

# King of Sword and Sky

Avon Books ~ May 07, 2024

ISBN (10): 0063382954

ISBN (13): 978-0063382954

By

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## Prologue

### Eld ~ Boura Fell

“Two Primages and sixty of my Black Guard slaughtered, and yet somehow the pair of you survived. While my prize escaped.”

In the lowest levels of Boura Fell, the subterranean fortress buried deep beneath the dark-forested heart of Eld, High Mage Vadim Maur paced the *sel’dor*-veined floor of a small, sconce-lit cell. Before him, two battered and bruised men sat chained to a pair of black metal chairs. One wore the blood-and-filth grimed remnants of an exorcist’s scarlet robes. The other wore shredded and stained crimson rags that had once been the silken garb of a Sulimage, a journeyman practitioner of the vast and ancient arts of Magecraft.

Vadim Maur’s pacing came to an abrupt halt. Luxuriant purple robes swirled about his spare form. Long, bone-white hair slid across his shoulders, accentuating the pallor of a face that had not seen sunlight in a thousand years. One beringed hand shot out. Thin, cadaverous fingers closed around the swollen jaw of Kolis Manza, Eld’s most famous and esteemed Sulimage, who had until only a few days ago served his master Vadim Maur’s bidding in Celieria City.

Now, the Sulimage’s sash had been stripped of its jewels of achievement, and the shredded, honor-bare swath of cloth had been tied around the man’s throat to mock his once-proud status as the High Mage’s most accomplished and magically gifted apprentice.

“Capture her,” Vadim hissed. “Bring her to me. That was my command.” Long, ridged nails dug deep into the Sulimage’s skin. “Yet you returned *empty handed*.”

“She was too powerful,” Kolis protested weakly. “Not even the Primages could stand against her.”

“Powerful?” Silver eyes snapped with fury, and white frost formed on every surface as the room’s temperature plunged in sharp response. “Of course she was powerful! She is the crowning achievement of my last thousand years of work! The Tairen Soul I created! My greatest triumph—*and you let her slip through your fingers!*”

“What more could I have done, master? The Fey broke through our defenses.” The Sulimage coughed, then groaned as his broken ribs protested. “I tried to hold them off, to give the others time to get her into the Well, but then she... her magic... just exploded. She surprised us all.”

“Silence!” Vadim’s free hand shot out with vicious force. Despite the High Mage’s great

age and increasingly frail appearance, his fist smashed hard against his apprentice's face. The heavy rings of power decorating each of his fingers amplified the force of his blow, and the crack of bone and the crunch of breaking cartilage echoed off the stone walls of the chamber. Blood sprayed from Kolis's mouth and nose. A groaning breath wheezed out of his lungs, and he slumped senseless in his bonds.

Vadim turned to the man in the ragged exorcist's robes and whipped a wavy-edged Mage blade from the sheath strapped to his waist. He snatched a handful of greasy brown hair and yanked hard, pulling back the prisoner's head and exposing his throat to the dagger's razor-sharp edge.

Pale blue eyes, surrounded by stubby black lashes, looked up at him in mute fear. Fresh blood trickled from both nostrils and the corners of the man's mouth, and vicious purpling bruises swelled on skin still mottled from earlier beatings. A pulse beat like a trapped sparrow in the man's throat, and his barrel chest rose and fell with short, rapid breaths.

The prisoner swallowed convulsively, and the skin of his neck pressed against the razor-sharp edge of the Mage blade. Even that light touch tore a fresh slice in the captive's skin. No blood trickled from the wound. The dagger's thirsty black metal drank every drop before it spilled, and the dark cabochon stone in the blade's pommel began to flicker with ravenous red lights. The man froze in breathless silence.

Vadim's mouth twisted in a snarl. "And you, butcher's boy. Did you seriously think for even the tiniest instant that your miserable, insignificant mortal life held any value to me except as a means to capture Ellysetta Baristani?" Vadim leaned forward, letting his silver eyes turn to dark, bottomless wells of blackness sparkling with red lights as Azrahn, the sweet, powerful magic of the Mages, gathered within him.

Den Brodson, son of a Celierian butcher and former betrothed of Ellysetta Baristani, stared up into those twin pits of blackness and knew he was staring death in the face. He'd seen death before, a few days ago in the Grand Cathedral of Light, when Rain Tairen Soul had pulled a Fey blade from its sheath and smiled into Den's eyes.

Then, Den had turned and leaped into the Well of Souls to escape. Now, gods help him, he had nowhere to go.

The white-haired High Mage leaned closer still. "Your only value to me now is what small service the Guardians of the Well will offer in return for the delivery of your rotting corpse as a sacrifice."

A mewling whimper broke from Den's bloodied mouth. He'd seen the Guardian's handiwork...seen what they did to the dead and dying. As long as he lived, he'd never forget the high-pitched, animal screams of Eld soldiers being eaten alive when fresh blood seeped through their bandages and drew the hunger-maddened demons like wounded creatures drew thistlewolves.

Gods, he didn't want to die that way. "Please..."

Black eyes sparked with a sudden flare of malevolent red. The High Mage put a hand over Den's chest, directly over his heart, the fingers curved like claws so that only the fingertips touched. All five, pointed nails gouged into the skin as if the Mage intended to bore through Den's chest bones and rip out his heart. The black eyes whirled. The skin where the pallid hand touched grew cold.

“No, wait! Wait!” Panicked, Den shoved his feet against the cell floor and scooted his chair back, retreating from the icy hand. The leg of his chair caught on an uneven stone and with a choked wail, he toppled over backwards.

Pain exploded in his skull as his head cracked against the stones. His hands, shackled at the wrists, scraped hard against their metal bonds. The sudden jolt shook his entire body, and a long, narrow parcel of wadded cloth fell out of his robe’s deep pocket to land beside him.

The pair of pale, hulking guards standing near the door strode forward to grab Den’s chair and haul it—and him—back upright. One guard kicked the small parcel, and sent it skittering across the floor. The fabric unwrapped as it went, and a handful of long, crystal-topped needles spilled out, chiming an absurdly cheerful series of tinkling notes as they rolled across the stone floor.

The High Mage went still. His eyes narrowed and lightened from nightmarish black to a slightly less terrifying shade of cold, glittering silver. Sheathing his dagger, the Mage pointed to the scattered exorcism needles. “Bring those to me,” he commanded.

Both guards rushed to obey, gathering up the fallen needles and bringing them back to their master. The Mage examined them closely. Most of the dark crystals topping the needles were dark, but several sparkled with ruby lights.

His jaw clenched. He spun around, grabbed Den’s chin in a fierce grip and shook him, making stars whirl across Den’s vision. “These crystals have tasted blood,” the Mage hissed. “Whose flesh did the needles pierce, mortal? Yours? Or someone else’s?”

Den swallowed the acrid bile rising in his throat. “Ellie Baristani,” he groaned. “She pulled them out to stop us from taking her into the Well.”

The High Mage released Den and straightened. He lifted the needles to his nose and inhaled deeply. His eyes fluttered closed. When he opened them again, the Mage smiled.

“Well, mortal, it seems you will keep your miserable life another day, after all.” He untied the sash from around his waist and wrapped the needles in it carefully, then deposited the small bundle in his own deep pocket. “I do not punish those who please me, and this gift is pleasing indeed.”

The shallow, relieved breath had barely left Den’s lungs before his chest constricted on a new surge of panic when the High Mage lunged and his bony hand closed round Den’s throat.

“Today is my gift to you,” the Mage hissed. “But for life after daybreak tomorrow, there is a price, mortal.” He lifted the Mage blade, twisting the black, razored edge so the light of the sconces made shadows dance across the dark metal. “Accept my Mark. Willingly bind your soul to my service. Or when the Great Sun rises, you will die a death more hideous than any you can imagine.”

Den whimpered.

The Mage smiled, pressed the point of his dagger to Den’s wrist and sliced. Blood welled from the cut and slid down Den’s arm like scarlet teardrops. The Mage lifted the wrist to his lips. Den flinched as a pale tongue flicked out, tasting his blood. “Answer me, boy. Surrender your soul or die. The choice is yours.”

Den’s hand shook. His entire body trembled. How had this happened? How had his plans gone so awry?

The Mage’s grip tightened, pointed nails digging into the soft skin of Den’s inner wrist.

“Speak, mortal! Do you accept my Mark? Of your own free will, do you bind your soul to my service?”

Den’s dreams of living in luxury in some remote part of the world, growing fat on the profits of Ellie Baristani’s magic, shattered like broken glass. There would be no palatial estate. No soft-skinned, buxom serving wenches to tend his every need. No lords lining up to seek his favor. There would be no Ellie Baristani on her knees before him, kissing his feet and begging for his forgiveness, whoring herself to please him.

His eyes closed. His shoulders heaved with helpless, silent sobs.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Yes, master,” the Mage’s hissing voice corrected.

“Yes, master.” Tears gathered in Den’s throat and burned at the back of his eyes.

“Then say it. ‘Of my own free will, I accept your Mark and bind my soul to your eternal service.’”

Den heard himself, weeping brokenly, repeating the damning words. Hot tears ran down his frozen cheeks. The cold press of the Mage’s mouth clamped against his wrist and pulled sickeningly as the Mage sucked Den’s blood from the sliced vein. Then came the colder press of that taloned hand gripping the skin above his heart. A sickly sweet aroma filled the air, overpowering, like barrels of rotting fruit. Pure, frigid ice, sharp as a knife, plunged deep into his chest. A will, heavy as stone, pressed down upon his.

He was in a black river, gasping for breath and fighting desperately to stay afloat, while a heavy weight slowly and relentlessly dragged him down. His head bobbed under. The thick, black, oily liquid of the river—so cold, so horribly sweet—enveloped him. His lungs burned as the air in them ran out and the need to breathe became overpowering. He fought, struggled, tried to kick his way to the surface, but the weight anchored him down, dragging him deeper and deeper.

His world was total darkness. No light. No hope. No hint of warmth. His lungs were on fire. If he breathed he would drown. If he didn’t breathe, he would die.

His mouth opened on a deep, desperate, despairing gasp. Oily blackness flooded in, filling his lungs, filling him.

With one last, choking, weeping cry for his lost life, Den Brodson surrendered.

## Chapter One

### Celiera ~ The Garreval

Seven days after departing Celiera City, the Fey reached the end of the mortal world. As the small caravan of wagons and loping Fey crested the top of a last, rolling hill, Ellysetta's breath caught in her throat. A great fertile plain stretched out below, miles of land sectioned into hedgerow-partitioned fields, all greenening with well tended crops against a dramatic backdrop of majestic mountains thrusting up from the earth like a solid wall.

"Oh, Papa," Ellysetta breathed.

"'Tis the most beautiful sight I've ever seen," Sol Baristani agreed in a whisper as he sat beside his daughter on the wagon seat, a lit match held, forgotten, over the tobacco-filled bowl of his favorite pipe.

Together, father and daughter stared in awestruck wonder at the majestic peaks filling the horizon.

At first glance, the mountains almost appeared to be a single range but Ellysetta knew from the countless histories she'd read that they were actually two separate mountain ranges. The fierce Rhakis arrowed down from the north, nearly colliding with the stately swells of the Silvermist range. Only a scant mile separated the two, an infamous pass known as the Garreval, gateway to the Fading Lands.

Misty clouds swirled across forested cliffs and steep highland pastures of the Silvermist mountains. The clouds hovering over the Rhakis were less gentle, dark with rain and boiling into lightning-shot thunderheads as the sharp peaks continued northward towards Eld. Those soft clouds and fierce storms merged into a dense, shimmering fog that filled the pass between the two ranges, and Ellysetta gave a small shiver at the sight.

The Faering Mists. The magical barrier that surrounded the Fading Lands, impenetrable to all but the Fey.

The match Sol held over the tobacco-filled bowl of his pipe burned down unnoticed until the heat scorched his fingers. "Sweet brightness!" he yelped. Hissing, he shook the match out, tossed the scorched remains over the edge of the wagon, and blew on his stinging fingers.

Ellie turned, trying to stifle her laughter as she reached for his hand. This wasn't the first time her father had seared his hands on a matchstick. It wouldn't be the last. His attention was too easily caught by some real or imagined beauty—often while he held a lit match in his hand, thanks to his fondness for his pipe.

"I'm all right, Ellie-girl," Sol protested when she took his hand.

"I know, Papa, but Marissya says I should practice whenever I get the opportunity." She held her father's hand in hers and focused on the reddened flesh, trying to block out the flood of thoughts and emotions that poured into her mind when she touched his skin.

Love. Worry. Instinctive fear, tinged with guilt. He still wasn't comfortable with the shining brightness and palpable magic of the beautiful stranger sitting beside him.

Ellie forced back the stab of pain his fear caused and tried to focus her thoughts the way

Marissya v'En Solande, the Fey's most powerful healer had shown her. Throughout the week-long westward journey across Celieria, Marissya had spent several bells each day with Ellysetta, teaching her how to wield her own powerful healing magic.

Though Ellysetta still had much to learn, she now understood on a conscious level the basic patterns of the healing weaves she'd been unconsciously spinning all her life. Marissya assured her she'd soon be able to summon and spin those weaves on demand, using only the amount of power needed to weave them, but restraint was something Ellie still had difficulty mastering. The powerful, hidden barriers that had kept her magic bottled up were gone now, and the weaves she'd once spun with such subtlety now surged forth at her call like a river gushing through a shattered dam.

Remembering Marissya's admonitions, Ellysetta reached down into the well of energy at her center, carefully calling forth the glowing threads of power she would need. Red Fire to draw the heat from the wound. Green Earth to heal the damaged flesh. Lavender Spirit to steal away the pain. And something else Ellysetta had discovered while observing Marissya during their lessons. A special, golden something that Marissya called a *shei'dalin's* love, the mysterious force that was unique to Fey women. It made all the threads of the *shei'dalin's* weave shimmer with a warm, golden cast. No Fey warrior could spin his magic the same way.

"It springs from the compassion and empathy of a Fey woman's heart," Marissya had told her. "It isn't a seventh branch of magic. We cannot separate it out and weave the *shei'dalin's* love by itself. It's just the natural way Fey women weave magic."

"And do I weave *shei'dalin's* love the same way?"

At that, Marissya had laughed. "Feyreisa, you do *nothing* the same as other Fey." Then, still smiling, she'd added, "I'm sure you must, Ellysetta, but when you weave, your magic is so bright, its power blinds me."

Now, holding Papa's hand in hers, she attempted to summon her magic and wield it with control and restraint, as Marissya had been trying to teach her.

She found the threads, wove them in a loose healing pattern, and with a gentle "push" of power, sent the weave into her father's hand. The push slammed out of her with the force of a hammer strike, her weave flaring with blinding brightness.

The startled jerk of Papa's body and sudden widening of his eyes made her grimace in dismay.

"Light save me," she muttered under her breath. Then, in a louder voice, she said, "Are you all right, Papa?"

Sol blinked several times and took cautious inventory of himself. When he didn't find any missing—or extra—appendages, he gave a smile. "Well done, Ellie-girl. The finger's good as new." He held up his hand to show her.

Sure enough, the angry red burn on the tip of his finger was gone. But that wasn't the problem. She watched her father run his newly healed hand through his hair. His hand stopped in mid-motion.

"Oh," he said. Sol Baristani was of the age when many mortal men began "thinning the forest" as Papa put it. Or, rather, he had been. Keeping his gaze fixed on her face, he patted the newly thickened growth of hair crowning his scalp. "Well...er... that's not so bad. Provided it's not some frightful shade of green." His brows drew together in mock concern, and he added in a

hesitant, rather fearful tone, “Er...it’s not green, is it, Ellie?”

Ellie sighed. “No, Papa, it’s not green.”

With a twinkle in his eye, he pretended relief. “Well then, there you go.” He laughed and grinned, and reached across to pat her hand. “You did good, Ellie-girl. You may have overdone the weave a little, but the finger’s healed. Besides, what man wouldn’t like a little more hair when his own starts to go missing, eh?” Thrusting his pipe stem back between his teeth, he lit a fresh match and held it to the bowl, puffing until the shreds of tobacco began to glow orange and puffs of fragrant smoke wreathed his newly regenerated headful of hair...and a face that had lost at least ten years of age in an instant.

She forced a smile. “*Beylah vo*, Papa.” Weaving youth on mortals wasn’t one of the things Marissya had taught her—but apparently the patterns were very similar to regular healing.

A happy shriek sounded at Ellysetta’s right. The Fey warrior, Kiel vel Tomar, his long silvery-blond hair woven into a plait, ran past with Ellysetta’s nine-year-old sister Lorelle perched on his shoulders. Kieran vel Solande, Marissya’s son, followed a few paces behind. Lorelle’s twin, Lillis, sat on Kieran’s shoulders and kicked his chest with her heels as if he were one of the Elvish *ba’houda* horses pulling the wagons in their caravan. Her small fingers clutched tufts of his thick, wavy brown hair.

Lillis and Lorelle were clad in miniature versions of Marissya and Ellie’s brown traveling leathers, which they had insisted Kieran weave for them. Kieran and Kiel had done their best to keep the children’s minds off the grief of Mama’s death by making each day of the trip a new adventure. The twins had taken to the idea, enthusiastically using even the briefest stops as an excuse to explore—always under watchful Fey eyes, of course, but rarely in clean, tidy places. The keepsake boxes Papa had carved for them years ago were now overflowing with treasures from their journey: small rocks, wildflowers, snail shells, bird feathers, whatever caught their attention.

Kieran cast a grin Ellysetta’s way. His steps faltered as he caught sight of Sol Baristani; then his gaze shot to Ellysetta. She blushed furiously. A *shei’dalin’s* ability to restore mortal youth was a secret the Fey had guarded for millennia, and she had just revealed it for anyone to see.

Fortunately, before he could say anything, Lillis tugged on Kieran’s hair and bounced on his shoulders. “Faster, Kieran!” she cried. “They’re beating us!”

With a final look and a shake of his head, Kieran turned away and raced down the grassy hill after Kiel and Lorelle.

Ellysetta watched them and the tension that had been growing in her all week squeezed her chest tight. They were nearing the end of the journey. One more day, two at the most, then she would leave what remained of her beloved family to follow her new husband Rain through the mysterious Faering Mists, perhaps never to return.

Sol patted her hand and nodded his chin in the direction of the twins. “It is good to hear them laughing again.”

“Yes,” she agreed. The twins hadn’t had much cause for laughter of late.

“They miss their mother,” Sol said. “They try to smile and laugh for my sake, but I hear them each night, crying into their pillows and pleading for her to come back.”

Just that quick, Ellie’s own sharp grief struck hard. Her face crumpled and her eyes filled

with tears. “I miss her too, Papa.” Stern as Mama sometimes was, Ellie had never doubted her love—and never loved her back with any less than her whole heart.

“Oh, Ellie.” Sol slid an arm around his daughter’s shoulders and pulled her close. “My sweet, Ellie-girl. We all miss her.”

She turned her face into his neck as she had so many times in the past and sobbed. And her father held her, as he always had, patting her back and rocking her as if she were still the small child who’d crawled on his lap for comfort after evil visions tormented her dreams.

She cried until her tears were spent, and when they were done, wiped her eyes as best she could and begged again as she had so many times this last week, “Won’t you please come with us, Papa? Rain will grant you and the girls escort through the Mists. You could live there, with us, in safety.”

Sol sighed. “We are not Fey like you, Ellie. Our home is here, in Celieria, and the last promise I ever made your mother before...” His voice thickened. He drew a quick breath and swallowed the lump in his throat. “I promised her that day before she left for the cathedral that if anything ever happened to her, I’d make sure the twins were raised in Celieria, among their own kind.”

“Papa, she asked you for that promise when she still thought I was demon-possessed and the Fey were evil. She realized her mistake in the end. Don’t you think she’d realize her mistake about this too?” They’d been over this a thousand times since leaving Celieria City. “Wouldn’t she’d rather know the girls were safe regardless of where they live?”

“I gave her my word, Ellie. Shh.” He put a finger on her lips to forestall further objections. “It was my last vow to her, as sacred to me now as if I’d sworn it to her on her deathbed. So long as there is a chance of the girls living here in peace among our own kind, then here we will remain. You’re Fey, Ellysetta. You belong in the Fading Lands. We are mortal, and we belong here.” His eyes were filled with sadness but also unwavering determination.

Seeing that look, Ellysetta knew she’d lost. Her father was the most loving man she’d ever known, but when he had that hint of steel in his eye, it meant he’d made up his mind and would not be budged. She bit her lip, stared at the hands clasped tightly in her lap and nodded, afraid to look at him for fear the fresh tears burning at the backs of her eyes would spurt out in dreadful, graceless sobs.

She heard her father sigh again, saw him shift in the periphery of her vision. His hand, broad and bronzed and callused from his years of woodcarving, reached out to cover hers. Love, rich and sweet and steadfast as love ever had been, poured into her through the touch, along with pride and gratitude, and a thought that rang in her head clear as a bell.

*I love you, my sweet Ellie-girl. No man could love a daughter more, and no man could be prouder than I am of you. Though I will do everything I can to honor your mother’s wishes, I won’t risk my children’s safety needlessly. If trouble comes, the girls and I will pass through the Mists. That’s my oath to you.*

Through vision blurred by swimming tears, she met his eyes and saw for herself the truth she could feel through the touch of his skin. It was more than she’d expected. His promise was an oath he considered as binding as the vow he’d made to his wife.

As the wagon continued its swift, smooth roll down the grassy hill towards the fertile plains of the Garreval below, Sol looked out at the majestic mountains and green fields.



“This is a beautiful place,” he said. “I think your Mama would have been very happy here.” Ellie laid her head on her father’s shoulder. “I think so too.”

\* \* \*

“The redirection weaves are up. The Garreval is secure.” Belliard vel Jelani, General of the Fading Lands, released the net of Spirit threads tying him to the dozens of Fey scouts spread in a five-mile radius around their destination. As they had all week, the warriors had cleared the caravan’s path of mortals and spun redirection weaves to turn away curious locals and Eld spies.

Just over three weeks ago, Celierians and their families had lined the roads and cart paths from the Garreval to Celieria City to watch the immortal Fey run past on their annual trek to the nation’s capital. This time, not one mortal would see or remember the Fey’s passing.

Bel turned to find Rain staring off towards the Fey caravan, his face drawn. “Rain? Something is wrong?” Bel’s hand went instinctively to his steel, his fingers hovering over the hilts of his Fey’cha throwing daggers.

“*Nei*.” With obvious effort, Rain dragged his attention back to his best friend. “Well, *aiyah*, but no different from the wrongness that has followed us since leaving Celieria. She weeps again for her mother.”

Bel glanced down at his hands, away from the pain in Rain’s lavender eyes. For all his power—impressive even by Fey standards—Rain could not weave the sorrow from his beloved’s heart. Oh, he could have spun a rosy illusion of happiness upon her—or asked another Fey to steal her memories—but that was not the Fey way. Both honor and love bound him, and he could do only what Fey men had for centuries: stand strong for his mate and offer what comfort his love could provide.

“You should go to her,” Bel said.

Rain sighed and shook his head. “*Nei*, she needs him more than me now—someone who loved her mother as deeply as she did.”

Bel had known Rain too long not to hear the comment left unsaid. “Everything Lauriana Baristani did, she did for love,” he reminded Rain gently. “And in the end she gave her life to save her child.”

“I realize that,” Rain replied, “but I cannot pretend an affection I never felt.”

Bel nudged a large clump of field grass with the toe of one black boot. Lauriana had never wanted Ellysetta to wed the Fey king, and she’d made sure everyone—including Rain—knew it. “Perhaps,” he finally said, “Ellysetta doesn’t need you to pretend love you did not feel. Perhaps it is enough just to know you are there, loving her.”

“She knows.” Rain swept a sharp gaze over the valley below. “So, there’s been no unusual activity in the last four days, and not a single person following us since we left Celieria City. I’m not sure if I should be relieved or suspicious. The Eld I knew would never let us get away so easily.”

Bel took the hint. “Perhaps our decoys are working.” A separate party of Fey had gone north, towards Orest, accompanied by a magic-warded wagon, so that Eld spies might think it held Ellysetta and her family.

“Let us hope so,” Rain said, his face set in stone. “But let us also prepare for the alternative—and not only from the Mages. If the *dahl’reisen* learn that Ellysetta can restore

souls...”

Ice shivered through Bel’s veins. “You don’t think Gaelen would...” His voice broke off in disbelief, then surged back in protest. “He is Ellysetta’s *lu’tan*.” After Ellysetta restored his soul, Gaelen had bloodsworn himself to her service, vowing to protect her for the duration of his life and the death that followed. No *lu’tan* would break that vow. “Gaelen is Fey once more. His honor has been restored. Do not forget, without him Ellysetta would already be in the hands of the Mages.”

Rain’s jaw set. “I have not forgotten. Nor do I forget that all it takes is one look at his face without that scar, and his *dahl’reisen* friends will know the truth.” Of all the Fey, only *dahl’reisen* scarred, and they only when they made the kill that tipped their immortal souls into darkness. When Ellysetta had restored Gaelen’s soul, she’d wiped his *dahl’reisen* scar from existence. “No matter what trust you may feel for Gaelen as a fellow *lu’tan*, do not let your guard down. The *dahl’reisen* cannot be trusted, and they could attempt to use his long acquaintance with them to their advantage.”

Rain’s expression grew grim. Bel felt the brief surge of power, quickly harnessed, that came in response to whatever unpleasant thoughts were crossing Rain’s mind.

“I think I will return to Ellysetta after all,” Rain said.

He stepped back and the brief surge of power became a breathtaking flood as he summoned the Change. Sparkling gray mist billowed out in whirling clouds around Rain, and when it cleared a death-black tairén crouched in his place. The great winged cat fixed one large, glowing purple eye upon Bel, and a throbbing Spirit voice sounded in Bel’s head, powerful and resonant with the rich musical tones of the tairén.

\*\*To Teleon, brother, and tomorrow, to home.\*\*

\* \* \*

Ellysetta climbed out of the wagon to walk the last mile across the greening plains of the Garreval as twenty Fey raced on ahead to secure their destination: the outpost built at the base of the ruins of the once-great fortress of Teleon. Lillis and Lorelle walked beside her, their small hands clutching hers.

She would always be grateful for this time Rain had given her with her family. He could have flown her straight to the Fading Lands on tairén-back but he had not. Knowing how dear her family was to her, he’d arranged for all of them to travel together. The Elvish *ba’houda* horses, bred for endurance and speed, traveled much faster than mortal steeds; but Rain in tairén form, using magic to power his flight, could have traversed the thousand miles across Celieria in a single day.

Even though he still left small courtship gifts on her pillow each morning, this extra time with her family was his true gift to her, and she worked to sear every precious memory into her mind. Like this one: the girls tripping through the tall grass at her side, their hair bouncing with their steps. A slight breeze blowing, fragrant with the scents of mist off the mountains and warm grass waving in the wind. She squeezed the twins’ small hands and watched dimples flash in their cheeks as laughter bubbled from them.

Dear gods, how she loved them. And if any harm ever befell them because of her...

\*\*No dark thoughts, shei’tani.\*\* The admonishment slipped into her mind on a now-

familiar weave of Spirit.

Ellysetta glanced up at the great winged black cat soaring swiftly towards her over the top of a nearby hill. \*\*Not so dark this time,\*\* she answered. \*\*Only a little grey.\*\*

She could not blame him for thinking the worst. Her mind had not been peaceful since leaving Celieria City. The High Mage might not know where her body was, but despite Rain's presence and the twenty-five fold weaves the Fey placed around the camp each night, the High Mage been able to find her soul more than once when she dreamed. He'd not managed to put another Mark on her, but each time he'd found her, she'd bolted out of sleep with her tairen roused to a raging bloodlust, roaring for death and vengeance.

Consequently, she'd spent most nights wide awake and flying the moonlit skies with Rain.

\*\*I was just thinking I'll miss my sisters when we're gone. And I can't help worrying about their safety\*\*

\*\*Kieran and Kiel will allow no harm to befall them.\*\* The two Fey and two hundred of their brethren would be staying behind at Lord Teleos's ancestral estate near the Garreval to guard Ellysetta's family.

Rain swooped down the side of the hill fast and hard, Changing in mid-flight to the black-leather-clad form of his lean Fey body. He landed running, and a brief, swift jog brought him quickly to her side.

Just the sight of him and his glowing lavender eyes made Ellysetta's breath catch in her throat. All Fey were ravishing creatures, but the legendary Rain Tairen Soul outshone them all. He was an immortal king whose unshielded Fey beauty dazzled the senses, his face a masterpiece of breathtaking male perfection, saved from prettiness by the thrust of strong bones beneath the skin and the aura of deadly promise that swirled just below the surface.

He was a Tairen Soul, the strongest and rarest of all Fey, a master of all five branches of magic wielded by the Fey, capable of Changing into one of the magical, fire-breathing tairen of the Fading Lands.

He was her truemate, the other half of her soul; and when at last Ellysetta found the courage and unconditional trust necessary to embrace the darkest shadows of his soul and her own without fear—to bare without reservation every thought, every fear, every shame and maleficence inside her—then at last their souls would join for all eternity. If she failed, their uncompleted bond would drive Rain to madness and eventually death.

Yet even knowing that, Rain's love—intense and absolute—shone from his eyes as he approached, setting Ellysetta's senses aflame. She began to tremble. \*\*Shei'tan.\*\*

Luckily, before Ellysetta could embarrass herself, her young sister Lillis squealed and threw herself into Rain's arms, shattering the intoxicating spell holding Ellysetta captive.

"Will you take us flying again today, Rain?" Lillis's long eyelashes fluttered and her rosy lips curved in a beguiling smile. Only nine years old she might be, but Lillis Baristani had already honed her feminine wiles to an art.

"Oh! Yes! Yes! Please do!" Choosing natural exuberance over winsome guile, Lorelle bounded up, grabbed Rain's free hand and jumped up and down with excitement.

Ellie smothered a laugh. Lillis and Lorelle had shed their fear of Rain and his power. He had become part of their family. Which also meant he'd become a hapless male to be twined around their fingers.

Rain, in return, had learned how to relax around them and let them draw out the Fey-gentleness in his heart. Though he was a man who could slaughter his enemies without mercy, with the twins, he now laughed and smiled like a man who had never known darkness.

“Let us get you safely settled in your new home first, *ajianas*. Then I will take you both flying again.”

Of course, he still had to work on how to say no.

“Hooray! Hooray!” Lorelle threw up her arms and danced around him in enthusiastic circles.

“Can we have a new kitty in our new home?” Lillis asked, fluttering her lashes again. “Since we had to leave Love behind.”

Kieran had convinced the girls that Love the kitten, who had a terrible aversion to magic, would be miserable living in the Fading Lands or staying with them so close to the powerful magic of the Mists. They’d reluctantly agreed to leave Love behind in Celeria City.

Rain smiled. “A new kitten? I imagine Kieran and Kiel can arrange that. Perhaps one for each of you, hmm?”

Lillis strangled him with more hugs, then leapt out of his arms so she and her twin could run tell Kiel and Kieran they were going flying again and that Rain had said they could have a new kitten.

Ellie shook her head and watched them go. “One day you will have to learn the fine line between loving adoration and slavish devotion.”

He pressed a kiss on her palm. “Let me give them what gifts and freedoms I can. Their lives will soon have restriction enough. Teleos!” Rain lifted a hand to the Fey-eyed Celerian Great Lord, Devron Teleos, who stood beside the truemates Marissya and Dax v’En Solande, staring in silence at the place that was to be the Baristani family’s new home. “How long has it been since you’ve been to the Garreval?”

Teleos’s mouth drew down in a grimace. “I’ve made a point of visiting all my holdings at least once every year, but as you see, there’s not much to draw me here.”

Below, on the lower slopes of the Rhakis mountains, the remains of a once-great fortress rose from the tumbled rubble of silvery blue stone: Teleon, the former family seat of House Teleos. Even after a thousand years, its once-fabled beauty still lay shattered and abandoned, its Fey-spun towers and parapets crumbled, the remains covered in lichen and mosses and crowded with tufts of cliffgrass. A small stone outpost—crudely built and clearly mortal in origin—had been constructed atop a small hill at the base of the mountain, not far from the remains of what had once been a glorious gate into the walled city-fortress. Smoke curled up from a vent hole in the outpost’s small central hall.

Ellysetta tried to hide her dismay. This was her family’s new home?

As if hearing her thoughts, Lord Teleos said, “I feel a poor host for offering my guests so rude an accommodation.” The Celerian Great Lord, a descendant of Rain’s long-dead friend Shanis Teleos, eyed the remains of his once-great family estate with grim eyes. “Rain, are you sure the Feyreisa’s family would not be better served in one of my more respectable holdings?”

Rain smiled and shook his head, his straight, silky black hair sliding over his black-leather-clad shoulders. “*Nei*, this is perfect for our needs.”

“This was a place of great beauty once,” Lord Teleos said in a sorrowful voice. In the days

before the raising of the Mists, his family had been close friends of the Fey, and the many Fey ancestors in his family tree had left Devron and all his forebears stamped with Fey eyes, a glow to their skin, and lifespans much longer than those of pure mortals. Teleon, which had once been an estate of inestimable beauty, had been a gift from the Fey to their friends and kin in House Teleos.

“*Aiyah*, it was,” Marissya agreed. “I remember the terraced gardens with all their fountains. It reminded me of Dharsa.”

Lord Teleos regarded the ruins of his family estate with somber eyes.

“I always wished my ancestors had repaired it once the poison of the Wars was cleansed, but perhaps it’s best they never did. Mortal hands could never have done Teleon justice.” He sighed. “Some things, once lost, are better left in the past.”

Rain made a sound in his throat that sounded like something torn between a growl and a laugh. “And some things deserve to live again.” His eyes crinkled at the edges. “You did say we could make it habitable, Dev.”

Teleos’s brows drew together. “You mean to restore Teleon?”

“*Aiyah te nei.*” Yes and no. And on that mysterious note, Rain smiled and said, “Come. I think you will find you are not so poor a host as you fear.”

Brimming with curiosity, Marissya, Dax, Teleos and Ellysetta followed Rain as he led them the final half mile to the foot of the mountains.

Near the gate of the small outpost, and stationed along its outer wall, two dozen armored Celerian soldiers stood at attention. To a man, they sported snarling tairen’s-head helmets and white tabards edged with scarlet and emblazoned with the arms of House Teleos: a golden tairen rampant on a white field with a rising red sun. Pennants of white, scarlet and gold fluttered in the breeze.

They passed through the open gate, but when Lord Teleos would have headed for the main hall in the center, Rain stopped him. “*Nei*, Dev, not that way.”

Bel ran up just as the small party rounded the corner of the hall and started towards the back wall. Ellysetta turned to greet him, only to find him frowning up at the mountain towering over the back wall of the outpost. The shimmering radiance of the Mists was very bright, like a shadow made of light rather than darkness. Though mortal eyes would not see it, the whole mountainside glowed and rippled with undulating bands of magic.

Rain turned to cast a glance over his shoulder and smiled at Bel’s perplexed look. The rear stone wall of the outpost lay before him. Rain took another step. The air around him rippled like water in a pond.

With one more stride, Rain passed through the wall and disappeared from view.

“Spit and scorch me,” Dev breathed. He glanced at Marissya and Dax, then charged after Rain, plunging headfirst into what seemed like solid stone. The air rippled again, and Lord Teleos vanished too.

“Spirit weave,” Kiel said, his eyes sweeping over the mountainside. There was no sign of Rain or Lord Teleos, only the rear wall of the outpost and, beyond that, the tumbled remains of Teleon scattered across the mountainside, tufts of cliff grass and stands of hardy mountain trees waving in the breeze.

“Scorching clever one,” Bel said. “They’re using the magic-shadow off the Mists to mask

the energy of the weave. Not even a Spirit master would see it until he was almost on top of it.”

“Well?” Kieran said with an eager grin. He held out a hand to Lillis. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go see what’s behind the weave.”

With a burbling laugh, she stuck her hand in his and they ran up the trampled path after Rain and Teleos. Lorelle grabbed Kiel’s hand and yanked the Water master with her as she darted forward in hot pursuit.

Ellysetta, Bel and Sol followed close behind, and when they stepped through the rippling wall of illusion and cast eyes on the sight beyond, Ellysetta’s jaw dropped open in stunned wonder.

“Bright Lord save me,” Sol whispered, staring awestruck at the gleaming magnificence before him. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful.”

“It’s like a magical palace from a Fey tale,” she breathed.

They were standing at the open, arching gate of an immense mountain fortress of unparalleled grace and beauty. Silvery blue stone soared high into the sky in a dazzling display of Fey artistry and architecture. Crenellated walls gave way to lush, gracefully terraced gardens bursting with trees, fountains, fragrant shrubs and flowers. Pennants in the bold colors of House Teleos fluttered in the breeze from every tower and along the series of interior walls that ringed up the mountainside and circled the upper keep with level after level of protection and silvery blue beauty.

“Ellie! Papa! Come look!” Lillis and Lorelle stood in the center of a small grassy park nestled against the second inner wall. They laughed and danced beneath the graceful, arching branches of cherry blossom trees as pale pink petals rained softly down upon them. Kieran and Kiel stood nearby, watching the children with indulgent smiles.

Lord Teleos stood dumbstruck at Rain’s side as Ellysetta and Sol crossed the lower courtyard to join the twins. “You did it,” he said. “You restored her to her former beauty.”

“Not completely,” Rain admitted. He dragged his gaze away from Ellysetta and the children and gave Devron Teleos his full attention. “A number of the gardens and buildings on the middle levels are still just Spirit weaves, but the walls and gates are real, and defensible, as is the manor at the top.”

“Even so...this is an amazing feat. How did you manage it?”

“Three thousand Fey stand guard at the great war-castles of Chatok and Chakai beyond the Mists. While we journeyed across Celieria, they came through the Mists to prepare a suitable home for the Feyreisa’s family. And to prepare Teleon for battle once more.”

Lord Teleos turned to him in surprise. “You think the Eld will strike here? With the Mists blocking any hope of entrance to the Fading Lands?”

Rain looked across the flagstone-cobbled courtyard to the lower garden, where Ellysetta, Sol and the twins were inspecting a marble fountain of dancing maidens whose slender, upstretched fingers rained veils of clear water into a small pond.

His expression lost any hint of softness. “If the Eld come,” he said, “I doubt it will be passage through the Mists they’re after.”