

Chapter One

She frowned, contemplating her choices, considering well. Lives depended on her choice, especially her own.

A blade? Or a mace?

Lady Bethral, Warder of the Castle of Edenrich and Protector of Her Majesty, Queen Gloriana, the Chosen of Palins, tightened the last of the buckles on her armor as she looked over the rack of weapons at her disposal.

“Don’t see why you bother even pretending,” Oris grumbled from behind her, his deep voice echoing off the stone walls of her office. “You’re gonna take the mace.”

Bethral looked over her shoulder at the older man, and raised an eyebrow. He shrugged, lifting his chin to meet her eyes. “You always do.”

“It’s true, Lady,” Alad chimed in. The younger man was nearer her height and could look her straight in the eye. He gave her one of his boyish grins, his blond hair falling into his eyes.

Bethral shrugged, then turned back and pulled the mace off the rack, securing it to her belt. “I like the feel of a mace.”

“Can’t understand why,” Oris said. “A blade’s a better choice. What if . . .”

Bethral ignored him as she checked her saddle-had bags for the final time. Oris was a good man of strong opinion. He did his job well, and if he voiced his opinion of weapons once in a while, it was fair enough.

“There’s times you need to slash, then there’s times you need to hack away,” Oris continued.

Alad sighed, and rolled his eyes.

Bethral looked around her office. Odd how things had turned out. She’d gone from simple mercenary to this in less than a year’s passing.

There was a grumbling sound from the window-sill. The ugly barn cat roused itself, stretching in the sun as it woke from its third nap of the morning. Red Gloves had once said that it looked like a soured boil with its mottled fur. Bethral wasn’t sure that was true, but it wasn’t the loveliest creature, that was certain.

The cat yawned, showing all its teeth, then started to wash its face.

“Then there’s stabbing,” Oris continued. “What good is a mace if you need to run something through? I ask you—”

In less than a year’s time, Bethral had gained a battle mare, a barn cat, and plate armor that other warriors could only dream of. She’d fought beside the Chosen to challenge the usurper for the Throne of Palins, and had stood at Gloriana’s side as she claimed the throne.

She had lost her sword-sister, though. Red Gloves had left before the coronation. Bethral had offered to go with her, but Red had stopped her with a simple question.

“Now who’s avoiding the call to adventure?”

Bethral wasn’t sure she’d made the right choice that night. But here she was, and here she’d serve, until there was no longer a need for her services.

But for now, she’d a task at hand.

Bethral sighed as she picked up her helmet, and slung her saddle-bags over her shoulder.

The cat roused itself, then leapt to the floor to twine around her legs.

“You’ll see to the Queen’s safety while I’m gone?” Bethral rounded on Oris, cutting off his speech.

Oris and Alad both glowered at her. “Been doing it since she was a bit of a thing, back at Auxter’s farm.” Oris stiffened, his face getting red. “No reason to think I’ll do anything else.”

“True enough.” Bethral nodded to both men. “But she’s no longer a child you need to watch over. She’s the Chosen, the newly crowned Queen, and new to the throne. If any were to—”

“They won’t,” Alad said firmly.

“Our oaths on it,” Oris added. “They’d have to take our blood before hers would spill.”

Bethral nodded, and stepped past them to the door of her office. She’d be gone only a day or two at most. “Then escort the Queen to the courtyard. I’ll stop in the kitchens first.”

Oris and Alad gave her a bow, and headed off to the Queen’s chambers.

Bethral stood for a moment, thinking. Oris was right, there were times a blade was handy.

She returned to the racks and grabbed her sword. Oris would snort when he saw both weapons on her belt, but that was fine. Hope for the best. Plan for the worst.

Bethral strode back to the door. Her saddle-bags were packed well enough, but some trail rations would not go amiss. Just in case.

The kitchens were busy, with servants headed this way and that, carrying trays and pots of kav. The nobility usually broke their fasts in their rooms, summoning food and drink. The staff would have already eaten, and were now about the business of the morning.

Bethral paused, waited for a serving girl to ease through the door with her tray, and then slipped in behind her. If she was lucky, he'd be . . .

She was in luck. He was there.

Ezren Storyteller, also known as Ezren Silvertongue, was not one to eat in his room. He preferred the kitchens, with their wide hearths, warm baking ovens, and servants' gossip.

He was careful to tuck in near the hearth, where he'd not get in the way of those busy with their tasks. The room smelled of warm bread, and there was hot whispering of the comings and goings of the noble lords and ladies.

Ezren stayed quiet, enjoying his bowl of pot oats sweetened with honey and cream, a mug of kav near at hand. He'd made it his habit to rise early and take this place, letting none serve him in bed like a lord. No, this was far more comfortable and far more worth-while. Queen Gloriana needed his aid, and knowledge was valuable. Very valuable.

"More kav, Storyteller?" one of the cooks asked, holding out a fresh pot.

"Always," Ezren swore.

The cook laughed, and poured. "They'll be trussing up a carcass on the spit soon, for tonight's dinner. Mind your clothes when they bring it in. The lads always get blood all over everything."

"I'll have a care." Ezren smiled at her and took a sip. He'd have to leave soon, anyway. Evelyn and Blackhart were departing this morning, and Ezren wanted to bid them farewell.

Of course, Lord Marlon would be there as well, for he was going to open the portal for them. Ezren would have preferred not to come into the man's presence, because Marlon was

firmly convinced that Ezren needed to die, and by his hand.

Ezren sighed, catching a glimpse of the manacles that he wore hidden under his sleeves. The Lady High Priestess Evelyn had given them to him, and explained their nature. They absorbed magic, including the wild magic that cursed him. Evelyn had been chained with them when she'd been captured.

He'd resisted them at first. Too many memories of his enslavement. But at Evelyn's urging he'd put them on, and felt the pressure in his chest ease. Without the chains, they appeared to be heavy bracelets. And they did conceal the scarring around his wrists. Still, they made him uneasy. As if, at any moment, he'd find himself . . .

Ezren frowned at his breakfast. If wearing the manacles rendered the wild magic null, it was worth the cost. The people around him were safe. For now.

Evelyn had told him last night that she had learned they were only a temporary measure. The manacles would not last forever. Eventually they'd absorb all the magic they could, and crumble into so much dust.

Well, that was for another day. For now, Ezren needed to finish eating. He took another sip of kav and then froze.

She was here. In the kitchen.

He kept the mug up, using it to cover his face as he let his eyes scan the room. They caught a sparkle of light off plate, and a glint of golden hair. There, between the kitchen and the pantry.

Lady Bethral.

It was just a glimpse, and then she was gone, disappearing into the shadows of the room

beyond. Moving like a silent spirit, even in full armor.

His . . .no . . . an Angel of Light, who had rescued him and saved his life. Lord of Light, Lady of Laughter, she was lovely. Tall, powerful, with hair like gold and blue eyes like a spring sky . . . and not for the likes of him.

The kav tasted suddenly went bitter in his mouth. Why would she give him a second look? Whipped, scarred, a man unable to save himself from being enslaved. No real skill with sword or dagger, and no equal to her. A storyteller with a broken voice, no longer able to enthrall an audience, much less a woman of her--

“Lord Ezren?”

Ezren turned from his thoughts and saw one of the palace clerks hurrying toward him. “Lord, there is some question concerning damages done at the Flying Pig Tavern last night. The men were there at your expense, and the innkeeper has presented this bill . . .” The man held out a roll of parchment.

Ezren stifled a curse at the amount. “Blackhart’s men. It has to be. Let us go talk with this innkeeper.”

Bethral paused in the doorway and watched as Ezren held his mug out to the cook, his green eyes sparkling. Something he said made the cook laugh.

She’d been out of her mind when she’d bought him for a copper.

She and Red Gloves had been on their way to another city, looking for anyone who’d hire their blades. Her sword-sister had been frothing at the mouth as they’d purchased supplies, all because a goat-herder had told her a prophecy about her birth-mark. Red had not liked that one

bit.

The slavers had thrown the man down to the platform in the slave market, offering him as meat for dogs. Blind with rage, Bethral had flipped the copper coin onto the platform, and then eased him up and over her shoulder. Her sword-sister had squawked like a chicken, but Bethral had just turned on her heel and walked away before she'd killed a slaver. Or two.

She'd leave no man to that death, no matter how impulsive or crazy her purchase had been. Red had complained, but she'd fought their pursuers as Bethral had mounted and fled, the slave in her arms.

The cook moved off, and Bethral slipped into the pantry, not wanting to be caught staring. She took a deep breath of the herb-scented air, then went to where the dried meat and hard biscuits were kept. Bethral grabbed one of the small cloth sacks on the shelf and busied herself filling it.

She'd lost her heart when Ezren had opened his green eyes and stared at her, cradled in her arms and safe from their pursuers. She'd caught her breath at the secrets those eyes held even as he slipped back into unconsciousness.

Bethral had stayed in Edenrich to see if there was a chance that those green eyes might focus on her.

Ezren Silvertongue had recovered with the aid of magical healing and a grim determination to survive what had been done to him.

Beaten, abused, he'd been as close to death as any man Bethral had seen on the battlefield. But even with his tongue cut from his throat, he'd clung to life with a strength of will that astonished her. And his voice . . .

Bethral had been told that his voice had changed, but all she knew was that his voice sent a small thrill down her spine every time she heard him speak.

Which wasn't often. For Lord Silvertongue had immersed himself in the Court once again, rejoining the life he had lost during his captivity. In particular, he seemed very adept at avoiding her.

Bethral shrugged. What was, was. She could no more change than that barn cat could change the color of its fur. At least she caught glimpses of him occasionally. If she was careful, she could stand in the shadows and listen to him talk to others. And if the day came that he courted and won a lady of the Court, well . . .

She'd deal with that when the time came.

Bethral sighed, and slipped back through the kitchen without drawing attention to herself. Time to meet Gloriana in the courtyard and then be on her way.

The bright sun blinded Bethral as she stepped through the double-doors and into the courtyard.

A quick sweep of the area told her that her orders had been obeyed. Lady High Priestess Evelyn stood off to the side with Orrin Blackhart, who was talking to his men as they clustered near their horses.

The walls were manned, and the guards at the gates of the courtyard were at attention.

Bethral felt a pang of envy that she hoped did not show on her face. Evelyn had found her love, and had fought her way to his side with an unshaken faith in him, despite his past.

"Is it safe?" A soft voice came from behind her.

Bethral glanced back, giving the young girl behind her a nod. "All's well, Your Majesty."

Gloriana nodded in return, then started across the courtyard toward Evelyn. Oris and Alad waited by the door, watchful in their own right.

Bethral frowned slightly as she watched the two women hug. This would be a hard day for Gloriana, having to say farewell to the woman who had raised her for over half her life. Evelyn was leaving this day to return to the Black Hills, taking over as the Guardian until the new High Baron could be named.

Hard for the girl, who sat so new on her throne. Bethral frowned again, not sure that her decision to leave for a few days was wise. The bandits who were harassing the main road into the City needed to be stopped, but . . .

Bethral's men were gathered at the other side of the courtyard, near the stables, preparing to ride with her. One was leading her horse, Bessie. The roan mare stepped out with pride, her barding gleaming in the bright sun. Bethral chuckled softly to see the cat walk over to the horse and rub against a foreleg. Bessie nuzzled the small creature, giving it a welcoming chuckle.

Bethral turned back to her duty, and followed Gloriana, focusing on Blackhart's men. She didn't know them well, and it paid to be watchful.

Gloriana was still hugging Evelyn. "All we need now is High Mage Marlon."

"My father is not known for his promptness." Evelyn returned the hug with a warm smile.

But Bethral's attention had been caught by one of Blackhart's men. The sight of him confused her. What was he doing in Palins? A big black man, dark of skin, his face and arms

covered in ritual scars. Bethral was willing to bet the scars also covered his chest. “Greetings, warrior,” Bethral said in a tongue she had not spoken in many years. “You are far from the Plains.”

The black man's eyes went wide. “You know my—”

A sound from behind her, and without turning Bethral knew that Ezren had come out of the Castle. He emerged into the light, blinking and looking about. “Blackhart”— Ezren's voice cracked as it rang out over the courtyard — “about your men and their activities.” Ezren started across the courtyard.

“Uh-oh,” said the short man.

“Told you not to put it on account,” the tall one said.

Bethral had been about to turn, but stopped at the sight of the black man's face. It turned ashen, his eyes wide as he stared at Ezren.

“About these charges” — Ezren came right up to them, the roll of parchment in his hand. -- “it seems— . . .” Before he could finish, he stopped with a gasp, as if in pain, clutching at his chest. “What—”

Bethral risked a glance his way as Evelyn reached for him. “Ezren, what's wrong?”

Ezren yanked back his sleeve, revealing one of the manacles of a spell chain. Bethral frowned; the metal band looked like day-old bread, crumbling off Ezren's wrist.

A -‘pop’-, and High Mage Marlon appeared out of nowhere. “Ready?” he said. “I can't be all day—”

White-hot flames surged around Ezren, exploding with power.

Ezren pressed his hands over his heart, the roll of parchment falling from his hands. He

stumbled back as the manacles crumbled away. With a cry he collapsed in the center of the courtyard, barely able to keep his head up. “No, no, no,” he rasped.

With a roar, more light surged up from his chest, a huge column of light and fire that started to spin. A wave of heat and force washed over the courtyard, knocking everyone off their feet and sending the horses into fits.

Fear surged through Bethral, fear for Ezren, but her training made her lunge for Gloriana.

The power had begun to turn, spiraling in on itself, with a sound like a thousand running horses. The very stones beneath them vibrated with its fury.

“Rogue!” Marlon bellowed. The big man was on the ground, his silk robes spilled around him like a deflated tent. Bethral wedged Gloriana behind his bulk, and stuffed her between them.

Ezren had rolled to his side, and Bethral caught the glint of his green eyes. White-hot power flared about his body, and the sound grew louder. The power lashed out, hitting the area around him. His eyes closed, and he started convulsing on the cobblestones.

Terror caught Bethral's throat. If his wild magic had gone rogue, everyone in the courtyard would die, including Ezren.

Bethral caught the glance between Marlon and Evelyn, saw Evelyn stop her apprentice from aiding Ezren. Her heart contracted in her breast. Marlon was going to kill Ezren. He was staring at Ezren, reaching out as if to--

Bethral raised up on her knees, reached over and jerked Marlo's arm to the side. “NO!”

Marlon didn't struggle. He just turned on his side to look up at her. “He'll kill us all.”

No. Not while she breathed. She needed to get him away, away from the City, from

people. No matter the cost. Bethral jerked her head up and caught Evelyn's gaze. "Open a portal," she screamed. "As far distant as you can."

The wind whipped at their hair and clothes, and the fury of the power grew.

Evelyn shook her head. "You'll be killed."

As if that mattered. Bethral released Marlon's hand, still focused on the priestess. "As far, as remote as you can," she yelled. "Where he'll not kill anyone else."

To her relief, Marlon nodded to Evelyn. They'd do it. She just had to get Ezren up and through the portal. Bethral took a deep breath, but before she could stand, a pale hand grabbed her arm.

She looked down, and saw Gloriana staring up at her, her brown hair tossed by the winds. "Bethral, no, no! Don't leave me!"

There wasn't time. Bethral had to choose, and she had made that choice long ago. She rose to her feet, fighting the winds. Marlon reached out and wrapped his arms around Gloriana, keeping her down. He was talking, but she was protesting, struggling against him.

The power lashed out, as if understanding Bethral's intent, striking cobblestones with white shards of lightning, as if the magic itself sensed a threat.

A portal appeared behind the fury, its soft curtains a contrast to the chaos around them. It waivered, then solidified as Evelyn and her apprentice concentrated.

Bethral did not look back. She fought her way forward through the waves of raging power around Ezren. The flares danced around her, striking her again and again. She took the blows as she reached his side.

He wasn't dead. Bethral gasped in relief. But he was unconscious, his face turned up to

the sky, barely breathing. Once again, as she had that fateful day, she reached for Ezren Storyteller, to lift him from the ground.

But this was no starved shadow of a man. She staggered as she gathered him into her arms, heaving him over her shoulder.

The winds grew wilder still, their roaring almost a scream in her ears. They battered at her, as if to tear Ezren from her.

Bethral bared her teeth, took a step, and then another, trying to walk into the portal. But the magic threw itself at her, and when she tried to step forward, she staggered again, almost falling. Bethral wept in frustration as she strained. She had to--

Bessie was beside her, snorting, nervous, her nostrils flared. Terrified, but standing firm. The cat was on all fours, claws hooked in the saddle-bags, every inch of fur standing on end, mouth open in what had to be a hiss of defiance.

Bethral reached for the saddle, pulling herself up and over in one smooth move. Ezren slid off her shoulder, but somehow she managed to keep him in her arms.

The light, the wild magic surged around them. Ezren's entire body convulsed and Bethral struggled to keep her hold. She leaned forward, and cried out to Bessie. "Heyla! Heyla, girl, go! Go!"

Bessie gathered her hind legs, and started forward.

The raging fury lashed out, striking both at the portal, and behind them. A thick strand of impossibly bright white whipped out. Bethral glanced back, saw the strand lashing at the others. It would kill--

The big black man stepped in front of them, naked from the waist up. He stood, arms

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wide, shouting, "That which was lost is now found!"

Bessie moved, and Bethral's attention returned to the portal that danced before them. The roan leapt forward, as commanded, bolting into the portal. They surged straight through the raw power. For just a moment, Bethral saw open skies and smelled the scent of wild flowers.

Then the world disappeared in a flash of white. Bethral cried out as Bessie slipped out from under her legs, as Ezren tumbled from her arms.

Bethral fell as well, smashing into pain and the deep darkness of her own failure.

Chapter Two

Gilla's heart stopped when the sky tore open above the Plains.

She'd been tending to the gurt drying racks, turning the pebbles of hard cheese so that they dried evenly. It was boring, a child's task, not fit for one of her maturity. But she'd gritted her teeth and done it nonetheless, because being an adult meant that you did what had to be done without protest, now didn't it?

She cast a quick glance behind her to see if anyone was watching her be responsible. But none of the Elders were in sight.

She sighed as she moved to the next rack, shooing gurtles out of her way. A few had

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wandered between the racks, looking for sweet grass. "Muwap." One of them shook its head, protesting. This part of the herd had just been shorn, and they looked funny, stripped of their fur.

Gilla sighed again as she continued her chore. It was spring on the Plains. Soon, within days, the theas would be releasing the young adult warriors to seek out the armies of the warlords for service, and she'd qualify, if they felt she was ready. And she was more than ready, more than. . . .

The sky crackled. The hair on Gilla's arms stirred, as before a summer storm. The land shook with a pounding of thunder, under a cloudless open sky. She looked up and saw the blue sky tear open to show a white glow beyond.

Her heart froze, the gurtles stilled, everything was silent for a long moment. The edges of the tear pulsed above her, as if waiting.

In the next breath, a horse jumped through the tear, as if clearing the banks of some unseen shore. Gilla had a brief glimpse of two people, one astride in armor, one cradled in the other's arms as they hung there in mid-air.

They fell in the next instant, plummeting down, loose and free-falling, and disappeared in the tall grass.

The rip in the sky exploded with light, and disappeared.

"Muwap! Muwap!" The gurtles around her exploded into action. Gurtles feared what they did not know, and once feared, all they knew was '-away-', as fast as their hooves could carry them. Gilla grabbed at the nearest rack and struggled to stay upright as the gurtles bolted by her, bleating their warnings and running straight through camp.

Cries arose from the tents behind her, but Gilla did not glance that way. She kept her

eyes on where the enemy had fallen, and warbled a cry to summon warriors to face this threat. She waited as the last of the gurtles ran past, then drew her dagger, and started forward.

The young grasses were already springing back as she moved, their flowers torn and shredded by the gurtle hooves. She got low, taking what cover she could, and crawled toward the enemy, the hilt of her dagger in her hand, the blade pressed to her forearm. She'd worn her armor this morning, as a warrior should, and her blade was sharp and ready. Her heart beat faster as she moved closer. . . .

The horse staggered to its feet, shaking its head. It was huge, a big roan, and wearing armor the like of which she'd never seen, although she recognized the saddlebags. The animal stood there, its legs splayed out, head low, as if exhausted. Amazing that it hadn't broken a leg in the fall.

Gilla watched for a moment, then eased the grasses back in front of her face, keeping a careful eye on the horse. There'd be others coming, but she wanted to be able to report the danger. She needed to see. . . .

Her blood singing in her ears, she slowly raised her head. Two people were sprawled in the grass. The one with the armor . . . Gilla winced at the sight of that one's leg. Twisted like that, it had to be broken.

The other figure stirred, groaned, and sat up, his hand raised to his head. He was hurt as well, but there was no blood that Gilla could see. No armor, no weapons either.

He saw the other person, and cried out something, then crawled over to remove the helmet. Bright blond hair spilled out, and Gilla could see the still, slack face of a woman. The man grew distraught as he examined her, and raised his head to look around.

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Gilla sucked in a breath as his bright green eyes stared directly into her brown ones.

Ezren Silvertongue awoke to pain.

A dull pain, as if his entire body had been wrung out like a cloth. It hurt to breathe, hurt to move. He had known beatings in the time he had been enslaved, and thought he had learned every manner of ways that a body could hurt.

He had been wrong.

Ezren concentrated on breathing for a moment, keeping his eyes closed. He was conscious of the sweet smell of grass crushed beneath him, warm sun and a gentle spring breeze on his skin. Which was wrong. He was not sure exactly why, but it should be cold. . . .

A rasping purr and a wet nose in his ear made him jerk upright.

Lord of Light, that hurt. He wrapped an arm around his stomach and groaned. But the next breath was easier, and the next after that.

The hideous cat from the barn, the one that had attached itself to Bethral's warhorse, sat next to him. With its mottled coat of black, brown, yellow, and a kind of green, it almost blended into the shadows in the grass. Its watery yellow eyes stared at him unwaveringly. Accusingly.

Ezren frowned, staring back. Last he recalled, he had been in the kitchens of the Castle of Edenrich, being presented with a bill for damages at the Flying Pig Tavern. He had taken it up, and gone to confront the miscreants, but now. . . .

He looked out on nothing but grass and wildflowers, as far as the eye could see. Wide blue sky that stretched from horizon to horizon and filled his vision. His heart skipped a beat at

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the sight. He had never felt so exposed as at this moment; one man in an ocean of grass. He looked down, trying to steady himself.

The cat stirred, and slipped into the grass. Ezren watched it go, and then lifted his eyes and saw—

Bethral, sprawled on the ground like a broken doll.

“Bethral.” He lurched onto his knees and crawled to her side, ignoring the rough grass that cut his hands and the pain that lanced through his bones.

She was still as death, and pale, so pale under her helmet. He fell at her side, and pressed his fingers to her neck. *Please, Lady of Laughter, let her not be dead.*

She lived. Her heart still beat.

Relief flooded through Ezren as he fumbled with the chin strap, then eased the helm from her head. Bright gold hair spilled out, covering the ground and his hands with its silken glory.

Lady of Laughter, she was lovely.

He had called her an angel once, one of the Angels of the Light, come to escort him to paradise. He had thought himself dead at that time, and had opened his eyes to find himself in a small hut with an angel at his bedside. He had never called her that again, unable, unwilling to try to place any claim upon her. But in all truth she was glorious to look on. Her lovely face, and those bright blue eyes.

Eyes now closed, in a face pale and still. Crumpled, broken, her leg twisted.

Ezren swallowed hard, and looked out at the emptiness around him in bleak despair.

And straight into the startled brown eyes of a young girl hiding in the tall grass.

Gilla lowered her head and started to scabble back fast, crawling away from the man.

She was so stupid, to be seen like that. She'd—

A firm hand grasped her ankle, and Gilla froze.

The hand squeezed once, and Gilla breathed again. She looked back and saw Urte's calm face. Relief washed over her. Urte was an elder. She'd know what to do.

Urte crawled forward, followed by Helpers, his dark face so serious. Both in leather armor, armed and grim. Relief flooded through her. Helpers was also a strong warrior, his skill with a sword well known.

They came up on either side of Gilla, until their heads were level. "Report," Urte whispered.

"Two people, a man and a woman. A horse, too." Gilla spoke fast. "Urte, they fell from the sky!"

"I saw," Urte offered reassurance. "Continue."

"They are not of the Plains. They seem hurt. The woman and horse wear armor. No weapons that I saw. Something small moved at the man's side, but I didn't see it clear." Gilla stopped. "He saw me, Urte. I—"

Urte's look silenced her. "Did he attack you?"

"No." Gilla shook her head.

"What does that matter?" Helpers whispered. "They are not of the Plains, and therefore must die."

Urte ignored him and considered the path Gilla had left in the grass. "The horse. Hurt?"

"It's up, legs splayed. It looks exhausted." Gilla said.

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“Helpers, to the right. Make no move until I give the command.”

Helpers grunted, and wormed off through the grass.

Urte started to crawl as well, angling away from Gilla's path. Gilla sighed. She'd be ordered back, she just knew it and wouldn't get to see anything.

Urte looked back at her. “Go back up there, and wait for my command.”

With a thrill of pride, Gilla obeyed.

The girl had disappeared but Ezren suspected she had gone to summon others. Frankly, it was the least of his concerns.

He got to his feet slowly, easing up as his muscles protested. A pause to catch his breath, as pain and exhaustion washed over him. Then he staggered over to Bethral's horse.

Bessie stood motionless, her legs splayed, head hanging down. Poor beast. She didn't react as he pulled the saddle-bags and bedroll off her back, trying to get to the waterskin.

He cast a glance back toward Bethral, but she was still silent and motionless. She'd want him to see to her horse before anything else, so he knelt by Bessie's head and dug around for anything he could use. Finding a bowl, he filled it with water.

“Come, now,” he said softly, putting his wet hand under her nose. “Come on, Bessie.”

The cat emerged from the grass and started to rub against Bessie's foreleg, a deep rumble coming from its chest.

Bessie snorted, started to lick at Ezren's hand and then put her nose in the bowl. Ezren struggled to give her as much water as he could, but the bowl wasn't really deep enough for her to drink.

“Better?” he asked as Bessie lifted her head and straightened her legs.

It was all he could do for now. He crawled back to Bethral's side, dragging the waterskin, saddlebags and bedroll with him. He fumbled with the buckles and got the bedroll free. He settled the blankets around her as best he could. He didn't dare move her, but she'd stay warmer this way. Besides, he wasn't sure what else to do.

As he tucked the blanket around Bethral, Ezren used the concealment of the cover to pull one of Bethral's daggers from her belt. He stuffed it in the grass by his leg, out of sight but well within reach.

He settled back on his heels and looked down at her.

He doubted there was much in the way of healing supplies in the bags. What he wouldn't give for the Lady High Priestess and her healing magic to be standing next to him. But he might as well wish the Edenrich Castle would appear around them.

Not a bird in the air, yet the meadow larks seemed to be singing all around him. Ezren pulled the waterskin close and wet his fingers. He reached out and stroked Bethral's pale cheek, and blew gently on her face. “Lady Bethral, wake for me.”

No response.

“Lady Bethral.” Ezren tried to keep his voice soft, but the rasp of it grated in his ears. His finger traced a damp line over her forehead. “I have no clue where we are, or how we came to be here, but I need you to wake up, Lady. We both know that I am a man used to city comforts. You are a skilled warrior, Lady, used to the trials and travails of the wilds.”

Bessie jerked her head up, and snorted.

The grasses moved, and armored warriors rose to surround them, swords and lances in

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hand. One of them barked out something in a language that Ezren did not comprehend.

“I do not understand you,” he responded as he fumbled under the blanket for the dagger.

“Lady Bethral, wake for me.”

She was dreaming. She had to be. She'd heard that husky voice call her name only in soft, sweet dreams.

There was a dull throb in the background of her dream, and it seemed to be her leg. It was a promise of pain to come, and she recognized it well. She'd enough experience with injury to know not to move without learning more. She knew full well it would be bad.

Better to float, and listen to that voice.

But . . .

Duty called her forward, demanded that she respond. But she didn't want to answer. She wanted to listen to the dream, to pretend. . . .

Duty was a bitch.

A different voice spoke then, harsh, demanding, in a language she knew. Her eyes snapped open at the words, as fear surged over her.

“Intruders! Explain yourself, or die!”

Chapter Three

Ezren froze as Bethral spat a word, and then yanked him down to sprawl in the grass.

With one smooth move she sat up, took the dagger from his hand, and threw it.

Shouts came as the warriors dived for cover.

“*Bragnect!*” Bethral cried the word again as she twisted around, up on her good knee, drawing her other dagger. “Stay down,” she hissed, her face gray with pain as she scanned the grass that surrounded them. “How many?”

“At least four,” Ezren said, trying to remember to breathe as he stayed flat in the grass.

“I have no idea where we are—”

“The Plains,” Bethral cut him off, reaching for her helmet. “We need to get to my horse and—”

A voice shouted from the grass. Ezren stared at Bethral's face, watching as she hesitated, then called a response.

There was silence then, as if their enemy was considering her words.

“A reprieve?” Ezren whispered. “What is going on?”

“I confused them.” Bethral kept her voice low, and her dagger ready. “What happened before I woke?”

“I roused, got water for Bessie, and then tried to wake you when a child appeared in the grass—”

“Child?”

“A young girl. She disappeared as soon as she saw me.”

“A thea camp, then,” Bethral mused. “Not a war camp.” She glanced at Ezren, then back out at the grasses. “The ‘children’ here can be as deadly as the adults.”

“Lady, how did we get here?” Ezren asked. “I remember . . . I was upset. Something about a bill for damages . . .”

Bethral snorted. “Blackhart’s men. You came out into the courtyard—”

“There was a man, a black man, standing there, covered in scars.” Ezren paused as it came flooding back. “Lord of Light, the wild magic flared. Those manacles—”

“Failed.” Bethral nodded. “They crumbled away to nothing.”

“It is a wonder that the Lord Mage Marlon did not kill me.”

“I stopped him,” Bethral didn’t look at Ezren. “When it looked as if the wild magic would destroy us, Evelyn opened a portal, and I brought you through.” Her blue eyes flickered in his direction. “How do you feel?”

“Sore.” Ezren frowned. “I am not sure why.”

“You were wracked by convulsions,” Bethral said calmly. “But I meant the magic. Do

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you feel like it will flare again?"

"No." Ezren put his hand to his heart, but felt nothing. "It is quiet. It would appear that I owe you yet again, Lady. It seems—"

A voice called out a question from the grass. From the tone, Ezren could tell it was making a demand.

Bethral replied. From the sound of her inflection, she was making demands of her own.

The voice responded.

Bethral grunted. "It seems we might have a chance, after all. Help me with this. I need to remove the plate from my right arm."

Ezren rose carefully to his knees. "What if they attack while—"

"They promised not to." Bethral gave him an odd look. "While they have odd ways, they have honor, Storyteller."

He did not doubt that, but didn't say anything. He rose to his knees. "How do we get this off?"

"There's two straps." She held out her arm for him, all of her weight on her good knee. This close, he could hear the pain in her rough breathing. "Just under there."

Ezren fumbled a bit, but the piece came off to reveal the thick, quilted gambeson beneath.

"Cut it." Bethral handed him her dagger. "At the seam, if you can."

Ezren sliced the sleeve at the shoulder.

"Help me up." Bethral clenched her jaw. Ezren slipped her arm over his shoulder and helped her to stand. He wrapped his arm around her waist, and let her brace herself against his hip.

Once she was stable, Bethral glanced his way. "For now, stay silent. I'll explain this later, I swear."

"I will hold you to that, Lady." Ezren whispered.

Bethral called out to their unseen enemies, then reached around and tore her sleeve down to display her upper arm. Ezren glanced over, surprised to see a row of tattoos. There were two columns of four lines each, black ink against her skin.

A warrior rose from the grasses and stepped forward slowly, showing empty hands. Ezren watched as she approached. Bethral tensed, but took no further action. Together, they waited as the woman came close, and studied Bethral's arm.

Bethral held her breath until the warrior stepped back and smiled. "So now those of the Plains fall from the skies? There's a song here, I am certain."

Bethral sagged a bit against the Storyteller, and felt him take her weight easily. "And long in the telling."

The woman considered both of them. "Bethral of the Horse, I am Urte of the Snake." She tilted her head to one side. "You missed with the dagger."

"No," Bethral said, keeping her gaze on Urte. "I did not."

Urte barked a laugh. "Is this one also of the Plains?" She jerked her chin at Ezren.

"No," Bethral said. She could only hope she remembered the right words. "He is Ezren Storyteller, honored Singer of Palins."

Ezren frowned when he heard his name, but said nothing.

"Palins." Urte's eyes flicked off to the distance and back. "Far from his home, then."

What is he to you?"

Bethral bit her lip. Never had the temptation to lie been so strong within her. She'd always believed that honesty was the best course, but . . . how she wanted to claim him as her own. Instead, she chose a phrase that those of the Plains would understand even if Ezren Storyteller did not. "I am his token-bearer. We know not how we came here, and our only wish is to depart in peace."

With that, the pain hit her hard. Bethral's vision grayed.

"Ah, where is my courtesy?" Urte moved to help Ezren lower Bethral to the ground. "Sit, warrior of the Plains. I have sent for our elders."

Ezren lowered Bethral to the ground, keeping a careful eye on the strange warrior.

"Reprieve?"

Bethral was pale, taking deep breaths. There was a faint sheen of sweat on her face.

"Yes. They have sent for their . . . leaders."

"Lady," Ezren said as he knelt at her side. The woman warrior knelt as well, but her attention was focused into the distance.

"My mother was of the Plains." Bethral answered his unspoken question. "The tattoos on my arm mark my . . . lineage. My membership in the tribes. She taught all of us children the language and the ways of the Plains." A chuckle escaped her, sounding more like a sob. "I am going to wish I had paid better attention to my lessons."

"We need to get you to a healer." Ezren leaned over and pulled the blanket across the grass to throw it over her shoulders.

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“As to that,” Bethral drew a shuddering breath. “Storyteller, listen to me. They have no healing.”

“Nonsense.” Ezren shook out the blanket. “Of course they have healing. What do they do when someone is hurt or injured?”

“They kill themselves.”

Ezren froze, looking at her. “That is madness.”

Bethral sighed as he pulled the blanket around her. “Storyteller, do yourself a favor. Assume they are right.”

“What?”

“They live in a harsh land, and they live by very different rules. But they live - even prosper. If you want to live, best to accept their ways.”

“And you?” Ezren's voice grated in his throat.

Bethral shook her head. “They are a nomadic warrior people and they have no supplies or time to waste on the wounded. I'll be expected to—”

The woman warrior called out, waving her arm over her head. Two warriors appeared on horseback, headed in their direction.

Bethral tried to sit up as a sign of respect, but Urte pressed a hand to her shoulder.

“Stay.”

The two elders rode close, and dismounted, walking through the grass toward them. An older man, wearing armor that was a mixture of leather and chain. His skin brown and wrinkled, and he was as bald as could be. His eyes were bright blue and considering.

The other was a woman, also tanned, her hair a bright white. Her armor seemed of even better quality, with more chain than leather. Her brown eyes focused on Bethral's arm. They both drew closer.

Bethral extended her arm for consideration, and the woman took her wrist, and studied the tattoos. The woman wet her thumb, and smeared it over the markings. Bethral suppressed a shiver at dampness on her skin.

"So," the woman said, "it appears you are truly of the Plains, for all that you fell from the sky. I am Haya of the Snake, Elder Thea."

"I am Seo of the Fox, Elder Warrior," the man added. "We greet you, Bethral of the Horse, and offer you and the Singer shelter within our tents."

Safe. He was safe, for now. Bethral dropped her gaze. "Thank you, Elders."

Haya grunted, as if pleased. Seo paused, and considered Bethral's leg. "Although, it would be better, perhaps, that our tent comes to you." He turned, and shouted for others to bring supplies. Warriors went running at his commands.

Ezren still knelt next to Bethral, watching the faces of those around him.

"Your injury, it's a bad one, eh?" Haya asked.

Bethral nodded. "It is, Elder. But I must see to the Singer's safety before I go to the snows."

"As to that," Seo said, "there is time for talk, Warrior."

"There have been . . . events," Haya added.

"Events?" Bethral asked.

"Change is in the wind, Warrior," Seo answered. "And none knows if it bodes ill or

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good.”

“Change?” Bethral blinked away the sweat. “On the Plains? But my mother said that the Plains is as the land. Unending and unchanging.”

Haya nodded her understanding. “So it is, and so it has always been. But now one has come that brings change with her.”

“Who?”

“A warprize.”