

The Hunt for Silvera

by Ryan E. Holman

"Find the one whose name makes Queen Melessa shudder," her father had said. The girl was traveling alone on the worn trail leading through what was known as the Rolling Wood. She remembered King Yvan's dying words vividly—she had been the only one in the king's chamber, despite the physician's orders. That her father would die within the next day or two had been unspoken but a certainty; the least his daughter could have done was remain until he breathed his last. Cara knew why her mother hadn't been there—she had been too busy counting the bribe-monies she had accepted not to attack neighboring kingdoms. Cara shuddered as she nudged her horse into a trot. Only once had she seen the spiteful queen shudder; when the king's closest advisor had mentioned the name "Silvera." The will dictated very specifically that Silvera would inherit all due the queen of the late King Yvan's kingdom. Cara had the document in her saddlebag to show Silvera when she found her. The lone traveler snickered to herself; no wonder Melessa had shuddered. Heaven forbid that the current queen lose any kind of money. The skittish horse avoided a puddle as the sky turned a dusty rose that faded to the midnight black somewhere above and behind her.

"Better find a good place to camp, huh?" asked the human to the beast. The animal whickered as if in response. Cara's eyesight strained in the weakening dusk light to find someplace safe with access to water and a good place to tie the horse, and preferably high enough to avoid the majority of the maniacs rumored to live in these woods. Any of the others Cara would simply have to fight. She touched the sheath at her waist where the dagger was stored with that last thought. Her father's enemies and Melessa's allies would love to see Yvan's heir dead, she knew — but her father's dying command had been to *her*—no one else.

Something about the aura this place seemed to give off disturbed her; it was almost as if she was being...watched...from somewhere in the inky darkness of the shadows that surrounded her. Cara felt her heart jump as something skittered across her path. The horse stopped dead in its tracks and let out a whinnying cry that pierced the near-night like an arrow. The quick-moving shadow stopped for a moment, stood on its hind legs, sniffed the air, and then seemed to look at the frightened beast almost quizzically. Cara breathed a huge sigh of relief. Just a rat. Nothing to be afraid of; there were enough in Yvan's—now temporarily Melessa's—royal stables.

Suddenly Cara felt a great weight on her back as she was pushed from the saddle and hit the road hard. She heard the horse scream and then the sound of galloping hooves going down the road. The cloaked figure tried to aim a blow at her face, but Cara dodged the gloved fist and managed to push her attacker away from her. He rolled for a few feet, giving Cara enough time to come to her knees, drawing the knife. As the form lying on the road struggled to stand, Yvan's daughter went to him, putting her knee on his chest so that he couldn't move.

"What do you think you're doing? Who are you?" Cara pressed her knee harder against her attacker and held the knife blade mere inches from his throat.

The attacker took a few panting breaths before answering, "I'm sorry. I-I thought you were someone else."

"I don't believe you." growled Cara.

"Oh, my lady, but you must believe me!" He sounded older than he apparently was.

"Why should I trust the one who attacked me in the middle of nowhere? How do I know

you're telling the truth?" Cara looked into her attacker's eyes with malice.

"You - I mean I - I mean—" the robber stuttered.

"Who did you mistake me for?" Cara moved the blade closer to his throat.

"A-a-a-another r-r-r-rider, o-one who stole my f-f-f-father's p-pendant. I-I-I didn't mean t-to at-attack *you*, milady. I-I thought y-y-you were the thief—"

"Do you know who I am?" She cut him off sharply, though her voice had lost a bit of its edge. The boy appeared to be genuinely frightened. His eyes had begun to glisten over.

"Y-y-y-y-yes, milady," he stammered. "H-h-h-h-his Majesty's d-d-d-d-daughter, Cara. Oh p-p-p-p-please don't report me to the s-s-s-s-seneschal. It was a g-g-g-g-genuine mistake, I swear --"

Cara fractionally moved the blade away from her would-be victim's throat. "What's your name, boy?" The boy only looked thirteen or so. And from his appearance it must've taken a divine act to knock her from the saddle. Cara stood but kept her eye on him, ready to give chase if he attempted to run.

"Matthius, m-my lady, son of Lord Daren of Jalequinn." It was a city Cara knew, one of the more wealthy holdings in her late father's kingdom. He produced from the pocket of his shadowy garb a roll of paper, imprinted with the broken seal of Jalequinn's lord. She unrolled it. Written on the parchment were the details of a warrant, claiming a high reward for anyone to deliver to Lord Daren the culprit to be tried and executed by his court. No wonder Matthius had attacked her thinking she was the culprit; the reward was high enough to attract people like Melessa looking for easy coin.

Cara considered the parchment and the hopeful look on the young rogue's face. She kept her face expressionless as she re-rolled the paper and handed it back to him.

"I will make you an offer, young Matthius." He wasn't that much younger than she, but she chose to use her royal status to her benefit. Matthius opened his mouth to speak, but Cara silenced him with a gesture. "Wait until I present my offer. I am willing to help you track down your pendant thief, if you will help me." Cara's companion nodded vigorously and Cara glanced where her horse had been when she had been knocked from the saddle. "One, you will help me look for my horse. Two, you will help me find Silvera."

"S-Silvera!" squeaked Matthius. "B-But she's not been seen since my father's time!"

"The choice is yours," Cara continued. "Help me and I will assist you. If you don't, we both go our separate ways and you get no help in finding Lord Daren's pendant."

"What about the reward?" asked the boy. Now that there was no knife close to his throat, the stammer appeared to be gone.

"I have no need of such money. If you help me all of the reward is yours. If you don't and I find it, the money is mine to do as I please with it."

Matthius considered this offer carefully, looking from the paper to Yvan's heir and back again. Then he knelt before the princess.

"I will help you if you help me." Cara motioned for him to rise and Matthius did so. "I suppose we should find a camp."

"After we find my horse. She can't have gone far." For the first time since she'd left her father's deathbed, Cara smiled.

The duo searched for Cara's mare until the moon was high in the sky, but to no avail. Cara

yawned. "I don't think we're gonna find her tonight. Let's get some sleep and then search in the morning."

Matthius nodded his agreement. They couldn't risk a fire; it would attract the murderers and other assorted criminals like moths. But although Cara had brought up the subject of sleep, she wouldn't go to sleep; she still didn't like the idea of giving Matthius (if that really was his name) another opportunity to launch an attack on her. Instead she leaned against a tree and looked at her companion's silhouetted form against the night sky, trying not to let sleep overcome her. Apparently Matthius had the same idea; although neither of them spoke, each knew the other was awake, watching them, seeing what they would do.

After a few hours of this paranoid vigil, Cara's vision blurred as she tried to fight sleep. She shook herself awake. She saw Matthius reach into his cloak and pull something out. Cara held her breath as the object was held up for a moment and moonlight glistened off the blade of a dagger. Cara reached for her own weapon as Matthius reached somewhere beside him and drew out something round, which he began to peel with the weapon. Cara loosened her grip on the hilt of her own dagger. Oh. Matthius was just getting something to eat. She saw him freeze as a branch snapped behind her. He placed the fruit somewhere behind him and cleaned the weapon's blade on his cloak. Cara followed suit and tried to pinpoint the location of the intruders.

"Lord Daren's son has to be here somewhere," said a male voice close by. "That peasant girl said she saw him coming this way." She sensed, more than saw, Matthius hit his forehead with the heel of his hand and couldn't help but smile. She would have to ask him about that later.

"We found his horse...the one he stole from his father's stables." Cara rocked back on her heels and peered over the top of a bush to see a few officers in the Jalequinnian red and gold. Her eyes widened as she looked at the steed the guard held by the reins as it stamped and shook its head, fighting its captor. That wasn't Matthius's horse...it was hers. She thought about the parchment with the royal seal on it in her saddlebag. She just had to get her father's will back...and she had to do it fast. Cara sat back and looked around at her companion before crawling over to him.

In the softest of whispers, she asked, "Do you know them?"

Matthius nodded. Cara glanced behind her, where the guards continued talking.

"If we don't find him, Milord will have our hides. So we've gotta keep our story straight."

"Do you think we could fight them and win?" she asked, touching the hilt of her knife.

"If we're lucky." Cara smiled.

"That's my horse and she doesn't look happy. I think we can count on help from her if we're loud enough. Just avoid her hooves."

Matthius smiled back in the darkness and they both rose, weapons in hand. Cara surveyed the little clearing they'd found, looking for things she couldn't leave behind. There was her pack with a change of clothes; she could leave that if she didn't manage to knock both guards unconscious. She looked at Matthius, who crouched behind a bush, waiting for the princess's signal.

"On the count of three," she mouthed. The boy nodded.

"So we have it straight, lieutenant; we searched for the boy but found only his horse in a swamp; we saw his camp and we think he's been captured. We can smear some mud on the horse's legs to make it believable." The soldier closer to Cara nodded in agreement.

Out of nowhere, two thieves came flying from the bushes. The horse shied and reared on its

back legs as Matthius landed on the soldier who had held the reins and sent him sprawling. The reins dangled as the horse looked around wildly and came down on the apparent lieutenant's skull. There was a sickening crunch as the horse reared up again. Matthius rolled clear of the horse's hooves as Cara battled the other officer, attempting to get a good shot at his face. The soldier yelled, swearing and wondering what had happened. He yelled for his dead companion, wondering why he didn't come to his commanding officer's aid. Cara finally got her shot and slit his throat. The blood on her hands sickened her as she looked up at Matthius, who held the horse's reins as he looked back at her.

Cara stood and looked at the river of blood that flowed on the road from her victim's throat to the grass. "We had better go, milady. It won't do for anyone to see us here, looking like this." Cara nodded and walked to the steed, ignoring the proffered reins and heading straight for the saddlebags. Silently, Yvan's daughter prayed that the will was there. She had killed for this...hopefully it was still there. Cara's bloodstained fingers met the parchment and she let out a huge sigh of relief.

"What is it?" asked Matthius.

She ignored him, saying only, "It's there."

"What's there?" Cara took the reins and studied Matthius's face as she put her foot in the stirrup and offered him a hand up behind her.

"You heard of my father's death, correct?"

"Everyone has, milady." She considered her words carefully before speaking them.

"In my father's will, it said that Silvera was to become queen of his kingdom after his death. I'm out to find her. The piece of paper is the proof I need to dethrone Melessa once I find her." Cara turned the horse to the left, away from their victims' corpses. She nudged the horse into a canter fast enough so that the only choices Matthius had were to hang on to Cara's cloak or fall off. In this manner, the pair took off along the road as the first rays of dawn lightened the sky.

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The silver-grey wolf smelled blood in the air and moved toward it, cautiously sniffing the air to find any other sign of life. She padded across the forest floor, coming finally to the road, where two beat-up and bloody soldier humans lay. The wolf sniffed tentatively at the air, looking for whomever or whatever did this. But the only smell was old, like it had been there early that morning. They seemed to be gone now. The wolf quietly went across the path, avoiding the dark crimson puddle that spread from the nearest soldier's throat. She went into the bushes and froze. Something was there, by the tree. Something brown. A hare, perhaps? The wolf crouched down, ready to pounce on her prey. But there was something strange about this rabbit—it didn't move. The wolf looked at the object strangely, then padded up to it. Still it didn't move. The creature pawed at it. Still the thing didn't move to any noticeable degree. She sniffed at it. The smell of some sort of meat was strong in the wolf's nostrils. The wolf pawed at it again, harder. No response. Frustrated, the wolf growled at it and pawed at it again, harder. Something gave and a small tear could be seen in a corner of the object. The wolf clawed at the bag, making the tear go from corner to corner of the pack. The smell of meat was almost intoxicating. The wolf buried her nose in the pack and finally found her prize. She ate ravenously, not caring that she was pushing something out of her way.

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Long after the animal left, another pair of guards came on horseback to the bloody scene.

“Milady, this sight is not fit for your eyes.”

“I will look at what I please!” said the woman who rode up behind him on a proud white horse. She took a quick look at the carnage before her and then peered over the bushes.

“What is that on the other side of the bushes?” she asked sharply, pointing. One of the guards dismounted and climbed over the bush.

“It appears to have been a pack, my queen.” He held up a torn piece of fabric from inside of it.

“Do you know the owner?”

“It appears to be the one you sent your daughter out with, Your Majesty,” Melessa motioned for the cloth to be brought to her. She looked at it for a minute before remarking.

“It’s Cara’s, all right...something dreadful must’ve happened to her.” Melessa buried her face in her hands but under her palms she was smiling. She erased the grin quickly and raised her head humbly. “I suppose, then, that she has failed to find Silvera, which means” she sniffed “I must take my place at the throne of the late Yvan’s kingdom.”

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Cara and Matthius rode almost constantly until sundown, when they came to a particularly sharp bend in the path. The princess slowed the horse and peered around the curve tentatively.

“Do you hear that?” she whispered.

“Hear what?” replied her companion. After a moment, the noise came again.

“Sounds like people,” said Cara.

“Are they friend or foe?”

“I haven’t a clue, Matthius. Let’s dismount and get ourselves a better view.” The pair dismounted and led the horse into the trees. Matthius went on ahead as Cara carefully tied the animal tight enough that it couldn’t escape. By the time Cara got to the edge of the woods, Matthius was already there, crouching in the shadows. She knelt not far away, taking in the little village before her.

“Appears to be a village, milady.” The pair watched as the villagers traded something that jingled for a bolt of cloth here, a large vegetable there. Suddenly a man, until now unnoticed came to the center of it all with a scroll under his arm. He cleared his throat and silence fell among the villagers.

“I have a proclamation from Her Royal Highness Queen Melessa of Demoa.” Cara’s eyes widened as she looked at Matthius. He stared right back at her for a moment before returning his gaze to the assembled mass. The man continued.

“The late King Yvan’s last will and testament clearly stated that his daughter Cara should find the next monarch to replace him upon his death. However, since Cara seems to have befallen an unthinkable fate, his Queen, Melessa, has been forced to take the throne.”

A gasp went through the crowd assembled. Cara, too, gasped. “But I’m right here! What is that greed-filled, hateful woman up to?” The one holding the parchment awaited the dying of the

crowd's response before he continued.

"Because of the palace's heavy losses in recent wars, Her Royal Highness is grieved to announce a tax increase to cover our losses. Hopefully this shouldn't be for very long, as it is to cover our deep debts to other kingdoms."

Cara was too angry to speak, picturing Melessa counting out the monies taken from bribes in stacks taller than herself. Her teeth clenched, and she turned to go. But at the next statement, she turned back nearly blinded by rage.

"Due to the unusual lawlessness of this land of Demoa, soldiers will be making regular rounds with a judge. Any troublemakers are to be brought before this judge and if the perpetrator is found guilty they will be fined for the judge's time and imprisoned until they receive notice to the contrary in the royal dungeons. The proclamation has been made. Be on your guard." With that, the man re-rolled the scroll and left the center of the crowd.

What once was a busy little town was silent in disbelief.

"If that no-good, sorry excuse for a queen thinks she will win this easily, she has another thing coming," said Cara under her breath as she walked to her mare.

To Matthius, she said, "I am *going* to find Silvera if it *kills* me. Melessa already presumes me dead, so my death will make little difference. And you're going to help me find her whether you like it or not."

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The two continued past the town and started to descend into the wooded valley beyond before they stopped for the day. Although this forest was much more tranquil than the Rolling Wood, Cara was still on her guard as she began to look for some supper in the packs. Out of the corner of her eye something moved; instantly Cara froze, waiting for the movement to come again. After a few moments, it did. Cara relaxed fractionally. It was probably only a hare, she reasoned. The flicker of movement came again. No, this was much too large to be a hare. Cara reached for her dagger and bent lower over the packs. Matthius seemed to sense the danger too, for he reached for a weapon as well.

With the next rustle of the foliage, a patch of grey fur was seen in the fading daylight. Cara unsheathed the dagger and watched intently for whatever creature it was to appear. Her eyes were greeted by the creature's when it tentatively stalked out of the trees. Suddenly the wolf paused and sat on its haunches, giving the humans an almost mocking look. Cara glared back at it. Likely, the creature had sensed the food in their packs. Well, you aren't getting any of our supper, no matter what your thoughts are otherwise, thought Cara, still rummaging through the packs, but with her blade ready.

The wolf watched the pair as they ate, but made no move toward them except to stretch out on the grass. Cara looked strangely at the wolf. Were this an ordinary canine, the food would be history, as would they most likely. And yet this wolf had barely moved since it had made its appearance. It didn't appear to be injured in any way, which made the wolf's behavior all the more a mystery to the princess.

"Doesn't make any sense, does it, milady?" asked Matthius, bringing Cara out of her

musings.

“Pardon?” Cara’s gaze left the wolf and went to Matthius.

“The wolf...she just sort of watches us and doesn’t make a move...shouldn’t she have tried to attack us or something by now?”

Cara nodded and pulled a piece from the bread in her hand. “It seems almost...almost human.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Is it? Has your father ever told you about Silvera?”

“Just hearsay.”

“Somewhere there was a rumor that she was a sorceress” Cara snickered without mirth “but then again, it is rumored that Melessa’s a sorceress as well and if she is one then why didn’t she use her powers to take the throne before my father died?” Cara’s gaze returned to the wolf. “Do you get the feeling the wolf is laughing at us?”

“So I wasn’t the only one to feel that.” Matthius looked at the wolf and saw what can only be described as a look of barely contained laughter in its eyes. “However, I fail to see what’s so funny.”

Hours passed and Cara took the first watch. The wolf stood and stretched about an hour after Matthius appeared to be asleep and walked toward the trees. At the last possible moment, the wolf looked over its shoulder at the princess. She got the distinct feeling that the wolf would return tomorrow, but when she looked again in the wolf’s direction it was gone.

Cara made no mention of the wolf’s disappearance the next day to her companion as they packed up and continued along the road into the valley. As they walked, Matthius thought she seemed somehow very far away as she led the horse along the path. True, she stayed on the path with little trouble, but the far-off look in Cara’s eyes had Matthius worried as they continued.

Around noontime, Cara stopped in her tracks.

“What is it, my lady?” he asked.

“The wolf’s back.” As if knowing that it had been mentioned, the wolf broke through the trees and came within a few arm’s-lengths away from the path. Cara’s gaze lost that faraway look as she calmed the horse that had started with the wolf’s appearance. Yvan’s daughter looked at the carnivorous creature before looking at her companion.

Matthius returned her gaze strangely. “Is that...is that the same wolf we saw last night?”

“I think so. Either that or there’s something strange in the water around here.” She had been teasing, but she stole a quick glance at the water skins.

Matthius stepped around the horse and took a step toward the grey wolf. It danced away and then looked at Matthius irritably.

“Leave it alone. It’s done no harm to us so far; let’s not push our luck.” With that, Cara led the mare forward. The wolf shadowed her movement, but it looked back at Matthius every few steps. Matthius regarded the wolf and his companion thoughtfully for a few moments before hurrying to catch up.

The wolf followed them almost silently until they came to another town. Apparently Melessa’s new tax had gotten here before they did; what could only be described as an aura of

uneasiness hung around the town like a cloak.

“How are our supplies?” came the question from behind the princess. Cara stopped and took a look at the two saddlebags and Matthius’s pack.

“If it’s not too expensive, we should probably stop.” Cara glanced at her money pouch and drew her hood up to hide her face. “But if we do, remember—Yvan’s daughter Cara, as far as we know, is dead.”

With that, Cara tugged on the mare’s reins and led them into the walled village.

“Halt! Who goes there?” asked a voice above their heads.

“You better do the talking,” Cara said quietly. “And don’t use our real names unless you want half of every Demoan army after us.” The guard glowered down at them impatiently.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he muttered before saying, louder, “We’re two pilgrims headed for the Holy Temple of Saints. All we want are supplies.”

“Bravo,” murmured Cara.

“How do I know you aren’t spies?”

“We serve no one but the Saints,” Matthius declared. Cara smiled in the shadow of her cloak.

The guard seemed to measure them for a few moments, as if debating whether or not to believe the traveler.

“Open the gates!” he called to someone else behind the wall. “But you,” the guard continued, looking squarely at Cara, “I will keep an eye on.”

“As you wish,” she replied, making her voice as low as she could.

The gates rolled open and Cara’s eyes swept the place. Apparently something horrid had happened here; nearly everything had a haze of smoke around it or was blackened or looked like it had been the victim of a brawl. She stepped over a form whose chest was full of arrows. She glanced back and saw it was the same man that had announced Melessa’s new tax back in that other town. But in a way it was good; opposition to Melessa would help Silvera regain the throne. That is, once she was found. She saw the scared eyes of children hanging onto their mothers’ skirts as they skittered around like frightened rats.

“Riots,” she heard Matthius say under his breath as they came into a shop. Cara busied herself looking around, and felt the shopkeepers’ suspicious eyes on her. Meanwhile, Matthius began to look around nonchalantly, looking for things he knew he could get a better price for. As he opened his mouth to address the shopkeeper, the shopkeeper said, “You’ll have to get that wolf out of here.”

Both of his customers looked in the doorway, where the wolf sat, banging a patient rhythm against the door jamb with its tail.

“Move,” Cara whispered to it. “Get out. We’ll meet you later.” Without any kind of fuss, the wolf looked pitifully at her, then turned and walked out.

“Who are you?” she heard the shopkeeper ask. She turned and lied, “His sister.”

“Impossible!” came the reply as the older man looked from her to her companion. “You must be some kind of sorceress or...”

“Why? I did nothing.”

“Exactly. That wolf followed your commands!”

“No. Your eyes must be tricking you. I believe my brother has a list of things he wants to purchase, if you don’t mind.” All the while she kept her face hidden in the cloak, trying very hard

not to laugh. The shopkeeper gave Cara a strange look, then returned to talk to Matthius. Cara watched the conversation out of the corner of her eye for a moment before drawing nearer to make sure her companion wouldn't doom them both with a slip of the tongue.

"And how many apples would you like?" asked the shopkeeper.

"Let me ask her. Mil—" He was silenced when a shooting pain from Cara's foot raced up his leg. He caught her glare and looked back sheepishly.

"Ten should keep us for our trip to the Temple of the Saints" at least keep the lie consistent "wouldn't you think?"

The shopkeeper nodded but looked confusedly between the two as he found the small crate. The cloaked figure was obviously the leader of the two; but pilgrims usually weren't so controlling of their comrades. Obviously, they were lying. He slipped his hand behind the crate and found the knife he had hidden there — perhaps it would finally see some use after all.

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Cara saw the blade glitter out of the corner of her eye about the same time as Matthius. Her hand moved to her hip where the sheath imprisoned her own knife. The store was deserted except for the armed trio. "We don't want trouble," Cara said softly, but she knew that the other two had heard it clearly enough.

"Who said I was giving you trouble?" asked the shopkeeper with an eyebrow raised. The princess shot him a defiant look from the shadow of the cloak.

Matthius glanced nervously at his companion. How could she appear so calm? He stiffened as he tried to control the shiver that kept sprinting up and down the arm that ended at the hilt of the weapon.

"We would like our supplies," requested Cara evenly. All guise of a deep, masculine voice was forgotten.

"Of course," came the reply in an equal tone. Cara reached for them and nearly lost her hand as the knife came down on the counter, embedding itself there. But while Cara startled at the quivering blade and reassured herself that she was still whole, Matthius had pinned the man up against the wall with his blade at the merchant's throat. From over Matthius's shoulder, the merchant's eyes met Cara's and widened.

"Your Majesty?" Cara looked at the merchant and then moved her hand to where the hood had fallen from her hair. "Wait until Queen Melessa hears of this."

"She mustn't," replied Matthius quickly as Cara reached gingerly for the sack of supplies.

"And why not?" asked the older man, seeming to ignore the fact that he was a mere slash of a blade away from meeting his maker.

Matthius and Cara exchanged slightly nervous glances, but it was Cara who replied. "Melessa is not my father's heir. We are looking for that heir."

The man perked up and Matthius eased up a bit — but *only* a bit — with his knife. "That means..." The light of recognition crossed his eyes.

"Yes." Cara almost smiled.

"Is there any other way I can help?" asked the shopkeeper. Suddenly he didn't seem so

malevolent.

“I don’t think so, my good sir, except that you never saw either of us nor heard of our business.” Cara motioned to Matthius and he drew his hand away from an assassin’s stance, but he still remained alert, just in case. Cara pulled her hood up over her hair and headed for the door. Matthius followed.

As the pair left the shop, a young boy escaped from a window in the back storeroom and ran for the stables. The sooner this news got to the Queen, the sooner his mother would get the bread they desperately needed. Maybe she would even throw in some scraps from one of her extravagant banquets. The boy’s mouth watered with the thought of all that food. Muddy feet splashed into a puddle as he crossed the street and sprinted into the stable, where a shaggy pony stood, tacked and just itching to gallop.

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“Your Majesty, there’s someone here to see you.”

“Tell them to come in.” Melessa only briefly glanced up from her ledger. She heard the door open and then gently close. She counted a few seconds in her head and then looked up thoughtfully at her visitor. Another peasant. Melessa made no attempt to hide the uncaring look on her face.

“Yes?” She caught the guard at the door’s eye, ready to signal the child’s removal.

“I bring news, Your Majesty, that might be of interest to you.”

“Guard—” she gave the signal. Despite this, though, the peasant continued.

“It’s your daughter.”

“Nonsense. The princess is dead.”

“I saw her in Verans.” The boy’s voice was fast, as if he wanted to get the news out before anything else could happen. The city’s name made Melessa stop the guard for a moment. Cara? Alive?

And probably still searching for that recluse too, a small but cunning voice in her mind said. Melessa’s mood instantly changed. She sat back in her chair and a slow smile spread across her face as her mind began to roll.

“Thank you. And your name would be?”

The child wasn’t too young to know of the queen’s knack for manipulation; he was wary as he said, “My name is Branden, Your Highness.”

Melessa beckoned a servant to her side and whispered, “Make sure his news does not leave the palace walls.” The servant bobbed a curtsy and then went to the door.

“Follow her, Branden. You shall be rewarded for this news. Oh, and Branden?”

“Yes?”

“This news must be kept a little secret, just between you and me.”

The boy nodded. Melessa kept the happy appearance until the door closed behind them. Then she beckoned a second servant to her side.

“Fetch General Carem to this office immediately. I should wish to talk to him. And tell him it’s urgent.”

* * *

“You look tired.”

“I am.”

“Then why did you volunteer to take the first watch?”

“Because I do every night, Matthius.” Cara was sitting with the wolf by the dying embers of that night’s fire. Her companion got up and walked toward her. The wolf uttered a low growl but didn’t snap. The horse barely even looked up.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Go back to sleep, it’ll soon enough be your watch.” She wouldn’t meet his eyes.

But her mind was whirling. Was she mad to continue her search? Melessa already presumed her dead; perhaps she should just abandon her quest and remain in the safe anonymity of a commoner in one of the villages they’d run across. Melessa would eventually die and leave Cara’s uncle in charge...he would make a good ruler to pick up the shambles of Demoa that its Queen would leave as her legacy.

What are you saying? Another voice in her head asked. *It was your father’s dying wish that you find Silvera; would you deny him his last request? And besides, you’ve got help. And he’s stayed on despite your lack of progress in his mission.*

“Cara?” She heard softly. She turned; Matthius was asleep. “Cara,” he said again, in a tone she knew meant he was dreaming. He repeated her name again. What was she doing in his dream?

“What is it?” she asked, going to him.

“What’s what?” he asked sleepily.

“You were talking in your sleep,” she replied.

“Oh. Sorry, milady.”

“Apology accepted. And stop calling me ‘milady’; it nearly gave us away once, I don’t want it happening again.” The princess turned back toward the fire, but she still felt her companion’s eyes on her.

Matthius rolled away from her and shook his head. His mind stuck on just one image from his dream; that of Cara’s face and flame-colored hair half-lit by candlelight, much as it was nightly by the fire. Strange how *that* image stuck; he knew he had heard something about his father’s pendant in there too, if only he could remember what it was. Something about someone saying that not only were his and Cara’s quests intertwined, but also their lives. Something saying that their meeting in the Rolling Wood was *not* an accident at all. And finally, something saying that the pendant could be found in West Branwendia, which lay on the path that they now trod. He would tell Cara this later, when she seemed in a more amicable mood. Until then, Matthius knew that his watch lay only a few hours ahead...and it would never do to have him even more half-asleep than usual for it.

* * *

A young peasant woman was sewing in her modest home when Carem’s army reached her village.

“Where are they?” The general asked.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Liar!” He made a motion which seemed to indicate to his men to tear up the place. Strangely, the woman remained calm as her meager possessions were strewn indiscriminately across the one-room residence. The silence from the woman only seemed to make the intruders’ leader more angry.

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about, sir.”

“You know full well, wench! The princess!”

“Princess? As in Milady Cara? But she’s dead, sir!”

“She’s been seen in this village. Now *where is she?*” The General’s rage was barely contained.

“She isn’t here, milord. Your men will discover that.” Despite how calm her face looked, she knew what their search meant. “It is time,” she muttered.

“What was that?”

“Absolutely nothing, sir.” As the General searched her belongings, the young woman gathered up the small bundle she had packed for just this purpose she had left by the door, then slipped out, heading for the stables. She only hoped that the liveryman’s memory was as good as her own.

* * *

Matthius saw it first, one night when Cara lay asleep.

“Cara . . . Cara, wake up.” Cara hadn’t slept heavily since Verans; his voice was enough to wake her.

“Mrmph? My watch already?”

Matthius shook his head in the predawn light.

“Then what?”

“I just saw something you might be interested in.”

“What now?” Cara propped herself on an elbow and moved some hair out of her face.

“Come look.”

“This had better be good, Matthius.”

“It is.” Cara looked at him dubiously, then kicked her makeshift blanket off and got up to follow him. They walked to the top of the hill they camped on, which allowed for a panoramic view of a valley they’d apparently been circling for the past week. Matthius pointed at something that appeared to be a few miles to the right. Cara squinted and all she saw was a shack.

“Is that what you dragged me awake for? A *shack?*” Cara asked.

Matthius nodded. His companion looked ready to retort something, but then Matthius said, “That shack is the border checkpoint between Demoa and West Branwendia, from the Continent-wide anarchy starting in my grandfather’s time. I’m surprised it’s still standing.”

At this, Cara seemed to perk up. “So that’s where Greypaws has been leading us.”

“Greypaws?”

“What I’ve been calling the wolf. It needed a name. I think it’s been leading us to Silvera.” For a moment, Cara was silent.

“And my pendant,” Matthius murmured to himself. But Cara was already on to her next thought.

“Which means if the wolf’s been leading us to West Branwendia, it’s leading us to her. Makes sense, Silvera is rumored to be in exile . . . and Melessa would never have allowed her to return to this country.”

Matthius seemed to take this in with a thoughtful silence.

“But *where* in West Branwendia?” Cara started down the hill, all sleep forgotten. Matthius glanced at the checkpoint again, then followed her before she could pack up and leave him in her excitement.

* * *

Melessa paced back and forth across the stone floor of her chamber, where a heavy book lay open. How had Cara managed to avoid her sorcerous gaze for so long? She looked in the mirror again, which had transformed to a misty, silent image of Yvan’s daughter and some little minion she had picked up along the way packing, with a wolf appearing to wait for them by the road to West Branwendia. She had sent a messenger out with promise of a heavy reward if he found General Carem and given him the roll of sealed parchment which told of this recent finding. It promised a pension and a promotion to Advisor-in-Arms if he captured that troublemaker. The fact that Cara was still alive had been a shock — had not the General sent a message that all was going well? Melessa looked again at the book. It said nothing of being unable to track her until she got nearly to the border of her country. And if she found Silvera, it meant that she wouldn’t be able to find her then either — unless, of course, the woman had stopped practicing magecraft. Which she doubted. And her position was too important to use all of her strength to reach to the farthest corner of Demoa in order to get rid of her daughter. Times were too demanding for her to be put abed from over-exertion.

She heard a knock on the door.

“My queen, are you there?”

“What is it?” Melessa snapped as the image on the mirror and the book vanished at a wave from her hand. A servant timidly worked her way into the room.

“Close the door.” The command was obeyed. “What have you brought me?”

“News,” the servant replied, “and tax money from Verans. It came with this message from General Carem.” The servant brought it out and handed over the parchment timidly. Melessa read the message silently. *Your Most Gracious Majesty, it read, we have upturned the city of Verans and have found nothing remotely related to the Princess except for a shopkeep who has been sent to you for your questioning. We could get nothing sensible from him, but perhaps with some persuasion, Your Majesty, he could be swayed. He will arrive with the taxes collected from the citizens of Verans and this message. . . .*

“You are dismissed,” Melessa said absently to the servant who had run the message to her from the courier and was now standing awkwardly by the door. When she was sure the servant had left, Melessa walked briskly to the door to “question” the shopkeep as to where Cara was headed next.

* * *

“General! I see something!”

General Carem looked at the scout, whose heavy breathing told of his haste. “Go on,” Carem said.

“At the top of that rise, we saw her!”

“Pardon?”

“We saw her, Milady Cara and another!” General Carem spurred his black horse to the indicated rise.

“I don’t see them.”

“Neither did I, General, until I looked *there*,” the scout pointed across the bowl-shaped valley at a shack dead ahead and to the left. A few inches, it seemed, to the right of that shack, were two moving dots. One of the dots had the obvious flame-red hair that could be no one but the princess — she was the only one in the kingdom who had hair *that* shade of flame-red the General, as well as most of Demoa, would know anywhere.

“What is that building there?” asked one of Carem’s men who had followed him up the rise.

“You fool! It’s the West Branwendian checkpoint!” Carem turned his horse around. “We’re going to cut them off.”

“How do you know they haven’t—” began the soldier again, but the general cut him off with a gesture.

“It’s too treacherous, even for us, to go straight through,” the General muttered.

His squire overheard, and in a timid voice said, “The trail is passable to cavalry if one follows the left path to the other side, General.”

Carem seemed to consider this before saying to his soldiers, “Go west, around the valley, and cut Cara off at the checkpoint. She won’t get to West Branwendia alive.”

* * *

Branden sat in his chains, wondering how long the Queen meant to keep him here before she sentenced him to death. Time had stopped having meaning long ago — night and day melded into a dusky twilight colored by the red dust of the dungeon.

He pulled again at the shackles which bound him to the wall, not even feeling the now-familiar sores surrounding his bony wrists meet friction with the merciless iron. He had heard the guards taunting him - he no longer listened, only wondering when he would be fed another bland, meager ration of stale bread or when he would be released from this nightmare. But most of all, Branden wondered what had gone amiss. He had brought news of the Princess — for the display of mourning he heard the palace had put forth, he’d have thought his news would have landed him a few coins and maybe a good word. Instead, he had been left here to die. Something was very wrong at this palace — if only he could know what it was.

* * *

“She’s-coming...Mistress.”

“Calm down, catch your breath. I know. I’ve sensed her and another since they came to this country. They will come soon enough.”

“Before or after Demoa goes to ruin?”

“The Demoa throne has endured for generations of power-hungry sovereigns. It will endure through this one.”

“How do you know?”

“When you’ve lived as long as I, you’ll have gained a sense for this sort of thing.”

“I hope you’re right, Mistress. The General acted as though nothing could stand between himself and his queen’s goal as she went through my hovel.”

“Things will work themselves out in the end.”

“Time shall tell, Mistress. Time shall tell.”

* * *

“Where are we, Cara?”

“I’m not sure,” the princess replied, running her hand over the cryptic, knife-forged wounds inflicted on the bark of a nearby tree. They had passed into West Branwendia a few hours ago. The territory had quickly become unfamiliar, and neither of the travelers especially liked it. Even more disturbing was the feeling on the fringes of Cara’s senses that they were being watched. Even Greypaws seemed to sense it as she traveled closer to them with every passing moment. It was times like these Cara regretted leaving that horse when they had begun to round the valley. With luck, the beast had wandered into a village where some small child could pity it — the animal really had served her well.

Cara snapped her thoughts back to the present as she heard Matthius call to her.

“We can camp here tonight.” He crouched in a large gap in the undergrowth with enough room — barely — for both of them and Greypaws to sleep without being immediately obvious, so long as Matthius didn’t talk in his sleep. Cara thought back to his calling out her name in the dream a few days prior and reminded herself to ask why — but now was neither the time nor place. Cara stepped over a few thorn bushes to where her companion was preparing to take first watch. Tonight she would let him, though tonight Cara strongly doubted she’d sleep. The carvings she’d seen were all too familiar, although she was sure she’s never seen them before. She settled down behind Matthius and with her back to him, her eyes scanning the undergrowth for any sign of movement. The sensation of being watched was too strong for her to ignore. There was definitely something here the princess didn’t trust, but she couldn’t figure out what. Quietly, Cara resigned herself to sleeplessness, wishing she knew what wasn’t right.

* * *

There was another group of warriors in these woods, at least from what the General could make out from his squire’s mangled babble. He had been rudely interrupted by the lackey before dawn. According to his rambling, the painted ones had been practicing their marksmanship on a

nearby cluster of trees, perhaps an hour's ride deeper into the forest from here. He said he'd never heard their harsh-sounding language before, and he'd heard the word "Mataki" repeated several times. Then the minion had fainted and been dragged away by others of Carem's men, to be sent to the Queen when he came around.

The General thought over the report for a time. If the part about "Mataki" was true, things could become much easier. The modern Mataki were a tribe of fanatics who believed themselves to be direct descendants of the old Mataki civilization whose realm once covered the whole of the Continent. If memory served the General right, they'd do *anything* to be recognized among the other nations of the world, who ironically had been the ones to contain them to this forest some years back. Thus, the original name of this forest had been long ago forgotten, and the "Mataki Forest" of West Branwendia became known. If there was a Mataki hunting party afoot, it might mean that they could be bribed to help in their search for the princess....The gears began to turn. Cara *had* to be in these woods somewhere. With an entire tribe after her in addition to his army, Carem thought, the forest will become *much* smaller for the Queen's daughter....

* * *

Meanwhile, Matthius received a similar awakening, only this one wasn't born of a lackey's panic. Rather it was his companion, telling him it was time to go. And a wolf, wagging its tail and tugging at his sleeve.

"I could barely keep Greypaws from dragging me off — we must be close!" said Cara excitedly. Matthius sat up and stretched.

"Morning already?"

"Yes, it's after dawn," she said patiently. "Let's go!" Cara had already packed Matthius's things. He stood and watched for a minute as the Demoan princess picked up a food sack and slung it over her shoulder. She turned and opened her mouth to say something more, but Matthius silenced her with a gesture.

"What is it?" she mouthed. Then she heard it too — the subtle, stealthy sound of snapping twigs getting louder. It came from the direction of Demoa.

* * *

"They're close, Mistress."

"I know."

"It will be close."

"Yes."

"I can't believe that General Carem thinks the Mataki will side with him."

"He'll be in for a surprise."

"I know, Mistress. Only I hope the princess isn't caught in the crossfire."

"As do I. Like you said, it will be close."

* * *

Branden reached. The little clay dish with its stale bread was only a finger's-breadth away....he relaxed for a moment, waiting for the feeling to return to his chapped, slightly bleeding wrists. He locked eyes with a rat across the way, by the door. It perched on its haunches in the dank gloom and then crouched, its little pointed nose wriggling like the so-called "meat" he'd been fed this morning.

"Don't even *think* about it." Were his ankles not shackled, maybe he could get it with his foot....was it just him, or had the rat crawled closer on its grimy little feet? Branden moved frantically, trying to scare it away. However this rat, unlike the rats of his village, was a brave little rodent. In what seemed to be one motion, the animal came close, picked up the meager ration, shot him what he could have sworn was an evil little grin, and with its meal in tow, waddled away. Even as his supper retreated, Branden wondered how long it would be until the Queen would kill him or — he hoped — pardon him for whatever crime he had committed to land him there and let him go back home. Somehow, he thought that the former was far more likely. Or maybe he would just die of hunger. Right now, both seemed equally appealing.

* * *

The Demoan princess let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. The one who approached *wasn't*, thankfully, one of her mother's henchmen. It was, however, someone she'd never seen before. He (and it definitely was a he, judging from the loincloth) was a young man, but hardly an inch of his copper skin could be seen through the green and black paint smeared on his body. In his hands was a bloody knife, and over his broad shoulders was slung the carcass of a deer. He looked at the pair with an eyebrow arched, and then changed his path to skirt the clearing.

"We must be in the Matakai Forest. I'd know that body paint anywhere." Cara remembered her father saying something of Silvera living around there when she was first exiled. That was years ago, but maybe they'd know where she went if she wasn't there any more — or at least which direction.

"Cara?" Matthius looked after his partner, then moved to catch up to her as she caught up to the young man. He looked ready to gut her with the knife, but Cara showed she carried no weapon. The knife in her boot was only there for protection if she needed it.

A few short syllables were uttered in the harsh language of the Matakai.

Why didn't I pay attention when my governess tried to teach me their language? Cara thought, then tried to figure out how to ask him. Perhaps an introduction would help a bit. She figured that Silvera's name was well-enough known, maybe she could start with that.

"I'm looking" she put her hand on her brow-bone and moved as though searching, "for Silvera. Do you know where she is?"

At Silvera's name, the look changed from one of confusion to comprehension, then flashed back to confusion again. He pointed to her with a questioning look she could only interpret as "Who?"

She pointed to herself. "Cara."

He repeated the name, then took her arm with the hand that didn't hold the knife. He pulled her after him into the woods. His touch was gentle; he wasn't going to hurt her, it seemed, at least

not yet. Matthius stayed out of sight and followed at a distance. Greypaws was right on his heels — until something heavy came at him from behind and toppled him to the ground. In a few moments, everything in Matthius’s world faded to black.

As Cara bumped along, half-dragged by the Mataki man, she wasn’t sure where he was taking her. Suddenly, the hunter fell forward. An instant later, she saw why. A feather-tipped arrow was deeply lodged in his lower back, surrounded by a nasty ring of dark red blood. Turning to see the source, Cara saw a soldier atop a steed she assumed to be Matthius; A short distance away, she saw a black steed with a grinning man in the Demoaan royalty’s colors seated on its back. A man near him had an arrow trained at her.

“Princess, I am placing you under arrest — for desertion.”

* * *

“My lady, there’s a message from General Carem.” It was sealed with wax, which Melessa broke with a fingernail as she blinked her way into wakefulness. The messenger had awoken her at an ungodly hour, especially for word from her useless minion.

“You may go now.” The messenger bowed quickly and left, closing the door behind him. She unrolled the message and read it. *Your Most Royal Highness*, it read, *We have taken custody of the princess! We caught her in the Mataki Forest of West Branwendia. We await your orders.* Following this was General Carem’s signature. A glance to her sorcerous mirror proved the report true.

Instantly, Melessa grabbed a dressing gown and put it on, getting out of bed. *At last!* She went to her desk and scribbled a message on her own parchment. She’d keep her misguided daughter alive — but only while in chains in her deepest, darkest dungeon until she got a confession, true or otherwise. Then Cara would be executed. Melessa smiled as she pressed her sigil into the sealing wax of the return message. Things were finally looking up for her Queenship — as far as she was concerned, it was about time.

* * *

When Matthius came around, he was incredibly stiff, especially in his arms. He tried to move them, but the unpleasant feel of iron constricted them. Behind him was a wagon, which he (correctly, upon further investigation) assumed he was tied to. On the other side of the wagon, Cara was in a similar predicament. Of their provisions, there wasn’t a trace.

“Are you all right?” he asked hoarsely.

“Silence!” said the guard on watch over them as he kicked at Matthius’s shins.

Cara turned to him and he saw that one of her eyes was blackened. She smiled in recognition at him, then showed him that she was shackled too. Under the wagon, between them, they heard a whine. Greypaws was muzzled and chained too. The Mataki hunter was nowhere to be found.

Maybe he got away, Matthius thought. Maybe he can get help.

The thought went away as he looked around the camp. Horses were tied some yards to his left. The workings of a fire were in the center, and crude tents completed a ring around it.

Why haven’t they killed us yet? Cara asked silently. Desertion usually takes a death penalty.

And it's not like the Queen would miss me.... She continued to think as she surveyed the camp. There has to be a way out of here. And even if there isn't, I'm not going down without a fight. She rubbed her forearms together under the shirt sleeves and felt her father's will rub against both the arm it was rolled around and her other arm with a little rustle. She smiled to herself. *No, not without a fight.*

* * *

The man came into camp, half-dragged by two of his comrades. Instantly, a dark-haired, pale girl motioned them into an earthen house.

"What happened?" She asked in the harsh Mataki tongue.

"Shot by archers." They laid him out on a table, face down so that the girl could get at the wound.

"This is in deep," she said to no one in particular. "They must have been professionals."

She saw the man wince as she pulled gently at the arrow. At least he was alive. She wondered if this had anything to do with her mistress's visions. The hilt of the arrow looked like one her mistress had shown her. She resolved to ask the victim what happened when he came around. She pulled the arrow out and partially bandaged it, to keep infection away. Then she went about making a poultice to apply to the hole the arrow had left. Hopefully, he would be able to speak soon; somehow she doubted that whomever attacked with skilled archers had retreated after a single skirmish.

* * *

They came for Branden at one point; he no longer cared what time it was. They replaced his shackles with binders they could move him with and brought him to a cell. This one, however, had a very small slot for light and stale air to pass through. Perhaps he had lightened his sentence? The binders were removed. He was thrown in and felt a sharp pain at the back of his head. He was no longer shackled, which was a benefit. Things were looking up, slightly. The boy looked at the narrow slot to the outside and was nearly blinded by sunlight. He winced, bringing a malnourished hand up to rub the back of his head, where he felt a lump forming against his skull. His hair was matted and tangled. Again he wondered, where could he have gone wrong? At least this place wasn't worse than the chains. Yet, anyway.

* * *

A figure cloaked in shadow caught Matthius's eye. The soldiers, excepting the patrol watching the camp's perimeter, were asleep. He had been trying to do the same for well over an hour now; he guessed that his companion on the other side of the wagon didn't fare much better than he. For now, he concentrated on the figure in shadows. Who was that? He determined it had to be human. It walked too surely to be anything smaller. It crouched down in a bush silently as the guards passed. Then it peered around the foliage and appeared to stare directly at him. The figure waved its left hand casually; something silver glittered on its finger as Matthius felt sleep overcome him. Now,

he fought it, but eventually he surrendered, wondering who it had been that had sent him to enchanted rest.

He dreamt; the dream of Cara. But this time it was different. Her hair was a deep brown, and plaited, unlike Cara's remarkably red locks. When she looked up, still half-illuminated by the firelight, it was not Cara's face. This was a face he had not seen before. This young woman was about his age and had violet eyes; a sharp contrast to Cara's bluish-green ones. Was she the figure he had seen before falling asleep? She was beautiful....

The next thing he knew, all was black and he slept the dreamless sleep of the exhausted.

* * *

"The hunter says she's been captured, Mistress."

"I know. I've seen them in the soldiers' camp. Her companion saw me, I suspect."

"Are they all right?"

"They will be. We have to get a party together and go out to retrieve them. If Melessa gets them in her clutches, their doom is sealed."

"Should I call a meeting of the tribe?"

"Yes. We will have your patient lead us; I have not seen her, only sensed her. He will know whom it is we seek."

* * *

The hunter regained consciousness in the middle of the night. The healer's apprentice rose from her pallet by the fire.

"How do you feel?" she asked in Matakiki as he tried to sit up.

"Awful." He tried to take a deep breath and winced. "How's the girl?"

"What girl?"

"The one I tried to lead here...she didn't speak our tongue but I think I found out her name before the pain in my back made me black out."

"What was her name?"

"Cara."

"My mistress will want to talk to you. The girl you mentioned was captured by more Outsiders. Probably the same soldiers that have her now."

"Ah, so that's who you were talking to, my young apprentice."

"Aye, Mistress. He says that he was trying to lead her to you, but they captured her."

The elder healer paused while looking at the patient. "Can you help us identify her, if we showed you where she was being held?"

"I would if I could. But my destiny lies in helping my father in tanning. It doesn't take me out of camp. After this injury from Outsiders, my father will consider his argument for me to become a tanner like him clinched."

"You may be your father's only child, but I think your path lies elsewhere." The healer's apprentice studied her mistress's thoughtful expression before the hunter replied.

“I will consider your words, Healer.” The addressed considered this as big a concession as she’d get from the tanner’s son....For now.

* * *

When the sun filled the slot in his cell, Branden heard the prison guards speaking just beyond the bars.

“When did Her Majesty say to expect the Princess, sir?”

“Soon. As soon as General Carem can get her here.”

“Where is she to be held on her arrival?”

“In the shackles, where her hostage used to be.” *Hostage?* Branden realized with a heavy heart that they referred to him. Would he *ever* be freed? The move had given him hope. Now, that was fading fast into a depression so deep it would make him vomit, were there anything there to produce more than a dry retch. For the millionth time, he wondered what had gone wrong. Whatever it was, in his next life Branden would make certain he didn’t do it. Or even anything resembling it, for that matter. Unfortunately, he had yet to figure out what “it” was.

* * *

A council was called at sundown at the Mataki camp.

“I move that we form a party, go out, and save the captives,” the woman leading concluded, in flawless Mataki. She had come from the Outside long ago. The tribe had asked no questions and received no answers in regard to her past; all they knew is that she had been knowledgeable in the art of healing in the midst of the most disastrous epidemic the tribe had known to date. After, the woman had become a permanent facet in the tribe and had even taken an apprentice from their ranks. Even though the apprentice was suspected to be another Outsider, it was a symbol of the healer’s permanence among them. And now, she asked for aid to be given to more Outsiders, these of consequence. She had described a daughter of a dead king and a tyrannical queen; also her companion, of lower rank but equally in need of rescue.

The council elders were hard to sway — they tried to keep as far from the Outside as possible. The younger warriors, both male and female, however, were chomping at the bit. It had been long since something exciting had happened around camp.

“It is her destiny. It is the tribe’s destiny, just as it was mine to come and serve you all as healer.”

“But you have not seen her. You do not know if they have killed her or not. We could be risking it all for nothing.”

“I have sensed her, I know she is there!” Her voice took on a note of desperation.

“When they took her, she was alive.” A new voice, a masculine one, interrupted the council proceedings. Everyone turned to see the newcomer. It was the hunter Nighteyes, and he was relying heavily on a human crutch. His breathing was shallow around the bandages at his waist. “And further, I will lead the party to retrieve her and her companion. There was also a wolf with them, I saw it following us with her companion.”

Wolves were good luck in Mataki society. Nighteyes knew it had affected the elders as they commiserated over the healer's proposition, now supported by one of their own.

"Thank you," mouthed the healer to the hunter.

"It is my destiny," he mouthed back.

* * *

The next morning dawned overcast and cold. Cara awoke and stretched as best she could while chained to the wagon wheel. Greypaws looked at the princess calmly from behind the worn leather muzzle. She knew something was happening. She strained around the wolf to see what was happening. Carem's men were packing tents and saddling pack horses. The princess's heart sank as she realized they were breaking camp.

Probably headed back to Demoa, she thought. Who knows what'll happen to us there. She knew Matthius must have similar apprehensions. She turned and whispered as quietly as she could, "Matthius?"

But he didn't hear her. He was too busy looking at the general. Something in the Jalequinnian red and gold hanging at Carem's chest had caught his attention. The general shifted his weight as he considered his troops. There it was again! Matthius recognized his father's pendant. But what was it doing here? There was only one like it on the Continent; it *had* to be the one, there could be no mistake. But how did *he*, of all people, acquire it? And furthermore, how could Matthius get it back?

* * *

General Carem surveyed his inferiors as they broke camp. Soon, they would be back in Demoa, he would have his promotion, and to top it off, he hadn't even needed those fool Mataki to capture the princess-turned-traitor and her accomplice. The general almost smiled with satisfaction at his own work. However, the general's self-congratulation came to an abrupt halt as something much too big and sure-footed to be a woodland animal moved at the edge of camp.

* * *

"Can you see her, Nighteyes?"

"Not her, but her companion's secured to the supply wagon at the far end of camp, where Swifttail and his group are."

"Tell them to proceed with the rescue while we keep the soldiers busy."

Nighteyes crouched lower in the undergrowth and let out a nightingale's warble, low in the foliage.

In reply, Swifttail sent back a similar call above the soldiers' noise as they broke camp.

As Nighteyes relayed the message, the healer's apprentice scanned beyond the brush. The apparent leader stood in middle of the scene, surveying the others' work. The rest were dousing fires, dismembering tents, or loading supply wagons. These, they had decided after her mistress's appraisal of the camp, would be their first target in the attack. This would serve the dual purpose of weakening

the enemy and strengthening their own arsenal. Both would decrease Mataki casualties. With luck, the war party would be in, successful, and out long before midday.

She saw the leader's eyes move in her direction. She froze. If they'd spotted her, their element of surprise would be lost. She heard Swifttail's signal a heartbeat later. It was hardly over before the howling Mataki war cries began and those around her began to charge.

* * *

Cara felt a swift movement to her left as the howling started. As she turned, she saw a painted warrior fighting their guard hand-to-hand. As the guard stumbled backward, Cara brought a leg up and kicked him hard in the back of the knee closest to her, making both fighters fall to the ground, the intruder on top. He looked like the hunter, a little. Only she knew he was a different Mataki. Somehow, these people would help. All she could do was watch as the Demoan fighter pulled a dagger from his other side and attempted to get the upper hand. Meanwhile, another Mataki had come to her side with what appeared to be an axe. Cara's eyes went wide. But instead of aiming for her, the axe hacked at the wagon wheel's spokes that her bindings were attached to. Just then, the fight in front of her grew more violent as the guard pushed up. His assailant pushed him back with enough force to knock the breath out of the Demoan and send the knife skittering across the sparse grass.

Unfortunately, the pair happened to land on the princess's ankle, eliciting a shout of pain.

She saw them wrestle off of her foot as the guard gained the upper hand, trying to find anything to slow his attacker. Cara didn't get to see the result of this; her benefactor had put the axe back in the loop at his hip and started to pull her to her feet. As soon as she tried to put weight on her painful ankle, she winced.

"Can you walk on it?" asked the fighter in her own language. Even with his accent, she was happy to hear it.

"I think so." Just the same, the fighter acted as a crutch to get her to a spot in the woods away from the fighting.

"You will be safe here, for now. Someone will be back to take you to our village. Perhaps our blacksmith can take a look at those shackles."

"Thank you," Cara replied. The warrior smiled at her before returning to the Demoan camp.

* * *

Matthius, from the other side of the wagon, got to see the other group emerge from the underbrush. They were rather an intimidating band, despite the fact that their leader had his lower torso bandaged. As the bandaged one and half a dozen others went to work, Matthius felt the wagon tilt back, as if the opposite wheel had fallen off. Greypaws whined as she scrambled to avoid the wagon's weight. Matthius craned his neck to see behind him. Apparently the shift had been enough to pull the worn leather muzzle — and its attached metal leash — off of the wolf's snout. Greypaws sneezed, then looked at Matthius. As she stepped forward to meet him, Matthius saw the general draw his sword. Archers, hidden until now, loosed their first round of arrows. As skirmishes

unfolded before him, Matthius felt hot breath near his wrists. Greypaws was attempting to chew through the spokes of the wooden wagon wheel. And once he was free, he would get his father's pendant before he continued with Greypaws to safety. Behind him, Matthius heard a choked plea for mercy — in what language, he didn't hear — and a sigh of death.

Greypaws's jaws finished their task then she ran to the nearest pair of wrestlers. She bit the uniformed one's ankle as he attempted to get a knee between the Matakis' legs to inflict more pain.

Matthius pulled his chained arms over his head, scanned the camp-turned-battlefield and finally saw General Carem fighting a female warrior — or at least trying unsuccessfully to pin her beneath him. In her fury, the warrior finally kned him. As the attacked doubled up in pain and the warrior rolled clear, Matthius reached down and found the pendant hanging outside the general's shirt on a thin golden chain.

"This is for my father," Matthius hissed. He yanked the pendant for a moment before the chain snapped. Matthius took it from the general's neck, which now would display a mark from the pressure of the chain. As soon as he had pocketed his prize, Matthius slammed both hands, now in fists, into Carem's jaw, sending his head back into the unyielding ground a few times until it was clear he was unconscious. His purpose served, Lord Daren's son fled to the woods with Greypaws close behind before more soldiers realized his absence.

* * *

As suddenly as the attack began, another long howl echoed over the battlefield. Nighteyes pulled his dagger out of the Outsider's flesh and knew that their purpose had been served. As he moved to retreat with the others, he took inventory of the losses. For every Matakis warrior who lay dead or beyond a healer's help, there were at least one or two Outsiders. They had fared well. All that remained was to collect their targets and return for a more detailed realization of the battle at the War Council.

* * *

Melessa looked at her mirror. How had this happened? She could find neither her misguided daughter nor that little puke she'd found as a companion anywhere. They had to be within Silvera's range. Too bad Cara was barking up the wrong tree....Melessa smiled in spite of herself. With luck, Cara would either give up and come home (where a dungeon stay awaited her) or fall off a convenient cliff sometime soon. Then the news of her daughter's death wouldn't be as amiss as she found out she had been. Melessa so hated to be wrong....

* * *

Cara's ankle and wrists throbbed painfully as she sat waiting for the promised escort. The sounds of battle and the howl she presumed to be the call to retreat had died out long ago. To her right, the princess saw figures moving towards her. She crouched as low as she could, trying to see if the newcomers were friend or foe.

There were four of them. Half were armed, though none looked as though they were tracing a target. One looked somehow familiar...Cara strained to see him. Looking closer, she saw that one of the armed people was the hunter she'd seen before her capture. Only now, he had a bandage about his waist. He was the only one of them she thought she had seen before. He had been kind enough to her before — this was likely the escort that her rescuer had referred to. He smiled a bit when he saw her. The smile was genuine; she doubted that they would harm her. She raised her head as they concluded their approach.

Two of them knelt to either side of her as a third examined Cara's bound wrists. He murmured something in his own tongue that she didn't understand. When he looked up, the other two murmured something she interpreted as agreement. The one who had examined her chains looked up at her and smiled, saying something that the princess figured was supposed to be reassuring. Carefully, the quartet surrounded her and pulled her to her feet. This time, her ankle couldn't hold her weight, and she fell backwards, against the bandaged hunter. He winced as she tried to apologize, but she was pulled to lean on another as the hunter regained his feet. Slowly, the four led Cara further into the woods, presumably toward their settlement.

She couldn't help but wonder how Matthius fared. Hopefully, he would be wherever these people were taking her. If he hadn't escaped...

Cara tried not to think about that possibility. *He escaped*, a voice inside told her. She hoped fervently that she could trust it.

* * *

Matthius sat and panted. Running was made much more difficult that he would have thought with his wrists shackled. He'd run this far over the course of the afternoon and finally run out of energy as the sun began to set. This should be farther than the Demoan soldiers would search. Those left alive, anyway.

He'd retreated beyond the sounds of battle; he didn't know where he was, nor where their rescuers' settlement was. For now, however, he would rest here. Greypaws wouldn't let anything catastrophic happen. He rubbed the wolf between the ears as he settled most of the way under a low bush. He would try and find his way at dawn. Until then, Matthius would get some much-needed sleep.

* * *

Greypaws waited until her he-companion was asleep and well-hidden before she went to the village. A pack of humans had their den there. Maybe they'd rescued her she-companion. The wolf hadn't seen her since those humans with the canine snarl had come onto the scene. She trotted through the waxing moonlight, her sense of smell proving the direction of the dens. With luck, she'd be there and back long before her he-companion awoke.

* * *

Through half the night, the wolf had led them. Nighteyes had said that this was the Outsider's companion. The elders wouldn't like this many Outsiders in the village, they knew. But the wolf's appearance had swayed them. Now they followed her to, presumably, the third in their party.

He lay curled in a ball, mostly hidden beneath a bush. It was a good place; had the wolf not revealed his location, they wouldn't have found him. The other Outsiders most certainly wouldn't have.

They were careful not to wake him; if he'd run this far, he probably needed to rest more than anything else. Carefully, they moved him onto a stretcher they had brought for this purpose. With the wolf following close behind, the party headed back to the village.

* * *

"How do they fare, Mistress?"

"It is to be expected. They will both awaken soon. I want you to stay here."

"Stay here? Where are you going, Mistress?"

"To tend those worse off than these. I will return soon. I want someone here when they awaken."

"Yes, Mistress."

* * *

General Carem opened his eyes and immediately shut them against the sunlight. How long had he been unconscious? The last thing he remembered was that Jalequinnian brat leaning over him....He winced at the pain at the back of his neck. The little wretch had stolen the pendant...and he'd lost two good scouts when he'd "collected" it "to pay the taxes due the Queen." He had rather liked using the bauble as a reminder to his men of his superior rank....

The general sat up and finally summoned the energy to open his eyes. What remained to their camp was in shambles. It would be at least half a fortnight's walk back to the palace....more if he delayed the inevitable. He appeared to be the only one of the Demoan forces alive. He knew Queen Melessa would *not* be pleased to learn that her top general had been defeated by savages. Carem looked around and got to his feet...before those savages came back to finish the job.

* * *

Branden looked up from his meager meal as he saw a shadow cross his slot of light, then leave. Was the slot, then, on ground level? He hadn't really considered it before. The slot wasn't all that far up....he finished the bread and then placed himself right under the slot — in time to have raw sewage from someone's chamber pot dribble onto his head. He scraped some of the slop from his eyes and realized that the rocks making up the wall were a bit uneven. Could they then be climbed? Branden's fingers closed on a rock and he raised a grimy foot to find a foothold. He got three limbs on the wall and finally his other foot found a hold, however briefly. He slipped on the muck that covered both his feet and the wall, landing with a slight splash in the muck that had formed a puddle

where it had been dumped. Apparently he'd been thrown into a sewer of sorts; had it always been like this? The slot appeared uneven; perhaps the rains had washed it out. It would explain the sharp-edged gravel that littered the now-reeking floor of his cell. Branden shuddered and decided he would have to wait for the muck to dry a bit before he investigated the slot further. Until then, he would try not to inhale the stench any more than he had to....

* * *

Even before she opened her eyes, she hurt. But there was a soothing warmth on an aching joint that seemed to continue along her stomach and drift off to her left.

Whatever she was laying on was hard. But somehow, it was not uncomfortable. With a wince, Cara opened her eyes. When she tried to stretch, she realized her right arm was bound in a sling. Her ankle, injured amidst the rescue, seemed to be whole and without pain. With her left hand, the Demoaan princess rubbed her eyes. Slowly, the groggy fog surrounding her vision receded, and Cara slowly took in her surroundings.

This place seemed to have one main, sparsely decorated room, which she was in, and a loft, which had a ladder connecting it to a spot just out of the corner of her eye. Directly ahead of her smoldered ashes in a naked stone fireplace. The hearthstone had a rosy tinge to it, and in front of that sat a short three-legged stool. There was a window across the room, and a door next to it. Beyond the door lay nothing but forest, though she could faintly hear a murmur of voices in the distance. Turning her head on a neck that could hardly move without starting a race of pain up and down her whole body, Cara saw her companion, still asleep. He didn't appear to be in pain, though. *This is a good omen*, she thought.

Rapid, light footsteps from outside drew Cara's attention. A low shadow trotted before its owner. She knew not whether this was friend or foe; frankly, she didn't want to find out the hard way. She drew her feet up onto the table and held them there, despite the complaint from every joint in her body.

Her heart beat faster as the newcomer approached....*The footsteps are far too steady to be something small...yet they sound familiar...*

Within moments, a canine form entered the dwelling, sniffed, and then looked right at her with copper eyes. It was almost as if the wolf was laughing....

"Greypaws?" the wolf walked over to the princess and nudged her foot with a cold nose. With a sigh of relief, Cara felt the tension ease away. Another shadow crossed the doorway; this one was human. The tension returned as fast as it had gone.

Cara's heart pounded in her ears. *Please, let this be another false alarm...*

But an unfamiliar figure blocked the light in the door.

"I see you're awake. That's usually a good sign."

* * *

Melessa paced the floor of her office. How had this happened? She glared at the mirror that displayed Carem's limping return — empty-handed. Couldn't he do *anything* right?

Cara had disappeared from view days ago. Who knew where she was now? She'd probably been killed — but then wouldn't the queen have sensed it? Perhaps the general had finished her off. *No, he'd never so openly defy royal orders.*

But again, where was she?

Perhaps she had found Yvan's little playmate. No; Melessa couldn't think like that. Not when she was so close....

There was nothing she could do right now and she hated it. To try and chase Cara down would be a futile effort; neither Demoa's army nor her own power were great enough to scour all of West Branwendia. Better to wait for the princess's return, if she did. Then, and only then, would the trap be sprung. Melessa almost hoped, for Cara's sake, that she was already dead. If not, a fate worse than death awaited her...and if she *had* found the recluse, she would soon realize the gravity of her error....

* * *

Matthius's dream had returned, though as before it was not Cara he dreamt of. The new, now-familiar face was breathtaking; he couldn't get this new girl and her violet eyes out of his mind. He had never mentioned the dream to the princess. Who was this new girl?

As usual, he awoke with a start, sitting bolt upright on the table.

And he saw *her*.

There *she* was, talking with Cara. *Both of them? Together?* He pinched himself hard — he *had* to be dreaming.

Ouch. All right, maybe he didn't.

"Are you feeling any better?" *Her* voice was more beautiful than any melody to his ears. And her violet eyes nearly silenced him.

He could do little more than grunt in reply. Cara's voice, seeming flatter and huskier to him now, brought his mind back to their present location.

"Matthius, this is — my apologies, I don't believe I caught your name."

"I'm Eldana. I'm apprentice to a healer here. Perhaps she might help you more than I in your quest."

"Eldana...." He sounded a bit distant to Cara. Then the princess noticed the hint of a smile that crossed the younger girl's face as she and Matthius locked eyes.

"Perhaps I should leave you two alone." Cara rose with a wince and half-ambled, half-limped to the beckoning sunlight, with Greypaws in tow. As she turned to the north, she saw the village stretched out before her. A creek ran through the surrounding forest. The foliage seemed to Cara like large arms, holding the village of varied homes close. Many were made of wood, but pitch and oilcloth were not uncommon amongst the buildings. The wolf passed her and trotted into the thick of the scene, seeming not to have any particular aim to her walk. People walked about with purpose, carrying various possessions on their backs. In the middle, a large structure with many vents in its sides stood, ominous in comparison to the other structures. This one was made primarily of wood. The Demoa princess heard murmurs from inside, in the harsh language the hunter and their rescuers had used. Even despite the language barrier, she didn't feel she should intrude. Instead, she limped

toward the creek, hoping it had drinkable water.

Flinching, Cara knelt on the mossy bank. The water formed small undertows in the deeper spots; she saw a leaf become trapped. This truly was a serene place, dappled with sunlight. With deference to her arm, she scooped some water into her left hand. By the time she got it to her lips, the water had run through her fingers. She tried again, but to no avail.

She saw movement on the other bank; it seemed too heavy to be Greypaws. The old fear that it was General Carem and another legion of Melessa's Demoan soldiers returned like a tidal wave.

With a sigh of relief that felt like it deflated her entire body, Cara realized it was merely one of the Mataki hunters. His eyes matched Greypaws'; hopefully that was a good sign. He also appeared to have been recently injured; there was a bandage circling his waist. He appeared to ignore her, however. Still on her guard, the princess attempted again to scoop up some water, failing again.

With a feeling that was both relief and anxiety, she realized that the hunter was out of her line of sight. She straightened, licking her lips.

Cara heard a splash and realized that the bandaged hunter had not left, after all. Below her chin were his cupped hands, with more water than her left could have ever carried alone.

She glanced questioningly at him, but only found a short smile and a little nudge of the water toward her.

"Drink," he said in accented Demoan. By that point, the princess wasn't going to argue. Carefully, she half-lapped, half-gulped down the water he offered. As she finished, she wiped her mouth with the back of her good hand.

"Thank you....I didn't realize you spoke my language."

The discovery hung in the air for a moment, then the stranger spoke, though his speech contained slightly unnatural pauses. "It isn't a...common tongue here. It is...thought of as the tongue of the Outsiders. Only a handful here speak it."

"Outsiders?" Cara winced as a shock of pain attacked her right elbow. Carefully, the newcomer helped settle her on the ground. However, before her benefactor could reply, someone shouted from the village. The stranger looked deeply into Cara's eyes as he rose. There was something familiar about him, if only Cara could put her finger on where they had met before.... With a smile, he broke the gaze and hurried to the voice, leaving the Outsider princess to her thoughts.

* * *

"I cannot say, Healer, that the approval of the Mataki high council is with you in this regard."

"I know that they are awake, but anyone can see that neither of them has yet recovered. Especially the girl."

"But if they are pursued, it could mean endangering the entire village when word gets to the Outside."

"The warriors slew their captors."

"But where some Outsiders go, more follow."

"But they are equal to the Mataki in stature. They need time to recover as much as any of the

tribe.”

“Healer, I recognize that, but the fact remains that they will be pursued. If it is in the tribal destiny to house them to full recovery, might it also not be in the Outsiders’ destiny to come and search for their kin?”

“The Outside is not hindered by familial ties.”

“Whether they are or not makes little difference. If they are so important as to be a part of the tribe’s destiny, they are undoubtedly as such in other destinies besides our own. Whether we are in those others remains a mystery, but we are less likely to be if the Outsiders leave as soon as possible!”

* * *

Branden could barely stay on the wall. The hardened slop had attracted flies and made the wall nearly impossible to scale. He saw feet moving outside the slot, his only grip on reality. Not a one of them stopped. Did anyone even realize someone was down here?

He doubted it.

His breath came in ragged gasps; the cold of the previous night must have entered his lungs. Death would be nice right about now....

But instead of a deliverer, a clicking sound; a key turned in the lock. The hulking silhouette of the prison guard extinguished any hope for escape as Branden was dragged from the wall and pulled toward the stairs. Perhaps, then, he was being granted his freedom? Clinging to that narrow hope, Branden struggled to keep up with the guard on legs that hardly worked. Though he knew it was mere delusion, Branden prayed that Queen Melessa had been dethroned. Or at least had her head examined.

* * *

After nearly an hour in the calm of the village’s edge, Cara struggled to a standing position. The hunter, she was nearly certain, had been the one she had been with just prior to her capture. He had been kind to her; in her current situation, any face that even seemed remotely familiar was a comfort. The look that had passed between Eldana and Matthius she had seen before; perhaps in an illustration her former nurse had drawn on some smuggled, precious parchment for her while telling a tale. Yes, that was it. That same look had passed between the two lovers in the tale.

Guess I won’t be in Matthius’s dreams anymore, she thought. Good riddance.

But they were both still left with the problem of finding Silvera — instantly Cara noticed the paper was missing from its placement around her arm. Yvan’s will, that decreed her quest necessary. But where had it been taken? Cara instantly set off for the healer’s dwelling. Eldana seemed to have been there while she had been asleep. Hopefully, she would know what had become of it.

* * *

“I have here in writing that the girl means us no harm. She only wishes to find the future

queen of her homeland. Is that so much to ask?”

“Watch your tongue, Healer.”

“My apologies to the council, but my points, I feel, are valid.”

“They are. However, we must put Matakiki interests before those of strange Outsiders.”

“Might I remind you that I, too, am of Outside blood?”

“We know that, Healer. However, you have proven yourself and been adopted into the tribe. Therefore that is an insignificant fact that holds no bearing for your request.”

“What if the pair were to prove themselves worthy?”

“That would require them to stay. We want them out.”

“At least let the Outsiders stay until they have recovered fully.”

A long pause followed.

“All right. But as *soon* as they are recovered, they are to leave this village. Not so much as an hour later. Furthermore, you are to aid them in recuperation. We want them back to the Outside as soon as is humanly and humanely possible.”

“Thank you. You shall not regret this.”

“That shall be for the chronicles to decide.”

* * *

“How l-long have you lived here?” Matthius asked. He had walked painfully out to Eldana as she washed some of the old bandages in the creek.

“Most of my life...though there are some scenes from a past I don’t remember that keep cropping up. Occasionally I’ve been sent on an errand by my Mistress as I’ve been for the past season. But as far as I’m concerned, this is my home.”

“I s-see. You do not have the same appearance as your k-kinsmen.” *That infernal stutter!* He blurted it out before he realized he had done so.

“No, it is true, I do not.” She gazed into the water as it stilled, at her reflection. Abruptly, her violet eyes glanced around as she leaned closer to Matthius. “Some even suspect that *I*, too, am of Outsider blood.”

Outsider? It would make sense, though, considering the condescending gaze most of the other cultures fixed on these people.

A surprisingly comfortable silence followed as Matthius’s thoughts wandered. The sunlight was nearly absorbed into the deep sepia tone of Eldana’s hair. It was definitely *her* who had haunted him during the journey here; all that remained was to figure out how, precisely, to approach her with the patience he would need.

* * *

Barely an hour later, Matthius sat before the fire as Cara entered the healer’s dwelling. She had obviously been moving as fast as she could to get here. She turned her back to him as she proceeded to rifle through nearly volumes, almost in a light of sheer panic.

“Matthius! Where are you?”

“Right here, Cara.” She had moved from the table next to where she had slept to a shelf on the far side of the fireplace. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find it!”

“You can’t find what?”

“What do you think?” She snapped. She looked around, and, finding no one else, hissed, “My father’s will.”

“Are you sure?” Matthius looked around the immediate area where he sat.

“Do I *look* like I’m not?”

Just then, Eldana made her entrance, marked by the soft scraping of her feet on the flat stone that formed the threshold. “What’s wrong?”

Matthius opened his mouth to reply, but Cara answered before he did. “Nothing. I just misplaced something.”

“Do you need any—?”

“No.” Then, as though it occurred to the princess as an afterthought, “Thank you.”

“Perhaps you seek this?” asked a new voice. The newcomer’s voice startled them all. A robed silhouette filled the doorway. It held a scroll in its shapely hands.

“Mistress,” said Eldana, breaking the silence. Matthius recovered first.

“I don’t believe you and I have met. I am Matthius, son of Lord Daren of Jalequinn.”

Matthius’s voice seemed to bring Cara out of her shock.

“And I’m—”

“Princess Caralese of Demoa. I am glad you are feeling better. I have been expecting you both since the seasons changed.”

* * *

General Carem approached the riot-torn city of Verans. No one really noticed his approach; they were too busy fighting each other. This was a good thing; perhaps they would forget about his company’s thorough search for that annoying little Princess. But then again, maybe they would remember him. Who in their right mind would attack the Queen’s head general?

The general laughed at himself. *You really must be losing your mind after all that time on the road.* Here was a man, unarmed, with no standard-bearer and no retinue, claiming to be the Queen’s most favored general. Thinking of it, General Carem hardly believed it himself.

But he did need food. The provisions in the camp, those he could find after those barbarians attacked, had run out a few days ago.

On the other hand, if the smoke billowing from the village or the chaotic screams from inside were any indication, perhaps this wasn’t the best place to stop.

General Carem continued on toward the Demoan palace, bypassing Verans.

* * *

Carem had failed her.

Cara was *still* missing.

Melessa fumed.

“Your Majesty?”

“What?” The word came out even more sharply than she had intended; luckily, it was merely a servant who addressed her. Timidly, the servant ventured into Melessa’s line of vision.

“Your Majesty, the hostage has been brought to the throne room for questioning as you requested.” At Melessa’s nod, the servant turned to go, then stopped.

“Your Majesty?”

“What?” Melessa made no effort to conceal her irritation this time.

“I just wanted to know if you wanted some food and Your Majesty’s royal taster brought up. It seems that Your Royal Queenship hasn’t eaten in several days.”

“I have no need of food. Leave me be.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” With that, the servant left. Melessa looked in her mirror.

Where can that bratty daughter of mine be? She wondered. I’d have felt it if she had died; whomever’s protecting her would have had their power shift. I’d go after the little rat if it wouldn’t kill me as well as her little protector. Has she found that husband-stealing witch yet?

The Demoan queen couldn’t take that chance. She opened the big door to the room that had become her headquarters and beckoned to one of the servants outside.

“Find one of the more impressionable, power-hungry knights.” *Cara can run, but she sure can’t hide. Not this time. This time, I will lead them myself. If not in body, then in sorcery. This ends now!*

* * *

Cara could feel the color drain from her face in that shocked instant.

“Who? What...?” She could hardly *form* a coherent thought, much less vocalize one.

“I know you must have quite a few questions. I have several for you as well.” The newcomer stepped away from the doorway and her features came into view. She looked around thirty, though the streaks of grey in her dark hair made her seem older than that. She was not a pretty woman as Cara supposed her mother had been when she had married Yvan, but she was certainly not homely. Even as Cara thought this, the woman put the scroll into the princess’s hands. She glanced at Eldana, and she hastily grabbed Matthius’s elbow and pulled him out of the room. Cara was left alone with the older woman.

“Where is she taking him?”

“Out and around the village. They have plenty to talk about, they should afford you and me a chance to talk. Would you care for some tea?” She indicated the small pot over the fire.

“No, thank you. Who are you, to know me on sight? I don’t ever recall meeting you before.”

The woman appeared to examine the pot before she began to speak.

“I am the Healer to this village. Originally I came from this area, though I was what this village calls an Outsider.” She spoke in perfect Demoan. Unlike the Mataki hunter’s, hers had no noticeable accent. However, this did not cover the fact that she had ignored Cara’s question.

“How, then, did you know my father? He rarely left Demoa’s borders personally.”

“I will get to him shortly. All of it will fall into place, you will see. A sorceress burned my

former home and I was sent to Demoa as a refugee, of sorts. I met your father since we were under the same tutor. Though your father's education was meant to make him king, he still found time to teach me to use a sword. It was through him I learned the basics of my healing."

"Then why are you here?"

"I will answer that, but not now. Right now, that is enough. It is my turn to ask the questions, for I have not traveled to Demoa in many years. How fares your mother?"

"She and I are not exactly on speaking terms at the moment." Cara wasn't ready to divulge that she and Matthius were wanted as common outlaws in their homeland if she didn't already know. This woman might yet try and turn them over to Melessa, for all the princess knew.

"I suspected as much." But before Cara could question her as to that, the inquisition continued. "I shall assume from the document you so eagerly sought that your father has passed on, may his soul rest in peace."

At this, Cara sobered. "Yes."

"I'm sorry, he was a good friend, and I'm sure he was a good father and king. He shall be missed, I know." She paused. "What, then, brings you to West Branwendia?"

"Not what, whom. The search for his successor has brought me here. My father told me to find someone in his will."

"So I have seen. That scroll, shall I presume, is his will?"

Cara nodded as it was handed to her. A silence followed, broken by a new voice. As both the woman and Cara looked up, Cara realized it was the hunter she had met earlier by the stream.

"Lady Silvera, the High Council wishes to speak to you, immediately."

* * *

Cara froze. *Lady Silvera?*

"If you will excuse me, Princess," said the healer as she rose. As she left, she murmured something Cara couldn't make out to the hunter. The bandaged man then came into the building and went to one of the cabinets, searching through it carefully.

"I don't believe I ever caught your name," Cara said to his back.

He replied in Demoa as before; the pauses remained. "Here they call me...Nighteyes. I am one of the tribe's...hunters. Does your...arm feel any better, Cara?"

Now she was certain that he had been the one to help her before her capture. "Much. I wanted to thank you.... For both the water earlier and for trying to help me find her."

"It's nothing. She...said she was...expecting you." He put down a bundle of bandages and took the seat Silvera had occupied with a smile. "Seems...you weren't the...only one searching that day."

"No. The men who once called my father their leader decided they didn't want me to find her."

"Why?"

"My mother was left as queen of my homeland until I found my father's successor. I know her. She does not make a good leader for my people, though since she is queen they must obey her wishes." Almost as an afterthought, she added, "She wants me dead."

“Why did they not...kill you when you were...captured?”

“I would like to know that myself, to be quite honest. But I’m happy they didn’t.”

“So am I.”

Cara looked up, startled, then smiled. “Thank you, Nighteyes.”

* * *

“You wished to see me?”

“Yes. It has come to our attention that the Outsiders have healed rather nicely. If you recall our agreement...”

“They are in no condition to travel! The boy still limps a bit and I know his companion will not leave without him, not in her state.”

“We did not agree on either of them being ready to travel. We agreed on their leaving as soon as they are healed. The girl wandered to the creek this morning on her own. She can just as easily travel to the Outside.”

“What if I was to keep a closer watch on them? I am certain they shall take their leave of us soon.”

“Not soon enough.”

“I only ask for another few days to be allowed to extend hospitality to them.”

“You try our patience, Healer.... But we will allow you a few more days to be their host. But after that, the High Council shall not entertain any more of your requests.”

“I shall not be forced to *make* any more requests if the Council holds its collective tongue until that time is past.”

“Do not push your luck, Healer. The High Council grows weary of allowing you to harbor Outsiders it does not approve of to begin with.”

* * *

Melessa took her place on the Demoan throne, before the little boy who even she barely recognized as the one she had ordered thrown in the dungeon. The sycophantic nobles who usually inhabited this room has been chased out for this. No one remained except for her own personal guards and the one she was about to interrogate, covered in various bits of hardened dung and other sorts of slop.

He looked up with rheumy eyes. She hated to do this. *No, that was Yvan. He was soft, Demoa’s power on the Continent — the world, even — did not profit from his rule. He was soft. His widow will not make that same mistake.*

“You claim to have seen the Princess about a fortnight ago. Is this true?”

“Yes.”

“Yes *what?*” She wasn’t going to let even him get away without giving her the proper respect.

“Yes,...Your Majesty.” He hacked something up, then swallowed whatever it was.

“Where did you see her?”

“In” — cough — “Verans.”

“Verans, eh? Which direction was she going?”

“I..”

“Well?”

“I...don’t know, Your Majesty.”

“You lie!”

“No, Your Majesty, I” — a few hacking coughs — “honestly don’t know.” By this point the little captive looked about ready to break into sobs at any minute. A guard knelt behind him and took out a dagger to be placed at his throat.

“P-p-please, Y-Y-Your Majesty.... I know nothing” — gulp — “more than that....”

The guard looked at her for the signal to slit his throat.

“No. Do not kill him. Let him go.”

“Your Majesty?” The guard reluctantly rose to his feet.

“I did not finish. Let him go.... But make it impossible for him to spread any more ugly lies that my daughter is alive.” With this, she turned to leave.

“But....” Before the boy’s plea could be heard, however, the guard had him pinned, and another held his mouth open. Within seconds his voice was silenced to shapeless whimpers and mumbles. He was forced to look at his own bloody tongue in the guard’s hand before he was allowed to sink into a nice darkness where the pain in his mouth and the taste of his own blood were considerably dulled. The last thing he heard was one guard ordering the other, “Take him outside.”

* * *

“My apologies for that. It was a matter beyond my control,” Silvera explained as she re-entered her home.

“You’re Lady Silvera,” said a rather shocked Cara.

“Yes, though I fail to see why that would be a cause for surprise.”

“You’re my father’s successor.”

“Pardon me?” Silvera took a step closer as Cara unrolled the will.

“See? It is the final line: ‘To my daughter Caralese, I leave a charge: find the one who makes my lady wife, Melessa, shudder with the very mention of her name. She shall inherit the throne of Demoa. To my friend, the exiled Lady Silvera, I leave my widow’s inheritance.’ The successor, my lady, is you.”

“What in the name of...oh.” Silvera’s eyes clouded for a moment in confusion as she read the words the princess had read, then lightened in recognition. Silently, she rose and went to the water-laden pot on the hearth, bringing it out to set on the floor. The healer went to a table and picked out a few herbs, which were crushed and piled into her hand. These she sprinkled into the water, and the water began to boil. “I believe this is the instance you refer to. Watch carefully.”

She passed her left hand over the surface of the water and it stilled, its surface smooth as glass. Before Cara’s eyes, a scene slowly appeared with flowers, ivy, a stone wall...the princess recognized it as her father’s Royal Gardens, outside the palace. She saw her mother walking with her father’s closest advisor. A moment later, she heard Melessa speak.

“You have been loyal to me, and I know that you shall not betray me now.”

"Of course not, Your Highness."

"So then, you would tell me anything."

"Yes, Your Highness...."

"You were in the King's study when he put his seal on his will, were you not?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Was I mentioned in it?"

Here the addressed stiffened and hesitated. When he found his voice, it was deliberate. "I did not see you mentioned specifically, Your Highness."

Anger flashed in the queen's eyes. "You did not?" It was clear to Cara that she could barely keep her choler in check.

"No, Your Highness."

"Whom did you see?"

"There were a few names that I recognized—"

"Get on with it!"

"There were two I saw that would inherit Your Highness's due. Lady Silvera and Princess Caralese."

Melessa shuddered at the last word. "I should have known...."

The image vanished and was replaced by the reflection of the healer's smiling face. Cara's eyes were wide. "Then—"

Silvera inclined her head respectfully to Cara. "Your Majesty."

After a stunned silence, Cara found her voice. "We have to get back, so I can give you your due."

"You forget. I am among the exiled. I have been since before your birth."

"I will pardon you the instant I claim the throne; you will be free to traverse Demoa or not as you see fit." She paused. "Why did my father exile you?"

"It was to keep the peace in the palace, more than anything else. It was your mother who requested it."

"But what law did you break?"

Silvera sat on the nearest three-legged stool and regarded the now-clear dying embers in the fireplace, as though weighing her word choice. "When your mother learned of the friendship between your father and me, she became jealous. She wished for me to be out of the picture. She knew that I had been a student of sorcery and that I occasionally used it. Therefore, she issued a decree that all sorcery was outlawed. Meanwhile, she used her own sorcerous ways on my twin sister to lay a trap for me. To free her, I had to use sorcery of my own....Unfortunately it was in front of hundreds of high-ranking Demoa nobles who could not deny what they had seen. Therefore I was exiled."

"But she used sorcery herself. So she should have been exiled as well."

"She had no witnesses to her trickery. And were Yvan or I to protest, we would have gotten into more trouble. Just before I departed, however, Yvan came to see me. He apologized for the whole matter and told me that this would not go in history without retribution. I suppose that after you were born, he saw the good in you and decided to give you the throne and myself the widow's inheritance. I never asked for any of it, though I would like to return to Demoa. Melessa and I have a score to settle."

"You will have it." Cara turned to her companion as he entered with Eldana and Greypaws. "Matthius, if you plan to come with me, you'll need to pack tonight. I'm leaving at first light for Demoa."

* * *

"Mistress, how can you leave for Demoa? Who will be healer to the tribe?"

"You have learned enough to do so."

"There's so much more, Mistress...."

"I have taught you all that I can teach you. Practice and experience will provide the remainder of your training. You've been an apprentice for longer than most as it is. You're ready."

"I wish I shared your confidence, Mistress, I really do."

"You are released from your apprenticeship, Eldana. From now on, call me Silvera, just as everyone else does."

* * *

Matthius sat by the fire late that night, looking at his father's pendant. It glowed metallically in the firelight.

Behind him, Matthius heard a rustle. He looked in its direction.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." Eldana emerged from the shaded part of the room. Her hair was short now, cropped where the braids once began. Something in her eyes was markedly different as well, something Matthius couldn't quite put his finger on.

He pushed the thought away and replied, "It's all right, Eldana. What happened to your hair?"

"My mis — I mean, Silvera — said my apprenticeship was through. My plaits were symbolic of my servitude. I am now a full Healer....I've not been able to sleep, for thought of it."

"Nor could I."

There was another pause as the former apprentice came closer and squatted next to Matthius.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing at the pendant.

"It belonged to my father; one of the Demoa guards had stolen it."

"I see."

After a breath, Matthius continued. "I thought Cara was the thief. In exchange for not killing me, I agreed to help her find Lady Silvera." He paused with a mirthless laugh. "One might say it led me to my destiny."

"One might also say that it led you to me."

Matthius jumped. Jalequinnian girls were not nearly so forward, assuming Matthius grasped her meaning....

"'Tis a shame you must leave so soon."

That moment was as good as any to test his assumption.... "Who said I had to?"

Now it was Eldana's turn to be startled.

It seemed to Matthius that it was another who spoke his words. "Why should I go? My lord father presumes me dead. Honestly, I have no further honor-ties to the princess. I could make a life

elsewhere.”

“But where?”

“Here with you, if you all would accept an Outsider into your midst.” There was a pause. “Or, if you would accept one into your heart.”

Without another word, Eldana bridged the difference between them and covered Matthius’s mouth with hers.

* * *

Branden awoke sometime during the night. He was bloody and his mouth was caked with dry blood in a few places, but he was out of the Queen’s hands.

Free.

Branden relished that thought for a moment. *Free.* In a few hours, he would see the dawn. He would have smiled, had his jaw not hurt so terribly.

It was the queen that had done this. He wanted desperately to go home, to Verans. In a few hours, it would be light enough to go. Until then, all the boy needed was to get away from the palace gates. Slowly, Branden dragged himself to his hands and knees. Maybe he could crawl for a bit before he regained the strength to walk. And hopefully, Queen Melessa wouldn’t change her fickle mind again between now and daylight.

* * *

Cara sat by the creek with her thoughts. The soft sound of rushing water was comforting. It was almost a shame that she had to leave within the next day. The sky already began to lighten slightly on the horizon, which reminded Yvan’s successor of her coming journey.

How can I be Queen of Demoa? She thought. I know I will have a reign far superior to Melessa’s, and yet.... This is a major responsibility. Why did you send me on this quest, Father? I could have dethroned your wife long ago, had you merely named me your successor...the Demoaan people would not have had to go through the nightmare that is Melessa.... Queen Caralese. It has a rather nice ring to it, I’ll admit....

She was snapped out of her thoughts by words in accented and halting Demoaan.

“I hear you will...take you leave of us soon.”

Nighteyes. She nodded. “It appears my people need me there.” *I just hope there’s a Demoaan left to rule....*

“There will be,” the hunter replied. He sat next to her. The bandages that once bound his stomach were gone.

She hadn’t realized she had spoken her last thought aloud. “I hope you’re right.”

There was a silence. “Do you have an escort?”

“No. There’s no time to assemble one, and your people have been more than generous in supplying us for the return trip.”

“I’ve always wanted...to see the Outside. I could...supply you with an escort. You’ll...need one, if the queen is as bad as you say. No people willingly...abides tyranny.”

“I have to leave at first light,” Cara said thoughtfully. “Do you think you could assemble an escort by then?”

“All I would need is...permission...from the High Council. I have...an audience with them shortly.... Would you care to accompany me?”

Though she did not understand the Mataki tongue, she was convinced that this was something she wanted to do. “Certainly.” She stood with him, and he offered his hand. She took it with the hand that didn’t hurt and they went to the High Council. Though she had earlier refused it, Cara sincerely hoped that the Council would approve. Nighteyes was right; with Melessa’s tyranny running rampant in Demoa, it was doubtful that their return would be pretty.

* * *

“Do not waste our time, Hunter.”

“I have no intention of it. I come on behalf of the Outsiders.”

“What of them?”

“They leave at dawn. I wish to provide them an escort.”

“Why should the Mataki help the Outside? All they’ve brought us is despair; they confined our great civilization into a single forest.”

“That was in the ages of our ancestors. These Outsiders had nothing to do with our current plight.”

“Whom do you propose to comprise this escort of yours? You’ll not have the Council’s backing in recruitment.”

“I am aware of that. I merely ask for permission. There are many young warriors who would be more than happy to accompany us.”

There was a pause.

“We will not allow it. It is simply too risky for the Council to condone.”

Cara, who had watched all but understood none of the conversation between Nighteyes and the Council, watched as Nighteyes’s eyes grew hard and his Mataki grew even more harsh-sounding.

“And what if I were to go against the Council’s decision?”

“Then you would be expelled from the tribe. You would lose our protection, and we wouldn’t really care what became of you.”

“Then consider me expelled. I will be gone with the Outsiders, come daylight.” Nighteyes turned to leave.

“The High Council commands you to halt!”

“The High Council only governs the Mataki. I am no longer one of the tribe.” With that, the exile left. Cara glanced at the hardened eyes of the Council spokesperson and hurried after Nighteyes.

She caught up to his angry pace several arm’s-lengths from the tent.

“What happened?”

Anger made Nighteyes’s Demoa more fluid. “We’re going to find you and Lady Silvera an escort. It’s just that now,...things will become more difficult over the next few hours, before we depart.”

* * *

“Your burden is great, Eldana. Are you certain that you’ll be able to handle it when the time comes? I’ve not taught you much in this particular art....”

“Aye. I’ve got Matthius close; you said a family member would be able to shield me a bit, with no effect to himself.”

“I don’t know how much I shall be able to use that token as a gateway — I’ve not invoked one in years.”

“You shall do as you must. Everything shall turn out when the time is right.”

“It appears I’ve taught you well.”

“You expected less?”

“Of course not. Do you think Matthius knows the talisman’s power?”

“I doubt his true mind knows it. But he would have given anything to get it away from the Demoan general.”

“True. Though I’m surprised he fell — the pendant should have drawn power for him.”

“Perhaps it did, Silvera. There were reports of one missing when we set them to funeral pyres.”

“Oh? Does the High Council know this?”

“They figured he would serve as a warning of Mataki ferocity, and the return of the Mataki Golden Age.”

“Assuming he survived the journey home and the wrath of his queen.”

“Pardon my saying so, but that is a rather large assumption.”

“I know — and if I seek him out in sorcery, Melessa will know it. I shall find out eventually.... Right now I must pack and follow in his footsteps.”

* * *

“Are you sure I cannot talk you into accompanying me back, Matthius?”

“Certain of it, Your Highness.”

Cara stopped packing for a moment. “Stop that. I objected to ‘milady,’ why should I accept—” she stopped, mid-sentence. “It’s a shame you don’t return, for sure. I could easily have seen you having your own holding or becoming one of my trusted advisors.”

“I thank you for the honor. However, I need to stay here.”

Cara looked at him. It felt like the greenish cast of her eyes was boring a hole through him, to his very soul. After a pause, she said, “It’s Eldana, isn’t it?”

Matthius nodded.

“I saw her wearing your father’s pendant with her Healer’s amulet around her neck.”

Again, Matthius nodded. “How angry do you think Melessa will be, when you return?”

“Honestly, Matthius, I don’t know. I suspect she will be ready to kill me. But we have a sorceress on our side.”

“So does she — herself.”

This silenced Cara for a moment. *But if we were to somehow weaken her, we could overthrow her...and exile her forever from Demoa.*

* * *

Silvera put the last of her things in a little pack. There wasn't much she would need, considering her feet knew the way back to the court of Demoa, despite having been exiled for so long.

"Are you sure you should return to Demoa? Won't you be arrested?" asked Eldana, pulling nervously at the pendant on a thong — it had replaced the broken chain — around her neck. She had been silently watching Silvera for a while with a tinge of anxiety in her gaze; her former mistress was almost relieved to hear her voice.

"Demoa is in virtual anarchy right now.... I've seen it. And while my name endures, the people have twisted me into some sort of legendary giantess with power literally spilling off of me. They won't be expecting an ordinary woman.... Especially if I put on the rough clothes of a Demoa peasant and make most people look the other way...." *Even if that will only work for a limited time...*

"I will still worry, Mis—Silvera."

As Silvera put a dark blue cloth around her head and shoulders, she replied, "I shall have to draw off of you when we arrive; you shall know when we arrive. And if that has not happened within a fortnight or so, send the wolf after me. She'll know where to find me.... Won't you?" She scratched the animal on top of its head.

As if in reply, Greypaws started to pant.

* * *

"Is everything ready, Lady?" asked Nighteyes in Mataki. He and about half a dozen other armed Mataki waited with Cara at the edge of the village.

Silvera nodded. "It should be. I remember the way back to the palace." *Or at least, I think I do. It's been a very long time...but now Cara must reclaim her father's throne, and we must both face Melessa.*

Matthius and Eldana came to see them off.

"I still can't believe you won't be accompanying me back. But I know you can't be swayed."

Matthius smiled and put an arm around Eldana's waist. "No, I cannot. Eldana is destined to stay here. I am destined to stay with Eldana, wherever she is."

"I hope you will come to Demoa sometime, though. Your presence will be missed." With a smile, she kissed Matthius quickly on the cheek.

The other goodbyes were exchanged; there weren't so many, as the Mataki High Council had chosen to be markedly absent from this leavetaking.

And with a determined heart at what she must do at journey's end, Cara and her entourage left the village of the Mataki at dawn.

* * *

Melessa awoke that morning with a start. Something in the air wasn't right. It wasn't something truly tangible, more like something...sorcerous. Could it be that her errant daughter had found Silvera?

No, it can't be, a little voice reassured her. Surely the Mataki would have sided with her men, those sycophantic wretches.

The Demoan queen threw the covers back and rushed to her mirror. Where was that pesky General Carem? He had sent a missive stating that he carried grave news; it had arrived the previous evening and plagued her thoughts ever since.

She saw the general, outside the gates of the palace. As she watched, the drawbridge was lowered and the bedraggled excuse for a general made his way toward the throne room.

Normally, Melessa would allow him to squirm a bit before she had a little chat with him. Yvan would have allowed him to wash and rest. *This is too important for either*, the queen thought to herself as she dressed without the usual aid of servants. *And after all, he is just a soldier. My reign could be at risk!*

* * *

In the throne room, General Carem stood, awaiting his queen. He knew he was in for a royal rebuke, for failing to retrieve the queen's daughter. He had come so close.... Nervously, he rubbed at his neck, where the pendant's chain had once rested. He would go out and get that little puke one of these days....

But first, he must face Melessa. Her predecessor would have at least had the decency to let him wash up first....

Carem had no time to finish the thought. Melessa, garbed in red like fire, took her place on the dais.

"Speak." Guards blocked the doors. Though they were his inferiors, they still unnerved the general. He coughed nervously, then began.

"We were ambushed, milady...by the Mataki barbarians of West Branwendia."

"How many of them were there?"

"It is hard to say, Your Highness. There were enough to rout us."

Melessa's eyes darkened. "What of the princess?"

The general paused. "She...escaped. I believe the Mataki have her."

At this, Melessa almost smiled. "She's as good as done for, then. The barbarians don't understand our form of government, and they're too stupid to try and use her to gain my favor. They've probably raped and killed her long since."

Behind the confident façade, however, the queen bristled. *What if everything we believe about the Mataki isn't true? What if all the legends are...? No, that's nonsense.... Or is it?*

* * *

Branden walked on the road away from the house of torture that most called the palace and tried to remember the way back to Verans. He'd had a life there, he remembered, before the Queen

had cut out his tongue. Maybe that shopkeep would restore him to his old job, running errands. And if not — he'd try and find someone he could work for, on a farm, or something.

But first, I gotta get to Verans — if there's a Verans left, he added bitterly. Last I knew, a lot of fighting had happened a few days before I left to talk to the Queen....

* * *

Melessa paced her chamber.

Things were not going as planned. It gave her a headache just to think of it.

The shopkeep from Verans had arrived a few days before Carem and been about as much help to her as that boy — what was his name? — who had come before.

The boy, she had let live. The shopkeep hadn't been so lucky. Then Carem — that idiot — had actually proved useful for the first time in what seemed like half an age.

The Mataki had Cara. *Exile is good, but I would really prefer her totally out of the picture. All rights to Demoa should be mine — why else would I have married such a weak king? He was soft and didn't see what I see: when the rich get richer, everyone profits. New ages of prosperity always start roughly....*

Still, Cara was a problem. The Mataki were beasts. They might yet fear the brute strength of the Demoan army. *Carem has certain useful traits.... I will give him one, final chance, and show him my mercy.*

She stopped and gazed out over her land, out at the shadow of the palace that extended for into the landscape. *My power falls over this whole land, and yet I cannot even find the traitor who would usurp what is rightfully mine as Yvan's widow.*

No, she must not think like that. The queen shook her head to clear it. In a few hours, she would tell General Carem to get the finest of Demoa's army and make a thorough search of Cara's last known whereabouts, with instructions to only sack the Mataki Forest if they hadn't found her by the time they crossed the West Branwendian border. And if anyone asked, it was merely a security measure to ensure public safety.

With this plan formed, Melessa hardened herself for the day ahead.

* * *

General Carem rubbed his eyes. *What could that power-hungry, greedy sow want now? A messenger had just roused him. I help the woman get to power, and this is how she repays me. Give me my peace already, Melessa!* He dragged himself off of the pallet he had found by the small-and-dying fire when he had arrived at dawn. Not even the night guard had been able to rouse him when they had entered the barracks. Silently cursing the Demoan Queen's name, the general dressed for his second audience for the day with — he hoped futilely not orders from — Melessa.

* * *

“What day is it?” asked Cara. She and her party had been traveling over the West

Branwendian terrain long enough for the sun to go across a third of the sky, but Cara found she could no longer count the days since she had left Demoa. Her days with the Mataki village had all blurred until she couldn't discern one day from the next.

“In half a fortnight, it will be the celebration of the Rebirth.”

The princess stopped dead in her tracks so that Nighteyes nearly ran into her.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The Demoan High Court meets after the three days of celebrating the Rebirth. If Melessa believes me dead, she will make them all swear their loyalty to her and officially take the throne. In which case.... We have to move quickly, we must get back before the Court convenes!” *If all the nobles swear her fealty, then my claim to the throne is lost. I will not let that sow take my birthright as long as I'm still standing!*

Cara suddenly started walking as fast as she dared, knowing that the treacherous valley between West Branwendia and Demoa lay within a few days' walk.

* * *

“Your Highness, may I presume that you are aware that the celebration of the Rebirth takes place in exactly seven days?”

“I know. Send me a scribe and a messenger.” *The nation will want a formal declaration of mourning for that wretch who dared to call herself my daughter. She sighed. It will be much like the Court called to formally mourn Yvan. I just wish I could be absolutely certain that the army would get her.... Where is Carem, anyway? Ai, but my head hurts.*

There was a knock at the door. At Melessa's command, the scribe entered hesitantly. He knew the queen's moods had been rather unpredictable of late, to say the least. Rumors were whispered by the kitchen maids and livery boys that she had tortured a boy not unlike himself, just because he had said something that displeased Her Majesty. He stood stupefied for a moment, until Melessa broke the silence.

“Take a missive,” Melessa said, “that shall be sent to Jalequinn, Verans,....” she ticked off the list on her fingers. All of the noble houses would come to the High Court; all would have to swear her fealty and she would be Queen regardless of whether Cara returned or no. Only ten days remained until the High Court.... Likely there were houses already in preparation for the annual journey.

* * *

Branden returned to Verans — or at least, what remained of it. Riots had burned half the village with their effigies of the Queen. Where was his former master's shop? Where were the people?

The wind blew cinders over the ruins. It was as if some great piece of charcoal had made all of it. The high wall that had surrounded the town when he left was falling in places. Who knew where the people had gone? Perhaps they had been killed by that awful Queen, as he'd been maimed. Though wouldn't there then have been a guard, at least, to cover her tracks?

* * *

Silvera sat thoughtfully as the second watch of guards took their post. Every day, it appeared that she felt more worn — but that was to be expected. Every day they grew closer to Melessa and her sorcery.

At least Melessa should be feeling the same effects, Silvera thought. And she cannot do anything as all remember the reason for my exile. The country is close enough to anarchy that even Melessa should notice.

“Lady Silvera, perhaps you should get some sleep,” Nighteyes suggested gently.

She hadn’t even realized that the former hunter was awake still.

“If I could, I would,” she replied.

“Does Cara yet know of the magic bounds?”

Silvera shook her head; she didn’t even think about how Nighteyes had read her thoughts. Some Mataki could do that.

“She’ll have to, at some point.”

“I know. But I knew from the beginning that Melessa would make this difficult. If it lies in Cara’s destiny to know, I shall explain it to her. Until then, however, I would thank you to leave it to me.” *I just hope Eldana shall be all right.... That pendant is dangerous in hands even such as hers... and to keep her out of danger, we shall have to be very much apart. I hope Eldana has the strength...and that Matthius has the strength to watch it happen. Why did Eldana have to draw him to her?*

* * *

After her meeting with Carem, Melessa’s headache had grown worse. What was happening to her? She had been in the best of health a few days ago...and her herbal concoctions had done nothing.

She sank into a chair and winced. It felt like a blacksmith was hammering on her skull. Or like a thousand demons readying for the kill....

There was only one thing that Melessa knew of that could possibly do this...but how would the presence of another sorcerer be possible? There were only seven gifted with sorcery, and long ago they — and their trained apprentices who later inherited their gifts — had been forbidden to come anywhere near one another or to join forces.... That had been why she’d had to get rid of that horrible woman who could have kept her from Yvan and power....

Oh no. But Cara *couldn’t* have found her — and if she had, how could Silvera avoid the same symptoms? Melessa tried to think, but the pain started to overwhelm her senses.

Curse you, Silvera!

She swore against Cara as well as she ran to her heavy tome of sorcery. There just *had* to be a way around this....

* * *

Branden slept that night in the town. He had known no other life than this. His home and his

life lay in the ashes as though remains of some huge funeral pyre. Searching through the rubble, the boy had found large, burnt, yet still usable pieces of driftwood that had once comprised the roof of the local tavern. Supposedly, he had been conceived there, the son of a whore. This, he put at an angle against the stablest-looking remains of Verans's once-mighty fortress-walls. This, perhaps, would shield him from the rains and afford him at least limited protection from predators and thieves.

As though detached from his body, Branden had trudged to where his little room had been, where his keep had been; in the shop that had started this whole bloody business. Had all gone as planned, Branden would have bought his freedom from here. He remembered the little box he had kept in the corner near his pallet. Likely, it had burned; but it had contained nearly everything he'd had in the world: a large scrap of fabric torn from one of his mother's skirts and a few meager coins. He had found the coins, though they were half-melted and buried under layers of ash. The scrap of fabric was reduced to barely the size of his foot, and even that was burnt and dirty and tattered. This he now held tightly in his hands as he had to his mother's skirts. By the Saints, that seemed like a lifetime ago.

His stomach no longer rumbled as much; he had searched for wildberries by moonlight and had found some in the low plants that graced the landscape around Verans. Branden hadn't picked the very last of them, but he knew that he would have to find more food if he planned to survive. And he had decided after he had escaped that he *would* survive. He had to. Otherwise, his captor and attacker would win, and countless others would be tortured and silenced as he had been. Other towns would be burned and abandoned, and other people would be subjected to the Queen's sick whims.

No, that just couldn't happen.

* * *

People from all around answered the call to the annual Demoan High Court. They knew that this would be a celebration, but would likely be tinged with an air of mourning for the Princess. Everyone knew by now what had befallen her. It seemed a shame; she might have made a good queen. But they could not think like that. Especially not when Queen Melessa would be their host. Some had stayed behind in their respective kingdoms as a symbol of protest, but the majority flocked to the palace, awaiting the jousting, the pomp, and the opportunity to sell their various wares.

Meanwhile, the servants of the palace worked round the clock to ensure that the most important of the nobles would have suitable lodgings. Beds were re-made, the dust was beaten out of some of the finer tapestries, and the Queen sought a gown appropriate for her "mourning" around the immense headache that had grown constant. She could see the flood of people coming, its tide flowing closer and closer to the palace walls. Within a few days they would be there; hopefully, Carem would have found the traitoress and she could be quietly put to the dungeon and later poisoned. As for Silvera, that little usurper would be taken to the dungeon, her heart cut out, and her body burned at the stake. Her heart, Melessa planned to have for supper within a day of her arrival.

* * *

Branden awoke after another fitful night in the ruins. His stomach cramped with hunger, and he knew that he would starve soon if he didn't find something to eat. He saw something move out of the corner of his eye; it was small, but it might serve his purpose. He moved his stiff, cold body into a crouch and followed the creature with his eyes. It was a little bigger than the rats in the dungeon, black, and it had more fur, with a bigger tail....

The black squirrel barely knew what hit it when Branden pounced and bit the back of its neck, killing it in a mouthful of its lifeblood.

* * *

Eldana's head pounded as she tried to remember the ingredients to at least a temporary remedy for it. She kept reminding herself that she knew what she'd done when she had agreed to do this for her former mistress, and that she knew that the symptoms would probably get much worse as the princess's party drew closer to the palace in Demoa. In the meantime, she would grin and bear it.... She squeezed the talisman around her neck almost as reassurance, leaving a red mark on her palm. This slight pain distracted her mind for a moment from the one that ravaged her head.

Matthius entered the house and came over to her, wrapping his arms around her from the side. Eldana forced a smile and looked at him.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes," she said, trying not to wince at the pain that shot through her skull as she said it.

"Are you sure? You haven't seemed yourself for a couple of days."

"Positive, thanks." Matthius let her go and Eldana caught a fleeting look of concern as it flashed over his features. *It'll only get worse, Matthius. I just hope that we can both bear it when it does....*

* * *

It rained as they reached the valley.

Cara held her cloak tight around her as they made their way over the wet gravel and mud that combined to form their trail. Some of the scouts braved ahead; Nighteyes chose to stay near the princess and the sorceress. He offered them both aid over a slippery rock. More often than not, Cara politely refused it. Greypaws forged ahead, the wolf's leathery paws guiding it over the rocks with relative ease.

"How many days is it to Verans?" asked the princess, pacing as her comrades rested for a moment.

"The scouts will tell us. Probably not more than a day, if we go directly and through most of the night."

"We only have four days until the festivities begin for the Rebirth. Will we make it?"

"All in due time, Cara. Calm down. You'll do no one any good if you're exhausted from pacing about."

Reluctantly, Cara sat on a rock, but instead sporadically tapped her foot with the rhythm of rain on the muddy stone in front of her.

Silvera sighed and rolled her eyes at Nighteyes. He acknowledged her with a grimace.

“Oh look, the scouts are back,” said Cara, jumping up. She walked out about halfway to the pair of scouts that had gone ahead. “Well?” she asked them impatiently.

They muttered to one another in Matak, then one of them looked her in the eye and spoke. “We think the city is a day or two away. But, Princess—”

She had already turned and half-run back to help gather up the damp packs. “What are we waiting for? We can make the city if we hurry.”

* * *

Branden peeked out from his rustic shelter at the rain. Probably, there would be no more food today. But maybe that was all right. He needed to work on a better way to get these things, and that would mean more food. He still had the tail of the squirrel he had killed last night that he hadn't eaten yet. Branden hadn't seen anyone since he had arrived here, but still he felt he should have protection against whatever might be out there. He looked at the wet branch he had collected next to him and suddenly thought of an idea. He tried to bend the stick. It was still a little green; better than the brittle, scorched stuff in supply in the ruins.

Now all he had to find was a nice, sharp rock.

The rain washed some of the squirrel's blood off of Branden's face as he poked around to find the right one. It didn't have to be perfect, it just had to be sharp enough to peel away some of the bark and the green part into a point.

And then, he would be a force to be reckoned with.

* * *

The people were arriving by the wagon load. Nobles in their carriages, their litters, and accompanied by servants poured into the walls surrounding the grand palace of Demoa. Some of the more powerful (*Or so they think*, thought Melessa) lords and ladies would stay inside the palace proper; others would be encamped in the city surrounding the palace and receive the benefits of hospitality from the peasants, be they willing or not.

Within days, the place would be awash with revelers for the festival before the Court was called.

But first, thought Melessa, *we must hold a day of mourning for the late king's late daughter. The timing may be a bit off, but it'll be true soon enough. Maybe then this atrocious headache will be through, as well.*

Melessa was almost smiling to herself when she turned from the window to answer a knock at her door. “Enter!”

“Your Majesty?” It was one of Carem's errand boys. What did they call themselves again — scouts?

“What is it?”

“The checkpoints have been working non-stop. We've taken some in for questioning that may know something about your daughter's murder.”

“Of course. Report back if you find anything.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You are dismissed.”

The scout bobbed a stiff bow before making his exit.

Things were finally looking up. With the security surrounding the palace, it was nearly impossible for anyone to get through without questioning and investigation. Instead, Melessa could concentrate on which expression best portrayed the grieving widow and mother who must reluctantly accept her burden regarding the Demoan throne.

* * *

“Princess, everyone is tired. We have to rest.”

“Please, we must try and get a little bit further. It won’t be long until we get to Verans.” Cara looked at Nighteyes with what she hoped was a beseeching look. She, too, was wet and tired and sore. But she knew that they only had a few more days until the festival. Undoubtedly, half the kingdom had already arrived for the festivities. Despite the rain and the mud, they had been moving all day and Cara just *knew* that Verans couldn’t be that far away — could it?

Stop that, she told herself. Your father made you study those maps until you thought they would be permanently etched on the backs of your eyelids. Verans isn’t that far away. Just a little bit longer, and you’ll be there.

The countryside was getting darker with each minute. They would have to stop soon, and take shelter from the night and its brigands. She drew her wet cloak around her and started up a hill that hadn’t seemed so steep when she and Matthius had traveled here. That seemed so long ago, now. The light grew dimmer as they continued to scale the hill. Greypaws’s fur was slick with rain, forged against the muscle of the wolf’s body. She padded at Cara’s side, pulling ahead of the remainder of the party with the princess. Half to herself and half to the group, Cara murmured, “I know that Verans should be here, we should see its high walls by now....” *And why do I smell ash? This can’t be a good sign...*

Oh, dear spirits...

At the crest of the hill, Cara stopped suddenly. When Nighteyes and the others caught up to her, they understood why she had stopped.

Where the city of Verans once stood, there remained only scorched, smoking ruins.

* * *

From nowhere, it seemed, Silvera’s voice broke the stunned silence.

“We should camp here tonight. I doubt there’s anything left that any army would want. Even Melessa’s.”

Still in shock, Cara nodded and they took shelter in what had, ironically, probably been a stone fireplace — one of the few in Verans. *This must have been the mayor’s house*, thought Cara. All around, there were piles of ash and sparse pieces of wood sticking out of the ground like jagged little tombstones. Scattered about were some of the rare stone foundations of buildings, some with pieces of wood that had collapsed on them. It appeared that the townspeople — those who survived — had long since fled. No doubt this would reach the High Court as a complaint.

As if Melessa would listen... thought the princess cynically.

One of the lookouts looked at Silvera and asked her something in Mataki. Silvera replied and then turned back to her heel of bread that was her supper.

“Would you like some?” asked the sorceress to the princess.

“No.” Then, after a moment, “What did he just ask you?”

“How long it shall take us to arrive at the palace. I told him three days.”

“But the festival begins the day after tomorrow!”

“I know. I was thinking that we would hide in the Rolling Wood until the first day was past, and the majority of the travelers were already there. It would give us a good chance to scout the place, first. In addition, there should be fewer soldiers about and we can go in as late-coming commoners. They shan’t notice us amongst the festivities.”

Cara looked at Silvera for a moment, as if contemplating what she had proposed. “All right. I can get us into the palace unnoticed once we get ourselves in.” *And then, Melessa, we shall see who shall rule Demoa as Yvan’s official successor....*

* * *

“Go ahead, you can pass.”

General Carem yawned. Queen Melessa had assigned him to inspecting *wagons*, of all things. The day after tomorrow, the festivities would begin, and he and a small group of men would become the Queen’s personal guard for the duration of the High Court.

A General should not be inspecting wagons for upstart, dead princesses, thought Carem bitterly. *Why, I’ve served the Queen for years, since I was but a boy! And this is my thanks?*

He looked around until he found an officer taking a long sip of water from his canteen.

“Lieutenant!” he barked.

“Yes, sir?” The addressed sputtered, instantly straightening to look at his superior.

“Report!”

“Sir, we have found no one looking even remotely like the princess among the incoming wagons.” After three days of this, he had expected as much.

“No one?”

“No one, sir.”

The General sighed. “Lieutenant, you are dismissed.”

The lieutenant saluted and then turned back to his men.

This is ridiculous, thought the General. *She’s dead. We’re not going to find her in here.*

Least she had the good sense to get out while she still could.

This last thought came unbidden; he brushed it aside as he stopped another peasant’s wagon before it entered the palatial grounds.

* * *

Branden awoke to hear voices.

More soldiers? He wondered, reaching for his spear. *Maybe they have food....* He had given

up on trying to make the squirrels and small game taste like anything besides blood. He couldn't risk a fire, and now he was glad he hadn't. They probably hadn't taken notice of him, at least not yet.

This, Branden would use to his advantage.

He peered out of his shelter and looked. By a small fire sat a young woman with red hair — whom he'd seen before, but *where?* — and an older, dark-haired woman sitting with her. There were strange-looking people with them, some with tattoos running on their arms, backs, or chests. They weren't slaves, he knew — but who were they?

Branden crept closer, trying to find their food packs. There they were, at the edge of the travelers' makeshift camp in the burnt-brick structure that had once resembled a fireplace. He would wait until they were mostly asleep, then move in and get his hands on some real food.

All he had to do now was wait.

* * *

They set two people on guard that night, and they would all take shifts. They couldn't risk a fire while since they had entered Demoa; too many people might see them before they were ready. Cara lay awake, sleep the farthest thought from her mind. *Everything will be fine*, a part of her said.

If that's true, then why can't you sleep?

Cara rolled over and stared at the two separate forms she presumed to be Silvera and Nighteyes. Something moved behind them. Cara yawned quietly. She had to try and get some.... wait, it moved again! Cara stayed as still as she could. No, she wasn't imagining things, something had moved. There it was again, louder. Cara slid a hand down her leg, looking for her knife. Where were the guards? Probably searching the perimeter of the woods....

It moved again, to the packs. This looked like someone too small to be a Mataki guard.... *He's going toward the packs!* she thought with alarm.

In the darkness, she heard Greypaws growl softly.

Everything moved in slow motion, it seemed, as Cara got up and sprung at the intruder, pinning him to the ground with her knife at his throat.

* * *

Branden let out a gasp as another of his captor's party came up from behind. The newcomer struck two pieces of stone together to light a spark on a stick. The new firelight made it easier for both to see. The one holding the knife to his throat was someone he'd seen before.... He remembered her hair, and her voice when she spoke.

"Who are you?"

He couldn't answer, but tried with little muffled grunts.

"What the...." the young woman took his wrist roughly, but backed off with the knife. "He looks familiar.... You're the kid from the supplier's shop, aren't you?"

Branden nodded sheepishly.

"You know who I am then. Why were you trying to steal our food?"

"Don't you see? He cannot speak," said a third from the shadows. He could almost make out

her form in the dim light. "His tongue has been cut out."

Branden nodded and opened his mouth to show the woman with the knife that what her friend spoke the truth.

The woman's look of disgust was fleeting, but Branden still caught it. "This looks like something only my mother would do," she said with a sigh.

"She strikes again," her companion agreed.

"I'm Cara. How long has it been since you've eaten?" she asked. Branden had to think before he could answer her. He held up two fingers.

"Two days? That's awful," she replied. Branden nodded in agreement. "C'mon, let's get you something to eat. But if you try and run, we'll set Greypaws here on you." Cara motioned toward a wolf that had just strolled into the light. Still holding Branden's grubby wrist, Cara pulled him back toward what appeared to be the newcomers' camp.

* * *

"What happened to you?" asked Cara to the mute.

He looked at her for a moment before he started to sporadically gesture, to try and communicate his story to her. Cara looked on in confusion.

The boy grunted in frustration, then appeared to try again. He searched for something, picking up a soot-covered stick and pointing it at her. The princess's hand moved to the dagger strapped to her waist, but the boy started to draw in the dirt at her feet. He drew a crude figure of a woman, then looked at her.

"A woman," said the princess. The boy nodded and then drew what appeared to be a bowl on top of the figure's head, and a rough scowl on her face.

"The queen?" Cara asked incredulously. The boy nodded and then pointed to himself.

"You."

The boy pointed his hand at her, palm down, and then brought his thumb under them, moving them so that they moved like a mouth.

"Talked? Spoke?"

He nodded and then tapped the drawing with the stick.

"You talked . . . to the queen?"

A vigorous nod was the reply.

"What happened next?"

He seemed to think about it for a minute, then drew another crude figure in the sooty dirt. This one appeared to be male, and smaller. He pointed first to himself, then to the picture.

"That's you. All right."

He then drew a box around the picture, and then lines inside the box to make a lot of small rectangles.

"You were in a cage."

He smiled a little and then beckoned to her with his hand.

"You were in jail, in prison."

Another vigorous nod.

“At the palace?”

Again, he nodded.

“Then what happened?” asked the princess.

The boy opened his mouth and pointed to where his tongue should have been.

“Then they cut out your tongue.”

He then turned back to his drawing and drew an arrow leading from the boy in the cage out of it, quickly redrawing the figure outside the box, near the arrow’s head.

“Then you were set free.”

He nodded and then pointed to himself again.

“You.”

He moved two fingers like he was in front of himself like they were walking, and then gestured around the ruins.

“Came here after that.”

He nodded, then stopped trying to gesture for a moment.

Cara thought about what had just been told to her by the young thief. *How could anyone do something so cruel*, she wondered. *Melessa must be stopped, before she can do this to another innocent*. She noticed then that he looked about as tired as she felt.

“Get some sleep, young one. We can take you with us when we leave—”

At this, the boy frantically shook his head.

“No? But where will you live?”

The boy pointed toward his feet.

“Here? Are you mad?”

He shook his head again, then obstinately stomped his foot on the earth below him and crossed his arms.

“He’s probably afraid of what the queen might do to him further,” said Nighteyes from somewhere behind her.

“Is that it?” asked the princess. The boy didn’t answer, but his stillness was answer enough.

“All right.” Cara then smiled at the boy and left him to Nighteyes’ care; he was on guard now, and she was exhausted.

* * *

High Court in Demoa was always a festive time, with lords and ladies and their respective entourages coming from every corner of the kingdom. But this year, the festivities were bittersweet. Both King Yvan and Princess Caralese were dead. Thus, the new Queen Melessa had no heir if she were to — Saints forbid — pass on. All awaited the widow’s official rule, and what would befall the country under her hands. Yet despite her pivotal role at Court, no one had yet seen the new Queen since they had arrived. To some, this was strange. To others, it was understandable, as she would be installed in two days. Then, they would all swear their lives and service to her and to Demoa.

But first, there would be a day of mourning for the late royals.

Litters, coaches, and wagons arrived by the dozen, all but filling the streets of the capital and then stretching like a sieve beyond the city walls.

It had been much this way when Silvera had been exiled, all those years ago. Amidst the tents, those who recalled the now-legendary event regaled a new generation with the tale of a West Branwendian sorceress exiled for the criminal use of sorcery and Melessa's subsequent marriage to Yvan. It had all been quite overshadowed by controversy. This year, they would mourn their king and celebrate a new reign, hoping to the Saints it would give the prosperity enjoyed under its predecessor.

* * *

Melessa could barely open her eyes; the light made them hurt too much. She felt like her entire body had been run over by the Demoan cavalry. By the Saints, she hoped she felt better in time for the ceremony installing her as official successor to the Demoan throne.

Tomorrow, after her brief appearance as the priests called for the day of mourning and remembrance, she could lie low and try to relieve some of her illness. Her only solace was that Silvera had to feel the same and would therefore be unprepared for whichever of General Carem's checkpoints when she approached.

* * *

Silvera shook her head to clear it a bit. She knew that she was only mildly feeling what both Melessa and Eldana now felt, and she regretted the latter. But soon, it would no longer be an issue and Demoa's rightful heiress would take the throne. *This must come to pass*, she thought. *The future of Demoa depends on it.*

Ahead of her, a cloaked Cara had stopped in her tracks and pointed over the hill. Silvera's heart beat faster in anticipation as she followed the soon-to-be queen's gaze.

She saw before them, in the distance, the Rolling Wood.

In front of that was a long line of carts that led to a perimeter guard, blocking the road to the palace.

* * *

Eldana felt as if the talisman hanging from her neck was a gigantic boulder. It hurt to hold her head up.

It hurt to breathe.

Yet she tried with all her quickly-evaporating strength to continue as healer to the village. When some of the Matakis expressed their concern for her, she waved it off as the stresses of daily life.

Matthius asked what was wrong for a while, too, but lately he had stopped. For that matter, he hadn't said much of anything to her lately.

But then, she hadn't said much of anything to him, either.

Eldana wasn't sure that she liked this recent change to her relationship with Matthius, but knew that she *had* to do this one last thing for her Mis — for Silvera. Eldana owed her this much after all she had gained from the former healer.

Hopefully, repaying that debt wouldn't cost her everything.

* * *

They watched the guards for a moment from their vantage point in silence. They had moved off the main road, but still remained close enough to view those who would be their obstacle.

“What now?” Cara asked quietly. “If we attack, we’ll be killed and word will travel back to Melessa. Besides, they believe me to be dead.”

“We must somehow get past them,” Nighteyes agreed.

“There *is* one way, but there shall be a bit of a catch....” Silvera said hesitantly. All eyes — including the wolf’s — turned to her.

“First, Your Highness, I must make a request of you.”

“Oh?”

“You must allow us a legal reprieve until you have secured the throne.”

“If we use your plan, consider it done. On my word.”

That appeared to be the biggest concession she could get. Silvera took a deep breath and continued.

“We will have to use sorcery as our disguise — a glamor.”

“What is the catch?” asked Nighteyes.

“The catch is that it will drain a fair bit of my energy and that Melessa will be able to tell how close we are. Despite this, I doubt she shall do all that much about it.”

“Why?”

“Cara, did your father ever tell you about the reason sorcery is illegal in Demoa — or for that matter on most of the Continent?”

She thought for a moment. “Nothing more than veiled allusions, I’m sorry to say.”

“Then there is a bit of explaining to do,” said Silvera. “To begin with, originally there were seven to whom sorcery was granted. There were no restrictions, and the seven became exceedingly close in their journeys to enlightenment. Gradually, they decided to unite the world under their superior rule. But eventually, they would come to abuse their power. Thus, there was an eighth who came to possess sorcerous abilities. Some said that the powers that be would use this person to bring their tyranny to an end. This eighth was eventually killed by the other seven — but before dying, this person cast a spell so powerful, no one has yet undone it. Under this spell, the sorcerers were separated and unable to reunite without tremendous physical pain. There are a few rare ways around this, but it is exceedingly difficult to come by these ways. The original seven tried, but eventually all aged and transferred their powers to a chosen apprentice. With the power came the repulsion spell. Melessa and I are both in this succession, our powers handed down from two of the original seven.”

“But then, how did you manage to get around the spell, to come this close?”

“I haven’t, entirely. But as I said, there are ways around it.”

“Oh?”

“There are ways. I shall leave it at that.”

Cara was about to protest this response when Nighteyes interrupted.

“Night falls. I suggest...going with Lady Silvera’s plan and using the glamor. Then we...enter under cover of darkness.”

“Agreed,” Cara replied. “Let us begin.”

* * *

Melessa could not get out of bed. There was too much pain running through her. It was worse today than yesterday had been. She had needed support from her steward and the railing on the balcony this morning. The day of mourning for Yvan and Cara was underway.

But her symptoms had gotten steadily worse since then. At this rate, she'd be dead in a few days. *Or at least*, she thought, *wishing I was*.

She *had* to find that sorcerous leech, without sending the kingdom and the Court into panic. She was close, she knew. And if the leech *used* that sorcery, she would know it. Silvera wasn't *that* stupid, was she?

She must be, if Melessa felt this bad. The royal physicians had found no cause for her illness — she had known they wouldn't. And where was that maggot, Carem? He should be searching the grounds. She had sent him a missive stating as much, but he hadn't so much as replied, and she would know if her orders had been carried out.

For now, she would conserve her strength so that she could oversee the Court and festivities of tomorrow.

* * *

General Carem prepared to leave his post to return to his Queen. She had requested that he and a select few others would be her personal guard on the morrow, with the festivities underway. There had been no sign of Cara anywhere, nor of Silvera. This was getting quite old, quite fast.

As he assembled the select group, shadows came toward them and were stopped by the guards. There were three figures that appeared to take the lead. One had for herself a big black dog at her heels.

“Who are you?”

“We come to pay homage to Queen Melessa,” said an accented, masculine voice.

“Stop and be searched. Show yourselves.”

The three main figures pushed back the hoods of their cloaks. There were two women and a man in the lead. One of the women had greying brown hair and olive skin, the other was fair and had mousey hair. The man was fair-skinned and had his dark black hair in a plait off of the side of his head. Those who accompanied them were similarly complexioned.

“Have you seen anything suspicious on the road?” interjected Carem. Something in that dog's eyes looked familiar, but the coloring and size of the wolf he remembered from West Branwendia were all off.... And these people did not look to be Matakis. They wouldn't. When would she realize that Cara was probably dead already and that this search was useless?

“Let them pass,” he said, signaling to his men. “My men and I shall personally escort you in.”

* * *

Cara's breath caught in an inaudible gasp from behind grey and brown hair that had fallen into her eyes. “We thank you, sir,” she said in her most calm voice. Greypaws, in her new black garb,

snorted a bit and padded after them.

“Where do you hail from?” asked the General.

“East Branwendia,” Silvera said as she casually tossed her now-mousy braid over one shoulder. “We have been on pilgrimage from Demoa and did not hear of the Queen’s rise to power until half a fortnight ago. It is fortunate we are able to be here.”

“I see.” That appeared to pacify the General, at least for now.

They rode on in silence until they had passed the palatial walls — they were not stopped, as General Carem escorted them.

“Here we part, my friends,” said General Carem in what seemed his most cordial voice as they approached the center of the masses camped there for the night. “Enjoy the festivities of tomorrow.”

“We shall,” said Nighteyes quietly. General Carem and his men left, presumably to the palace.

Meanwhile, they had to find somewhere to set up camp that would give them ample access to the throne room, where Court would be held. Being out amongst the siege-like camp beyond the walls would never do. The party, still disguised, picked its way among the several tents, attempting to find somewhere clear enough for them and the handful of scouts.

“I believe I’ve found somewhere,” said Nighteyes from up ahead. He stood before a ditch that appeared to run under the building.

“What’s that?” asked Cara as she came up behind him. There were very few people around but the smell was nauseating.

“It appears to be the boy’s cell. He told me...about a slot while you...slept the other night.”

“Is it big enough for all of us?”

“It shall have to be,” said Silvera. Her voice dropped. “We cannot be seen entering, or else all shall be lost. There are guards circling among the crowd. We must be careful.”

“Is there anyone in there?” hissed Cara.

“Not that I can see,” replied Nighteyes.

“Good. Cover me.” With that, Cara started to widen the slot from the outside, digging with her hands. Greypaws saw this and joined her in the dig. The remaining people stood watch, covering their comrades’ actions. Eventually, they knew, they would hit stone, and then it would be a tight squeeze to enter. But enter, they knew they must.

Greypaws, working faster, hit stone before the princess. Dirt matted in her black fur.

“In we go,” whispered Cara. She stopped digging. Nighteyes volunteered to go first and carefully slid himself through the slot, disappearing from sight as a dull *thud* resonated from the darkness.

“I’m all right,” he said. “Send the next person down.”

Next to go was Cara. She slid herself into the slot carefully, as she knew that the dungeons could hold anything and be very deep underground. She couldn’t touch the floor as she hung from the slot. There were no good footholds, that she could tell. But there were an awful lot of flies, some of which bit her exposed wrists.

“May I help you?” came a gruff voice from above her.

“No, we were just praying for the Queen’s successful reign...” someone covered for them and the moonlight went dark as the shadows above her filled in the hole. She was hanging there in complete darkness.

“Let go, princess. I’ll catch you,” whispered Nighteyes from below her. She felt two hands on her shins and let go. She felt the backs of her knees hit what felt like one of his shoulders, then felt herself falling backwards. She braced for the hit, but instead of stone hit something a little softer.

The shadows moved from the slot and she could see him beside her. “Are you all right?” she asked quietly. She had apparently landed on him, and rolled clear.

“I will be... You have...very sharp elbows.” He appeared to be fine, excepting that the wind had been knocked out of him.

“What happened?” hissed one of the scouts from above.

“We’re all right. Send the next person down.”

This time, it was the scout. He and Nighteyes spoke for a moment in Matakai, and then they all turned to help the next person down. After a few more close calls, they all were in the dungeon, even Greypaws, who had more slid than controlled her fall.

“Is everyone here?” asked Silvera quietly.

There were grunts of assent from the darkness.

“Good. Tonight we should be safe — but we all need some rest. Tomorrow shall have an interesting morning, to say the least.”

* * *

There was no rest for Melessa.

They were here! Somehow, they had gotten here!

Melessa had dragged herself out of bed. Where were they? She was in a cold sweat as she almost crawled across her room.

Were they under the vase?

No, she had broken that when she’d thrown it against the door.

Were they behind the curtains?

No, she had ripped them down in a fit earlier tonight.

Were they under her bed?

No, she had torn that apart, even shredded her sheets and her pillow with a letter opener, which she still carried in her frenzied search.

Were they behind her mirror, which she had long since been unable to work in her sickened state?

No, she had broken that when she had thrown a small statue at it in her search for the errant princess and Yvan’s illicit friend.

“Steward!” she called in her now-hoarse voice. After two more calls, he timidly appeared at her door.

“Get General Carem. Have him search the grounds. If they are not found by the time High Court is called at dawn, you personally will pay! Do you hear me?” Her voice had risen with every sentence, punctuated by a wild jabbing of the letter opener.

The steward fled and went to find the General.

* * *

Cara awoke when the guards pounded through the dungeon.

“There is no one who could have entered — am I right?”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

“Are you certain there is no way to infiltrate the dungeon from the outside?”

“P-positive, sir.”

Cara heard a sickening crack and then heavy, metallic footsteps retreating up the stairs. She sat up.

“Are you...all right, milady?” came a soft, accented whisper beside where she had previously lain.

“Yes. We have to get out of here.”

“Why?”

“They will find our entrance and come in after us.”

“Is there even a guard left for the jail?”

“I think that ‘crack’ was him.”

“Me too.”

“They shall be around soon,” came a third voice. “Melessa probably knows we’re here and wants us gone.”

“I agree,” said Cara with a nod, looking blindly in Silvera’s general direction.

“But how do we get out?” asked a fourth voice from the darkness.

“I suggest we wait for them to realize the entrance. If a higher ranking officer is with them, he will have a key. Most do, in case the guard is killed in a brawl.”

“All right. We’ll wait, then.”

“High Court will be called at dawn. If we must, we can use another spell to eliminate the door then, but that will alert Melessa even more to our presence. As much as her insanity is deserved, I would rather not have her know our location more than she already does.”

Nighteyes put a hand on the princess’s shoulder in agreement. Though no one could see it, Cara was acutely aware of its presence.

“Everyone take a position on the edges; when they come and try to follow, we attack.”

* * *

General Carem sighed at the terrified steward as he relayed the message from the Queen. *She must be joking*, thought the General. First, he was to stop the aggressive search and lead a band of men as her guard. Now, the search was back on. Could she *please* make up her mind, already? Was this really so much to ask?

With a grumble, he dismissed the steward and started searching for a search party that he knew would work in vain until dawn.

* * *

“Did you hear that?”

“Yes.”

“Who goes there?”

Silence.

“Hey, what’s that?”

“What’s what?”

Thud.

“That, you moron.”

“It appears to be a — wonder where it leads.”

The soldier worked his body until he was wedged in the slot. Suddenly, hands pulled him down and all he could feel was a blade at his throat and see a woman’s head in the pale light.

“You okay?”

The woman nodded and the blade came tighter against his throat.

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s down there?”

“N-nothing, sir.”

“Then quit playing around. You know we got orders.”

Silence.

“When the General finds out about this, he’ll skin you! Get back up here! Don’t make me come down th—hey!”

He was pulled down by hands and landed hard on his back on the dungeon floor. As he struggled to get up, someone straddled his chest, pinning his arms beneath their knees, and someone else sat on his knees. He could feel a blade near his throat and something — presumably another blade — near his groin.

“How many of you are there?” asked a male voice from the darkness.

“Where’s Corlan?” asked the officer.

“If you refer to your comrade, he is dead about an arm’s-length from your head. We slit his throat.”

“What do you want?”

“Your silence. And a key.”

“You’ll never get either —” his voice erupted into a wet gurgle and soon was silent.

“Think there are any more?” asked Cara, wiping the blood from her knife and hands on the dead soldier’s cape.

“No,” said one of the scouts as he climbed off his perch on Nighteyes’ shoulders by the slot. “Did he have a key?”

“You mean this one, I presume?” asked Silvera from near the door. She had moved now from her position on the soldier’s knees and was busy at the door. Her still-changed mousy hair fell over her shoulder as she felt for the interior of the lock. Eventually, they all heard a *click* and the door creaked open.

“Let’s go,” said Cara, noticing the pale pink light that had begun seeping through the slot. “It’s time to dethrone a tyrant.”

* * *

The day of High Court dawned bright. Trumpets sounded to call forth all who would attend the Court and settle disputes and swear their fealty to the new Queen. It promised to be an exciting day for all involved.

Melessa had dragged herself out of bed and donned her most regal finery; once they had all sworn her fealty, the ceremonial crown would be placed on her head. It would probably make her dreadful headache much worse, but she would have to deal with it accordingly. She would be able to make it through the ceremony. She had to. A weak-looking queen would be taken advantage of, and thus her own power would be severely limited. No, it was time to show them all that she had her own agenda, but that at heart she was really a servant of the people.... Melessa's Demoa would be great and strong, she knew. And once they had sworn her their loyalty, going against her would be high treason, punishable by a slow, painful, public execution.

She looked at herself in her new looking glass, though it made her eyes swim to do so. She wanted nothing more than to get back in her nice, soft bed where she could go into a less painful sleep. No, wait, there was something more: she wanted her sovereignty to become something more than tentative and below that of Yvan. He had served his purpose; now it was time for *her*.

Her hair was done up rather ornately and she wore a rather simple red dress that rather nicely flattered her figure; atop this was a darker red cape attached by clips to her shoulders to trail down her arms and down her back, to give a train some inferior would carry when she walked.

"Steward!"

"Yes, Your Majesty?" he peered around the door as he stood in the doorway.

"It is time for me to meet my Court. Find those who will carry my train."

"Right away, Your Majesty." The steward's reflection bowed deeply and left, closing the door softly behind himself.

Melessa leaned against the frame of the mirror heavily. She fought the spell of nausea and the dizziness that attacked her. She prayed fervently that this would not happen during her appearance in public. If it did, it would spell an excess of trouble for her entire reign.

She'd had enough of that.

A knock came on the door and a muffled statement. Melessa took a deep breath before she straightened and smoothed her dress and hair.

"Your Majesty?"

"Come in. It is time to greet my Court."

* * *

There was only standing room as the ranks of nobles entered the throne room and filled in the throne room, leaving an aisle at the direction of the guards that extended from the door to the dais on which the Demoa throne rested. In this aisle, the Queen would make her entrance. Before the dais, complaints could be issued and the nobility's conflicts settled, with judges influenced by the royal widow's wisdom. After the business of the Court was settled, the ceremony that installed Melessa as Queen would begin.

The entire room was abuzz over the deaths of both royal members, even past the day of

mourning the day before. The royal daughter's death had come as more of a surprise; Yvan had been ill for quite some time. Some said Cara had been eaten by a wolf; others, that brigands had killed her as she was traveling somewhere on covert royal business. Still others believed that she had gone mad with grief and committed suicide. There had been no official word as to *how* Yvan and Melessa's daughter had died, merely that she had. But there was a small, minute fraction of the crowd that believed her still alive and merely in hiding. A small fraction of that believed she would eventually return to save them all. But most who believed this did so quietly. They knew that it was treason and that many would turn them in to be seen as heroes by the new regime.

Others who believed this were in the crowd and knew for a fact that the princess was alive. They merely awaited the proper moment to defend her as necessary. These members of the crowd seemed to be loners; no one really knew who they were, merely pilgrims who had come — as others had — to witness the coronation and the Court.

Suddenly, the room became silent as the door at one end of the hall opened. Several guards, in ceremonial armor and carrying well-polished weapons, entered in neat, synchronized files. The famed and revered General Carem led them. These men would all serve as personal guards of the Queen and would stand at attention in case anything treacherous or otherwise unusual occurred. The files split and lined the far end of the aisle, their backs to the crowds on either side.

Behind them were troubadours, announcing the arrival of Yvan's wife, Melessa. She followed the trumpeters with her head lowered in an attitude of respect to her honored guests, her hands calmly clasped in front of her. The troubadours lined the remainder of the aisle, which the Queen confidently traversed and took her place on the dais. A judge, heralded differently by the troubadours, followed her and sat at her left hand, to hear and judge the cases, but still to hear the widow's wisdom on any case. Typically, the royal wisdom was unnecessary, but sometimes the monarch would feel the need to interject. Other guards filled in around the room to serve as bailiffs and security personnel. In the smaller towns, these roles were filled by the residential bigger, brawnier men. Here, however, the disputes were generally between nobles and thus were to be handled with men befitting the nobility's position and prestige.

The judge called the Court to order, and proclaimed that any and all who had business here would, one-by-one, come forward and issue their complaint.

In reply to this, there were several who came forward. Some were land disputes, others broken marriage contracts. All were resolved by the judge. The solitary woman on the dais looked on with mild boredom written on her face, emotionlessly watching the proceedings. There was one that seemed to interest her mildly; the case of a Lord Daren of Jalequinn who complained of a missing pendant that had been in his family for generations. Even General Carem seemed to perk up at this. Most of the crowd found it amusing, since her had no real suspect as to the crime. Since no culprit could be found, the judge dismissed his case as the ravings of a lunatic and had him dragged away to be deposited outside.

There was a slight silence after this case, until a cloaked figure came forward. Its face was entirely shadowed by a hooded cloak.

“State your name, then speak your business.”

The figure's feminine voice came clearly and loud enough for the entire room to hear. “My name, for the moment, is unimportant. I wish to issue a complaint. Someone in this room is

attempting to obstruct King Yvan's wishes."

A gasp rippled through the room. Melessa looked at the speaker with mild, skeptical interest.

"There was one who was sent out to find King Yvan's successor. One who the King trusted enough to complete the task. One who would bring she who makes someone close to him shudder to her proper place on the throne."

Melessa looked at General Carem. His gaze ignored her and peered at the speaker as she continued. "However, there was another who wanted Yvan's inheritance so badly that they attempted to prevent the successor's finding, to the point of torturing a small child for giving her information that she wanted, to keep him from talking further. She found something that led her to believe that the one sent out by the king was dead, and thus could get what she had wanted all along, and had blackmailed her way into finding a position from which to strike."

Melessa twitched a bit, as though trying to feebly mask an attempt to get Carem's attention. But he, like the crowd, was leaning closer, trying to hear the speaker's words. Whomever these charges were levied against would face charges of treason, and everyone there wanted to hear every word.

"Furthermore, this person sent troops to extract this person from West Branwendia, risking a war which could potentially endanger the whole of Demoa and everyone here."

Melessa finally got Carem's attention and Carem signaled to the ranks around him. Guards began to advance on the speaker, presumably to arrest her. Seeming to notice this, she continued, though at a much quicker pace.

"Fortunately, the attempt failed, despite Melessa's efforts. For you see" the figure reached up and pushed the hood back, to reveal a long train of unusually-red hair "I have returned."

* * *

Silvera, from somewhere in the crowd, removed the glamor from the princess during her last few sentences. She couldn't issue a shield for Cara, not without being discovered.

Fortunately, it was unnecessary.

The guards stopped dead in their tracks when they saw the princess. The crowd was equally aghast.

"I've come back for my birthright, Mother. Father left the throne to me, and you know it. This is why you wanted me dead — why you told them all I was dead. Why you were forced to cover your tracks by searching half the country for me, to execute me when you did. But I escaped you. And now it is time for me to take my rightful place."

Melessa sputtered. "Get her, you fools!"

No one moved.

"Tell them, you clod!"

General Carem's face hardened and he looked at Melessa. Enough was enough. "No, Your Majesty."

"I beg your pardon? I am your Queen!"

"Not according to this," said Cara as she advanced beyond the circle of shocked guards and pulled a document from within her cloak. "This is Yvan's will, his final wishes to be carried out."

The judge took the paper from her and looked at the document. “It’s genuine. It dictates that the throne belongs to the one who makes Queen Melessa shudder,” he said, looking at Cara quizzically.

“Caralese,” said Cara mockingly, looking straight at Melessa.

The addressed flinched, though she obviously tried not to.

“Melessa, I charge you with treason, and attempted murder of a royal personage.” Cara looked squarely at her mother with no emotion in her eyes.

“You wouldn’t dare do this to your own mother! How dare you?!” Her voice cracked and she stumbled forward.

“But see, I’m not doing this as a daughter to her mother. I am doing this as Heiress of Demoa to a traitoress of Demoa.”

The guards seized Melessa’s arms and began to drag her away. She tripped, falling to her knees. In the process, her arms slipped from the guards’ grip.

She lay on the floor weakly for a moment, but then she weakly raised an arm and glared at Cara. Red fire came from her fingers in an attempt to incinerate she who would claim the throne.

“Cara! Look out!” came an accented shout from the gathered crowd. Many people hit the floor around her as Cara ducked just in time.

“You *know* sorcery is illegal, Melessa,” came another mocking female voice from the crowd. Melessa couldn’t identify the source, until she saw a very familiar, dark-haired woman in the crowd who smiled cruelly at her.

“You have no idea how much trouble you’re in, Silvera,” Melessa seethed.

“I should say the same to you.”

“Stop please, just for a moment,” called Cara from the dais. Melessa looked hopefully at her daughter.

“I will not have her put to death, as befits a traitor. Instead, she will be moved to a dungeon with her loyal supporters and left there, to be treated according to her former underlings’ whims. And she will be stripped of her sorcery, courtesy of whomever is capable of doing so.”

Melessa’s hopeful look turned to one of hopeless horror as several leers were sent her way. She was dragged away as Cara looked back to the crowd and sat on the dais.

“Now, are there any more complaints to be issued to the High Court this day?”

* * *

“Eldana! *Eldana!*” Matthius picked up his beloved’s head and attempted to revive her by slapping her cheeks gently. “Wake up, oh please be alive....” Tears started to stream down his face. A moment ago, all had been normal; and then, she had collapsed on the floor. She still drew breath, but that was the only sign of life. She couldn’t die now, not after all that had happened... He had known something was wrong, he wished he had pushed it more.... And now, she was unconscious and he didn’t know whether or not she would wake....

He dragged her limp body to pallet by the fire and looked for something — anything — that might be used like smelling salts to revive her.

“Hold on, Eldana... please, for the love of the Saints, hold on....”

* * *

The remainder of the day at the palace paled in comparison to the events of that morning. Cara sat on the dais, patiently listening with the judge to the complaints and assisting with judgements where she seemed to feel it was needed, using her authority as Heiress to straighten out some of the disputes brought before the Court.

The day wore on, and at last Demoa crowned its Queen. The crown made her traveling clothes look shabby and peasant-like, but this didn't seem to matter. Those who believed she would return cheered the loudest.

One man, near the front, caught her eyes. They shared a smile as the crown was placed on her fiery hair. A cheer went up in the crowd again as they all filed to swear to her and to Demoa their loyalty and service. This in and of itself occupied the time until well after dusk, when the new Queen announced that her first royal act was to rescind Yvan's forced exile of the Lady Silvera, and that henceforth Silvera would act as the Queen's advisor, as promised.

Another cheer went up.

"And now," said Cara with a smile, "Let the festivities begin!" The troubadours sounded their trumpets as Cara, followed by several of the strangers wearing cloaks similar to hers, by a wolf, and by Silvera, exited. The nobles did not see her again until late in the night, after apparently bathing and donning some of the royal finery; she was surrounded by Mataki warriors, in full ceremonial garb. They made a rather impressive sight as they all overlooked the revelers and proposed a toast to the future and to the remembrance of the Rebirth. One of the Mataki offered a toast to Cara's long reign, and others toasted to her health and General Carem even toasted Silvera's return to Demoa, with a smile in her direction. Silvera returned the smile. The wolf, who had until now been standing beside Silvera, quietly slipped outside and vanished.

In Demoa, there was celebration of a new reign, of a new Rebirth. A queen had been overthrown, and a new one had taken her place. What would happen now, no one could guess.

But for now, they didn't care.

Tonight, they celebrated.

* * *

Matthius had nearly fallen asleep when Eldana finally opened her eyes. He hadn't left her side, and had barely eaten or slept in nearly a fortnight, and her condition hadn't changed much in that time.

"Matthius?" asked a weak voice.

"I'm here."

"Good." She squeezed his hand with hers and looked toward the door. Greypaws stood in the doorway. "You're back." The wolf padded closer.

"What? I never—oh." Eldana reached to scratch the wolf's head.

"She's back. She made it."

"Who?"

"Cara. And Silvera."

“Oh.” Matthius managed a smile. “How are you feeling?”

Eldana heaved herself to stand and looked into the fireplace. “Thirsty. Could you get me some water?”

Matthius nodded, grabbed a water skin, and moved outside.

Quietly, Eldana took off the pendant and looked at it for a long moment, before she placed it into what would be the hottest part of the fire once she started one. It had served its purpose. It was dangerous. Thus, it would be destroyed so it could harm no one else, nor could it fall into the wrong hands.

When Matthius came in, she put her arms around him and kissed him.

“Feeling better?”

“Much better — now,” she said with a smile. She knew she wasn’t out of the woods yet, but she would be fine once she regained her strength fully.

Eldana’s debt was repaid.

Now, it was time to move on to the rest of their life.

THE END

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