have been the one to betray Aunt Lai,” Reven said bitterly. “We were brothers-sworn, we were fostered together, we roomed together, we studied together, we spoke of her teachings at night, when all around us were sleeping. I trusted him!”

“There is no way to know, now.” Abrey’s voice was quiet, with a soothing tone, and she reached out to touch his hand. “Don’t judge him yet.”

Reven shook himself, turned back and once again took his seat. “So, the Guardian of Night saved the Wanderers. Will the other Guardians help out as well?”

Before anyone could answer, a breeze swept past, carrying a strange voice. “I call! Come now, Aetor. Meet with me! Come!”

Everyone rose, including Reven. He felt as though something was pulling him, something he could not resist. Around him, people were disappearing, in a swirl of sand or a funnel cloud of water. Danrel and Abrey moved up to either side of him. “We must go, my friend,” Danrel said. “Just close your eyes and relax, your spirit will know what to do.”

Curious, Reven obediently closed his eyes. Almost immediately, his hands began to tingle. Without having to look, he knew that small spurts of lightning now jumped from his fingers, and then he felt as though a giant hand had picked him up and was carrying him off.

He was set down in a large open area just past a grove of trees. All his Aetoran companions were standing around him, as though to hide him. Ahead of them, there was a clear area of rock, with an arrangement of raised stone circles forming a kind of box, with one open end. Striding back and forth within this box was a black-haired woman in an impressive glittering gown; her hair was long and bound up with jeweled sticks, her skin was an unusual shade of brown that seemed almost golden, and her eyes slanted down toward the center of her face.

“We felt a new rebirth! We searched all over our lands, and found no one, so it must have happened here. Where is the New One?” she called out to them.

Kweret stepped forward. “Where are your fellows, Yetira? You called for all of us, yet you are here alone!”

“When I have a clear knowledge of what has occurred, then I will call my clan. Where is the New One?”

Jothreven felt a shiver down his back, and all the small puzzles his subconscious had been collecting began to echo in his mind. His new acquaintances were all Aetoran, yet he had no difficulty understanding them, or being understood. He felt no pain, and showed no sign of the severe injuries he knew he had suffered. The small settlement showed no sign of crops, fruit trees, food stores; the three horses were the only livestock he had seen, and one of those was his. And how had they all gotten to this place, apparently some distance away? This new woman was neither Eltenyahr nor Aetoran, so she had to be from Okalish, yet, again, he could understand all she said.

“Where is the New One? We felt his rebirth! There has been no rebirth since the Separation!”

Reven walked slowly away from his companions, to stand alone at the open end of the stone formation. "I believe I am the individual you seek," he said firmly. He turned his head to look straight at Abrey. "I ate, but not from hunger. I drank, but I felt no thirst. Perhaps I needed sleep, but the rest was only habit. Ketenorah succeeded, didn't she?"

Abrey faced him calmly, but with an air of sadness. "Almost. She killed you, but instead of passing from this world, you took a step in a different direction, and joined us."

"That's why I can understand your speech. But what are you? What have I become?"

The unknown woman approached him. "You are of Eltenyah. Since the Time of Separation, your people have called us Pretenders, because they wanted us to be Gods and we aren't. Your people are fools!"

Danrel stepped forward and laid a hand on Reven's shoulder. "That was more than a century past. We don't have the time to fight old battles now."

"We are Guardians," Abrey said proudly. "And now, so are you. Yetira is from Okalish, where we are called Watch Keepers."

As Reven shook his head in disbelief, Doralá said, "He needs to see us, in Guardian form."

Yetira smiled coldly, and with a swirl of silvery fabric, she turned and strode back to the far row of stones, mounting one and turning, to face them all again. A shower of tiny stars, so bright Reven had to shield his eyes, covered her, and then, the woman was gone. In her place stood a figure he had seen only in books, a giant gold and silver salamander, standing on its hind legs, with silken wings spreading from its shoulders. "I am Amalyetira, Watch Keeper of Stars," the creature cried out.

Kali moved next, to step up onto one of the stones on the right side of the formation. In a twisting funnel of very fine sand, he turned into a large snake, its head rising up taller than the man he had been. "I am Kaliendori, Guardian of Earth." The snake's voice was low and rough, yet it could be heard clearly.

Reven hadn't even noticed Doralá taking her place on the stone right beside Kali. Water sprayed up around her, as from a great fountain, and when it disappeared back into the ground, a giant otter stood in Doralá's tracks. "I am Iwendoralá, Guardian of Water."

Yevra was next, stepping up on Kali's other side, with wind blowing the wide skirt and draping sleeves of her white gown dramatically around her, subsiding finally to leave behind a huge moth, hovering just above the circular stone with slow, silent motions of its white wings. "I am Yevresesha, Guardian of Air."

Danrel squeezed Reven's shoulder and then stepped over next to Doralá. As he took his position, flames surrounded him, and did not entirely subside as the man took on the form of a large red and yellow bird, with fire crowning its head and spraying from the wing feathers. As Reven stared, awestruck, the Firebird opened its great beak to shout, "I am Danrelyadi, Guardian of Fire."

Kweret launched himself toward the stone next to Yevra. A black fog swept over him, and when he landed on the stone, it was with four black paws. The black desert lion gazed over the Calling Grounds with a predator's stare. "I am Kweretono, Guardian of Night."

Abrey reached out to stroke Reven's face with gentle fingers, making him look directly into her eyes. "Remember, we are also your friends," she whispered, and then she stepped up next to the Firebird. With a graceful shake of her head, her long hair swirled around her, and kept moving, changing color all the while, until it became the beautiful mane of the most magnificent white horse Reven had ever seen. With one last shake of its head, the horse spoke out. "I am Abreyoni, Guardian of Day."

Most of the stepping stones to Reven's right were occupied. The great Flying Salamander had taken the center stone of the line that connected the other two. For the first time ever, Reven truly prayed, albeit one simple phrase. "Creator, guide me." But before he could actually do anything, from the sky there came a remarkable sight: one single cloud, moving directly toward them, dropping snowflakes that disappeared before ever hitting the ground.

The cloud paused at Reven's side, and he could see the slightly built, white-haired woman within it. She faced him, and smiled. "Aunt Lai," Reven whispered, wondering why he wasn't surprised. Then, the cloud swept the sand off the only intact stepping stone to his left, and when it faded completely, the Winter Fox sat on the stone. "I am Turalaitha," it said, "Guardian of Snow."

Now, Reven knew what to do. He cautiously took a stand on the cracked circle next to Turalaitha, and raised his arms, reaching forward. Lightning shouted from his fingers, from his entire body. Thunder rumbled across the desert, and when the lightning faded, he stood erect on strong ursine legs, claws set firmly on the newly restored stone, brown furred front legs stretched out for balance, and with his Mountain Bear's jaws, Reven growled, "I am Jothreven, Guardian of Lightning!"

* * * * *

Revelations

In the grove just past the Calling Grounds, there was a meeting area, with a

bubbling spring and beautifully crafted chairs distributed among the trees so their occupants could all see each other's faces. Yetira called the other Watch Keepers from Okalish, and they brought with them some cider and some sweet fruit bread, so there could be a proper celebration to welcome the first new Guardian in over a century.

They were also celebrating the return of Turalaitha, who had not been seen since the Separation. Relaxing in one of the chairs, Reven found himself sitting between Abrey and Laitha, enjoying the refreshments and the company.

Unfortunately, the celebration didn't last very long. A flock of small birds swarmed into the grove. A few flew directly to Danrel, the Firebird, and others settled near to Erom, the Watch Keeper of the Sun. Abrey leaned over and whispered into Reven's ear, "His avatar is an Eagle. Messenger birds respond easier to those who know the use of wings."

One of the sand-colored birds was somewhat larger than the others, and this one had gone straight to Danrel, who raised his hand so the bird could perch there. As the rest of the grove went silent, the bird began to talk-sing, a long procession of chirps, whistles, and calls. Surprised, Reven found he could understand a few of the 'words' the bird was passing along, enough to know that the news was not good. Some people had been killed; the bird sent a brief mental image of a fight, and Reven recognized some of Ketenorah's guard, attacking people wearing the colorful garb of Wanderers. One more short image showed Jhirali and Ketenorah, staring down at an assembly of Aetoran villagers.

Then, all the images vanished, and the small birds took flight once more. "Why does she keep targeting Wanderers?" Kweret asked. And this time, Reven knew the answer.

"Turn your enemies against themselves," he said. "Blame the Wanderers for murdering the children and me, and then blame that incident for overthrowing the local government, for becoming conquerors instead of allies. That way, there will be as much anger toward the Wanderers as toward Eltenyah."

"This must be stopped!" Kali stated. "We can't just watch, and interfere occasionally. We have to meet them directly, all of us together!"

"Oh no, this is an Aetoran problem," Yetira said. "We cannot participate."

This started an angry exchange, but Turalaitha stood up and spread her arms in an arch over her head and then down to her sides, sending a quick shower of snowflakes over the grove. "There is much more you all need to know," she said, "before any decisions can be made or actions planned. It was a mistake for me to keep silent this long. Please, sit again, and listen."

There was so much sad determination in her voice, no one protested. Everyone sat down again, and all eyes turned to Laitha. Sensing her need for support, Reven

reached over and took one of her hands. She glanced at him, nodded once, and wrapped her fingers around his.

“After the great earthquake, Shyairah of Ice was full of sorrow, anger, and grief. She was convinced that humans are not capable of making safe decisions on their own, that it is not possible to save them by counsel or guidance. They must be ruled, controlled, and that requires worship.

“Obviously, the first religion failed. Shya decided they not only needed to worship out of love, they needed to be afraid. So she made the two-faced Mother out of herself – Mother Creator, for the people to love, and Mother Destroyer, to fear. That explained how the earthquake could happen, could destroy so much. It was easy, in the early days after the Separation, to get people to believe.

“I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn’t listen. I should have asked you for help, but I was too proud. I just hid; I watched, I tried to save individuals when I had the chance, and to teach some of the young, so the truth wouldn’t be completely lost. For Shya, my disappearance only made her more convinced that she was right.

“Then, people started questioning and investigating on their own, and she sought ways to tighten her control. She pulled more acolytes closer to her, and she used their faith, their spiritual power, to create her own magic. All her priests and priestesses use it, including those hidden among the population.”

“Ketenorah!” The name burst out of Reven’s mouth. “And those attendants she insisted on bringing. Spell Casters, she called them.”

“Yes,” Laitha said, taking a very deep breath. “And the magic they all use is the worst abomination possible.” She looked around the grove, capturing each Guardian’s eyes for a minute, making sure she had their full attention before she finished. “Blood magic. Reven, was Jhirali injured recently?”

“Yes, he fell from his horse, but it wasn’t bad.” Then, he realized why she asked. “Norah was with him. She drank his blood. And now he is hers.”

“As long as she did not cause the wound, yes.”

“That’s how this was kept hidden from us!” Abrey said. “She hid behind a shield of blood.”

“I could have told you,” Laitha moaned, “but I was so ashamed! I convinced myself that the people would rebel against her, reject her, and then I could lead them in the right direction.” She stood up. “My behavior was unconscionable, and I apologize.”

It was Yetira who responded first, “We all needed to open our eyes. Now, knowing that this terror is being visited upon our world, we cannot close our eyes again.”

“We need to assure that Aetor is safe, and then we must free Eltenyah,” Dorala declared.

“I say this, as a trained warrior: there is no way to free either Aetor or Eltenyah, without starting a flood of killing that would be as catastrophic as the great earthquake. People could come to fear us as much as the Mother Destroyer,” Reven said. “We must consider our actions carefully.”

Another round of protests started, but once again, something unexpected stopped the debate. The ground beneath them began to moan, and the air around them as well. Both Yevra and Kali cried out, almost as one, “The Calling Grounds!” As they ran toward the stone formation, the earth shook and groaned; clouds of dust rose around them, obscuring their vision. When it cleared, they faced a different formation: instead of the open-ended box, the stepping stones formed a complete circle. One at a time, they were compelled to enter that circle, to claim a specific stone.

When everyone was in place, they found that their home continent no longer dictated their location. This was a powerful message: they were responsible for all the people in the world, not just those who shared their continent of birth. Erom spoke first, “We have always known there was great power in the Calling Grounds. I think we have now been given new orders.”

“But we still don’t know what path we should take!” Dorala protested. “We just know that we should take that path together.”

At this, each of the stepping stones began to hum, and the sound kept growing. Soon, they could hear and understand what the stones were saying, and it was a name. One more stone rose from the ground; unlike the others, it was a dull red, and it vibrated. The name became clearer, and finally, Laitha began to call it as well.

“Shyairah! Shya, come to join us again! It is time!”

She continued to call, and one by one, all the others followed. “Shyairah, we meet! Join us now!”

The ground was also calling, and soon even the trees joined the chorus. The power within the circle grew and grew, and each of the Guardians felt their individual spirits merging, becoming one great united power, racing across the ocean, to the Mother’s Temple on Eltenyah. Anchored in the Aetoran Calling Grounds, this power began to pull, and finally, Shyairah, once the Guardian of Ice, could no longer resist.

As she took her place on the red stone, the power eased only because it did not have to pull any longer; otherwise, it was clear that the great strength still surrounded them. “You have no right to force me here!” Shya protested, although her voice shook. “I am not a Guardian of Aetor!”

“Look at the Calling Grounds,” Yetira said calmly. “We are now all Guardians of One World.”

“NO!” Shya screamed. “I, and I alone, am Guardian for Eltenyah! When you turned your backs, I worked alone to protect my people, and I have succeeded! They follow where I lead, and soon they will lead your people as well. People need absolute leadership, not gentle counsel.”

“And blood magic?” Abrey asked. “That gives you an artificial power, stolen from the very life spirit of your people.”

“A small price, when the result is loyalty and stability!”

“It is a terrible price, whatever the result,” Laitha responded, “Now even the ground beneath us, the air around us, and the power of the Calling Grounds, have brought you here. Oh, Shya, look at yourself; your own appearance shows the cost of your actions!”

It was true. Shyairah had actually aged. Her face was lined, her once lustrous hair was gray and thinning, and her hands were wrinkled and covered with age spots. There were even some scars, on her arms, showing that she had given some of her own blood to her most important acolytes, most likely to tighten the ties between them. “NO! This is not real, this is a trick! You have done this to me, you who was my sister once!” It was as though she herself had only just noticed the changes in her appearance, although it was more likely that she had simply refused to acknowledge them.

“Deny all you wish,” Danrel said. “This craziness is draining even your existence. It must stop!”

“And you think you can stop me, Firebird? My Ice will freeze your flames before you even get close!” The ice particles were smaller, but she was still able to transform into her avatar. Ice Bear rose to its full height, and roared in defiance.

Everyone’s eyes turned toward Reven. He had been raised to be a warrior, he understood the necessity and the price of battle, his physical death had been the direct result of his fellow Eltenyahr’s actions, and his avatar was the same kind of creature as hers. Lightning screamed around his stepping stone, and soon Mountain Bear stood to confront its white opponent.

Ice could not hold off Lightning, and soon the two bears were locked in close battle, tearing at each other with teeth and claws. The Mountain Bear was bigger, stronger, more experienced in combat – and Reven was younger and healthier than his opponent, an issue that had never before figured into any rivalry between Guardians. Still, the white bear was angry and desperate, fighting to justify its very existence, and Shya was also able to drain strength from those of her acolytes with whom she had exchanged blood.

Reven could have borrowed strength from the other Guardians in the circle, but this he refused to do. He called upon his mortal memories to keep his avatar focused and alert: the blank look in Jhirali's eyes, and once again, the feel of those small fingers clinging to his, until death loosened their hold. The pain of those memories gave Mountain Bear the extra strength for one last terrible effort. It drove itself close enough to Ice Bear to sink its teeth into the other's neck. Its jaws locked, its heavier body pushed until the white bear fell backward. Standing over its fallen opponent, with teeth still buried in the other's throat, Reven's avatar gave one last, intense shake, and Ice Bear failed.

There was one last burst of lightning, and then both Jothreven and Shyairah lay on the Calling Grounds. Shya's throat was torn open, blood pouring from the wound, and she was frantically trying to breathe, without much success. Her eyes stared at her rival as Abrey moved to help him. Laitha came over, and took Shya into her arms. No words were necessary. Her eyes froze, the painful gasping ceased, and Shyairah took her last journey.

* * * * *

The sun was just going down. Reven sat on a bench on the far edge of the Aetor Guardians' settlement, contemplating whether there was really any justice in Ketenorah's fate. Three days ago, as he defeated Shyairah in the Calling Ground, most of her close acolytes died, like Norah's two attendants, drained of all life by their Mother Destroyer in her final battle. Some careful scouting by several different Guardians had revealed that this was true in Eltenyah as well as among her close followers come to help Ketenorah conquer the Aetorans. But Ketenorah wasn't dead.

Prince Jhirali regained his senses when Shyairah fell, and the first thing he did was order the arrest of his new High Commander. She fought at first, and then simply collapsed. Her body was alive, and her senses, but everything else was gone. Reven wondered if he would have preferred her death, but obviously, the choice wasn't his.

Just a few hours earlier, he had revealed himself to Jhirali, with Laitha at his side. His old friend was working on new treaties with the Aetorans, as he planned to stay on this continent and build a new home for all those who had crossed the ocean with him. It was a bittersweet meeting; they were both happy to see each other, but there was no way to rebuild the friendship they'd had. Jothreven was just too different, and now he shook his head at his own stupid wish for them to stay as close as they had been before his physical death.

The Guardians had decided to take things very slowly, as far as regaining the faith of the Eltenyah citizens. They would be watching, of course, and whenever circumstances called for it, they would intervene to save lives, but also to discredit the two-faced Mother's religion. Her temple still stood, not completely abandoned, but since all of her highest priests and priestesses were gone, there was already a stale air of uselessness about the building, now nothing more than timber and stone.

Abrey walked up behind Reven, and laid one hand on his shoulder. When he looked up at her, she handed him a mug of the same refreshing fruit drink he had been given the first time they met. He took it gladly, and she slipped around to sit beside him.

“Do you think the Calling Grounds really had all that power, or did the Creator pay this world a visit?” Reven asked.

“We’ve discussed that question already.” She smiled at him. “We may never know for sure. Now, though, I have another question for you.” She moved closer to him. “Have you given any thought to why we retain all our senses, our feelings, when we cross to this existence? You said it yourself, we do not hunger or thirst, but we still enjoy these things we no longer require to survive.” She squeezed his shoulder lightly, and then thrust her hand up under the hair that fell almost to his shoulders.

“I wondered about it,” he answered, setting the empty mug down. “It’s not such a hard question.”

“We can exist for a very long time,” she said. “Letting us keep our feelings was a great gift ...”

“Abreyoni.” Reven’s voice had a harsh edge to it as he turned to look directly at her, at her sharply carved features, into her brown eyes with the occasional fleck of amber. “I know why.”

“Do you?” she asked, a slight curve appearing at the edge of her mouth.

He pulled her to him, and his mouth sought hers with both strength and gentleness. She responded in like fashion, and the kiss lasted a beautifully long time. When they separated, Reven grinned at her. “Yes,” he growled. “I know why.”

Together, they rose from the benches and walked back toward her quarters tucked into the hillside, his arm tightly around her shoulders, and her head happily cushioned against his cheek. The Creator had taken a big chance with this one simple gift, but for tonight, neither of them felt inclined to question it.



The Reluctant Bride

Donna Hatch

Abby shifted, bumping both her head and her knee, and reached two conclusions; first, the storage compartment of a mail coach was no way to travel; and second, she was a very great fool.

What had she been thinking stowing away? Now she was alone, without friend, and her parents were probably cursing her to high heaven. Moreover, Aunt Millicent might not be pleased to see Abby appear unexpectedly on her doorstep. She may be even less pleased upon learning Abby had defied her father and fled.

In the crowded compartment, Abby shifted in another failed attempt to ease her aching limbs. Her toes were numb and her stomach growled so loudly she was surprised it hadn't alerted the passengers riding inside.

With every painful, jarring mile, she wondered what was worse; running away or facing the terrifying man she was meant to marry. Perhaps she should have stayed and tried harder to find a satisfactory resolution instead of running like a coward.

At least as Lady Rosenburg, she'd be fed and warm. Unless the rumors were true. Another shiver crawled down her spine. Maybe he would throw her into the dungeon or starve her to death. Or worse, beat her.

She tried to wiggle the feeling back into her toes. Before she finished imagining all the ways a cruel husband could make her life miserable, the carriage came to a rolling halt. The voices reached her ears of the driver and the passengers unfortunate enough to secure travel aboard this rattling trap. A posting inn. It had to be. Perhaps here she could make her escape and purchase passage on a different coach. Inside this time. Surely she was far enough from home that her movements would not be traced.

Breathlessly, she waited until the voices faded, then lifted the hatch. All appeared clear. She pushed it all the way open and climbed out, her stiff limbs protesting as she unfolded them. A long breath of chill air cleared her head.

She stood in the courtyard of a busy inn situated off a tree-lined highway. Autumn had turned the trees all shades of gold and amber, like finely dressed guards standing at attention along the road. Her churning thoughts quieted as she beheld the magic of nature. After another bracing deep breath, she turned to retrieve her valise, but it was wedged between other bags. She had to tug hard before it finally sprang free. Before she could close the hatch, footsteps neared.

"'ey there! Wot you think yer a doin'?" She was seized from behind by the elbow and spun around.

A man with pocked skin and pointed teeth glared at her. She inhaled sharply as alarm washed over her like ice water.

"I'll 'ave no stowaways 'board me coach."

"Please, sir," she gasped. "I'll gladly pay you for passage. Only keep your voice down. I do not wish to be noticed."

He jerked her forward, his fingers digging into her arm. His foul breath nearly made her swoon as he leered at her. "Well, then, mayhap an arrangement kin be made, eh?"

"What is the fee, sir?" She held her breath, fearing his words.

"You give me all yer money, and yeself for tonight, and we'll see wot we kin do t' keep yer li'l secret." He pulled her in roughly until her body pressed against him and bent his head down toward her mouth.

“No!” She swung her hand, but before it reached his face, he caught her arm and let out a chilling laugh. Cold fear seized her lungs. He jerked her into his arms, his mouth twisted into a sneer. Breathless in fear, she kicked him in the shin. He let out a roar and shoved her to the ground. As she struggled to her feet, she tripped on the hem of her pelisse and fell to her knees. He raised his hand to strike her. With a cry of alarm, she threw her arm over her face, steeling herself for the blow, her heart thudding against her ribs.

“Stop!”

Abby looked up to see a finely dressed gentleman striding toward the driver. Another gentleman, not quite so well turned out, followed in his wake, struggling to keep up with the other’s long legged strides. It would have been comical if the situation weren’t so dire.

The nearest gentleman raised a fist, his commanding voice ringing out with authority. “What kind of barbarian are you to accost a lady? Leave off at once.”

Abby nearly wept with relief. A gallant hero to her rescue. But at what price?

The driver’s face twisted in rage. “She’s no concern o’ yern.”

“She is lady in peril. That makes her my concern,” the gentleman replied sternly.

“She stowed ’way on me coach and I demand payment.” The driver seized her by the wrists, as if to take her with him.

The gentleman clapped his hand upon the driver’s arm. “Unhand her, or suffer the consequences.”

The driver shook him off and rounded on him with a sneer, his hands . . . But before he could make a move or speak, the gentleman leveled a pistol at him.

“For heaven’s sake, don’t shoot him,” gasped the gentleman’s companion, a secretary or clerk, if his ink-stained fingers were any indication.

Her rescuer kept his eyes, and his gun, trained on the driver. “Here, a coin that you may cool your head in a pint and leave us in peace.” He fished out a coin and flipped it to the driver.

The driver caught it and a greedy light entered his eye as he examined it. Then he crassly bit down on it, a direct insult to the integrity of an obvious gentleman of means.

With no outward sign of annoyance, the gentleman added, “And another for your silence regarding the lady and her mode of passage on your coach.”

Another coin was tossed, and caught. The driver turned a sneer upon Abby. "This'll buy me better company than yern, anyway." He turned and touched his cap to the gentleman. "Milor'." He strode away without a backward glance.

As the enormity of her danger hit her, a deep quiver gathered in the pit of her stomach and sprang into her chest. She gasped for breath, her heart hammering, tears burning her eyes.

The gentleman knelt beside her and swept off his hat, revealing golden brown hair glinting in the setting sun. His brown eyes were filled with concern. "My lady, are you hurt?" his voice was gentle, in direct contrast to the harsh tone he'd used with the driver.

"He nearly...I almost..." Her voice cracked and she dissolved into tears.

Still kneeling next to her, he removed his gloves and silently handed her his handkerchief. She struggled to take herself in hand, and, after several shaking breaths, managed to silence her sobs. After wiping her tears with his handkerchief, she looked up into warm eyes set in a handsome face.

He was smooth-shaven with strong features and a square jaw. A long, ragged scar ran the length of his left cheek, standing out white against his sun-bronzed skin. But what really drew her gaze were his eyes. They were light brown with gold and green flecks and rimmed with a wide, deep green ring. She wondered if his eyes appeared completely green when he wore similar colored clothing, just as they now echoed the color of his coffee-colored frockcoat. She searched those fascinating eyes, looking for lust or greed but found only concern and kindness.

"My lady?" he prompted, turning his head slightly as if to shield his scar from her sight.

"No, I've come to no harm," she managed, still lost in his eyes. "Your aid was most timely, sir. I'm in your debt."

"Not at all. I'm unable to resist a damsel in distress." Humor crinkled the corners of his eyes as he extended his hands to help her to her feet. "Forgive me, we have not made the introductions. My friends call me Will."

Grateful she would not be required to give her full name, thus risking discovery, she ignored the breech in etiquette regarding calling a man – a stranger, no less – by his given name. "Then please call me Abby."

"Abby," he repeated with a smile.

With her gaze still locked in his, she placed her hands in his. As his fingers closed over her hands, he gentled his touch, as if fearing to hurt her. She looked down, amazed at how small her gloved hands looked in his. He pulled her to her feet and stood very

near. Her head barely reached his chin and his powerful shoulders looked sturdy enough to carry the weight of the kingdom.

“You’re trembling, Abby,” Will said softly. “May I assist you inside?”

“Thank you.” She glanced at his secretary and saw only concern in his expression as well. She bent to retrieve her reticule and swayed.

Will placed a hand under her elbow to steady her. “Do you have any other bags?”

“My valise.” She indicated the bag lying on the ground next to the carriage.

He made a quick gesture and his companion picked it up. As they entered the inn, the smells of bread and sausage greeted her, and her stomach rumbled in response. The main room was filled with hungry diners feasting upon their dinner but she saw no sign of the coachman. A serving girl cleared a table and an innkeeper hurried to them while drying his hands on a towel.

Will led her to an empty table and gestured to the innkeeper. “Bring a plate for the lady.”

“At once, milord,” replied the innkeeper.

Abby sank into a chair, grateful to be off her unsteady legs. She tried to draw a fortifying breath.

Will turned to his secretary. “Haws, inform the driver there will be a delay in our departure.”

Haws paused, as if surprised by the command, but quickly regained his composure. “Of course, my lord.” Haws set Abby’s valise on the floor next to her feet, inclined his head in a brief bow and withdrew.

Will settled into a seat next to her, close enough that she could touch him if she were to reach out. “Are you certain you’re unharmed?”

“He didn’t hurt me. Only frightened me.” She realized she still clutched his handkerchief in her hands. She held it out with a look of apology.

He waved it off. “Keep it.”

She dropped it in her lap. With shaking hands, she removed her gloves, frowning at the condition of the formerly pristine white kid leather, and pushed back her disheveled hair.

He looked her over carefully, his expression full of sympathy. “You look fatigued.”

“And rumpled, no doubt.” Truly, she must look a sight.

“Pray tell me; how long were you hiding in that storage compartment?”

A blush warmed her cheeks that this fine gentleman had caught her in such a childish and scandalous act. What must he think of her?

“Since early this morning. I didn’t dare leave when we stopped at the last inn. And now I fear I’ve been rash. It was foolish of me to travel alone.” She glanced up to find him watching her with a direct gaze. There was something quiet and melancholy mixed with the kindness in his face. “Thank you for buying the driver’s silence. I do not wish to be found.”

“Is that why you stowed away?”

“Yes. I have the money, but I was afraid my movements would be traced if I purchased passage. Someone might have remembered me.” She opened her reticule and handed him the equivalent coins which he’d paid the driver. “Please allow me to repay you.”

Will held up his hand in refusal. “Tis all part of the damsel-in-distress service.”

“Please. I do not wish to impose upon you more than I already have.”

“It would offend my sense of honor were I to take it.”

“I’m already deeply in your debt for your aid with the driver. If you hadn’t come when you did...” She stopped and concentrated on breathing lest she fall apart again.

Very gently, he asked, “Are you in danger?”

“No, just...” she toyed with the rejected coins. “I fear you’ll think me a terrible coward, but I’m running from an unwanted marriage.”

His brows rose. “One that is about to take place, or already has?”

“Oh no! I’d never...” She lowered her lashes as another heated wave washed over her face. “A wedding about to take place.”

“I see.” He leaned back in his chair. “Is your betrothed so undesirable, then?”

The stark desperation that had driven her from home threatened to overwhelm her. “Terrible. He’s much older than I, and grotesquely deformed. If it were only that, I’d honor my parents’ wishes, but he’s cruel. He beats his servants and keeps those who displease him imprisoned in his dungeon.”

His mouth curved in amusement. “Really? How gothic.”

“You think I’m making this up?”

“I find it hard to believe anyone could be as bad as all that.”

“I realize rumors are not always accurate, which is why I don’t believe that his eyes are blood-red like the devil and he grows horns at a full moon,” she said dryly.

“Very sensible of you.”

“You’re laughing at me.”

“No, my lady,” he said gravely, but the corners of his eyes crinkled.

A plate of food arrived and she tucked into it. As she ate the savory sausage, potatoes and bread and drank her hot tea, her spirits rose. Somehow, it would all work out.

After a moment, Will asked, “So ’tis not his monstrous face that frightens you most, but his potential to harm you?”

“I admit the very thought of his face does frighten me a bit, but I cannot bear marriage to a man I should always fear would strike or throw me in his dungeon.”

“It would be a terrible waste of space if a dungeon were not used on occasion, don’t you think?”

She looked up suddenly, but the sparkle of his eyes revealed his mirth. He wasn’t mocking her, he was teasing. The remaining tension coiled in her stomach dissolved. She felt her mouth curve. “It could be used to store wine. The really cheap kind one serves unwanted guests.”

He chuckled. “*Touché.*” With laughter alight in his eyes, his handsome face looked even more striking. Then he sobered and his gaze drifted, unseeing, to the window. Very quietly he asked, “Is he more hideous than I?”

She froze with her fork midway to her mouth. Something so haunting, so sad, entered his voice that she felt a lump rise to her throat. Then it struck her; he was lonely. If he thought himself hideous, it was probably because others had been cruel to him about his scar. She set down her fork and boldly reached out and traced the scar on his cheek, lightly, softly. He flinched but stilled under her touch.

“Am I hurting you?” she whispered.

“No.”

“You are not hideous. You’re handsome and kind and gentle. Any lady would be

fortunate, indeed, to have you.”

He stared in disbelief. “You truly don’t find me repulsive?”

“Absolutely not. And if I place my hand like this,” she cupped his face with her hand, “I cannot see your scar at all.”

His eyes grew suspiciously bright. He quickly closed them and placed his hand over hers where it still rested on his cheek. The warm contact sent a thrill of pleasure through her.

He drew a shuddering breath. “If one as lovely as you can look upon me, and touch me even, then perhaps I am not beyond hope.”

At that moment, with his warm skin under her hand and the vulnerability in his voice, she wanted nothing more than to somehow prove he was not beyond hope at all. A golden web of attraction and affection wrapped around them. At that moment, Abby would have given him anything he asked.

The serving girl dropped a glass, shattering the spell enfolding them.

It occurred to her that she was being terribly forward. “Forgive me.” She began to pull away, but his fingers tightened around her hand with an urgent grip as if it were the only barrier between joy and despair.

She held her breath. As a girl, she used to dream that her husband would cherish her, protect her, make her feel safe, and who would need her in return; a man like the gentleman seated next to her. If only it were he she was meant to marry...

Will released her hand and visibly straightened. “So you have not seen your betrothed when he turns into a demon? Red eyes and all?”

She laughed at the image. Something about the way he said it made the idea even more ludicrous than she’d first thought. “In truth, I have never met him.”

“Indeed? That’s unusual these days.”

“We’ve been betrothed since childhood. A member of my house always marries a member of his. ’Tis been a tradition for many generations. I do not wish to disappoint my parents, but when I heard he got one of his maid servants with child, then beat her and sent her away, I knew I couldn’t marry him.”

A thoughtful frown creased his brow, his hazel eyes turning introspective, his fingers rubbing his lower lip absently. “I wish I could save you from such a thoughtless and violent man. But running from your family is not the correct choice of action.”

“I’ve tried telling my father how much I dread this marriage, but he says I’m too

young to know what's best for me. Am I being unreasonable in wanting a husband who will be faithful and treat me with kindness?"

"Certainly not. But you should face your problems, not run away from them."

He was right, of course. She'd reached that conclusion in the carriage. But if she went back, she'd return to the ever-increasing pressure her parents placed upon her. And she was running out of time.

"Moreover, you cannot travel alone," he continued. "Where were you bound?"

"My Great Aunt Millicent. She has always been a sympathetic listener. I'm certain she will take me in. I'm hoping she'll write a letter on my behalf to convince my father to release me from this betrothal. She's the only one to whom he listens."

"How will you get there?"

She glanced at her reticule. "I have been saving all my pin money and can purchase passage on the next public coach that comes through here."

"But you'll be traveling alone."

"I know...I couldn't risk taking my maid with me. I didn't know what else to do. I had to act quickly."

He sat up as if coming to a decision. "Where does your aunt reside?"

"She lives in Shropshire."

His forehead creased in a thoughtful frown. "The opposite direction from where I am bound. And a goodly distance, to boot. Still, I see no recourse. I cannot in good conscience allow you to travel such a distance alone. I'll take you myself."

Take her himself? Truly, she'd never met such a gallant gentleman. He was like a knight of old, honor-bound to defend ladies. "I couldn't impose upon you in that regard."

"Nonsense. I'll send a letter ahead, explaining my delay, and take you in my coach. I'll need to hire a companion to protect your reputation. I daren't risk your virtue coming under question by traveling alone with me. Perhaps someone nearby would be willing to take the post. I'll make inquiries."

Tears stung her eyes and her heart swelled with tenderness. Was it possible to fall in love with a man she'd just met? He was everything she'd ever imagined in a husband; attentive, a considerate listener, intelligent, possessing of a healthy wit. And that gentleness of soul bespoke the heart of a poet. No doubt he would be a loving husband. And he was clearly a titled lord, so he would be well-connected enough to please Father.

Tears trickled down her cheeks.

His jaw tightened and the warmth in his eyes cooled. “You do not wish to travel with me.”

She blinked. “No, no, that’s not it. In truth, I was thinking that you are the kindest man I’ve ever met.”

He watched her as if to determine if she were in earnest. Slowly, the hardness faded, replaced by an unbearably soft expression. A moment later, his eyes twinkled. “Don’t say that too loud. I have a rather fearsome reputation as well, and I wouldn’t wish it to be softened by a mere slip of a girl.”

She smiled and wiped her tears with his handkerchief she’d left lying in her lap. “Forgive me, I’m not usually such a watering can.”

“A result of your fatigue, no doubt.”

She considered traveling with him over the next few days and found the thought most welcome. Then her enthusiasm dimmed as another thought occurred to her. Perhaps he was already wed or betrothed. He looked to be approaching thirty; most men were either married or promised by then. Yet, that sadness suggested he had no one to love him. She desperately wanted to be the woman who would make him forget his scar and who would bring out that wonderful smile. But he’d done nothing to suggest he had any interest in her beyond a noble desire to protect her. She searched his eyes, looking for clues as to his motives but only got lost in their beauty.

A brow lifted. “I seldom meet people who spend more time meeting my gaze than focusing on my scar. And usually they look away because they cannot bear to see it.”

“It isn’t so bad. And you have fascinating eyes. I can hardly keep from staring at them.”

“I pray the young lady to whom I’m betrothed will be as accepting as you are.”

Her heart sank as her dream crumbled. “You’re to be married?”

“I was traveling for that very purpose. Yet I dread witnessing her turning away in horror.” He turned thoughtful. “If only you and I could both cry off and run away together instead.”

She choked. Was he serious? Could it be possible he was developing feelings for her as quickly as hers were forming for him? If only it could be.

He hastened to say, “Forgive me, that was terribly forward of me. Just because I don’t make you shudder, doesn’t mean you’d ever consider—”

“I most certainly would.” Then she blushed. She was not playing the demure young lady at all. “I mean, if circumstances were different, and if you had the interest—not that I’m suggesting you do—I would certainly not refuse, should you express any desire to...”

He grinned broadly and she was grateful she was already seated, otherwise her weakened knees would surely have failed her. His grin transformed him from handsome to positively stunning. “This will be a most enjoyable trip to Shropshire.”

“Oh, my,” she said, a bit winded. “It most certainly will.”

“And it shan’t end there. All I have to do is show my face to my betrothed, and when she shrieks and cries off, I will tell your father I’ve fallen hopelessly in love with you and demand he consider me. I’m most determined. When I want something, or someone, I never allow others to stand in my way.”

Weakly, she said, “You’ve fallen hopelessly in love with me?”

The fierce determination in his expression transformed into utmost tenderness. “Do you mind so very much?”

She let out a half laugh, half sob. “Of course not. I believe I’m falling in love with you as well.”

He took her hands into his and kissed them both, one at a time, so slowly and gently that her heart ached. “Lovely Abby...” He straightened and the light of speculation entered his eyes. “Abby? You’ve never met your intended husband. And I’ve never met my intended bride. You aren’t, by chance, Abigail Lansford, daughter of Lord Suttenshire?”

Her heart skipped. “Yes.”

His lips curved slowly until he was grinning widely. “My betrothed.”

Her heart stilled. “Y-you’re Julian de Malet, Marquis of Rosenberg?”

“I am.”

She blinked. “But you aren’t misshapen or terrifying or cruel.”

Again that knee-weakening smile. “I am gratified to hear you say that. And you are even lovelier than I’d been led to believe. Even better, you don’t hate the sight of me.”

“But you...” She ran her hand over her eyes. “You told me your name was Will.”

His smile was tender. “I told you my friends call me Will. ’Tis a nickname based

upon my courtesy title of Viscount Wilton. I grew up with that title and only became Lord Rosenberg upon my father's death two years ago. Everyone close to me still calls me Will."

She blinked. It was all coming too fast. The kind and honorable Will was the cruel and horrible Julian de Malet, Marquis of Rosenberg? Her betrothed? It didn't seem possible. "The things I've heard about you."

"I assure you I've never beaten a servant, my dungeon hasn't had an inmate two hundred years, and I've never dallied with any of my staff."

Abby began smiling, her heart filling with light. "And you most certainly do not have red eyes."

"No horns, either, not even on a full moon." His eyes seemed to dance. "Are you disappointed I'm so ordinary?"

"Of course not. I'm delighted you're everything I'd hoped to find in a husband."

He squeezed her hands. "Will you marry me, dearest Abby?"

She touched his face again. Then leaned forward and feathered tiny kisses all down his scarred cheek. "Gladly."

He gently traced her face with his fingers, then kissed her upturned mouth. His lips were warm and soft, and increasingly possessive.

She would taste those lips every day for the rest of her life. The thought left her decidedly happy. And anxious to return home to marry the man of her dreams.



The Watcher

Antonia Tiranth

They call me the Watcher. Thought what exactly I am watching for is a mystery, even to me. Mallory's visions are never precise and all she could tell me was I needed to be here. She said I would know when the time was right. So I wait and I watch from this lonely cliff by the sea. The nearest town is almost a mile away and the townsfolk have plenty of crazy tales about me. I've overheard a few of them when I go to the market for supplies. Everyone has their theory about the man in the cloak, who stares out at the ocean for hours on end. Some are rather mundane and boring, others are quite creative. One young maid seems to think that I am trying to summon a kraken from the depths of the ocean to destroy the town. If I were so inclined to summon anything, it would certainly not be the kraken. She prefers to be left alone and would be more likely to kill me rather than the townspeople. Let them talk. I don't care for their chatter, their industry, or anything else to do with them. If I can't be home, then I'll take this tiny hut on a cliff.

Today began no differently than previous days, weeks, months, years. I awoke shortly before dawn and fixed myself a small breakfast of fruit and bread, eating alone in my ramshackle home. Winter was coming and the wind howled through the boards of my little home. I chose my heaviest cloak, wrapping it tightly around my shoulders before opening the door and took my usual spot on the cliff's edge. The ground here was smooth and grass free. Two years I had been standing in this spot. Two very long, sometimes lonely years. Not many from Shift, a place where the heart of magic still beats strong and my true home, ventured into this world. When someone did leave it was for something very specific and never for very long. There was only one who visited me and I hadn't seen her in nearly two months. I didn't blame her. I wouldn't visit me either. Even in Shift, I usually kept to myself. I closed my eyes, listening to the waves breaking against the rocks far below and the sea gulls cry as they flew over head. Salty sea air filled my lungs as I took a deep breath. Something nudged my leg and I opened my eyes, looking down at the small grey cat rubbing its head against me. I smiled. "Well, look who decided to finally come visit," I teased her.

She had the decency to look at least a little bit contrite, sitting on her haunches and licking one paw daintily. "I do say, Gareth, I don't know how you stand it up here. It's so blasted cold."

I chuckled. Winters in our home were never quite as cold as here. Only a few weeks of there were ever cold enough for snow. "And you're the one with fur, Siri. Imagine how I feel."

She scooted a little closer, pawing at the edges of my cloak. I opened it for a moment, allowing her inside to sit on my foot. "Have you seen anything?" she asked, her voice now muffled by the cloak.

"Not yet. Did you speak to Mallory while you were home?"

"Yes, but she hasn't seen anymore."

I sighed and turned my gaze back out to sea. A tingle ran up my spine as I caught sight of a ship on the horizon. "It's here."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." The closer the ship came, the more certain I was that who or whatever I was waiting for was on that ship. "Get off my foot. I need to get to the docks."

"I'll go tell Mallory." Siri rubbed her cheek on my leg before disappearing into the forest.

The docks were buzzing with activity as boats were unloaded and packed. I wove my way through the crowd scanning the ships, trying to find the one I had seen from the cliffs. When I did, I found an out of the way spot to observe the passengers. Many people left the boat but the tingle didn't return. I was beginning to think whatever I'd felt had been a false alarm. Finally it happened, an electric jolt ran through me as I saw him. He paused at the top of the ramp, his sunken eyes cast downward but the dark shadows under them were clear even from this distance. His skin was pale and stretched tight over his bone thin body. My heart went out to this boy, he looked so ill. Then I noticed the second boy beside him. Obviously they were twins but the second looked hale and hearty, except for the fact that he was a ghost. Shadow twins. No wonder Mallory had envisioned them. They were extremely rare and could wield magic with more efficiency and ease than even the oldest of mages.

A man and woman appeared behind the two boys, the woman giving the ill child a nudge forward, causing him to stumble a bit. "A mighty shame it 'tis," a voice murmured beside me.

"Beg your pardon?"

"That boy, sick 'e is. His mum and da brung him here ta the doctors, course if you ask me, they jess wanna dump 'im off." The ship hand leaned closer and I fought the urge to step away as his stinking alcoholic breath washed over me. "The men, they been talkin' and they say 'e's cursed. Strange thing been happen' since thens boarded the ship."

I didn't have to ask what kind of strange things. These people just did not understand ghosts. Thankfully, the man was called away just as the boy and his family passed my hiding place. I needed to get closer to that boy so I could find out why Mallory had the vision about him. Getting closer would be a bit of a problem though. I couldn't just walk up and start talking to the boy. His parents would call the authorities for sure. I would have better luck trying to speak with the ghost but I needed to get his attention. I cupped my hands, murmuring the words to summon a water sprite. She appeared in my hands, looking up at me with an annoyed expression on her elfin features, her foot tapping impatiently. "Forgive me," I whispered. "I am very sorry to bother you, this fine day but I need to speak with that ghost over there. Can you tell him to come here?"

For a moment I thought she might refuse. Water sprites could be so testy but she rolled her eyes at me and rose into the air, zipping toward the ghost. She flitted in front of his face, startling him and pointed him my direction, before diving between the boards of the. The ghost turned and met my gaze, surprise evident on his young features. I smiled and gestured for him to follow. Hopefully, he'd be able to move away from his twin. I ducked into an empty alleyway and waited. The ghost turned the corner, stopping in front of me. "You can see me?" He looked hopeful.

"Yes. I can and I'm not going to hurt you or your twin," I assured him.

“Please can you help Cael? It’s my fault he’s so sick and now they are going to do terrible things to him.”

“Its not your fault, uh, what’s your name?”

“Caim.”

I nodded. Since he’d asked my help, I could leave explaining why I was really here for later. “Caim, my name is Gareth and I will help both of you. I promise. And stop thinking it’s your fault. Whatever medicines they are giving him is what’s making him sick. Now, go back to Cael. I’m sure he gets upset when you are not around.”

He hesitated but finally nodded. “How will you find us?”

“Don’t worry. I have my ways.”

After Cael was gone, I ran a hand through my hair. This was definitely a first for me. Finding someone with a shadow twin, talking with said shadow twin, and promising to rescue his living brother from whatever medical atrocities his parents had brought him here for. Now to figure out how exactly I was going to rescue the boy.

I returned to my hut, pacing the small space, trying to decide how to go about my new mission. “Maybe I could just rush in and kidnap the child,” I said to the empty walls and then shook my head.. “No, that wouldn’t work. I’d just bring more trouble than I really want to deal with down on my head.”

I continued to pace and mutter until movement in the window caught my eye and startled me. “Damn it, Siri!” I opened the window so she could come inside. “Took a year off my life.”

Moving with all the grace of the cat she was, Siri bounded from the counter to the floor and up onto the table, before looking at me. “You should pay more attention, Gareth. I’m just trying to teach you that.”

I rolled my eyes at her and resumed my pacing. “Alright, well, now that you’ve given me my scare for the day, why don’t you use some of those feline smarts of yours and help me figure out how to help that boy.”

“What boy?”

“Oh, do pay attention,” I threw my hands in the air. “The boy I’ve been waiting for.”

She licked her paw, looking smug. “Mallory is coming.”

I froze, midstep. “What?” Mallory liked to be left alone. Her gift of vision plagued her too much in crowds to be comfortable. She hadn’t left her house much less

Shift, in years.

“You heard me,” Siri replied, stretching out on the table.

Why would Mallory risk leaving the safety of our lands? I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all. She wouldn’t unless... “She saw something.”

The cat nodded, her eyes narrowed. “She seemed quite upset by whatever it was. She said that you are to find out what you can about where the boy is being kept. She and Chance will meet us later tonight.”

Of all the people to bring, did Mallory have to pick Chance? I groaned. “Why is she bringing Chance? She’s as likely to summon a meteor storm down on our heads as be any help.”

“You know Mallory. She does what she wants.” Siri put her head on her paws. “And she’s always right.”

I couldn’t argue with that but Chance annoyed the hell out of me. She was too...too...too damn happy all the time. Rather than worry about that, I decided to do what I was asked. “Siri.” Her tail flicked but she did not answer me. I knew her well enough to know that motion meant she was listening. “Don’t try to eat me.”

She opened her eyes and lifted her head with a hiss, her steel colored fur standing on end. “I only tried to eat you once and it was an accident,” she spat, “I didn’t know it was you.”

I tried not to smile. I loved to heckle her. I moved closer to the table, smoothing her fur down, rubbing at the base of her jaw, just as she liked it. Eventually, she leaned into my hand and started to purr. “I’ll meet you three here at sundown.”

Stepping back, I closed my eyes, concentrating as I willed my form to change. I felt my clothes begin to hang loosely and when I opened my eyes, the world was much larger. I squeaked a goodbye to Siri and then darted towards the wall, where a real rodent had chewed a hole into it. As a mouse, I could wander freely around town and where ever Cael and Caim were.

It didn’t take me long to find the twins. Most of the resident ghosts were quite friendly and eager to help someone who would talk to them for even a few minutes. I was horrified to find that the poor boy had been taken to an asylum for the insane. As I wove my way through the halls, the shrieks and moans of the patients gave me the shivers. I couldn’t imagine how scared those boys were. I found them in locked in a room in a quieter section of the asylum, a place where the cries of the insane were merely echoes. Cael sat in a chair, dressed in a white shirt and pants, staring out his barred window at the gray sky. His shadow twin hovered at his side, looking worried. I

scurried across the room and up the chair leg, settling on Cael's knee. He didn't even look at me.

"Caim, I'm here." I hated my voice in this form. It was so damn squeaky.

Caim looked at me, confusion on his face. "Gareth?"

I nodded. "Long story, I'll explain later. Are you two okay?"

Caim shrugged. "I'm alright but..." he leaned closer, speaking in his brother's ear. "Cael, this is the man I was telling you about."

It took a moment but Cael's gaze went from the sky to me, though his eyes were dull and listless. "That's nice," he murmured.

Caim gave me a helpless look. "Don't worry," I assured the ghost. I was a bit concerned about the boy but I hoped once he was off whatever medications they were giving him, he'd recover. With a little help anyway. Though we'd have to get him out before they did anything more drastic. "Do you know if he is scheduled for any treatments?"

"Later tonight."

"Shit," Panic crossed the ghost's face, at my outburst. "I mean...hell, its exactly what I mean. Listen to me Caim. This is very important. If they try to hook him up to any machines, I mean any kind, you walk through it. If they try to give him more medicine, do whatever you have to. Kick up a gale, knock papers around, move furniture. Don't let them give him anything more than they already have."

Determination replaced the stricken look and he nodded at me. "Good boy. Now I have to go meet a few friends of mine. We'll be back soon to get you both out of here." I climbed down to the floor and then paused. "Where are your parents?"

"Speaking to the doctors...down the hall." Contempt, anger, and a little bit of sadness clouded his eyes.

Curious about now, I followed the hall to an office. I was not prepared for what I saw. I expected to see a mother and father distraught over their son's "illness" but instead I saw a man and woman, sitting stiffly in their seats, looking more annoyed than anything else. I settled into a dim corner to listen.

The doctor shuffled some papers, selecting one and presenting it to the couple. "If you sign here, we will have the permissions necessary to treat your son."

Had it been my child, I would have asked questions about the kind of treatments I was giving this man the ability to perform. Not these two, they just looked at one another, nodded and took turns signing the paper. Cael's father finally asked a question.

“And what will happen if your treatments don’t succeed?”

“That will be entirely up to you and your wife, sir. You could either take your son home and care for him or commit him here on a more permanent basis.”

“Either cure him or keep him,” the woman replied. “I don’t care which.”

“My wife and I are very important members of society. It would not do for us to be seen with such a child. Make whatever arrangements you must.”

I didn’t want to hear anymore. I made my escape, heading back to the cliffs, squeezing through the hole into my hut. Siri still sat on the table, sleeping it seemed. Quickly, I tunneled into my clothes, shifting back to human.

“Took you long enough.”

I rolled my eyes. Obviously she was not asleep. “I had to dodge some alley cats. Anyway, the only thing we need to worry about is getting the boy out. No one will miss him.”

Siri lifted her head, opening her eyes. “Are his parents dead?”

“They might as well be.”

Soon there was a knock at my door. When I opened it, I was nearly knocked off my feet as Chance launched herself into me, squeezing almost painfully. “Gareth!”

I extracted myself from the girl’s grip, all except my hand, which she still held, and she looked up at me with the most amazing sky blue eyes I had ever seen, a bright smile on her pink lips. I rolled my eyes and sighed. As much as she annoyed me, I could never stay mad at her. “Hello, Chance.”

My teeth clacked together painfully when she began bouncing up and down, tugging my arm. “This is so exciting! I’ve never been on a rescue mission before!”

“Chance, my sweetling, you’re going to scramble what little brains our dear Gareth has if you keep shaking him like that.” Mallory stepped into the room, her silver streaked brown hair whipping about her head in the wind off the ocean.

“Sorry, Mal,” Chance murmured, letting me go. She stood next to me, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

I glanced at Mallory, raising one eyebrow at her. She just shrugged, looking back at me. I briefly recalled a time when her gaze made me nervous. One eye was green, the other brown, the mark of a seer. “We need her tonight,” she replied, calmly. The dark

blue cloak she wore brushed the floor as she moved to a chair and sat, like a queen taking her a throne. “Now, tell us what you have learned.”

Chance edged closer to me, her blond curls brushing my arm. I took a step back and cleared my throat. “Apparently, I’ve been waiting for shadow twins—“

“Wow! Really? I’ve only read about them. Oh my gosh, this is just too neat.”

“Would you let me finish?” I turned on the girl, folding my arms and fixing her with a hard look. Unfortunately, it didn’t have any effect on her exuberance. She just nodded emphatically. I thanked the gods above that someone else was teaching her how to use her magic. “Thank you. As I was saying, I’ve been waiting for shadow twins. The ghost twin is Caim and the living one is Cael. Their parents have reacted as we’ve seen in the past. They think their son is crazy. The poor thing is sick from whatever the hell they have him on and now they’ve committed him to a mental hospital.”

“How terrible,” Chance moaned. “We must get him out.”

“That’s the plan, sweetling, so settle down,” Mallory replied. “I need you to be focused tonight Chance.”

“Do I have to blow something up?” The excitement in her question made me a little nervous.

“You are not to use your magic at all.”

“Damn.”

I couldn’t help but sigh with relief. “So, how are we going to get him out?”

“Simple, my dear Gareth.” The smug, self assured smile on Mallory’s face made me even more nervous. “We’re going to walk him out the front door.”

I couldn’t believe it. Yet Mallory and I walked down the hall with Cael between us, leaving the asylum. I really shouldn’t have been so shocked. The seer probably could have talked an ice cube into not melting in the summer. She’d managed to convince the doctor that we were from another private institution and that Cael’s parents wished his transfer. It had taken almost an hour but finally the man had given in. Caim walked on my other side, looking as nervous as I felt. The only thing that I had liked about this plan was that Chance was not here. She was hiding in an alley a little way from the building. The door was just ahead, a few more steps and we’d be home free.

I had been a little afraid that Cael might not come with us, but he just stared at the floor, letting us lead him. I opened the door and held it for him and Mallory. She

turned at the top of the stairs, taking Cael's hand. "Watch your step, love," she cautioned.

Cael just nodded and walked slowly down the steps. I prayed to the gods that we'd be able to reverse the damages of the medications the boy had been taking. My hand suddenly felt like I'd stuck it in a bucket of ice water. Looking down, I saw Caim's hand passing through mine. His shoulders slumped. My heart constricted with sympathy for this boy. What must it be like for him? He'd never been held, never had the comfort of another's touch. I made a mental note to do some research to see if there was any way to help him. "It's alright, Caim. Everything is going to be just fine."

Mallory swept us along at a brisk pace, one that Cael easily kept up with despite his near catatonia. We were nearing the place we'd left Chance and I was just beginning to relax when I heard a strangled sound behind me. Whirling I saw Caim, standing still, his face contorted with pain, clawing at his throat as he went to his knees. At first I couldn't see what was wrong, but then I saw the loop of pale yellow light around his throat. "Bane," I snarled, "Let him go."

His laughter echoed in the streets as Bane stepped from the shadows. He was taller than me and significantly stronger, physically at least. His right hand glowed with the same light that was around Caim's throat. "Got yourself a pest, Gareth," he said, casually. "I'm just doing you a favor."

I glanced at Caim. Normal magic had no effect on ghosts but Bane's did. He could disrupt the matter that made up a ghost. He might not breathe air as I did but Bane's magic was suffocating Cael's twin. "Release him now, Bane," I said, "You know what I'm capable of."

"Gareth." Mallory didn't raise her voice but I knew something else was wrong. Taking the risk of turning my back on my enemy, I looked over my shoulder. She knelt on the sidewalk, Cael cradled against her as he shook with convulsions. Whatever Bane was doing to his twin, was affecting the living boy.

"Damn it Bane, stop it. You're killing them." I could easily fling a fireball at Bane and end this right now but for two things. First, I would attract a great deal of unwanted attention by blasting the buffoon with a fireball, and second, Mallory expressly forbid magic. She must have a good reason for it, though I wished like hell I knew what it was.

Panic rising, I was looking around for something to throw at the man when Chance marched passed me. I made a grab for her but she shook me off. Seemed like everything was about to go straight to hell. Chance walked up to Bane and poked him in the chest. "You let him go right now, mister, or I'm going to be very, very, put out with you."

Bane's face mirrored my own shock and the loop disappeared from around Cael's neck. "And just who do you think you are little girl?" Bane managed to ask.

Just from the set of her shoulders, I knew Chance was giving him one of her sunshine smiles. That damn girl! “I’m Chance,” she said, brightly, sticking out her hand.

Predictably, Bane didn’t take it. Instead his hand shot out around her throat, lifting her off the ground. My heart skipped a beat. My hands tingled and itched as I fought the desire to call fire into them. For so many years, I’d been watching. Was I now destined to watch my friends die? “That thing ain’t natural and I aim to get rid of it,” Bane snarled.

He tossed her aside as if she was a rag doll and she hit the wall of the nearby building, crumpling to the ground.

“Chance!” I started forward but stopped when the wind kicked up, swirling around us. Magic tingled along my skin. I turned to the source of the magic. Mallory still knelt on the ground behind me but Cael was now standing, his eyes more alert than they had moments ago. Caim floated at his side, inches above the pavement. His eyes flickered with bright white light, pulsating with every gust of wind. Wind spirits danced around the twins, occasionally disappearing into Caim.

Cael took a few steps toward Bane. “You tried to kill us.” The words came from the mouths of both boys.

Bane tried to summon his magic but he was held powerless by the wind sprites attacking him.

“You tried to hurt our friends.” Cael and Caim moved closer and I tried to move, to go check on Chance but the wind kept me in place.

Bane let out a frustrated cry, as he tried to rope Caim again and was pushed back once more, making him stagger. “Back to hell with you!”

“Leave. Now.” The winds were blowing even harder, rivaling a storm off the ocean and its force turned on Bane, knocking him to the ground easily, sending him tumbling down the street.

Bane got to his feet and glared down the street at us. I thought for a moment, he would come back. I hoped he would. I was ready to toss Mallory's edict out the window and lob a fireball at him but the man ran. The gusts ended as quickly as they'd begun and out of the corner of my eye I saw Cael fall to his knees. Mallory was already crouching beside him and I wasn't really focused on the boy anyway. I ran over to Chance's still form, kneeling beside her, slipping an arm under her shoulders. I lifted her gently, brushing her hair from her face. There was a cut above her right eye, a trickle of blood running down her cheek. “Chance?”

She didn't reply and my heart skipped another couple of beats. “Come on girl, you can't have given up on pestering me just yet.”

Still no reply. A sick, cold feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. I looked up as Mallory approached, her arm around Cael, who leaned into her, looking exhausted. Caim floated closer, the same look of fatigue on his face, but also worry. "Is she--"

"She's fine," I snapped, looking back at the girl in my arms. "Chance, gods damn it, wake up."

Finally, I felt her stir and her eyes fluttered open. "Why do you always have to yell, Gareth?" she moaned, sitting up. She looked up at me, touching the cut over her eye gingerly. "Wow, that wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done, was it?"

I wanted to yell at her, to tell her never to do something so idiotic ever again but the words stuck in my throat. Instead I wrapped my arms around her, crushing her against me. "You little fool," I managed to croak.

"I'm okay," she whispered, rubbing my back. I squeezed harder and she let out a little squeak. "Oof, not so hard!"

"Come, its time to go home," Mallory said, reminding me of the others.

I let go of Chance, standing and pulling her to her feet. She swayed slightly but didn't fall. I handed her a handkerchief to wipe the blood from her face. She gave me a grateful smile. I turned my attention to Mallory, anger replacing my worry. "So explain to me exactly why you forbid us from using magic and let the boy call up a hurricane?"

Mallory shrugged, giving me that same cool, calm look she gave everyone. "It's what I saw."

I pointed a finger at her. "One of these days that's not going to be a good enough excuse." Siri landed on my shoulder, her claws digging painfully. "And just where the hell have you been?"

"Don't you bellow at me," she replied, swatting at my cheek. "There isn't anything I could have done against that brute."

I grunted, knowing she was right but still angry at having been so helpless in the confrontation. I didn't like feeling helpless. "Fine, let's go home."

"Where is home?" Cael and Caim asked in union.

I looked at Mallory, expecting her to answer but she didn't. I sighed, knowing what that meant. It had been years since I'd had a pupil and I wasn't really certain I wanted one. "Shift," I told the boys. "Its going to be your new home and apparently I'm going to be the one to teach you how to use that fountain of power you seem to have stored inside you."

I half expected one or both of them to protest. I'd seen that plenty of times. Some just didn't want to leave their homes and start a new life. The twins looked at one another and then back at me. Caim was the one to speak. "We'd like that."

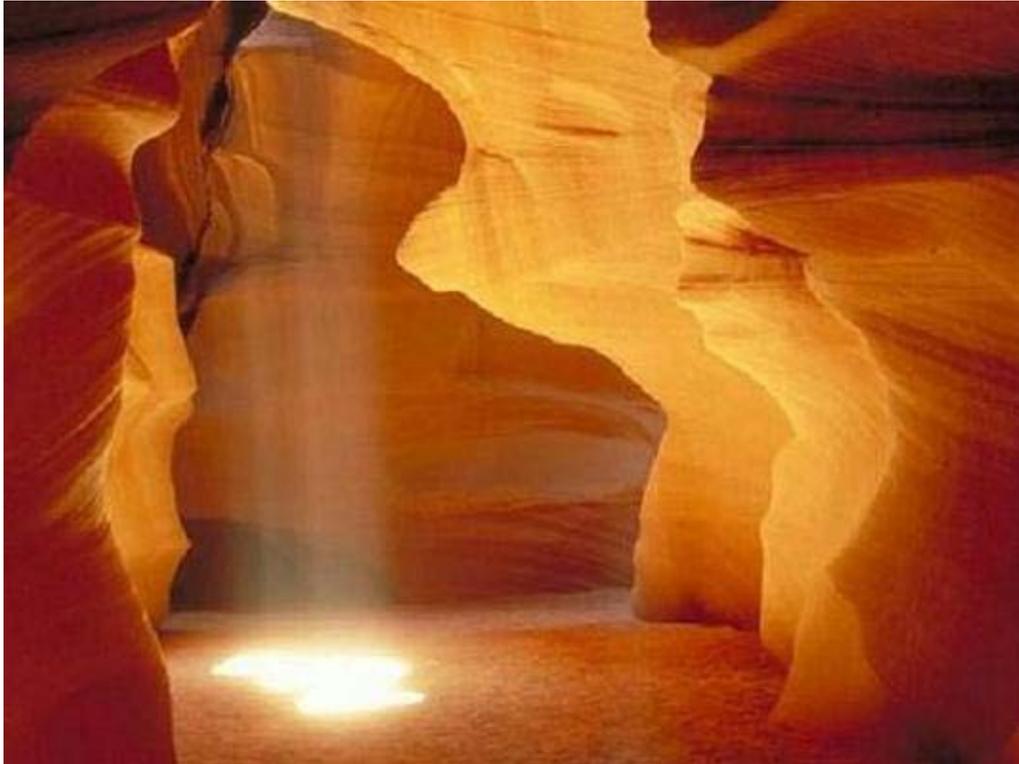
"Wonderful," I muttered and Siri batted my cheek again, this time with no claws, before leaping to the ground. "Would you stop that?"

Mallory followed the cat, tugging the boys along with her. A warm hand slipped into mine. "Don't look so gloomy," Chance said, tugging me forward. She seemed to have recovered to her usual self. "You know you'll love it!"

I rolled my eyes and followed. "Oh sure. I'll love it just like I love you pestering the hell out of me."

The girl winked at me. "You know you do."

I signed again, beginning to think that maybe she was right. I stomped down on the thought. I had enough to think about. My role as The Watcher was over. Now I was to be The Teacher. If today's demonstration was what the two could do untrained, I looked forward to seeing their ability developed. My two years of mostly solitary life was about to get very interesting.



Inshallah

(If God wills it...)

Denysé Bridger

The late evening air was alive with the ancient, mystical power of nature=s music. High above the soul-rending reverberations of the earth harmonies, the sky was glittering with the sharp light of countless, rapidly emerging, glowing eyes. In the midst of this beauty, they roamed eternally...

The Guardians.

The Protectors.

The Herejai.

Mythical warriors who were, to many, the majestic, awe-inspiring embodiments of creation=s purest heart.

Desert sands blanketed the vast, unending expanse of the arid world that stretched before the silent Chieftain. A dry, deceptively beautiful ocean, with secrets hidden beneath the serenity... Secrets that might destroy all that had been built in the sun-baked splendor.

The city of Harajain sprawled in the sand several miles away, beyond the ledge upon which he stood; the ancient city was the resting place of the Creature that could bring death to all life. And he, Ardane-Bei, respected leader among the Herejai, was charged with the task of preventing that tragedy from ever occurring again.

He sat alone in the encroaching darkness, watching closely all that was laid before him, every tiny nuance and detail clearly visible in his mind=s eyes. At his shoulder stood his truest friend, the proud stallion he had named Horus, the All-seeing eye. The horse was beautiful, and wise in a way that he had not encountered in other animals. And, despite the whimsy of the thought, the man felt that Horus did, indeed, have all-seeing eyes. As well as rare intelligence. The stallion was a better companion than many of the men he lived among, he thought with a small smile.

As they stood in vigil, horse and man, night continued to gain on the frail twilight. Very soon now the darkness would be complete, and a new kind of freedom would soon manifest itself to the solemn warrior who gazed upon his world, his heart deeply troubled by the taint of fear that churned within his blood. It would be temporary, taunting, shattering freedom—but freedom, nonetheless. The eternal promise, and the eternal curse of this existence. Exuberant, exhilarating life, yet not. Only the unrelenting hope for something that could never be.

Twilight=s final glory began to fade from the sky, turning blue to deepest plum, then, at last, to the concealing jet of true night. The stars, glittering sparks of crystalline brightness winked into clear view, quickly now, and he watched, each tiny radiance a miracle he never tired witnessing.

Ardane-Bei closed his eyes, let his heart reach, and stiffened reflexively when the anticipated backlash of emotion assailed his senses. . .

...He had found a kindred spirit, many years in the past, and like all wonders, lost what he valued most. He had waited an eternity since, asking whatever Gods would listen to grant him an end to his solitude and sorrow...

...None had chosen to hear him...

A voice whispered in the darkness, and Ardane-Bei tried to ignore it. It wasn't the voice of a ghost, or conscience, it was the voice of the damned--the dead. Pain pulsed in his chest, and he choked on the intensity of it, his soft, guttural growl of denial the only

sound in the silent darkness. His fingers shook and he turned away, unable to leave the beauty before him, even as he despised it now.

The tides of loss and anguish continued to roll over him, wave after wave of crushing memory that was not truly his—all coloured by love no mortal could ever comprehend. Each current tossed him along the span of centuries that defined another non-life, reminded him of the bonds that had been torn for so long, of ties that still bound him in spite of all that happened. What remained was torture, an unending vortex of relentless pain and hate.

The voices are not yours, Ardane-Bei. Nor the pain.

Ardane-Bei spun around, searched the blackness for a sign of life that shouldn't have been there. Horus had wandered away to stand a short distance from him, large, jewel-like eyes staring at him, reflecting back the light of stars in the ebony sky above them. Ardane now wondered if that movement away from his side was a warning he had not felt in his preoccupation with the riptides that continued to ripple over his spirit.

AShow yourself,≡ he ordered, his voice strong and steady, no hint of his uncertainty revealed in the low, rich tone.

Soft, tinkling laughter caressed his wary soul, and a smile began at the corners of his mouth, the response one he was unable to prevent or control fully. He waited, a tremor of uncertain excitement stirring deep inside him.

You know it is the voice of the Creature that haunts your soul, Ardane-Bei.

He nodded, angry in the space of a heartbeat, and desperately afraid of the truth that spoke to his spirit.

“If I am to lead the Herejai to truth, how can I remain bound to the Creature?”

He hadn't meant to speak the words out loud.

The desert knows you, as you know it... your answer may be closer than you believe.

He cast his searching gaze outward, over the dunes, soul reaching for the familiar rhythms of the ancients. Each Herejai warrior who resided beneath the sands had a voice that was heard within his mind.

“Where do I go?” Again, his voice breathed into the night air, and he waited, tension turning the disciplined muscles of his body to stone.

The Valley of Eternity. Where it began.

He wanted to ignore the sudden chill that froze his blood, and ripped into his heart with the force of a blade. If he went back, faced the light in the valley – would there be peace at last? This time his question was contained in the chaos of his mind, and no reply was given to his fear/hope.

Motion provided distraction. He turned away, steps swift as he strode to the gleaming black stallion that had been his companion most of his adult life. He murmured a greeting to the noble animal, then mounted. The calls of his warriors were blocked from his mind as he turned the magnificent horse into the wind that rose out of the sands and beckoned like a lover's embrace.

The stallion rode into the darkness, instinct guiding more than rider. The Chieftain allowed the night to cloak his brooding thoughts, and sighed inwardly. Age was a concept to men of the Herejai, many were ageless. Recently, Ardane-Bei was feeling the passage of the centuries as though he had lived them all in his presence form.

“Shebonna...”

His murmur, unheard by all but the animal who shared the desert with him, should not have been the anguish that rose as a snarl of hatred and rage to escape his tortured soul.

Time became indistinct as the horse's hooves closed unmeasured distance, his stride never faltering, his energy never failing. The first rays of a new dawn were beginning to peep over the distance horizon when the stallion stopped and refused to move further.

Ardane-Bei tried to move the animal, and actually stared in shock with the stallion continued to hold firm. He slid off the horse's back and would never quite know how the stallion had sensed the peril he was in.

Ardane's feet hit the sand, and he began to sink. Swallowed in a matter of seconds, he hit solid ground after a brief drop. Groaning, he rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. The warmth of the sun kissed his face, even though it was far from time for it to be at its apex.

Ice flooded his veins in the next heartbeat, and he vaulted to his feet, sword drawn in a fluid flow of movement.

“At last you have returned to me.”

The voice was the one that had spoken so many times, but this time the pitch and timbre was near to him, not filtered through the corridors of his mind.

He turned, limbs sluggish, objecting wildly to his determination to maintain his control of what he was doing.

“Let go of your fears, Ardane...”

She stepped from behind the sand coloured wall that had blocked her presence.

He stared, disbelief and desperation married in the instant it took to accept that she was real.

He fell to his knees, and she stepped closer. Her hands touched his shoulders, and his body arched in agony as he died.

The beam of the sun embraced him. He screamed objection and terror he had never known in life. As the brilliant heat of pure light poured into him and coursed along the path of his veins, knowledge came to him... a millennium of truth once forbidden was the gift given to assuage the end of his life...

He spoke long moments later, and horror seized him...

You know it is the voice of the Creature that haunts your soul, Ardane-Bei.

The voice of his altered existence, twinned with the voice of his beautiful Shebonna... long lost – restored now in this subterranean hell that would now be resting place.

The dirge of a thousand Herejai warriors battered his senses, and he wept...

