

Violet drifted unobtrusively away from the group once they had entered the inn. She was very tired of their conversation, which oscillated between the boorish banter of the three men and the condescending social commentary of the knight and the sorceress. A village like this, Maresbrook, was likely to elicit an extensive deconstruction from the latter, and the former would have no end of material, judging by the serving wenches flitting about.

It was late, and she was tired. She settled at one end of the bar, which was otherwise packed with farmers and village men, and watched the girl behind it pouring, and sometimes mixing, drinks.

Girl, Violet mused. That was a bit unfair. She was probably twenty-four or twenty-five, with a rope of dark hair halfway down her back and a figure that had most of the men at the bar watching her off and on as well. No, that was just the elven blood in her, which had her thinking of most people she ran into as young.

Violet turned her eyes back to the group she'd come in with briefly to make sure they were still there. The anticipated conversations were underway, judging by the look of things. The knight, Richard de Matin, bothered her the most. He looked his part – tallish, charming, mid-thirties, meticulously maintained blond hair. The people in the towns they passed through were all very obsequious; they seemed honored by his presence. But after two months, she was sick of him – the arrogance, the condescension, the miserliness.

Heloise Fontagne, the sorceress, Violet could almost forgive. She was raised more properly to be a lady-in-waiting, and travel through rural areas was just repugnant to her. A more gracious woman might have borne it better, but somehow that part of the curriculum just hadn't taken hold in the woman's mind. Had she been left in her native, more pampered surroundings, she would undoubtedly have been a much happier, and much more tolerable, companion.

The other two men Violet had just taken to avoiding altogether. Björn Eriksson was from up north somewhere, and his concept of acceptable interaction with females just boggled her. She had the feeling he had really spent much of his youth in a farming community much like the one they were currently in, and that he had picked up his barbarian warrior act sometime on his way south. The other man, Chester Forwythe, she avoided because he was a thief. He didn't advertise it, but it became blatantly obvious to her any time they entered a town big enough to have actual gutters and alleyways. She didn't have a lot that would interest him, but she didn't want him to notice the things that would.

The girl behind the bar had stopped in front of her, and Violet absent-mindedly ordered a drink. The group had come here to kill a dragon; something felt off about it. The village seemed too relaxed, too content, to have a dragon problem. But she didn't really need to worry about that, anyway. She wasn't going with them looking for it; they had just hired her to get them there faster than it would have taken them going around the Wenderham Bracken. The urgency seemed out of place now that they were here.

Over a few hours, the room thinned out, and Violet realized in the process of getting supper and several more drinks that the girl behind the bar never spoke. When most of the farmers had gone home, the girl had settled towards Violet's end of the bar. She motioned towards her ears when she saw Violet's eyes on her; after a moment the older woman realized she was asking about her elven blood.

"Nah, only half," Violet said quietly.

The girl's eyes shifted between Violet and the group she'd come in with once, then back.

"They just hired me to get them here," Violet shrugged. "One of that sad number of

stereotypical half-elven scouts.”

The girl drifted back down the bar again, and Violet sat a while longer, considering that. Most half-elves usually went into one parent or the other’s line of work – many were artisans, shopkeepers, or merchants. Most did, but she had been restless, and the little elven town where she’d grown up had been too boring for someone who wanted to see more of the world than the loom in her mother’s front room. If she’d realized what that ambition was going to do to her life, maybe she would have squelched it, but by now it was far too late.

She had a room on the second floor; the group would likely go out tomorrow, but she could sleep in. They hadn’t said how long they would be in town; perhaps it would take them a few days to root out the dragon. Violet didn’t really care, so long as they didn’t ask her to help. She had done her share of monster hunting decades ago; money notwithstanding, she wasn’t crazy enough to go back.

The front room of the inn was mostly empty when Violet came downstairs around noon the next day; a lone farmer and the group’s entourage – the knight’s squire, the sorceress’s maid, and their horses’ groom – were the only patrons. She settled at one of the tables a little away from the servants and ordered lunch from the sleepy-eyed wench that wandered over.

“One book, Cassandra,” the groom, Andrew Thompson, was saying to the maid, Cassandra d’Elore. “Just one book. They’ll be gone all day – she’ll never know it was gone at all.”

“You’re a clod and a fool, Andrew,” she sniffed in reply. “I’m not going to risk her wrath just for you to find out what I already know.”

“I can tell you what you already know,” he snapped. “Nothing. But I know what happened to her pearl earrings. I know where you sold them, and how much you got for them. I’ve known that for a year and a half, and you still won’t get me one book for one hour?”

“You know no such thing,” she hissed, drawing herself up and lifting her chin. The squire, Brinn de Cheval, had his eyes on Violet, and now that Cassandra had noticed her presence, she lowered her voice as she continued arguing with the groom.

The girl who had been working at the bar the night before was not there now; when she had finished eating, Violet walked over to the bar where an older man now stood behind it and settled her elbows on it.

“Did the knight and his company say when they’d be back?” she asked. He shook his head slightly.

“The lady said not to expect them for supper.”

She thanked him and headed outside. Maresbrook. She guessed it to be maybe two hundred people, if the farmers in a half mile radius were included. The inn, the Red Boar, was three stories, but not really big. Plank sidewalks ran down either side of the road where it ran through the center of the village, but there was no curb. She wandered up the street from the inn a ways, past the small dry goods store, the tiny green grocer, the sheriff’s office. The last had notices tacked outside the door; the dragon was mentioned in one, but it was just a warning to avoid the gorge west of the village, since it frequented that area.

Crossing the street brought her to a merchant’s depot office; apparently this was the local hub for farmers selling their products to ship to the bigger towns. Next door to that she found a small temple – barely more than a shrine – to Orannel, the god most of the kingdom patronized. An ancient, bent little priest was sweeping the walk out front; she stepped down off the sidewalk into the street to walk around him and not track dirt over his work. The elves still professed to

the moon goddess, Selene; Violet had tired of theological conversations long ago, and she didn't want to get into another. The priest didn't seem to notice her, however, so she continued up the street past a blacksmith, in front of which there was no sidewalk, probably to accommodate horses like the one the smith was currently shoeing. She stopped a moment, habitually sizing up the horse, and when her eyes shifted finally to the smith, she recognized him – or rather, she recognized the scar down his left forearm.

“Patrick Marshall,” she said flatly. He finished off the shoe he was working on before straightening to look at her.

“Avellia Llorelareth. You don't sound enthused to see me,” he said, letting his eyes run over her head to toe once before turning back to his work.

“I don't know. You disappeared, and with Sutton dead, it had a lot of people asking uncomfortable questions when I got back to Eberford.” She leaned against one of the poles supporting the roof on the open front of the building. “And you know it's always just been Violet.”

“Except to Sir Jasper Sutton,” Patrick said, waving his file at her.

“That's because Sutton was an incorrigible prig, and he was only tolerable when he was humored.”

“So what are you doing way out here?” he asked. “We're nearly in Genarvies here, and you seemed unlikely to head back there.”

“Eh, there's a knight and his companions looking for a dragon,” she shrugged. “I just got them here.”

“Looking for a dragon?” He straightened to look at her again a moment. “What, old Redscapes? He doesn't bother anyone.”

Violet just shrugged again. “It seemed odd when we got here and there was no panic. But if they want to go get themselves killed, I'm inclined to let them at this point.”

He finished with the horse and let it out into a corral behind the building; she was still standing there when he came back.

“Are you going to be around a while, then?” he asked.

“At least until I find out if they'll need to get back up to Eberford or not.”

“I guess you're staying at the inn, then,” he said, fidgeting with the forge.

“Ha. I told you no nine years ago, Patrick,” she said. “The answer hasn't changed. I'm old enough to be your mother.”

“You seem to think that matters.”

“You seem to think it doesn't.” She turned to head back to the inn.

“You haven't changed a bit, have you?” he said as she walked off.

“I got new boots,” she protested, holding out one foot and hopping a step to point at them. He just chuckled, and she continued back to the inn.

Violet settled on the upstairs porch of the inn to watch the village comings and goings. The pickings were slim: a few women shopping; half a dozen little boys playing with string and marbles and jacks; a blushing girl and the boy courting her. She ended up dozing much of the afternoon.

When she wandered down for supper, the front room was mostly full again, the local men gossiping loudly. Andrew Thompson sat at one end of the bar with a book in front of him, mumbling to himself as he read; Cassandra and Brinn were at one of the tables towards the back of the room, arguing quietly. Violet was fairly sure by now that they were a couple, whether

they were admitting it or not; they had the nuances, the spats, at the very least. She sat down by Andrew, and he jumped a little.

“Oh, hush,” she said. “I’m not going to bite you.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell,” he muttered, then turned his attention back to the book – one of the sorceress’s, Violet guessed.

The girl from the night before was working the bar again, and she brought Violet a drink before she asked for it. Her brows rose when she tasted it – its origins were elvish.

“Moontears? You’re a clever lass,” she said. The girl just smiled slightly.

Violet wasn’t expecting the knight and the others back that night, so she let herself finish the drink – she knew from experience it was likely to mean a hangover she wouldn’t want to walk with. The girl stopped in front of Andrew after bringing Violet her supper, putting her fingers to his lips to quiet him, then touched the book and his forehead once, and left him staring after her when she went back to working.

“What the hell was that about?” he said.

“It’ll work when you can form it in your mind, not your mouth,” Violet said. She glanced at the page, then him. “But probably not that one here inside. A bit messy.”

“Wait – you know magic?”

“Not really. A light spell, a handful of minor wards. Elves like it too much, so you learn a bit when you grow up among them.”

“Oh.” He paused a moment. “So if not this one, what?”

Violet leaned over and flipped through the book a moment, then left it open to a levitation spell. “Just focus it on something small,” she said. “It’s usually better to work up to things in case something goes wrong.”

She watched the comings and goings of the front room a while, sipping another drink the girl had mixed her. They would probably be expensive, but moontears were hard to find this far from an elven wood. Patrick Marshall came in towards dusk and stopped on the other side of her from Andrew.

“I thought you said they went off after a dragon,” he said to her.

“Oh, this is the entourage,” Violet said. “The groom and the squire and the maid.”

“Ah.”

“So you asked me why I was out here. I could ask you the same thing,” she said. “It’s damn’ near three hundred miles from where I last saw you.”

He was silent for several moments, his eyes on her, but she didn’t retract the question. “I’d rather not answer that in a room with so many ears, Avellia.”

She closed her hand on the wrist which bore the scar, tightening it slightly when he tried to withdraw it. “You know *why* it’s Violet, Patrick.”

“Fine, fine. Just come outside if you want to talk.”

She finished off her drink, then followed him outside.

“You’ve always had your secrets, Patrick, but I didn’t think you were ashamed of them,” she said, settling on the porch railing.

“Last time I was through here I was fifteen,” he said. “When things went to pieces nine years ago, I thought I’d come back and see where it went.”

“Where what went?”

He muttered something under his breath. “Anyway, she’d been married probably fifteen years by then, but the one, well…”

“And?”

“She doesn’t know, all right?” he said. “They called her Mavyn. Mavyn Apwyn. She works the bar here. But she’s mine.”

Violet let her eyes rest on him a few moments, amused, before replying. “If she doesn’t know, why stay?”

“What else did I have to go back to?” he shrugged. “Sutton was dead, and his wife never liked me. She’d have just thrown me out anyway.”

“And so you just set up here as a smith.”

“Sort of,” he shrugged. “The man who had the shop was in a hurry to get out of town. I just kind of took it over when he did.”

She was watching the room through the front window yet, but he had his back to it. She smiled slightly when the book’s sudden hovering startled Andrew.

“You don’t seem to think it’s much of anything,” he said, shifting his eyes to her.

“No? I never knew my father. And she seems to be doing well enough as is. A little sad, perhaps, that you can’t know her as such, but you weren’t exactly around during the years it might have mattered anyway. So at this point in time, it’s not particularly tragic.”

“I don’t know that working a bar is really doing well,” he said, frowning slightly.

“She can make moontears,” Violet said, hopping down off the rail, “so I’m not really inclined to discourage her in that.”

“I’d rather not talk inside,” he said as she took a step in that direction.

“Hiding from them, as well? You’re not going to make your life any easier like that.”

“Should I? After what happened?”

She turned a little faster than he expected and caught him by the collar. “That was not your fault. If you’re going to argue that point, I *am* willing to stay here long enough to drive that notion out of your head.”

“As though—” He stopped short, and she froze, hearing what he had: the steady beat of leathery wings, approaching from the west. A heartbeat later she had let go his shirt and was heading for the door.

“I need my swords,” she said. “Get people—”

“Out of the buildings,” he nodded, starting down the steps.

Once inside, she made a beeline for the stairs. Brinn stood when she came back downstairs buckling on her swords, and he followed her out onto the porch, Cassandra and Andrew and several of the tipsy farmers behind them.

“What’s going on?” Brinn asked Violet; people were running outside now, heading east out of the village. Violet just pointed to the west, where the dragon was silhouetted by the twilight, growing steadily larger. The farmers on the porch stood for a moment, staring, then panicked and ran.

“Well, shit,” Andrew said. Violet turned her eyes to him; he was still carrying the book.

“May as well look through that for a fire ward,” she said. “Brinn, can you actually use that sword?”

“Against a *dragon*?” he said. “What good would *that* do?”

“You never know,” she shrugged.

“It’s not like anyone else here is going to be able to do anything about it,” Cassandra said to him, “and if it’s coming here, it’s probably angry. So we can go run away with everyone else and hope it doesn’t hunt us down with them, or we can stay here and fight it.”

“What’s this ‘we’?” Andrew said. “It’s not like *you* could do anything to it.”

“Ha, we’ll see,” Cassandra said.

Most of the inn's patrons had fled behind them; Violet didn't see the girl, Mavyn, behind the bar when she looked, so she turned her eyes back down the street to the west. Patrick was walking back towards them, carrying a ten-foot pike and the mid-length blade she remembered him with the last time she'd seen him.

"You're not going to send them off?" he said to her.

"They're not my baggage," Violet shrugged.

"Well, at least one of us was wrong," Andrew said to Cassandra. "We'll see yet if it's both."

"That's rather short for a pike, isn't it?" Brinn said as Patrick stopped at the foot of the porch steps.

"It was made for fighting ogres," Patrick shrugged. "There are a few south of town that cause problems sometimes. I figure it'll work well enough for this."

Andrew was flipping a little frantically through the book; Violet took it from him and thumbed through it more calmly, handing it back when she had found a fire ward.

"How long's the dragon been here, Patrick?" Violet asked, stepping down off the porch without taking her eyes off the approaching creature.

"About three hundred years, from what I've picked up since I got here," he said. He reached over and pulled the kerchief off her hair, letting her mop of coppery tresses loose. It still barely passed her shoulders, but there was a hint of white at the temples now. She shifted her eyes to him a moment.

"Still a no. Try not to die too fast," she said. "I'm going to try to lame him once he comes down."

She headed off around the side of the inn into the village; Patrick tucked her kerchief into a pocket and settled on the steps to wait for the dragon to get closer.

"So who are you?" Brinn asked, his hand resting nervously on his sword hilts, his eyes on the approaching dragon.

"Patrick Marshall," the older man answered.

"And you know her how?"

Patrick just held up his left arm, the scar that ran from his wrist to his elbow still visible in the dim of the twilight. Cassandra's brow had furrowed at the name, but she held her tongue; she walked down the porch away from them a bit, briefly drawing Brinn's attention. Andrew was still staring intently at the page in the book. The dragon was drawing steadily closer.

Violet darted through the backyards of the buildings that lined the main street, looking for a good point from which to make an ambush, as well as any possible cover from the fires that were most likely coming. Most of the villagers had already fled, but a few stubborn ones could be seen through windows or on cellar steps yet.

The dragon hit the largest building in town, the merchant's depot office, first, then circled the town once it was alight, breathing fire once – twice – thrice more before it settled on the largest open patch of ground in town: the main street. It had noticed the people on the porch of the inn, and it started up the street towards them.

Violet drew the swords she had buckled across her lower back and slipped through two more yards before cutting over along the side of a house, coming out behind the dragon. Its wings were leathery; blunted horns rimmed its head and ran the length of its neck; its tail was thick, but smooth, more for balance and steering than anything else. She couldn't make out its scales in the twilight, but by the size – about fifteen feet at the shoulder – and general shape she figured it was a fire Drake. Still a dragon, yes, but not a real wyrm.

She sprinted out on a route perpendicular to the dragon's path, ducking under the tail to score it deeply on one hind leg at the hock. The bellow of pain and the sudden turn were both anticipated, and she caught the edge of the wing that came at her, using the momentum to land herself on the roof of the sheriff's office. She immediately slid down the slope into the backyard, landing at a run, heading back to the inn.

The dragon threw its weight against the building she'd landed on, looking for a quick route to her. Barely twenty yards from the dragon now where she stood, Cassandra dropped lightly down of the porch into the road and took several measured steps towards it. Patrick stood when he saw the hilt of a dagger in her palm; Brinn drew his sword. Cassandra threw the knife, which split into five in flight, and then she was running for the smithy across the street before they had even reached the dragon. They hit its neck and shoulder, doing minimal harm, but they drew its attention back to the inn's porch.

"Your sword will be most useful on its flanks," Patrick said to Brinn.

The younger man turned to go back through the building; Patrick started sidestepping towards the center of the street. The dragon was limping now, but it was angry. Violet sprinted out again, this time ducking under the dragon's belly and scoring it along the softer under scales. The dragon half turned to follow as she ducked into the shrine to Orannel, but Brinn had followed her out, and the constant sting on that side kept the dragon from following Violet. Patrick used the pike to keep the dragon from paying serious attention to the younger man; he jabbed with some skill at its throat and head, prompting the dragon to lash out at him. He landed in the forge.

Across the street, Andrew murmured, "Ah."

The spell slipped into place in his mind's eye, and *every* fire in the village went out. Violet shook her head slightly in bemusement as they were plunged into a deeper darkness. The dragon, now aware of the presence of what it perceived to be a mage, drew itself up. Brinn darted for the pike Patrick had dropped as the dragon inhaled, groping through the darkness in the dirt of the street for it. He found Violet beside him suddenly, handing him the pike; she redrew her swords and headed back around the dragon's side.

The dragon exhaled, and Brinn charged for its exposed underbelly with the pike aimed high. Violet had rushed for the unwounded hind leg at the same time; with both of its thrusting legs out of commission, it would likely be unable to get airborne. She heard Cassandra gasp as the dragon's flame lit up the street; Mavyn stood in front of the inn with her arms thrown wide. The flames could not pass her, turned back by a force Violet couldn't see. She didn't have time to think about the phenomenon, though, since the dragon had begun clawing at the pike in its ribs. She pulled out her swords and backed off quickly, retreating to the smithy.

Brinn had recovered his sword, but it was dark again, and the dragon had begun to stumble around, tearing at the pike, which had apparently become lodged solidly. It began bellowing as it tried desperately to remove the source of its pain, eventually falling backwards into the half-burned merchant's depot. Mavyn had run into the forge; Violet raised a bit of light so the younger woman could see, then began cleaning her swords.

Patrick had landed in the clutter of one corner of the smithy, and Mavyn was extricating him from it. He was unconscious but still breathing; Brinn walked over once the dragon had started thrashing in the depot building.

"Well, that went badly," he said quietly, helping Cassandra up from where she had hidden behind the forge bellows.

"Could have been worse," Violet said, discreetly watching Mavyn healing the gashes the

dragon's blow had opened along Patrick's side. "Could have caught us completely unawares, and lit up the town while there were still people in the buildings."

"No, I mean, what the hell happened to Sir Richard and the others if it came here, and *we* were able to deal with it?" Brinn said.

Patrick stirred before she could answer, and Violet stood and walked across to where Mavyn was trying to hold him still, dropping to one knee and catching his arm to help her.

"Let her finish," Violet murmured, easing him back against the bundle of burlap the younger woman had put under his head.

He put his free hand over hers, but turned his eyes to the wall; Violet realized he was a little embarrassed.

"Still bleeding so no one else has to," she murmured, giving his arm a squeeze. "You know I can take care of myself, Patrick."

"Brindenheim," he said flatly.

"That was just an unfortunate confluence of circumstances," she said. "So is this the kind of village that's going to be mad at us for killing a dragon without preventing the whole tearing-up-the-town part?"

"No, but some of them may be upset that it was provoked," he said, turning his eyes to her finally. "You're thinking about leaving tonight?"

"No, no." She squeezed his arm again, but more lightly. "No, I stopped running from other people's stubborn cussedness years ago. I don't really care if they want to get pissy about it, so long as they don't get stupid about it in the process."

"So how long's the grey been there?" he asked, almost teasingly.

"Since I went back to Eberford nine years ago," she said, smiling slightly, but there was pain behind her eyes as she said it.

"They didn't—"

"Hush."

"Violet—"

"Hush."

He eased back again under her firm grip on his arm, his eyes briefly shifting to Mavyn, who was still working on the gashes on his side. Violet turned her gaze to the wounds to see her progress.

"They're closed enough for now, hon," she said. "Don't wear yourself out just to get it in one go. I'll come get you if they need more attention tonight."

After a moment the younger woman nodded slightly, and Violet turned her attention back to Brinn and Cassandra, who had resumed what was becoming their default state – arguing quietly on the other end of the smithy.

"Andrew is still gibbering on the porch if you two want to try to calm him down," Violet said. "If anyone gives you grief about all this and you don't think you can handle it calmly, just send them to find me."

"Where are you going to be?" Brinn asked.

"Sitting up to make sure he does all right tonight," Violet said with a nod at Patrick.

"You don't have to—"

"Shush," Violet cut Patrick off. She eased him up to sitting. "If you think those hurt now—"

"Yeah, yeah, the bruises in the morning," he said ruefully. Mavyn put a hand on Violet's arm.

“Tomorrow,” Violet said to her. “Don’t strain yourself too much.”

After a moment the girl stood and headed back to the inn; Cassandra had remained when Brinn walked across the street to Andrew.

“There is no healing in sorcery,” she said to Violet, frowning slightly. “I can’t do any, but I do know that much.”

Violet shrugged slightly, helping Patrick to his feet. “She’s not a sorceress. A priestess, maybe, or a hedge witch, or even an animist, but not a sorceress.”

“I’ve never seen healing magic.”

“Probably because it comes from gods, not books,” Violet nodded slightly, “and the devotion required for that kind of power is uncommon.”

“A barmaid?” Cassandra protested. Violet glanced at Patrick once, as he’d remained silent.

“She’s a clever girl,” the older woman said, shifting the man beside her to put her arm around him to help him walk. “Well?” she said to him. “Point me in the direction of where you live so you can sleep.”

Violet had found Patrick’s home to be a small, two-room building a street over from the smithy. Once she had gotten him cleaned up and into bed, she had settled in the front room, watching the fire she had lit on the small cooking hearth.

The problem had never been that she didn’t like Patrick. No, the problem had been that she *did* like him, and he was human. She ran her hands through her unruly, reddish hair. He was almost forty; she was sixty-three. Half-elves had wildly varying lifespans, but they generally ranged anywhere from three hundred to six hundred years. A human was just asking for heartache.

She had realized, eventually, that the life she had taken up meant never settling. She got restless more than three weeks anywhere. And the men in her general line of work were not men she would consider worth having. Or, like Patrick, they were human. And elves were out of the question for the same reason humans were for her – their lifespans easily reached three *thousand* years.

She spent most of the night between checking on him with her head on the table. The two glasses of moontears had left her a little fuzzy, and the longer she sat up, the more her head hurt. Something was not right with the whole scenario, though; the knight and the sorceress and the others should have had no problem with the dragon. She wondered if they had even come here to kill it; her gut doubted it had killed them. It had come at them unwounded; at three hundred, a fire Drake was nearing the end of its natural life.

And now what? The knight and company were unlikely to return to Maresbrook, regardless of their status. She felt bad for the squire and maid and groom, who were now in limbo, their masters disappeared. Would they want to wait here in the village, return to Eberford, or try to follow?

A knock towards dawn drew her over to the door; Mavyn stood outside. Violet stepped aside to let her in, and the younger woman ran a hand over her eyes.

“I’ll sleep in a bit,” Violet said. “I need to find out what the others are planning to do today...”

Mavyn had raised a brow at her, and Violet sighed slightly.

“He’s still asleep. I’ll be over at the inn, I guess.”

The dragon’s corpse was still in the depot building when Violet walked back to the inn;

the front room was empty yet, so she went upstairs to her room and lay down. If they wanted to leave today...

Noonday sun streamed through the window into her room when Violet woke again. Her shoulder was sore, probably from catching the dragon's wing to vault onto the roof the day before. After she cleaned up, she packed and headed down to the front room. Patrick was sitting at a table in one corner with Brinn, Cassandra, and Andrew; Violet settled on one of the open chairs.

"Have you all decided what you're doing?" she asked when they all turned their eyes to her.

"Not exactly," Brinn said after a moment.

"There aren't that many choices," Violet said. "Stay or go, and if go, where? Looking for them, or back to Eberford?"

"I don't think going back to Eberford without knowing what's going on is a good idea," Brinn said. "They'll just have questions we can't answer, and have to send people to find out, and that'll just take longer."

"Well, despite whatever they said, I think it's damned clear they didn't come here to kill a dragon," Patrick grumbled. Violet shifted her eyes to him.

"Why *are* you a part of this conversation?" she asked.

"I don't have to be," he frowned at her. "But if they're going to go looking for them, we're a long way from Eberford, and there are much nastier things than firebrakes around here."

"And you think you would help?" Cassandra said. Violet put a hand on Patrick's arm to keep him from standing.

"He may be a little out of practice, but Patrick is pretty damn' good in a fight," she said. "Whether he wants to travel at his age is another matter."

"Oh, hush, you. Sutton was almost sixty on his last campaign," Patrick said. "The only thing that's ever sore is the mark *you* gave me."

"Wait – Sutton?" Brinn said. "Sir Jasper Sutton?"

Patrick just grumbled something, but Violet nodded slightly.

"But he died on campaign.... It was assumed—"

"The subject isn't open for discussion right now," Violet said. "If you all are waiting here a while, I don't care, I just need to know. If you want to go somewhere, then we have something to talk about."

No one answered for a while; when Violet stood to go, Cassandra spoke.

"Waiting won't do us any good. I don't think they were planning to come back here."

"And why do you say that?" Andrew said. "They've left us in limbo for almost six weeks before."

"Heloise took things with her she normally leaves when she intends to come back," Cassandra said. She had her eyes fixed on the center of the table; Violet waited, but didn't sit back down.

"Do you want to tell us where they went, or did you just want to go back to Eberford?" she asked the younger woman.

"I don't know where they're going," Cassandra replied, lifting her eyes to frown at Violet. "I just know they chose here because there's a gorge where they can pass into Genarvies without being seen."

"What?" Brinn said. "We've got a treaty with Genarvies—"

“That’s more complicated,” Violet said. “If they’ve gone into Genarvies, they may have been sent by someone, and if *you* cross into Genarvies through the normal border crossings, that person may hear about it. *They* might hear about it. And that could get unpleasant quickly.”

“If we don’t at least pretend to go look for their bodies soon, people are going to wonder,” Andrew said. The others glanced at him.

“We can’t stay here,” Brinn said. “That would also make them wonder.”

“Then be ready to go after lunch,” Violet said.

“The bar girl seemed to want to go with us if we left,” Andrew said. Violet’s brow furrowed.

“How’s that?” she asked.

“If we’re going to run into trouble, the healing could be useful,” Brinn said.

“Well, yes, but how did she seem to want to go with you all?” Violet reiterated. Andrew passed her over a slip of paper, on which was scrawled a request to that effect. “Oh.”

“I’d rather she didn’t,” Patrick said.

“Your objection is expected,” Violet said. “But if they’ll have her, it’s their choice.”

“You don’t object?” he asked, a little surprised.

“No, I don’t object,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “And if she does go with them, you’re going to tell her, and them, or I will, but damn it, nine years to be here and not tell her is rather unfair.”

“They asked me not to,” he said, frowning now.

“You talk as though you’re not going with us,” Cassandra said.

“Oh, I can, but you haven’t asked me to,” Violet said, a smile hovering on her lips for a moment. “I’m just a scout. I can get you where you want to go, but you have to ask, and you have to make up your mind just where it is you’re going.”

“You can’t help us find them?” Andrew said.

“I probably can,” Violet said, “but you have to wonder if finding them is in your best interest, if they intentionally left you here. They may not want to see you.”

“No, but if they’re going into Genarvies so sneakily, they can’t be up to anything good.”

“And you feel morally obligated to stop them if they are?” Patrick hazarded.

“Hell, no,” Andrew said. “I’m not stupid. I’ve been working for them for five years. If they’re scheming something and they pull it off or get caught trying, I’m going to get implicated as a friggin’ accomplice.”

They fell quiet at that.

“I’ve been through a lot of Genarvies at one point or another,” Violet said finally. “They have a day and a half on us already. It’s not impossible they’re doing something for the king, but he isn’t likely to do something to jeopardize the treaty – at least not for another ten years, since the last war still has the kingdom in debt.”

“Do you really think we could even do anything if we caught up with them?” Cassandra said. “It’s not just Sir Richard and Heloise, you know. Björn is mean in a fight, and Forwythe can be very dangerous. Andrew may be able to pull out little spells, but the lady has almost twenty years of practical experience.”

“Yes, but I have over forty,” Violet said, leaning forward slightly, “and Patrick did spend fifteen years in the field. And your Brinn is not helpless in a fight.”

“The girl does seem capable of some wards,” Andrew said.

“Her name is Mavyn,” Violet supplied. “Well, if we are going after them, be ready to go. I need to eat if I’m going to be walking.”

“There’s still a horse for you,” Brinn said. Patrick shook his head slightly.

“Save the horse for the girl if you’re insistent on taking her,” he said. “Violet moves faster on foot.”

She reached over and ruffled his hair once. “And you’re lucky for it, or you’d be dead, eh? If you’re going with us, be ready. We can’t put it off too much longer.”

Once they had paid off the innkeeper, packed, and gotten the horses ready, Violet led the three over to Patrick’s house. His horse, she noted, was not of farming stock. He led them, after much prodding from Violet, to the house where Mavyn lived with her mother. Violet held his horse by the others in the road as he went up the walk to the front door and knocked.

“I’m here to see Mavyn,” he told the older woman who answered; Violet wasn’t sure if the others could hear them.

“Oh, no, you’re not,” the woman relied. “I told you when you came back here that she’ll have nothing to do with you. She’s never known about you—”

Mavyn had come down the stairs, and the woman whirled.

“What have I told you?” she snapped. “You stay upstairs in your room till it’s time for you to go to work.”

Mavyn ignored her, her eyes on Violet, and held up a hand for her to wait. She darted back up the stairs.

“You know, if I’d known you were just going to use her for the money, I’d’ve have come over here sooner,” Patrick said. The woman swung at him, but he dodged it comfortably. “You liked me better when you thought I was never coming back, it seems.”

She disappeared back into the house; Mavyn came back downstairs with a valise while she was gone, and she slipped out past Patrick as her mother returned with a rolling pin. Patrick took that as his cue to retreat, and he hurried back down the walk. Violet helped Mavyn onto the extra horse as Patrick took his own; the woman on the porch of the house screamed after them as they left.

Violet caught the horn of Patrick’s saddle and put one foot on his to pull herself up to talk in his ear. “So are you going to tell her or not?”

“Right now?” he murmured, turning his eyes to the face hovering so close to his. He has seen her balance like that before, reporting on the field in the midst of battles; he hadn’t realized just how intimate it was.

“Or I can.”

“Fine, fine.”

She dropped back to the ground, and he pulled his horse around to go ride beside Mavyn. Violet couldn’t hear what was said, but a few moments later a thud drew her to turn her head. Mavyn had urged her horse up next to her; Patrick was picking himself up out of the dust of the road while his horse milled around beside him.

“I suppose you haven’t been probably introduced,” Violet said to Mavyn. “Patrick you probably know. Brinn de Cheval was the knight’s squire. Cassandra d’Elore was the lady’s maid. And Andrew Thompson was the groom.”

“All this ‘was,’” Brinn muttered.

“Are you going to introduce yourself?” Andrew asked. Violet glanced back at him, her eyes amused.

“I’m Violet,” she said. The fields had given way to pastureland on either side of the road, and a wood stood off to the north.

“Do we even know where this gorge is?” Cassandra asked after they had been riding about fifteen minutes. Patrick rode up next to Violet, staying on the other side of her from Mavyn.

“It should just be up through the wood a ways,” he said.

“I have a fairly good idea where it is,” Violet said.

“Have you been through it before?” Brinn asked

“No, but I’ve seen detailed maps of most of the border,” she replied. “There’s a stream that runs through the right kind of rock formation.”

“When were you planning to leave the road?” Patrick asked.

“When we get further from the village,” Violet said.

They fell silent again. Violet had traveled with the three for about two months already, and they were unaccustomed to talking while traveling – the knight and Björn and Forwythe had done most of that. Mavyn apparently didn’t talk at all, and Patrick... well, she didn’t think starting a conversation with him would be a good idea while they had an audience.

After almost an hour, Violet finally headed off the road towards the wood. It was almost a mile off the road; the pastureland there was somewhat overgrown and disused. She walked a ways along the edge ahead of the others until she found a break in the underbrush for the horses to go through.

“It’ll be easier going once we get to the stream,” she said when the others caught up. “This is an old wood.”

Patrick went in first, followed by Mavyn, then Brinn, then Cassandra, then Andrew. Violet slipped off ahead of them, looking for a game trail or a more open space so they could move faster. She came to the stream first, so she headed back to them.

“Anything interesting?” Patrick asked as she fell in beside him.

“Not really. The stream is about a half mile in. No real trails between us and it. So we’ll just have to put up with the undergrowth till then,” she said.

“So what do you know about the royal politics that you haven’t told us yet?” he asked. She glanced up at him.

“Why do you always assume I know something?”

“Because you usually do.”

She didn’t answer, instead pulling her kerchief out of a pocket to hold her hair back.

“Do you really think there’s any chance they’ve gone into Genarvies for a legitimate pursuit?” Patrick asked. “Going in like this?”

“Heh. I don’t know. We’re going after them the same way,” she said. “Not that I could likely get into Genarvies any other way without an official writ anymore.”

“Why not?” Brinn asked.

“We *were* at war with them within the past ten years,” Violet said. “And they know well enough who and what I am.”

“You’re not from Pellevaera, though,” Patrick said.

“No, but I have lived here almost thirty years. That does mean something to them.”

“Are we being followed?” Andrew broke in. Violet glanced back at him, then disappeared off into the underbrush. Patrick swore under his breath.

“If we are, she probably shouldn’t be going off alone,” he muttered.

They reached the stream before Violet returned, so Patrick turned them west along it. He didn’t like her extended absence, but he hadn’t heard anything, so he didn’t feel justified looking for her yet. Mavyn edged her horse up closer to his to put a hand lightly on his shoulder. He

glanced at her, but didn't say anything. Violet caught up with them about fifteen minutes downstream.

"Anything?" Patrick asked quietly.

"Tracks," she said. "And you know what it takes to hide from me in the woods."

"Why the hell would anyone be interested enough in any of us to send someone like that after us?"

"They may have been following since Eberford, actually," Violet shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know the three well enough to know if they have enemies. The knight and company certainly do, and they may be looking for them, not us. You might have left questions in some people's minds, but you've got a mostly bland history."

"And you?" Cassandra asked.

"If they're looking for me, I suppose we'll find out soon enough," Violet shrugged.

"Something to do with the name Mr. Marshall uses for you?" Andrew asked.

"I'm not sure any of the people who knew me on bad terms under that name are still alive," Violet said. "I stopped using it a long time ago."

"What name?" Cassandra asked.

"Avellia Llor... Llor..."

"Llorelareth," Patrick finished for Andrew. "It makes her grumpy if you don't have cause to use it."

"Because I made some people angry when I left. So it's just better all around if it stays dead," Violet said.

The stream banks had grown narrower, and she drifted from side to side across the water, examining them as she walked. Eventually she stopped a moment on the opposite bank from the others, then headed back to Patrick.

"There've been horses through here," she said. "We should probably cross if we're going to follow the tracks."

"Are you sure it's them?"

"De Marin has stars on his horseshoes," Violet shrugged.

They followed her across the stream, then up the bank as she read the tracks the horses had left sometime the day before. They ranged mostly along the stream, but stayed under cover of the trees.

"The stream would be easier going, Violet," Patrick said.

"Might they have been trying to avoid the dragon noticing them?" Cassandra asked.

"Possibly. If you want to ride down there it's probably all right," Violet said. "I'll just keep with the tracks in case they veer off."

The tracks stayed with the stream, however, and Violet found the point at which they had likely encountered the fire Drake – there were scorch marks around an undamaged circle of ground, and marks where the dragon had shoved off with its hind claws to take flight. She stopped a moment, looking at the patch. It had taken them about three hours to get that far; the dragon hadn't reached them till twilight, and it had likely taken the dragon maybe forty minutes to cover the same distance flying. What had the knight and the others been doing that they had taken so long to get here? She followed the tracks back down to the streambed and waited about five minutes for the others to catch up.

"Well?" Patrick said.

"They're back in the stream for now," she shrugged.

Another hundred yards traveling, and they had entered the gorge. The stream dropped

steadily; a narrow trail ran along the north wall, following a more consistent, though sometimes steep, path than the stream, which occasionally took four or six foot drops over small falls. Violet couldn't read much in the rock and grit of the trail; occasional hoof prints confirmed that someone, at least, had been through recently.

"Trails like this don't just appear on their own," Patrick said quietly to her as the path leveled out, the gorge walls rising fifty feet above them now.

"Heh, I know that well enough, Patrick," she said.

They had stopped to rest a moment; her eyes were on the ground yet. She had spotted boot prints five times, going in both directions. She wondered if perhaps they had met someone here – someone in on whatever they were scheming, or a guide to replace her. At the least, de Matin would have a good grasp of her unwillingness to do something against the king; she had only agreed to take them to Maresbrook when he had mentioned the dragon. He socialized with men who were at times more or less open about their coveting the throne; Violet had ended up on the side that had put the king on the throne twenty-some years ago, and she had no intention of undoing that. Even after the misunderstanding nine years ago.

She frowned to herself. Too many people who knew about that episode didn't understand it, but not many knew. There had been rumors, of course; there were always rumors. But she knew when she had decided to go back to Eberford that the situation would look odd from the outside, and she knew that the king would eventually understand what had happened, if she could get across well enough that it was what had actually happened. And he had, but many of those who did know what happened thought that it meant she was more flexible in her support of him. Their assumptions had irritated her to no end; she had handled them badly, perhaps, as she had chosen to just disappear for a year or so.

After they had had about fifteen minutes to rest, Violet started west again. They would need to find somewhere to camp for the night if they couldn't get to a village with an inn, and although she knew much of Genarvies, she wasn't sure if the immediate locale had anywhere they could stay.

The gorge continued for almost another half mile, but the path had leveled out, so the going was easier. It was late afternoon, and the land that stretched west from the bottom of the gorge was mostly scrub forest.

"How much further is the border into Genarvies?" Brinn asked as Violet was picking out the trail the hoof prints took into the trees.

"Oh, we crossed it a ways back in the gorge," she replied. "There are patches of peat in this forest, and not a lot of people, so we may be outside a bit for nights."

She heard Cassandra sigh heavily.

"In this kind of country, lass, the ground may be more comfortable than the inns," Violet said.

"As though *that's* encouraging," Cassandra said.

"Well, I'm following their tracks so far as I know, so you can at least be comforted in that the lady is going to be going through the same discomfort as you."

"You never particularly liked any of them, did you?" Brinn said.

"I feel kind of bad for the lady," Violet said, "because she was never meant for this kind of life. But de Matin has always put my back up, and the other two were too boorish for me to be particularly friendly. So not really."

"Well, that makes two of us, then," Cassandra said.

"Cassandra!"

She waved off Brinn's disapproving exclamation. "If you ever break out of your rigid little honor façade, you'd say the same thing."

"But you've worked for her for eight years," Brinn said.

"And I'd think you'd know well enough by now what kind of hell it's been," she snapped. He didn't answer; the group rode on into the scrub in silence.

The tracks Violet was following grew easier to follow as they got further into the forest and the ground grew softer – and then they started riding through areas of standing water. The light was fading, as well.

"Ugh. I'm going to lose them in this bog in the dark," Violet said. "And this is not going to work for camping."

"There's also the matter of food," Andrew said.

"Ha, well, yes. I can probably scrounge up something this time of year in short order, but it may not be pretty."

"If they hired you to get them through the Wenderham Bracken safely," Brinn said, "why would they be wandering into this without you?"

"It wasn't safety they were concerned about with the bracken," Violet shook her head. "It was speed. They had a target date for arriving at the village."

"But why?"

"You're asking the wrong person that, lad," she said. "Try to keep them out of the quicksand, Patrick. I'll be back."

She moved off ahead of them of them, disappearing into the scrub and the dusk. Patrick picked carefully through the pools of water when they couldn't ride around them, going slowly enough to back out of the ground seemed too soft.

"So what *does* it take to hide from her in the woods?" Brinn asked when Violet had been gone about ten minutes.

"Probably an elf," Patrick said. "And elves are expensive for that kind of work if they're not doing it for their own people."

"You think she's hiding something from us?"

"Violet has been working for the king or his army off and on for over twenty years," Patrick said. "And she hunts with him on occasion. So she's around the people who make broad policy decisions often enough to have an idea of what's going on behind closed doors."

"You seem to know her well enough," Cassandra said. Patrick shrugged slightly.

"We were in the same army fighting along the border with Genarvies for about eight years."

"So you know this area?" Brinn asked.

"Not really. Maresbrook's locale, since I've lived there a while. But I was mostly about three hundred miles south of here."

"Sutton's command," Brinn nodded.

Patrick didn't reply. That war was not something he wanted to remember. Their light was steadily fading, as well, and he was devoting most of his attention to keeping them from getting into a pool too deep or soft to be safe. Violet reappeared after another ten minutes or so.

"There's a hamlet about a mile to the north on a logging road," she said. "There's something of an inn, but just a loft to sleep in."

"Better than nothing," Patrick said. "It's going to be chilly tonight."

She led them off to the north, around several fetid pools of muck, and then they were climbing a low hill, part of the sides of which had been cleared for some sad looking little fields.

The hamlet Violet had mentioned was enclosed by a short log palisade, and barely a dozen buildings stood inside.

“They’ll have nowhere for the horses,” Andrew said as they rode up to the gate.

“They said the field on the northern slope is fine if you want to picket them,” Violet said. “They don’t see much in the way of travelers, so be ready for questions. And be mindful, eh?”

Whatever anger Mavyn had felt that afternoon at Patrick had apparently worn off, as she stuck close to him once they were inside the inn – basically a room with tables and a bar, a cooking hearth on one end, and a ladder to the loft above. Andrew was gone a while with the horses. Brinn and Cassandra stuck together at the table with Patrick and Mavyn, but Violet settled at the bar to think.

They were going to be wandering blindly now if they lost the tracks. She could probably find them again, but it could take a day or two if they had veered off too far, and the weather and the bog would reclaim them fairly quickly. They would have to do some asking around, but that could cause them problems – word that someone was looking for a knight and a lady would get around, especially when they got to more populated areas. And dropping in on a hamlet like this? They would probably be news for the next six months.

The boot tracks bothered her; the four horses were being ridden, and they had likely contracted a guide, someone who knew this part of Genarvies better than she did. They would probably be moving faster, and more directly, to their destination than Violet could lead her group. For all she knew, she could be leading them into taking the fall for whatever it was de Matin and his people were going to do.

The younger people eventually went up to the loft to sleep, and Patrick settled at the bar beside her.

“So are we going to talk or not?” he asked.

“Depends what you’re intending to discuss,” Violet said. “This is not an encouraging situation; I probably won’t be able to track them in the bog tomorrow. And we don’t know where they’re going or what they’re going to do.”

“And the option of going back to Eberford...”

“Probably not a good idea. I don’t think they have any idea what their employers are up to – Cassandra may have an inkling, but not enough that she could really pin them down. But you know how things work; like Andrew said, they’ll be seen as associates. And if they try to throw whatever de Matin is up to at *me*, there are going to be serious issues. One would think Philip would understand where I stand, but people who want me working for them instead of him keep murmuring against me, and this would be just one more episode in their attempt to sway him. Going back now, people will be asking them questions in uncomfortable ways, and that’s really not fair when they have no idea what’s going on.”

“You really think they don’t?”

“After two months of seeing how things worked among them? The knight and the lady treated them like chattel; Brinn is too well raised, I think, to let himself be angry about it, but you’ve seen Cassandra’s reaction. So no, I don’t think they were in on whatever was being schemed. If anything, I think they expected the dragon to kill them, and any witnesses that they’d been through Maresbrook.”

“They underestimated you, then.”

“I’m not sure they expected me to stick around.”

“And does your reluctance to go back to Eberford now have anything to do with when you went back nine years ago?”

“Heh.” She fidgeted with her mug a moment. “It would be worse this time, I think. I’m not sure what I’ve been attached to in getting them down to Maresbrook – through the Bracken, no less, which means they’ve mostly be outside surveillance for two months. I knew what had happened when I went back nine years ago. That does make a difference. So I’d rather go back with de Matin or his head in hand, and let him be the one answering questions.”

“You seem convinced he’s up to no good.”

“He associates with people who want Philip off the throne. Another war with Genarvies would probably do that, but they could have other schemes entirely that are outside my scope of awareness.”

“And pulling you into a wild goose chase in Genarvies with enough people seeing you and getting word to the authorities?”

“Enh. I’m not harmful to Genarvies during a peace, and I know enough already that my being here isn’t going to make me more of a threat if there’s ever another war. And I’ll probably leave Pellevaera when Philip dies, anyway.”

“*You* see it like that. But the government of Genarvies...”

“Bah.” She settled her chin on one hand.

“They had you in the dungeons, didn’t they?” he asked more quietly.

She didn’t answer.

“Violet...”

“I don’t really know what you expect me to tell you,” she murmured. “It wasn’t the first time I’d been in one, and given the way things had gone, I was expecting it.”

“Wait, not the first time?”

“The other wasn’t in Pellevaera.”

“Oh.”

“Be careful what you dig into, Patrick,” she said. “I have a good twenty years on you, and there’s quite a bit in there that I probably should have avoided.”

“Why are you still working for him, then, if he’d put you through that?”

“Sutton’s command was wiped out,” Violet said. “That hole in the lines made things messy for the next three months, and then the fighting stopped, and everyone wanted to know how things got so bad that the whole troop went. And you know what happened, how implausible it sounds.”

“Yeah.”

“So it just took a while for Philip to accept the actual happenstances as reality.”

“And of course the fact that you lived.”

“Well, yeah, but I’ve always been capable of extricating myself if things go catastrophically wrong.”

“Brindenheim,” he reminded her again.

“Confluence of circumstances,” she objected. “The river flooded, and the courier had been intercepted, so they knew I was there. I can’t swim a river in flood stage, and—”

“Enough, enough,” he chuckled. “I’ve missed you.”

“You know the answer is still no.”

“I know.”

She reached over and rubbed his shoulder once. “And not because I don’t like you.”

“You know that’s one of the things that confirms, despite whatever skills you have at getting through the woods and warring and all, you’re still a woman at the core,” he said.

“What is?”

“That I don’t understand you at all, and love you anyway.”

She fell quiet a while, slowly finishing off the mug of something Patrick didn’t recognize.

“She didn’t really seem surprised when I told her,” he said finally.

“Oh, they’d probably all suspected for a while, and she’d probably heard the rumors,” Violet shrugged. “She reacted appropriately, I thought.”

“Hrmp. You would.”

“I never did have a chance to explain why Sutton sent you off, did I?” she said.

“Does it matter? I should have been with him.”

“I understand why you feel like that,” she said, “though you may not think I do. But Sutton was a rare breed. Old school. Knights like him are scarce anymore. And the only reason I left when he told me to was because he revoked my commission. But you – you’d never officially been his squire, Patrick. I heard the whole story from him, more than once.”

“Violet…”

“Or did you already know he’d promised your mother he wouldn’t get you killed, that he was only taking you along until he found a new squire?”

“That part, no,” he said, sourly. “Did he tell you the rest of it, as well?”

“What, about your paternity? Yeah.”

“He would never admit it to me,” he said.

“Did you ever ask?”

“Like I could have done that,” he said.

“Do you really resent him that much for it? I’d think you’d understand well enough how things like that happen. And acknowledging you when his wife couldn’t bear children would have caused even more problems.”

He just grumbled something she couldn’t make out.

“Well, you’ve got a clever daughter out of it thus far,” Violet said.

“Mute since she was eight,” he said, a little sadly.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m sure she’ll find her own way of nagging the eventual husband.”

“Heh.”

She put an arm around him briefly to give him a squeeze. “You didn’t have to come with us, you know.”

“I’ve been hiding from the world too long.”

“Heh. That’s why I initially came to Pellevaera, you know.”

“Hiding? How so?”

“After how angry I’d made so many people? Leaving the country seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“I never really have heard that story. That you killed someone, yes, but not the details.”

“Oh, not tonight. That would take too long. But you’re not the first man to tell me he loved me, Patrick. And few of them have been as good a man as you. So.” She turned to go upstairs, but he caught her arm.

“Don’t tell them about Sutton. Please.”

“They may not ask again.”

“Please, Violet.”

“About the battle, if they ask. And that I made you stay out of it because he asked me to. But not the why’s.”

He was quiet a moment, then let go of her arm. “All right.”

It was pouring rain when Violet got up in the morning. She sat down at one of the tables in the inn, in a sour mood, waiting for the others to get up. The rain would obscure the tracks, and they'd be left guessing.

"We're going out in this, aren't we?" Andrew said glumly once they were all downstairs.

"When did I ever in the past two months give you all a reprieve for rain?" Violet said. "I'm not going to be able to track them now, and we're going to have to move quickly to pick up word of them before we get too much further behind."

"Are you just going to leave us in the dark?" Brinn asked.

"About what?"

"You've been assuming things the past day or so," he said. "I don't know what, but it's been clear that you know something."

"Not really," Violet said. "I know that de Marin is cozy with a crowd that has a history of scheming against the king. I know that they've gone into Genarvies somewhere. And that's pretty much it."

"How far behind them are we?" Patrick asked her. She shifted his eyes to him.

"At least eighteen hours. But with this rain, in the bog, the tracks are going to be gone."

"Are *they* wandering blind?" Brinn asked. Violet was quiet a moment, picking at the last of her eggs yet.

"I don't think so," she said finally.

"So it may not even be possible for us to catch them," he said.

"Well, not for you all," Violet said. "If they're heading the same general direction as their tracks, I could probably be caught up with them by tonight at the latest."

"Then why not all of us?" Andrew said.

"The horses can't move that fast through the bog," Patrick shook his head.

"Does this logging road run in the same direction they're going?" Cassandra asked.

"Roughly." Violet pushed her plate back finally. "As long as it doesn't turn too much to the north we could probably follow it a while."

"The horses will like that better, at least," Andrew nodded.

"Well, whenever you're ready to go, let me know," Violet said, standing and heading for the door. "I'm going look around a bit."

The logging road was little more than a dirt track, but it continued most of the day on the west-southwesterly course that the tracks had been following the day before. The ground became higher towards dusk, and they crested a ridge in time to see the setting sun slip away; a small town was nestled below. The forest thinned out on the mile or so down to the town, and cleared, rolling farmland extended to the west.

"Brinn, you might want to do the talking," Violet said as they got nearer to the town. "Just keep in mind that I, at least, have limited funds, and I don't know what your budget is like, and we don't know how long we'll be here. So..."

"I get the idea," he said.

They ended up in a shared room at one of the inns in town, but there were beds with sheets, and the bathhouse had hot water. Violet stood a while at the bar after the others had gone up to sleep, listening to the local people talking; after a little while Patrick came back downstairs to stand next to her.

"Try the mulled wine if you're going to have something," Violet said to him before he could speak. He took her suggestion, and they both stood silent a while.

“I suppose a lot of men have told you they loved you,” he said finally. She glanced at him.

“Fewer than you might think, given my age,” she said. She stroked the hand beside hers on the bar before picking up her glass again. “You may be the only one who actually meant it.”

“Does that mean you frustrated them more than you do me?”

“Ha, perhaps.”

“You just won’t tell me why, will you?” he said. Violet turned surprised eyes to him.

“You really don’t know?” she said. “I thought it was more obvious than that.”

“Given that I’m male, and thus dense?” he said flatly.

“You know what the elven blood means, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to die eventually regardless of whether you let anything happen, and you’ll have to deal with it anyway. I can’t really do anything about that.” He leaned over slightly closer to her. “Do you really think it’s going to hurt less either way?”

“I don’t know.”

He put his hand over hers when she let it rest on the bar again, and they were quiet a while. Violet was fairly sure by now that the knight and his companions had been through the area, judging by the murmured gossip their appearance in town had created.

“So were you going to stand down here all night?” Patrick asked finally.

“Tempting, but no,” Violet said, smiling faintly, “but you’re not that lucky, either.”

“Heh.” He tilted his glass slightly to see what he had left. “So how long have those two been together?”

“Which?”

“Brinn and the maid.”

“My guess was something along the lines of three years. Why?”

“Do you think he knows about her other liaisons?”

Violet frowned slightly. “Leave her alone about that, Patrick.”

“Well, *you* apparently did, at least,” he said.

“My dislike of de Matin isn’t solely political,” Violet said. “No, Andrew apparently overheard that fight, and told me about it several weeks ago. The lady would have dismissed her if she’d refused, and her prospects for future employment would have been dead at that point. And her father was lax about negotiating her a marriage, so she’s somewhat trapped in this life at this point, or will have to take a rather undesirable husband to get out of it.”

Patrick grumbled something under his breath she couldn’t make out.

“He’s a good lad, and it’s a pity this hand is getting dealt to him,” she continued. “But maybe we can sort things out, and they can go back and not suffer too much for it.”

“You don’t owe them that, Violet.”

“Perhaps not. But it’s complicated, and I’d rather avoid a repeat of nine years ago.”

“And if this falls through?”

“Then we probably ought to just keep going straight across Genarvies,” she said, shifting her eyes to him again a moment. “I’ve never been fond of the whole ‘guilt by association’ idea.”

He drained his glass. “Then we’re going to have to catch up or find out what they’re up to fast enough to stop them.”

He headed for the stairs, and after a few moments Violet followed.

The weather had not improved the next day, but Violet gave the others time enough to provision a little in the market before they left. The town had been Flederheim; she knew fairly

well where they were. The north-south road ran along much of the border, somewhat intermittently, but if the knight and the others had taken it, she might have guessed at their destination. She was fairly sure, however, that they had continued west, and three days to the west was Pernham. Pernham was a real city – not particularly large, but large enough – and from there the major roads headed off in half a dozen directions. If they were too long getting to Pernham, the trail might become too cold for them to follow.

“So is it likely to continue to rain on this trip?” Cassandra asked towards noon when the drizzle picked up again.

“This is what October is like most places,” Violet shrugged. “I don’t know what they’re up to that they decided to do it now, but I generally prefer June or September if I have to be travelling consistently.”

Cassandra frowned to herself, thinking.

“You don’t know anything else of what they’re up to, do you?” Andrew said, narrowing his eyes at her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “You know they’d never say anything in front of us – Brinn is too forthright, and you’ve got too much common sense to get dragged down like that. And even what I did overhear, it’s all out of context. So I don’t know if I know anything really useful.”

“Lovely how you don’t say *why* they wouldn’t talk in front of you,” Andrew muttered.

“Enough, enough,” Brinn said. “If they’re scheming something bad enough and we somehow get implicated, either we can never go back to Pellevaera, or we’ll have to leave Genarvies in a hurry, or some combination of the two. So if there’s *anything*, Cassandra...”

“God, if you knew what kind of sieve my mind was, you wouldn’t be haranguing me this much,” she sighed, rolling her eyes.

“I’ll warrant you can name the price of every jewel the lady owns,” Andrew said. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“It’s not my fault you don’t have an adequate grasp of sensible business practices,” she said. “Let me think a while, all right? They’d been planning this trip almost a year and a half, and there’s a lot for me to try to sort through.”

Violet turned her head slightly. “A year and a half? Hm.”

“What?” Patrick asked. Violet shook her head slightly.

“I don’t know yet,” she said. “I need to think on that.”

They stopped that evening in a village Violet correctly guessed to be Dalnedorf. They had walked off and on to rest the horses, and between the rain and the mud and the chilly wind, everyone was tired and grumpy. Violet sat with the others in the inn to eat supper, and Brinn lingered a moment when the others had gone up to bed and she seemed unlikely too yet.

“We’re just not going to get answers about Sir Jasper, are we?” he asked.

“That depends what you want to know,” she shrugged. “Watching a man like that, whom you respect and admire, die, knowing that you can do nothing to prevent it – it isn’t easy, and Patrick took it very badly. You seem quite curious, though.”

“I saw him only once, when I was a boy, but his reputation...”

Violet smiled slightly. “If you were hoping to work for a man like that, they’re rare nowadays. But I suppose they always have been.”

“They say he was too old...”

“No. Not really. Just moving blindly, because I was down for three days, unconscious from fever. And by the time I was up again, they were trapped, the two hundred of them, in a

valley between their infantry and their heavy cavalry. So it was going to go badly regardless.”

“You got out, though.”

“Only because he revoked my commission and sent me off,” she said. “I’d have stayed otherwise. Probably would have, anyway, except that he told me to get Patrick out.”

“... why?”

“Because he was a sentimental old man, by that point, and Patrick never held an official position in the army. Served fifteen years, but without a commission. I damn’ near had to kill him to keep him out of it, anyway,” she said.

“And so you just left him?”

Violet was quiet a moment, stirring through a mug of liquid Brinn couldn’t quite guess the identity of.

“When you’ve worked for a man like Sutton long enough – Philip is like this, too, for the most part – when he tells you to go, it’s hard not to. You feel guilty afterwards, but if getting out when he said go let him die with a clear conscience, that was about as much as I could do for him at that point.”

“Are you really that close to the king?” Brinn asked.

“Close?” She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve known him for a long time, worked for him for a long time.”

“Oh.”

“You seem surprised.”

“Well, given what happened at the end of the war...”

“A misunderstanding,” Violet shrugged.

“You went back without Mr. Marshall, though?”

“Patrick didn’t handle it well,” she shook her head. “I’m not really surprised... He was fifteen when he started working for Sutton, and that was pretty much his expected career ending, on top of feeling as though he had somehow failed him. But Sutton had detached me from the army, revoked my commission. I had to go back.”

“Oh.”

“Have you given any thought of what you’re going to do if this works out and we get to go back to Pellevaera eventually?” Violet asked.

“I don’t know. My father will have a fit if I show up there out of work. One brother is getting the barony; one is knighted; one is in one of Orannel’s monasteries. He’s already told me he’s not going to arrange for a marriage. Depending which way this sorts out, either looking for a new employer or perfecting starving in the streets.”

“Cassandra...?”

He was quiet a moment. “Her father wouldn’t go for it, and mine would probably have a fit. He’d just hold everything she’s been through against her.”

“Your fathers don’t *have* to arrange it,” Violet said.

“No, but neither of us is going to have an income for a while, either. So it may just not be possible anyway.” He stood to go up to bed. “Not that it really changes anything, I suppose.”

Violet lay awake, staring at the darkened ceiling of their room, debating the knight’s possible motives for coming to Genarvies with a sorceress, a barbarian, and a thief. Murder, theft, treason, and all sorts of general diplomatic mischief were all possibilities still on the table.

And they were still being followed. The tracks were sporadic, but there; she was fairly certain she had probably been within ten feet of their pursuer and unable to detect his presence,

and it irritated her. If the pursuit had intended something malevolent, she expected it to have occurred by now. But she couldn't be sure – it could show up in a couple weeks, or when they were far enough into Genarvies to get trapped there if the authorities decided they didn't want her there.

She worried about losing them at Pernham; she worried about catching up in time only to catch the blame for whatever they did end up doing. She wondered how innocent Cassandra really was with regards to the unknown scheme; that thought reminded her of the time frame. Almost a year and a half ago... she had been in Eberford then, April rains being on her list of unpleasant traveling weather. Up there with October rains... She drifted slowly off.

The rain had let up the next morning, but the road was muddy, and Violet was tired. She was used to walking tired, but the mud was not improving her mood. If she'd been alone, she would have taken off through the fields and meadows, where the groundcover at least kept her feet from sinking an inch and three quarters with every step.

"That was April, and April last year was twenty years," Andrew said suddenly towards noon. Violet turned her head slightly. "I remember for the parade he wanted the horse's hooves blacked, and the horse kicked the pot, and it took two hours to wash it out."

"I don't know if that really matters," Cassandra said. "She'd been snappish for quite a while before that, anyway."

"The lady seems grumpy in general, though," Andrew said.

"Well, yes."

"Twenty years," Violet mused. "He granted clemency to almost two hundred, but the former Duke of Lethuria was beheaded."

The others fell quiet again.

"Walter Greneur," she continued, mostly to herself. "A cousin on his mother's side, kept almost a third of the northeast in a state of constant revolt for the first three years of Philip's reign."

"That was a bit of your work, wasn't it?" Patrick said.

"What was?" she asked.

"Bringing him into Eberford in chains."

She just shrugged slightly. "Some people don't like to admit they're beaten, which I understand, but to be such a damn' nuisance about it..."

"Wait, that was *you*?" Brinn said. "I remember him being escorted through the city by a company of knights..."

"Greneur wasn't a bad man," Violet said. "He was just on the losing side, and couldn't let go. And wouldn't, even after twenty years."

"Would he really have any bearing on whatever they're doing, though?" Cassandra asked.

"Greneur was a cousin of de Matin," Brinn said quietly.

"Oh."

"Very different men," Violet said. "Greneur could not have been the king Philip is, but he might have kept his duchy if he could have conceded."

"I don't recall you there, though," Brinn said. "Granted, I was eight at the time, but still..."

"Violet used to wear formal armor," Patrick said.

"Heh, I used to do a lot of things more formally, but Philip has slowly been worn down to

understanding that such things hinder my work more than help,” Violet said.

“Where *are* we headed, anyway?” Brinn asked.

“Pernham. We may lose them there, we may not,” she said. “The city has major roads to most points, and without knowing what they’re up to, it may take us too long to figure out where they’ve headed to actually catch up.”

“This road goes straight to Pernham?” Patrick asked.

“It should,” Violet shrugged.

“So why don’t you...”

The gaze she turned over her shoulder at him silenced him.

“You do move faster than us, don’t you?” Andrew said.

“We’re still being followed, aren’t we?” Patrick said when Violet ignored the younger man’s question.

“And I don’t know by whom,” she said. “I can go, if you want, but I don’t know that it’ll really help anything.”

“But if we lose them, we’re screwed anyway,” Andrew said. Violet shifted her pack slightly.

“Fine. Once I know roughly which way they’re headed, I’ll wait for you in Pernham,” she said. She left the mud of the road for the recently denuded fields to the north, and within fifteen minutes was out of their sight.

“Did I make her angry?” Andrew asked.

“It’s not you,” Patrick shook his head. “Just the situation in general.”

Violet reached Pernham around nine that evening and settled in to listen to the gossip at one of the busier taverns. She was fairly sure in a short amount of time that she had reached the city a few hours after the knight and his companions; she spent almost half an hour talking herself out of going to confront them alone. The tavern was bustling; she frowned as a man slid into the seat next to her at her table.

“I’m surprised you left them alone,” he said to her. His ears were in the shadow of his hood, but elven; she drummed her fingers once on the table.

“And?” she said.

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” he said.

“Should I? My memory is better for estimated numbers and distances and such.”

“I suppose my name would not mean much, and I don’t know that you would believe me if I told you who I worked for—”

“Believe? Maybe. Trust you regardless is another matter entirely,” Violet said.

“He is curious why you left Eberford with the knight,” the elf said. Violet set down her glass.

“That’s *it*? He sent you to inquire about that? It was a stupid guide job for petty cash for the winter, and now I don’t know what the hell it’s turned into. God, I hope he pays you well for such trivial fluff as that.”

“No, no... not just that,” the elf said. “I suppose you’ve realized, then, that the knight is up to something.”

“Yes,” Violet frowned, “and is somewhere in town, but not alone, or I’d go find out what now and get that damn’ well over with.”

“You don’t know?” the elf said, somewhat surprised.

“You say that as though I should.”

“I had thought the servants would have told you.”

“I don’t think they really know,” Violet said.

“No? They’ve all worked for them for seven years or more...”

“That doesn’t necessarily ensure endearment,” she said. “He is not a pleasant man to work with.”

“Ah.”

“So are you the one who’s been following us, or guiding them?” Violet asked, picking up her glass again to drain it.

“You hadn’t guessed?”

“I don’t know. I’m getting sick of all the stupid, petty hate in politics, and I’m about ready to go see if my mother wants me back, or if I burned that bridge too thoroughly.”

“His sources think they’re headed for Olloria, so you may have the opportunity to ask,” the elf said. Violet shifted her eyes to him again.

“Is there some reason I should know about that you know where I’m from?”

“Your mother has wanted to know what you’ve been up to,” the elf shrugged.

“Bah, great. Well, I’ll see which way they go in the morning. If they’re headed all the way through Genarvies, I’m going to be even more confounded as to their purpose.”

She started to stand, but he caught her arm – and found her other hand closed about his wrist just as quickly.

“You don’t want to know what I can tell you?” he asked.

“I’m not going to trust anything you tell me anyway,” she said.

“There’s a dragon in eastern Olloria,” he said. “Not like that little fire Drake.”

“The wyrm Vellaerinoth,” Violet said quietly, sitting back down.

“And in his hoard is a lichstone...”

“The Lichstone of Herodius,” she nodded.

“Their most able leader—”

“They want to bring back Walter Greneur,” she breathed. “Well, that’s not good, but it’s far easier to deal with than some political mess they might have stirred up here in Genarvies.”

“I thought you had some kind of... *problem*... back in Olloria,” the elf said.

“That’s been forty years,” Violet protested, “and involved humans.”

“You’d be surprised how long humans will hold a grudge – down through generations, even.”

“Ugh. Well, we’ll see what happens, I guess. And I’ll see which way they go in the morning,” she said, frowning at him as she stood. He just smiled slightly.

“You’re very much like your father, you know.”

Her frown deepened, but she just headed for the stairs.

The elf had disappeared again by the morning, and Violet made her way around town, eventually settling at a somewhat unobvious point in the market from which she could see most of the major roads heading west. She didn’t know that they would come through the market, but it would be the easiest route to get out of town, and she had a hunch that would be behind their choice of route.

Towards ten in the morning they finally appeared, the knight and lady and barbarian and thief – Forwythe made her uncomfortable in a city. Their guide was a rough-looking human man somewhere older than de Matin. He seemed uncomfortable in the city, Forwythe or none.

She followed them out of the market, staying about a block back, occasionally crossing

over to parallel streets for a block to try to avoid notice. They left through the northwestern gate, and she watched them for a while, disappearing into the little patches of wood and brambles that ran north of the road. Towards noon she headed back to the city; she had told the others she would wait in Pernham...

The northwestern road could take them to the city of Knortington in about eight days. And in about five weeks, it could take them all the way to Olloria, if they stayed on it. But most of the western roads could. If they were going after the dragon, though... Vellaerinoth's lair was most quickly reached via that route. She didn't completely trust the elf – she wasn't sure if she could have anyway, even if she knew for certain that he worked for Philip. Growing up among them had left her with a general mistrust of male elves.

The elven wood straddled the border of Genarvies and Olloria; she wondered if this elf did know her mother. And the throwaway comment about her father... She sighed slightly at that thought. *She* didn't know who her father was. Her mother did, but she had maintained without wavering that it was unimportant for Violet to know.

She went back to her inn, not sure what time the others would show up, and spent a good portion of the day watching the street traffic. She was restless, wanting to be off. Vellaerinoth would be a challenging fight, even for a seasoned knight with an experienced mage backing him. He was one of the older wyrms in Olloria, and his hoard was rumored to be vast, given the number of kings he had blackmailed into tribute and the sheer accumulation of years.

Violet had only seen a wyrm once, from a distance – generally the best way to see one, anyway. They were too unpredictable, too dangerous, to really deal with, and getting within a mile or so of one had been quite close enough for her the last time. They were undisputedly the most powerful creatures of the mortal realms. She frowned slightly to herself at that thought. They were not reputedly patient creatures, either, and if de Marin and company took something from Vellaerinoth *without* killing him, she wasn't sure they would be able to assuage his wrath and come off it alive if they caught up to the knight and the dragon subsequently caught up with them.

Or the elf had been wrong, or lying, and her mind was now working through needless tangents.

Towards dusk she went to watch the eastern gate she expected the others to arrive through, and she fell in next to Patrick when they arrived.

"How did things go?" she asked him.

"Consistently uneventful," he said. "You?"

Violet shrugged slightly. "It can wait till you've eaten."

That answer just made them impatient, but she didn't elaborate until after she'd led them to the inn and they had all sat down to eat. She would have waited until they had finished eating, but Brinn and Andrew were both too impatient to wait that long.

"They left out the northwestern gate," she shrugged finally in response to one of their questions.

"And that's it?" Andrew said.

"That's all that I know for certain," she said. She had ended up seated between Patrick and the stone fireplace, and it made her feel a little trapped. She hadn't seen the elf since the night before, and she still wasn't sure how much she could trust his information.

"Are you still jittery about that lion rumor?" Patrick said.

"What, everyone in a thirty mile radius saying, 'It's just a lion,' and then when we go

through that ravine, it's a friggin' manticore?" Violet said. "Maybe."

"And so you're just not going to tell us the rumors?"

"I don't know if it's rumors or misinformation," she said, picking at the potatoes still on her plate.

"Better than nothing."

"I don't know about *that*."

"Fine, then. But if you're just saying that not to scare them—"

"Vellaerinoth," Violet said flatly, cutting him off.

"What?" Patrick asked, confused. Of the others, only Mavyn seemed to recognize the name; she was digging for her pencil.

"A wyrm. Not like that little firedrake, a real wyrm."

"Wait... if they're just going after a dragon, why would we try to stop them?" Brinn asked.

"I don't know that they're trying to kill him," Violet said. "I do seriously question whether they can – he's very old, and very canny. It's more a matter of what's in his hoard, and with Forwythe with them, getting at that might be feasible without killing him – although crazier, in my opinion. The dragon is going to *know*. And having a wyrm like that hunting you just seems like a death wish to me."

"What's in his hoard that would interest them?" Cassandra asked. Violet shifted her eyes to her a moment before she answered.

"A lichstone was mentioned to me—"

"Mentioned?" Patrick said.

"By that elf that has been following us," she frowned, "which is why I don't know if they're really going there or not, but it's not implausible."

"What's a... lichstone?" Brinn asked.

"Turns someone who's dead into a powerful kind of undead," Violet asked. "There are other things that could interest them, though – the Crown of the Sun Goddess, for example, or the Scepter of Juris."

Mavyn had passed her a note, and Violet was quiet a moment to read it.

"I thought Aurora's Psalter was destroyed in the elven wars fourteen hundred years ago," she said when she had.

Mavyn shook her head slightly.

"I wasn't exactly intending to actually get close enough for him to notice our existence if they do actually go all the way to his lair," Violet said.

The younger woman just shrugged slightly.

"What *are* you talking about?" Patrick asked.

"Aurora's Psalter?" Violet said. "It's a relic, consecrated by the goddess of the dawn."

"And why would you be interested in it?" Patrick asked Mavyn. She just rolled her eyes at him.

"He *knows* he's dense because he's male, hon," Violet said, smiling slightly. "You don't have to rub it in. I do that enough."

"What's the difference between a wyrm and a firedrake?" Andrew asked reluctantly.

"Size, intelligence, magical endowment," Violet shrugged. "Wyrms are also terrifying."

"I think that was a given," Cassandra said.

"So basically they might be going to kill a dragon to get some kind of powerful relic," Brinn said. Violet nodded slightly.

“Or at least distract him long enough for Forwythe to get in and out with it,” she said.

“But is that necessarily bad?”

“Depends what, if anything, they get, and they intend to do with it,” Violet shrugged.

“You have an idea, then,” Cassandra said.

“They’re without a capable central leader right now if they’re intending to openly oppose Philip again,” Violet said. “A lichstone might fix that.”

“That’s a rather risky plan, isn’t it?” Patrick said. “A lich can’t really be controlled, and if it decides to do something according to its own benefit, they may not be able to stop it.”

“If they hate Philip that much, they may think it’s worth it.”

“Bah, that will be a mess to deal with.”

“So are we still going after them?” Andrew asked.

“We probably should,” Brinn said. “There’s always the chance they’re just treasure hunting, but if they *are* up to what she’s suggesting, it’s probably better if they don’t succeed in getting that thing back to Pellevaera.”

Andrew sighed slightly. “Fine. I’m going to go sleep while the beds are decent.”

He headed off for the stairs. Violet waited to speak again until he was out of earshot.

“Did the lady leave any more books?” she asked Cassandra when she and Brinn also stood to go upstairs.

“Well, yes. Why?” the younger woman asked, frowning.

“It might be prudent to let him see them,” Violet said. “I don’t know just what we’re going to run into at this point.”

Cassandra frowned slightly. “I doubt it will really help.”

Violet just shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not.”

Brinn had stopped halfway to the stairs, waiting, and Cassandra turned and followed him. Mavyn lingered a few minutes longer, still finishing her drink. Patrick didn’t seem inclined to get up anytime soon, so Violet ordered another drink when one of the serving girls got close enough.

“So the elf followed you and not us,” he said when they were alone.

“Yep.”

“And you don’t trust him?”

“He *probably* works for Philip. But I don’t want to get blindsided by something. They’re heading in the general direction of Vellaerinoth, but I’ll want to keep checking up on them, probably. Just in case they’re planning to do something else, too.”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“Five or six weeks, depending on the weather and all,” she shrugged.

“What’s the next major town on the road they took?”

“Knortington, in about a week or so.”

“Do you want to go ahead?”

She glanced at him. “I don’t know. I suppose I could catch up and follow them, but if they change course I might lose them letting you know, or not be able to leave word in such a way as you could follow if I stayed with them, and if I just went ahead of them, they might change course before they caught up.”

“How far behind them are we?”

“Maybe twelve hours.”

“You can travel twice as far as they can in a day, can’t you?”

“Well, yes. But I couldn’t really follow them and then come back, because I’d just end

up passing them twice if I went all the way to where I think they might be going and back.”

“Oh. I suppose that’s true.”

“I’ll just do it for the major crossroads, eh?” she said. “If we lose them with a twelve hour gap I think I can find them again. At least until we hit the wilds on the far side of Genarvies.”

“I’ve never been this far west before...”

“I... was born in Olloria, in that part of the elven wood. So I’ve been through a lot of the eastern part of Olloria and most of Genarvies. If we get out towards Yenisberg, that area is pretty familiar.”

“Ah, all right.”

She had edged a little closer to him after her drink had arrived, and after a little while he put an arm around her shoulders.

“You never have liked the cold,” he said quietly.

“Not enough meat on me to keep me warm,” she said, shrugging slightly. Patrick gave her a squeeze.

“I’m sure there are legions of grandmothers out there willing to rectify that,” he said. Violet clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle the laugh and keep herself from spitting out her drink.

“God, I only met my grandmother once, and I would be scared to do so again,” she said.

“Why?”

“Mother had never married, at least the last time I heard from her. Grandmother is roughly the equivalent of a Peer in elven society, and so I was an absolute *scandal* to her.”

“I suppose the other one would be dead now.”

“Probably. Mother won’t tell me who my father was, so I couldn’t really check, anyway. She’d have to be past a hundred, though.”

They were both quiet a while, and Violet started on a third drink.

“You’re a lot freer with the hard stuff than you were last time I saw you,” he said.

“Heh, it’s the elven blood. It takes alcohols of elven origin or about seven of the average human drinks to really get me buzzed,” she said. “If I get to seven or eight, you should probably start worrying.”

“I’m just being foolish, aren’t I?”

She turned her cheek against his shoulder a moment. “No. Not really. But if you ever thought of me settling down, you’ll probably be disappointed.”

“And what are you going to do when you run out of places to wander?”

“Find a boat, probably.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do if this little escapade doesn’t get me killed.”

“I suppose wandering around doesn’t really appeal at your age,” Violet said, a little teasingly.

“Not when it’s cold enough to freeze overnight,” he said. He reached up to pull the kerchief off her hair, then settled his cheek against it.

“So, what, November to sometime in March?” she murmured.

“I suppose something like that. Though this weather has been a mess, and we’re barely halfway through October.”

“Oh, it’ll be snowing by the time we’re in Olloria probably,” Violet said.

“Ugh.”

“Oh, I don’t like it any more than you do,” she said. She settled her cheek against his

shoulder again. "I do actually have a flat in Eberford, you know. I don't use it very long at a time, but it's been easier than trying to get a new one every few months."

"I don't know if I can even go back there again," he said. "After how things went..."

"Oh, we'll see."

"So when did it stop being a no?" he asked.

"Ha, you're not *that* lucky yet," Violet said. "I hadn't seen you in nine years till a few days ago. But I was fond of you then, and... Well, eventually I'm going to have to stop pretending I'll ever meet a man with a similar potential lifespan that I'll actually *like*. Half-elves are rare enough, and I have a hard time trusting elven men."

"Huh? Why just the men?"

"Because half the ones I ever knew while I was living among them chased both me *and* my mother. And that's just... well, far beyond my comfort level. But anyway... I guess I'm eventually going to just have to be resigned to getting my heart broken every half-century or so."

"Oh."

"We're probably going to be four or five months getting back to Eberford," she said, sitting up a little to finish her drink. "But if it's amenable to both of us at the end of that, I'll leave the option of you coming to stay with me on the table."

"If I'm just going to be a strain on your resources..."

"I have a commission from Philip," she said quietly. "It's basically a stipend during times of peace."

"Is he going to object to me?"

She turned somewhat coy eyes to him. "He had better not. I may work for him, but he doesn't have that kind of leverage over my personal life."

"Will your mother?"

"I haven't spoken to my mother in over thirty years," Violet said, "so whether she does or not really doesn't matter."

"Oh."

She drained her glass and settled back against him. "I didn't really have the kind of relationship with my mother that you had with yours. I don't dislike her, but I'm too restless to have stayed there."

"What would you have done there?"

"Probably weave. She was the rebel of her siblings, really. Both her sisters married high in the Guard, but she ran off and apprenticed herself to a weaver."

"I suppose you doing something similar shouldn't have surprised her, then," Patrick said.

"I guess. Most other half-elves I've met have been homebodies, regardless of whether their mother was elven or human."

"Then why does everyone assume half-elves become scouts or rangers or cavalry officers?"

"Probably because most of the half-elves most people see are." She stretched her legs. "But if you grow up along the edges of an elven wood you meet a lot more half-elves than there are in most of the rest of the world."

He touched the grey at her temples lightly. "I can't help but wonder what they did to you to cause that," he breathed.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I decided a while back that I'm not getting so involved in a country's politics again after Philip dies. You understand how it is, I think – what working for a man like Sutton or Philip is like. And I wouldn't regret doing that again, but there's just so

much other stuff tied to it when you get up to the level like I've landed at – when just being on the level of friends with someone makes people scheme against you. And what it does to your trust in people..."

"Does that mean you're just not going to tell me?" he asked.

"It really wasn't all that awful," she shrugged. "No rack, no thumbscrews, nothing like that. But the fever that had me on my back three days came back on the trip back to Eberford, so it really didn't take much."

"Should you even be traveling this time of year, then? When it's raining so much, to boot?"

"Oh, I've been fine. I spent a couple months in Eberford when Philip stopped panicking about it all, a large chunk of it sleeping."

"All right."

"How late were you going to sit up?"

He kissed her forehead lightly. "Until you tell me what it is about my daughter I didn't find out living in the same town nine years."

"Heh, you mean about her being a priestess?" Violet said. "I haven't actually asked her details, but I'm fairly sure that she serves Aurora, which is why the Psalter would interest her. And I would guess that's why she no longer speaks."

"How's that?"

"Her voice may belong to her goddess alone."

"But why?"

Violet shrugged slightly. "It may be a condition of her goddess granting powers like the healing magic. Or there may be some other stipulation. Someone who has that kind of favor with the divine usually has a very personal relationship with them, so there are myriad possibilities I couldn't even guess at."

"Oh."

"I think she has a crush on Andrew, as well."

"Wait – *what?*"

"He's a very nice young man," Violet said, smiling slightly. "I'm sure a lot of girls fall for him without it going anywhere."

"But—"

"Oh, do stop worrying. I could be wrong. And if it hasn't been plainly obvious, she *is* a very sensible girl."

"And much too old for me to start acting like a father, I suppose," he sighed.

"I wouldn't say that. But she's quite old enough to decide the if-whens with regards to men, so treating her like she was, say, fifteen, would be a bit harsh, and I doubt she'd take much heed to the protestations, anyway."

"Bah. How does she have more sense than either me *or* her mother, in that regard?"

"Ha, well, she may have been under a goddess's guidance since she was eight. That could be part of it."

He was quiet a moment. "I suppose if she's under a goddess's protection, I can't really do much for her."

"Maybe, maybe not. There is much comfort to be had sometimes in knowing there's someone looking out for you."

"And who has ever done that for you, that you can say that?" he murmured. She glanced up at him, her eyes a little sad now, and she sighed slightly.

“Your father. I suppose at some points in my life his paternalistic attitude might have been irritating, but he had a good touch with it.”

“I don’t know how you managed to bear going back to Eberford after that. I still don’t know if I can face that.”

“Oh, hush. It was *not* your fault, and I’m really not sure we could have avoided it even if I *had* been able to walk in the days leading up to it.” She closed her eyes a moment; his arm had tightened a little around her shoulders. “You disappeared, and I was... well, not thinking entirely clearly, I suppose. With Sutton dead and you gone, the last person I could really turn to at the time was Philip. When of course he would be totally thrown by losing Sutton and me showing up.”

“I suppose you didn’t really take it any better than I did, then.”

She was quiet a little while again before speaking. “We should probably try to get out early. We might be able to shave some of the distance between them and us.”

“Do you know where you want to try to intercept them?” Patrick asked.

“Before they have a chance to make a wyrm angry, if that proves likely,” she said. “If not... well, we’ll see where we end up.”

He stood finally, and Violet stretched again, then followed him up the stairs. They had gotten one large room again to save their funds, and she caught his arm in the hallway.

“Do you want to keep my feet warm tonight, or would that prospect make you too excited to fall asleep?” she asked. He sighed slightly.

“I’m getting old enough to just sleep.”

“Mm. Don’t get all mopey. You may not remember, but I do recall telling you once, nine or ten years ago, that no didn’t necessarily mean never. Sometimes, but not for you.”

“It’s not that. It’s that’s I’m old enough to get into bed with a woman and just want to sleep.”

She reached up and kissed his cheek. “Well, it has to start somewhere, doesn’t it?”

Violet woke to the sound of a razor being stopped; Patrick was shaving when she sat up. The younger people were all still asleep, so she settled back to watch him. Something at her core was a little flattered; she knew he would probably rather have some beard for the winter, and that he remembered her preference for clean shaven men...

She got up when he was finished to peck him on the cheek. He was bare to the waist, the bit of a belly he’d collected as he neared forty more apparent, but the shoulders that had always drawn her eyes still as solid as she remembered. He caught her around the waist a moment with one arm.

“Not too run down for you, am I?” he murmured.

“You underestimate your appeal,” she smiled. “This trip will be more bearable with you along.”

“I just wish I were more useful.”

“What, the man Sutton trusted to act as his lieutenant when he split his forces? I think your experience will be quite valuable if we manage to confront them and it goes badly.”

“I’m a bit out of practice.”

She reached up to kiss the tip of his nose. “I’m sure Brinn could use some work, as well, if you want to arrange something. I need to eat.”

She slipped out of his embrace and into the hallway, trying to calm her racing heart on the way downstairs. Telling him no had never been easy... His suggestion the night before, that

she stick with following de Matin and his group, had probably been the most sensible, but she really didn't want to leave him again. It had been a long time since she'd had *any* kind of relationship, and her reluctance with Patrick had always been a reluctance to get close enough for it to hurt when she lost him. But, given how things had gone when Sutton had died... trying to keep things platonic wouldn't matter. She had never been in love with Sutton, and she was still irrational from the grief for a period of time. And whether she could admit it to him or not, she was fairly sure she'd fallen for Patrick years ago. She was regretting having wasted so much time with regards to him.

The elf was sitting at a table in the front room when she reached it. Violet rolled her eyes and frowned when he motioned her over, but she walked across to take a seat opposite him.

"So do I get a name, or are you going to suffer one of my nicknames?" she asked.

"Ialar Llorelareth," he said, almost cheerfully, and her frown deepened.

"If you tell me you're related, I'm going to have to bitch at my mother."

"A cousin," he shrugged. "A son of the son that never made it into the Guard."

"My mother never mentioned a brother," Violet objected.

"Oh, I doubt she would have. They've always been on bad terms. He went into the Magistracy when it became clear that swordplay was not going to ever work out for him, and she... well, basically she has caused paperwork issues for years."

"Ha. That sounds like Mother, at least. But if they don't get along..."

"Oh, Grandmother keeps her hand in everything. And your proximity to the king of Pellevaera made her uncomfortable enough to land *me* out there."

"Bah. It's not like I'll stay in Pellevaera after he eventually dies. Not long, anyway. Not for a while. I've stayed this long because he's worth working for, but I don't want to go through another change of kings. Not with how far up I ended up."

"No?"

"Having to choose sides if it's contested? I don't want to have to do that again."

"With Llorelareth blood and the path you've chosen, you're likely to land in the same position somewhere else," he said.

"I doubt blood has much to do with it," Violet frowned. "I think it's more that I have similar taste in pastimes as Philip and am not as likely to aggressively vie for favor on a hunting trip as a lot of the men on his court are."

Patrick came downstairs finally and took the seat beside her, a little cautiously, and after looking at him a moment, the elf's brows rose.

"And Jasper Sutton's bastard, as well? You're just making this trip so eventful," he said. Both Violet and Patrick had frowned.

"That is not and was never meant to be common knowledge," Violet said.

"I've been told you tend to babble endlessly in delirium," the elf said coolly, "so if it's gotten around, it's your own fault."

"I'm sure Grandmother getting you back in a box from me wouldn't do anything to improve her opinion of me, but it doesn't mean I wouldn't do it given due cause," Violet growled. "Don't push your luck."

He just smiled slightly. "Pushing your buttons is *far* too easy when I knew your father as well as I did."

Her expression remained stormy, and Patrick leaned slightly closer.

"Are you going to introduce me," he asked, "or have you not gotten that far yet?"

"I don't know if I believe a word he's told me," she said, "but he knows enough about me

that I am fairly sure he's from the Ollorian part of the elven wood."

The elf's face fell a little. "We did meet once, when Grandmother went to talk to your mother about you. She wanted you to go live with them in Felinara, but your mother was stubborn and refused. You were about four. I seem to recall you bit me."

Violet didn't answer, her eyes turned towards the embers in the fireplace. She had not wanted to go anymore than her mother wanted to send her, but her grandmother had tried to manage it, anyway. She had made him bleed.

The four younger people came downstairs, and they all hung back from sitting down when they saw the elf.

"Are we interrupting something?" Brinn asked.

"No," Violet said flatly. She was angry yet, partly at herself, partly at her family in general. "We should be off soon."

The younger people's conversation with the elf – mostly Cassandra and Andrew – drew out his name and general relationship to Violet, but little else was revealed before she pushed back her plate and headed for the door. Patrick didn't move to get up yet, so the others waited, as well.

"Is something wrong?" Brinn asked.

"She's just grumpy," Patrick shrugged.

"She looked rather angry to me," Cassandra said.

"Nah. An angry Violet generally makes something bleed." He was mopping up the grease from his bacon with a biscuit. "The last time I really saw her angry, she knocked a brigadier general through the front window of a tavern."

"Is he coming with us?" Andrew asked with a nod at the elf. Ialar shook his head.

"I have other things to do yet," he said.

Andrew got up after a few minutes to go get the horses ready; the others went back upstairs to pack. Patrick sat finishing his breakfast in silence across from the elf, uncertain how much trouble he was likely to be for them.

"You and she traveling together might make people nervous if they realized who you are," the elf said finally.

"How so?" Patrick asked, having settled into a very rational, calm mood that was making Ialar a little nervous.

"Given the history your fathers had together?"

Patrick set his fork down. "*She* doesn't know who her father was, and as such, I don't, so all those allusions are just going nowhere."

"She doesn't *know*?"

"Apparently her mother would never tell her or something," Patrick shrugged. "And given that he would never acknowledge the relationship, I never really probed mine's doings prior to working for him."

"I suppose at this point, with him dead, telling her wouldn't mean much anyway."

"No, but throwing it in her face repeatedly that you do know when she doesn't will *not* endear her to you."

"Oh, our grandmother would find ways to have me assigned to some dull, remote part of the border if she thought I were becoming friendly with the half-elf in the family," Ialar said. "Even if she's the one managing to do something that doesn't involve sitting around on court nine-tenths of the year."

"And just what are you doing?" Patrick asked.

“She got me assigned to the embassy in Pellevaera to keep an eye on Avellia,” Ialar said, sitting up a little. “And I keep the king informed of her whereabouts, as well, in case he needs to reach her.”

“I suppose it does take an elf to keep track of her.”

“Oh, she’s quite good. I have three hundred years on her, or she might give me problems, in that regard.” He leaned forward slightly. “I get the impression I will be seeing more of you in doing my job with regards to her.”

“Do you, now?” Patrick said. After a moment he shrugged. “For however long this debacle takes to work out, anyway.”

“You would not stay with her?”

“It’s really more a matter of whether Violet will have me or not, and that, I think, is really none of your business.”

“Oh, perhaps not. But her mother has always been curious whether or not she has grandchildren yet.”

“Heh, I don’t think Violet likes children that much.”

“So that’s still a negative, then.”

“As far as I know.”

She came back inside finally, heading for the stairs to get her things. Patrick pushed his plate back.

“Are you going to follow the knight or us?” he asked as he stood. “Or do you have things beyond that to do?”

“What are *you* going to do?”

“I was under the impression it was in everyone’s favor that they not get whatever their aiming to do done,” Patrick said. “So I believe we’re pursuing them to that end.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“She doesn’t trust you. But yeah, wurm, lichstone, other possible relics. If they’re aiming to do something else on the way that is detrimental to the peace between Genarvies and Pellevaera, we’ll probably try to avert that, as well. But we’re about a day’s ride behind them...”

“If she doesn’t trust me, my scouting after them wouldn’t help. I could – cover it overnight and meet you briefly when you catch up, then leave again.”

“So only bother telling us if they veer off the course she’s apparently expecting them to take if they’re going to that wurm,” Patrick shrugged. “She could catch up and trail them, but she seems reluctant to.”

“I don’t think she expected to run into you again,” the elf said, smiling faintly.

“She doesn’t usually allow sentiment to overrule prudence,” Patrick frowned.

“She let Sutton talk her into getting you out of things,” he replied, “and that really only worked because of how she felt about you then – and it was fairly obvious from the outside then. So it does happen.”

“Bah.”

“I’ve apparently made her, what was it, grumpy?” Ialar said. “So I probably shouldn’t keep you any longer and delay her further.”

Patrick grumbled something and headed for the stairs. Violet was tightening the buckles on her pack when he got upstairs; the younger set were on their way out. He caught her around the waist when she straightened.

“Are you going to be all right?” he asked quietly, holding her tightly. She was trembling, still angry.

“Why does no one trust me to let me live my life or do my job?”

“Because you’re half something else, and a woman, and pretty, and it scares them,” Patrick said. “I thought you knew all that already.”

“I thought maybe they’d eventually get over it.”

“Mm. Kind of hard to get over you.”

“Patrick—”

“Fine, fine, I’ll save it for when you’re not grumpy,” he said. He loosened his hold on her, and she reached up to kiss his cheek once before turning back to her pack. “And you’re not going to make it any easier if you decide to go.”

“Oh, don’t you start in like that,” she said. “I really wasn’t intending for us to split up when the war ended, but things just didn’t work out like that. So don’t go and get all pessimistic before we even get anywhere, huh?”

“Wait, what?”

“Was I really that obtuse back then? I’ve been fond of you for a long time, Patrick.”

“Oh.”

The rain let up for the next few days, though it grew progressively colder. Most of the trees were half-bare, and Violet was determined to buy a set of woolens when they got to Knortington. The knight and company seemed to be staying on their expected track ahead of them.

About halfway between Pernham and Knortington they had to camp outside for the night, and Violet built them up a generous fire. Patrick and Brinn had done a little sparring when they had stopped along the road at noon occasionally, and they took the opportunity to again. Mavyn had been sewing since they left Pernham – some warmer things for both her and Cassandra, Violet had realized. Once the fire was sufficiently built up, Violet sat down next to Andrew where he was peering intently at a page in one of the lady’s spell books.

“How are the horses doing?” she asked him. He shrugged slightly.

“Well enough. The roads here are decent enough that they’re probably not going to have many problems.”

“And how is that coming?” She nodded at the book.

“I don’t know. I can figure out a lot of the basic ones, but there doesn’t seem to be a lot of useful stuff in the books she left.”

“Useful how?”

“Oh, things like divination, or something that would make this cold less irritating, or a way to speed up our pursuing them.”

“I wouldn’t worry about the latter,” Violet said. “If the horses are doing well enough, we can probably push an extra hour or two daily and catch up to them in a week or ten days.”

“Do we *want* to catch up to them yet?” Cassandra asked. “It’s not like we can prove they’re doing anything wrong.”

“Not to confront them,” Violet shook her head. “Just so that we don’t have to worry about losing track of them.”

“Won’t that be a little risky, though? They might see us.”

“I would take them seeing us as being bad as a sign they’re doing something wrong,” Andrew said.

“That doesn’t make it any less unhealthy if they’re angry with us,” Cassandra frowned.

“If they do go all the way into Olloria to Vellaerinoth’s lair, I’d rather be close enough to

stop them *before* they make him angry enough to go on a region-decimating rampage,” Violet said. “Quite frankly I’m far less concerned about confronting de Marin and the others than I am about getting on the bad side of a wyrm over two thousand years old.”

“Would he follow us all the way back to Eberford?” she asked.

“Dragons fly fast enough that we probably wouldn’t get that far,” Violet shook her head. “The world is really better off with wyrms, really. They tend to accumulate objects of great power that are often better off out of the hands of humans or elves or dwarves.”

Mavyn frowned slightly at that, and Violet shifted her eyes to her.

“The cult of Aurora has been mostly dead for fifteen hundred years. There’s been no one who had a right to it to watch over it. And if she wants you to take custody of it, I doubt the wyrm will keep it from you. But I’m really not including going to meet him up there on my personal list of goals,” she said.

The younger woman just shrugged slightly and turned her eyes back to her sewing.

“How long have you been waiting to make this trip?” Violet asked her.

Mavyn held up eight fingers briefly.

“Ah. I won’t promise you anything, hon, if they change course. But if they don’t, it may afford you the opportunity.”

The several more days it took them to get to Knortington remained cold and dry – above the freezing point, but still uncomfortably chilly. Violet kept them moving an hour or two longer than she might have if they weren’t trying to catch up, but since continuing on two of the nights meant they stayed in a village and not off the side of the road, no one had any complaints.

Knortington wasn’t a huge city – maybe three thousand people – but it sat atop a bluff along the river, and its walls made it imposing. Violet stopped on the edge of the market.

“If you all have the cash for warmer things, you’ll probably want to get them now. If they continue on towards Olloria, we’re at least two weeks from another town this size,” she said.

“Ugh. If we catch up to them, I’m going to want to smack her for starting on something like this at this time of the year,” Cassandra growled.

“Heh. If you’re going to face a dragon, the end of November isn’t a bad idea. The cold slows them down quite a bit, and if he’s been hibernating long enough, they may not even wake him up,” Violet said.

“Oh.”

“Where are we meeting up again?” Brinn asked.

“The Jaded Rose, probably,” Violet said. “They had good sheets last time I was through here.”

The younger people wandered off to shop; Patrick dismounted to walk around the market with Violet while she looked for suitable woollens.

“So what do you think they’re after?” he asked her.

“Probably what the elf mentioned, the lichstone. That or it’s all coincidental. But conceiving of the trip when Walter Greneur was killed, and heading for the lair of a wyrm who possesses the Lichstone of Herodius? ‘Off to kill a dragon’ is a nice, agreeable cover story that very few people would object to. Hell, they managed to pull me in with it for what they needed me for.”

He put his free arm around her. “Greneur was impressive on the field.”

“Heh, so was Philip. So was Sutton. So were you. There were a lot of good men in that

war; unfortunately they weren't all on the same side. I don't think I could bear to be involved in another civil war in Pellevaera."

"Which is why you're so concerned about keeping them from reigniting that one, I suppose."

"I suppose," she agreed.

"We're not going to run into trouble with you going back into Olloria, are we?"

"I hope not. Hopefully it's been long enough for people to have forgotten me, but I don't know. I'm a little more concerned with that we're going to cross into the elven woods, probably, and the road will likely take us within about eight miles of my mother."

"Oh."

She reached a hand up to his cheek once; he'd been keeping up with the shaving. "We need to get you a scarf. And I don't intend to stop and see her unless it's feasible on the way back."

"You're sure?"

"Probably in grey or blue..."

"Violet..."

"It'll cause too much commotion if I stop on the way out."

She eventually found the woollens she wanted, as well as a scarf for Patrick. The Jaded Rose was not far from the market, and once they had acquired space for their group and the horses, they settled in the front room, near the fireplace, with hot drinks.

"So you've been through here before," he said.

"Ha, about thirty years ago. So hopefully it's as good as it used to be."

"Decent coffee, at least."

She settled back. "Cassandra's concern about the lady's skill is not unwarranted. She would be teaching back in Eberford, I think, if the Academy there were not so pigheaded about her womanhood."

"How did you want to deal with that, then?"

"I'm hoping, in part, that Andrew will acquire enough to at least keep things from going unpleasant quickly. And your daughter does seem to have her goddess's blessing on this trip."

"What was that you asked her – how long she'd been waiting to make this trip?"

"Since she was eight," Violet nodded.

"Oh."

The younger four arrived closer to supper time; there was snow on their hair, and Violet swore under her breath.

"If it sticks before we get out of Genarvies, I'm going to be as inclined as Cassandra is to make them feel for it," she said as she watched them head upstairs to put down their things.

"If you're not going to go ahead of us, you don't *have* to walk the entire time," Patrick said.

"I'd rather not wear down the horses, either," she said.

"Wait until we catch up more, then," he shrugged.

"You're just looking for an excuse for me to ride with you," she teased.

"Oh, as though there's something wrong with that."

She gave his knee a squeeze. "Like I said, a no from me with regards to you isn't a never."

The snow didn't stick, but the frost was thick the next morning. Violet was in a generally

grumpy mood as they continued west out of the city. The sky was grey and menacing yet, and a bitter wind was gusting off and on.

“Feels like February,” Andrew grumbled.

“If this is late October this year,” Violet said, “February is going to be wicked. And we’ll probably be out in it.”

“If none of these books has anything to make this more bearable, I’m going to be in a very sour mood when we catch up with them,” he said.

“Heh, I think we all are,” Violet said. “Regardless of what they’re up to, de Marin is at least getting an earful for this. I should be four hundred miles south hunting boar right now.”

“Why?” Cassandra asked.

“Because it’s warmer down there,” Violet shrugged.

The weather continued clear and cold for several days out of Knortington, and they eventually got within about an hour of the knight and his group. Villages had become scarce, however, and three consecutive nights they had to camp outside.

“What’s the next town?” Patrick asked Violet when she settled beside him to sleep, four days out of Knortington and camping again around a fire.

“City, or village?” Violet asked. She settled her face against his neck, half under their blankets.

“City.”

“Yenisberg, on the border of the elven wood where it extends into Genarvies. We’ll reach a smaller town, Welleston, in about ten days, and Yenisberg is about a week or ten days beyond that. Then a week through the elven wood to the border of Olloria, and then another week or so to the general area of Vellaerinoth’s lair.”

“Ugh.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe I am getting to old for this.”

She just laughed softly. “I hope not. These next ten days to Welleston may be the most dangerous part of the trip so far as traveling. The elven wood is generally well policed, but this part of Genarvies is full of bandits and trolls and ogres and such.”

“And we’re staying outside?”

“There really aren’t a lot of villages to stay in,” she said, shrugging slightly.

“Are you going to actually sleep?” he asked, half-accusingly.

“I have been. If it doesn’t wake me up before it gets here, I probably wouldn’t see it first awake anyway.”

He kissed her forehead. “All right, then.”

Violet let herself doze off, waking after a couple hours when the fire was mostly burned down and Patrick was snoring steadily. She added some wood to the fire so they would have heat the rest of the night, then slipped off into the scrub along the road, heading west.

A few miles up the road she found a village – fortified with a wooden palisade and a heavy gate. The guard was asleep, so she slipped over the wall and slunk through the dark of the sleeping village. The inn was on the square, and old, stately building. They had seen better times, no doubt; the wilds of this part of Genarvies had not always been so desolate. She considered that as she pulled herself up the back wall of the stable onto its roof to gain access to a window in the upstairs hallway. No, this area had been devastated almost seven hundred years ago, and the population had not grown enough since then to push back into the area. The wrym

Shallonis...

She wiggled the window catch open and slipped inside. If the knight and company weren't staying there and someone noticed her, things were going to get very awkward. She was somewhat concerned that if they *were* there, Forwythe would notice her snooping. Several slightly opened doors later she had confirmed their presence, and she left the way she'd come.

Her mind turned back to the dragon as she walked through the scrub back to their camp. The wyrm Shallonis had dominated this part of Genarvies for centuries, but she eventually butted wills with Uther of Loringal, the founder of Genarvies' current royal line. Shallonis had been taking tribute from the petit nobles of north-central Genarvies for what seemed like eons, but Uther had demanded that they pay tribute to him alone. Their protests about the wyrm had led to an ultimatum: they could fight the dragon, or they could fight him. They had chosen to fight the dragon.

Supposedly she had been killed, and Violet thought that there was probably some truth in it – they had probably wounded her badly enough that she had died of it. But she had wiped out the nobles of this part of Genarvies almost to a man; only one had survived her, by continuing to pay her tribute, and subsequently Uther had him killed. Much of the land still lay barren, covered by forest, scrub, and heath; the villages that had survived were very old, very independent, and – if rubbed the wrong way – very stubborn.

Patrick was sitting awake by the fire when she got back; she went back to their blankets to get warm, and he followed.

“You can't do your scouting when I'm awake?” he murmured.

“Not if I don't want them to see me.” She settled back into the hollow she'd made earlier. “And they're still on course.”

“How far ahead are they?”

“Four or five miles.” She pulled the blankets further up. “You harp about me not discussing my speculation, but don't offer up your own?”

“There's really not much for me to speculate about here, hon,” he said. “I've been out of things for nine years, and I don't really know this de Matin or the others.”

“Mm. But you served under Sutton for fifteen years, and I've seen you lead a troop in battle before, so I do know what you're capable of.”

“That's different than chasing four people hundreds of miles across land I'm unfamiliar with.”

“I suppose.” She stretched, and his arm tightened around her. “Sleep. This is a nervous land. We need to be on our toes.”

They traveled for almost three more days before they managed to stop in a village for the night. This was Hursten, whose walls were stone and whose gates were banded with iron. The younger part of the group seemed a little intimidated as they rode in.

“What the hell is out here that they feel the need for all this?” Andrew asked as they passed through the stone archway.

“Used to be a dragon,” Violet said.

“What kind of dragon?” he asked. “And why do walls matter when they can fly?”

“I don't know,” Violet shrugged. “They make people feel safe. But so far as the dragon, well...” Some of the townspeople were frowning as they passed, so she just shrugged again.

“Something that left a long memory,” Cassandra breathed. “Is that not answer enough?”

The inn was the Gilded Chalice, and Violet was quiet as they ate. She was a little

nervous about going back to Olloria. The dragon had been almost seven hundred years ago, and people still frowned. But would anyone really remember her? By name, maybe, but... Even if they did, she would only be outside the wood – what, two days? And that was up towards the wyrm’s lair. People would avoid that area, so maybe they wouldn’t even run into anyone.

The younger people stayed downstairs with her and Patrick longer than she anticipated; when most of the local people had left the front room, Andrew leaned forward slightly.

“So what kind of dragon?” he asked in a hushed tone.

Violet raised a brow. “Are you all really that curious about it?”

“There are no wyrms in Pellevaera,” Brinn said, “just dragons like that fire Drake. I don’t think any of us realized they got bigger than that, and that? That was pretty big to me. But no one really panics about dragons like that unless they’re terrorizing villages. But the look those people gave you when you mentioned it—”

“If you guessed it was a wyrm, what else is there to know?” Violet asked.

“What happened that all these people are still spooked about it?”

“It’s why this area is so empty,” Violet shrugged. “It’s been a long time, though. Almost seven hundred years.”

“If it’s been dead so long, why is it still empty?” Andrew asked.

“Why are you asking me this here, and not when we’re camped outside somewhere without people who get antsy hearing about it?”

Patrick put a hand lightly on her arm. “That’s just your scouting instincts, hon. It’s too cold to sit up and talk outside.”

“We’re going to have to come through here on the way back,” she said. “I’d rather not have them angry at us.”

“For talking about a dragon that’s been dead how many hundred years?”

She muttered something under her breath. “Fine. But if we’re stuck outside here in February—”

“Yeah, yeah. Not your fault. Now tell the kids a story so they’ll go up to bed, hm?”

She settled back against him, a little grumpy. “It’s been almost seven hundred years, really – since Uther of Looringal took the throne of Genarvies. At that time, the wyrm Shallonis lived in this region. I don’t really know how long she’d been here; Vellaerinoth is much closer to where I grew up, so I know more about him, and she’s been dead a long time. But most of the nobles in the region paid tribute to her. Uther told them to stop – that any tribute they paid was to be to him alone.”

“And the dragon was angry about it?” Andrew asked.

“Something like that. The nobles weren’t immediately inclined to stop – tribute keeps a wyrm from coming to take what it wants for itself, generally. But Uther didn’t back down – he intended them to stop, or he’d make them. So the nobles were basically faced with the option of war with Uther or war with Shallonis. And when they chose to fight the dragon, she killed them. Only one kept paying her tribute; Uther had him killed.”

They were quiet.

“So yeah, most of this region has been ravaged by a dragon,” Violet shrugged. “She was pretty thorough, so I’m really not surprised they’re still angry about it.”

“Are they mad at the dragon, or at Uther?” Brinn asked.

“Heh, I’m not going to speculate on that. Their politics are their own.”

“Was there ever a wyrm in Pellevaera?” Andrew asked.

“It’s been a long time since there was one reported,” Violet said. “The last I know to

have been there was Illyrian, and that's been closed to three thousand years. Pellevaera is a bit too densely populated outside the Wenderham Bracken for a wurm to comfortably take up residence."

"Why do you know so much about dragons, anyway?" Andrew asked.

"When you grow up maybe a half-day's flight from a wurm's lair, you do spend some time studying them."

"Oh, so you're from around there?"

Violet just shrugged. "Most half-elves are born in the wood. Most never get around to leaving, though."

"So is there anything else we should know about the dragon we're apparently heading for?" Brinn asked. Violet turned her eyes briefly to him, then back to her half-empty plate.

"Not really. I really have no intention of us getting close enough to be noticed, so there's not much else to tell."

"You seem to be implying that there's no way we could survive a meeting with him," Brinn said.

"A wurm? God, it took them the troops of this entire region to kill Shallonis. With a sufficiently capable mage, you might be able to take one down with just a few trained to fight them, but really, they're just so huge – and they breathe fire, and have magic of their own. For the most part you're looking at just getting squished before you can really even do anything else."

"So they might even get themselves killed before we ever get that far," Andrew said.

"Not impossible," Violet shrugged.

"So what do we do if that happens?"

"Turn around, go back, and tell Philip that de Matin got himself killed by the wurm Vellaerinoth," she said, "since if that happens, it happens, and anything else that he might have been planning will just be speculation at that point."

"Wait," Brinn said. "You think he's planning treason, but if he got killed by the dragon, you wouldn't tell the king any of that?"

"I'll answer what questions Philip asks of me regarding it, but I'm not going to smear a dead man's reputation without any solid evidence on my part. What Philip already knows of it I don't know."

"I suppose he's not likely lucky enough to have you raving in delirium twice," Patrick said to her.

"God, I hope not. I was sick as hell," she said.

"So you don't profess to a goddess?" Cassandra asked lightly. Violet raised a brow at that.

"I'm not *that* elven," she said.

"No?"

"Not really that religious, either. You'd be surprised how many of Orannel's clergy will stop you on the street if you look remotely elven and exhort you to convert. It would be rather difficult, really, since I don't have anything to convert from," Violet said. She paused a moment. "Not that my mother needs to hear that, I suppose."

"Duly noted," Patrick said. "No theological conversations with Violet's mother."

She poked him in the ribs. "If we get that close, I don't know that it'd be a good idea for you to meet her, anyway. She already has a track record with human men, and I am *not* going to risk her taking to you in *that* way."

“What, there are more besides you?” Cassandra asked.

“Not that I know of,” Violet said. “But there is me. And given the odds? There was probably something going on for a while. So nope, no risking Mother *liking* Patrick.”

“I suppose that’s a uniquely half-elven problem,” Cassandra mused, “your mother being a serious possible rival.”

“Depending which side is which, but I suppose.”

“What, you think I wouldn’t refuse your mother?” Patrick asked.

“That doesn’t matter,” Violet said. “It would just be *weird*.”

The road past Hursten descended into a valley; the trees grew thicker and taller the further west they went. They would reach the Bollesa River soon, but the town that had once marked the road’s fording the river had been dead for over six hundred years, and there was little left to mark its location, save a few ruined towers.

Violet began walking into the forest on either side of the road as they traveled, and the attention she was giving to the ground made Patrick nervous.

“Dare I ask what you’re tracking?” he asked finally

“Troll,” she said, cutting across to the trees on the other side.

“How many?” he called after her. She came back after a few minutes.

“Just one. Trolls are bigger than ogres. They generally only come in ones.”

“And?”

“This one attacked them, but the lady scared them off before it could do anything, I think,” she said. Patrick swore under his breath.

“What?” Andrew asked.

“That means it’s still hungry,” Patrick said.

“Oh.”

Violet disappeared into the trees again. Andrew began thumbing nervously through one of the spell books; after a few minutes Mavyn rode up next to him to take it from him. She flipped through it a moment, then handed it back, open to a page towards the back.

“What does this – oh.” He fell quiet, studying the page intently.

When Violet returned, she was running, and Patrick settled his hand on his sword. She swung up next to him, balanced on the toe of his boot, holding on to his saddle horn.

“There’s the remains of a tower where the road crosses the river,” she said. “The door still closes, though it doesn’t have a complete ceiling. But we need to get there before it gets dark.”

“How far—”

“About six miles.”

“And we have... maybe twenty minutes?”

“Yeah. Get moving. I can probably distract them from the horses—”

“Them? What happened to trolls come in ones?”

“Mated pair,” Violet said, dropping back to the ground. “Which means she’s pregnant, and *hungry*. So move.”

Patrick reached down and caught her before she could disappear into the trees again. He leaned down to kiss her when she turned. “Be careful.”

“Mm. Tower by the river. Before dark. Or we may have real issues, hm?”

He let her go, and the younger people, who had overheard about half of what Patrick and Violet had said – “trolls,” “pair,” and “*hungry*” had stood out – urged their horses after Patrick’s

when he put his heels to it. Violet's urgency became clearer to him when they got further along the road; the horses picked up the scent of the trolls, and they were difficult to keep on the road.

Somewhere off to the south ahead of them, a roar bellowed from the woods. The noise drew a beast out of the trees north of the road. It stood over fourteen feet tall, and its long, gangly limbs seemed longer and thinner when contrasted with its protruding, heavy abdomen. The female, Patrick guessed. She hesitated in the road ahead of them when she saw their horses, taking a step in their direction, but another bellow to the south spurred her into the trees on that side of the road.

"That was a *troll*?" Andrew yelled; Patrick didn't answer. They needed to get to the tower before it got dark, because in the dark, the trolls' advantage might be enough that they really couldn't fight them off.

After cresting a low hill, the river came into view, about three miles ahead, a straight shot along the road, the water glittering in the last light of the day. The ruined tower was visible, as well, still rising a bit above the trees. The sounds off to the south of the road made Patrick worry; he could faintly hear Violet yelling in trollish, taunting them, no doubt. He was less worried that she would be killed outright than that they would blood her, and that she would be too angry, too worked up, to leave the fight. And for all the experience she had, two trolls, one of them a pregnant, hungry female, were still probably too strong for her.

They didn't see the trolls again before they got to the tower, and Patrick waved them all inside, waiting until last to drop off his horse and lead it in. The door was heavy, the hinges rusted and stiff, but he and Brinn and Andrew managed to close it.

"How is she going to get in?" Andrew asked. Patrick pointed towards the hole in the roof above, about forty feet up.

"She can really climb this?" Brinn asked.

"We can open the door if we have to," Patrick said, "but she'll probably yell at me if we do."

There was enough wood lying around from broken furniture and pieces of the stairs to start a fire in the hearth opposite the door. Cassandra and Mavyn and Andrew eventually fell asleep after they had made a little supper and eaten, but Patrick sat restlessly on the lower steps, whose stone construction left them extant still, and Brinn was awake beside the fire yet.

The sounds outside had been muffled by the door, and eventually Patrick could no longer hear her. The trolls didn't come looking for them, either, though, so he wasn't sure what had happened. He knew that, no matter what *had* happened, if he went looking for her in the dark, regardless of what condition she was in and how he felt about her, she would be angry. So he sat and tried not to cry for being able to stick by what he still felt compelled to think of as *duty*.

Almost an hour had passed before he heard a faint cackling. It came from above, and he was fairly sure it was Violet; whether the stairs were intact enough for her to come down he didn't know. He stood and started up, cautiously testing each step on the way before trusting his weight to it. There were some gaps, but overall the trip to the top was still manageable.

Violet was sitting on the floor with her back against the wall; he could barely make her out, for the firelight was forty feet below and half burned down. The cackling he recognized, though. That happened any time she killed something she could understand – she didn't handle it well. He sat down at the top of the steps to wait for her sanity to come back, but she passed out first. He carefully carried her back down the stairs.

Brinn was standing when he came into view again, and Mavyn had woken and sat up. Patrick unbuckled Violet's sword belt and let it drop before laying her next to the younger

woman.

“Did she kill them?” Brinn murmured as Patrick retreated to the fire to stir up some light for Mavyn as she began to work.

“I don’t know. Probably at least one if her mind was gone enough for her to be cackling like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t deal well with death dealt by her own hand,” Patrick shrugged. “Never has. Generally best not to ask questions if she doesn’t volunteer the information, since it’s usually incoherent, anyway.”

“Oh.”

Patrick picked Violet’s swords up to clean them while Mavyn was working on her wounds. His stomach was in a knot, and he didn’t dare go over to see how bad they were until Mavyn had had a chance to look at them.

“How did she ever manage the war, then?” Brinn asked quietly after Patrick started on the second sword.

“She mostly just scouts,” Patrick said. “She didn’t do much fighting unless she ran into a patrol or their scouts. She *can*, she just avoids it with sentient creatures when she can.”

“Ah.”

Mavyn motioned him over when he’d finished the second sword, and he crossed to her; she handed him a note. He took it back over by the firelight to read it, then walked back.

“She’s all right otherwise, though?” he asked.

Mavyn nodded slightly.

“Well, we can keep going if we’re careful and stay on the road,” he said, shaking out his blanket and sitting down next to Violet.

“Shouldn’t we let her recover some?” Brinn asked.

“She probably won’t wake up for a while,” Patrick said, “and she’ll be upset if we fall too far behind after finally catching up this much to them.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Troll blood got in her blood,” Patrick shrugged. “It’s sort of like getting *really* drunk... so she’ll probably be a bit loopy when she does wake up.”

“Oh.”

“Besides, if we do stop anywhere, I’d rather it be in a village.”

Violet slept most of the next two days; Patrick kept the group moving steadily along the road to the west, riding with her held in front of him, bundled in both her cloak and their blankets. Mavyn checked the recently closed wounds several times a day to make sure the travel wasn’t irritating them. They saw no more of the trolls, dead or alive; Patrick felt like they were being followed, but he didn’t want to leave the others alone on the road.

Early in the afternoon of the second day after the encounter with the trolls, Violet’s eyes flickered open; she squinted up at Patrick for several moments before recognizing him. She reached up and brushed his cheek lightly with the fingers of one hand.

“You were a good boy and stayed in the tower,” she mumbled, smiling slightly. He shifted her to sit up a little.

“Anything to make you happy, hon,” he murmured. “Do you want to stop and get down for a bit?”

“No, no... no... You’re comfy.”

“Why don’t you close your eyes and rest some more?”

“All right.”

She snuggled closer against him, resting her face against his neck, and was shortly asleep again. Brinn urged his horse up next to Patrick after a while.

“Is she all right?” he asked. Patrick shrugged slightly.

“A little out of it. I don’t really want to know what kind of hangover this stuff will give her when it’s strong enough to do this.”

“At least she’s not an angry drunk,” Brinn said. Patrick glanced over at him, his eyes amused.

“I’ve only seen her drunk by conventional means once, and that’s been over ten years. Angry, no. Inducing of mass disappointment, yes.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Well, it was a regimental dance, and there was champagne, and she learned to party among elves. She drank a lot of men under the table, and was still dancing when a lot of them could no longer walk straight.”

They reached another well-fortified village just after dark that evening, and Patrick carried Violet up to bed to sleep before joining the others back downstairs.

“Do you think we’re still on course?” Andrew asked when Patrick sat down to eat.

“I don’t know, but I don’t know where else they would go out here,” he replied.

“Do you think she’s going to want a horse after she wakes up again?”

Patrick shook his head. “We might be able to talk her into one, but I doubt it.”

They had been eating in silence for a while when Violet made her way down the stairs and unsteadily across the room to slump beside Patrick on the bench. He put his arm around her shoulders, and she sank against him.

“Don’t like trolls,” she mumbled.

“Do you want to eat?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

She was quiet then, eating slowly once Patrick had gotten a bowl of the stew for her, and he kept an arm around her to help keep her upright.

“So where are we?” Violet asked once her bowl was empty.

“I think they called this place Junston,” Brinn said. She was quiet again for a while, thinking.

“Are we too far behind?” Patrick asked her.

“Not really. I should probably check on their distance when I can do so without stumbling all over.” She closed her eyes again and settled a little closer to him. “We should probably get to Welleston the day after tomorrow.”

“How much further do these wilds extend?” Brinn asked.

“And is there anything in them worse than trolls?” Andrew muttered. Violet’s eyes flickered open again.

“The wilds thin out a day or so past Welleston,” she said. “So far as worse than trolls, though, it really depends how you define ‘worse.’ There are a lot of things out here.”

“What else is really likely to bother us, though?” Patrick asked. “Ogres won’t usually bother a group on horse, and anything smaller won’t usually go at an armed party.”

“Smaller wouldn’t be worse,” Andrew said.

“Heh, wondering what’s between trolls and a wyrm that’s out here that we’d have to

worry about?" Violet asked.

"I suppose."

She shrugged slightly. "There isn't a lot out here that's bigger than trolls. Wyverns, in places. There are hill giants north along the river, but we're not going to get anywhere close to their territory."

"Oh."

Violet stayed downstairs with Patrick after the others had gone up to bed. She wasn't sure she could really walk again yet without slowing them down, so she'd probably acquiesce to ride with him in the morning if he offered.

"How late were you going to sit up?" he asked. She squeezed his arm lightly.

"However long you did. I don't think I can get back up the stairs."

"Ah. Heh."

She turned her face against his chest a moment, waiting for the tears that were hovering to calm down.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked quietly.

"I was rather foolish about it," she said.

"Foolish how?"

"Taunting them as sorely as I did."

"I don't speak trollish, hon," he said, "so I don't know what you did."

"I guess it doesn't matter now."

"Do you want to go lie down?"

"Not alone."

"All right." He finished off his drink and helped her up, then carried her back up the stairs.

"Get this kind of headache off silverjuice," she murmured as he let her down to open the door of their room. She caught hold of his shoulder for balance.

"*You* might," Patrick replied. "I don't want to know what it would do to someone without the elven blood."

"Heh. Probably not."

Once he helped her to bed, she pulled her thin pillow close to his so she could draw on his warmth. Patrick lay awake for a while with an arm around her, staring at the faint silhouette of her face in the darkness. Unless something on the trip drastically changed things, he was going to go back to Eberford with her. To stay.

He closed his eyes, trying to calm his racing mind. She had tangled with trolls and, he guessed, nearly died. And he hadn't really been able to do anything – although in the same situation, would *she* have left the tower to look for him? Probably, but she *could*. Patrick could get around all right in the wild, but he could track only rudimentarily, and in the dark he would be blindly lost. She had avoided bringing it up, but she *could* see in the dark to some degree, and in some ways it put her at a huge advantage on the open road at night. But if she *had* been killed...

That night nine years ago came back again, when she had told him to follow, and initially he hadn't thought anything of it, until he heard the horns and realized that Sutton's troops were moving in a different direction. She had run down his horse and pulled him off and told him, very simply, that Sutton had said that he was not to go with them. And in his grief he'd fought her, and come off the worse for it, and then she'd bandaged the wounds and made him stay and wait. They had been within sight of it, but under the cover of enough trees as to have remained

undetected. When the enemy troops had moved out of the area again, she had finally fallen asleep, and he had taken the opportunity to leave.

Eventually he fell asleep, and Violet woke after he had been asleep a few hours. It was sometime in that indeterminate stretch of night that is either very late or very early; she would have gotten up, normally, to go find out how far off the knight and company were, but she wasn't sure she could walk well enough for that yet. She settled closer to Patrick again and soon fell back asleep.

Violet was still riding with Patrick when Welleston came into view, but she dropped down off the horse about a mile and a half still out to go on ahead. She walked through the main streets with her hood up, turning off onto a side street when she spotted de Matin's horse outside a tavern. She hadn't quite intended to catch up *that* much.

She doubled back, and once she had figured out which inn they were staying at, she made her way back to the gate to intercept Patrick and the others.

"We need to cut off to a less busy part of town," she said quietly to Patrick when she swung up onto his horse behind him again. "Just take the next right; there are some good inns by the north gate."

"Is something wrong?"

"We've kind of caught up," she said. "I don't know that there's a point in having a confrontation without any evidence one way or another."

She guided them through the city to a stately, older inn a few blocks from the northern gate. The establishment had ample staff in the stables, so Andrew carried in his own bags for once. They had already started serving supper in a large room off the foyer, and the younger people in the group seemed a little surprised by the inn's layout.

"What, you've never been in a proper hotel?" Violet asked as she led them up the stairs.

"I guess not," Brinn said.

"Well, they gave us actual room keys," Patrick said, stopping to pass them out on the landing. "You kids have fun."

Violet took a moment to start a fire in the stove in their room once Patrick had closed the door behind them; they had gotten four rooms for the group, and she wasn't sure if they would have any other opportunity to get private rooms.

"Did you want to go see what they're up to?" Patrick asked her quietly.

"What, tonight? I don't know. I stand out a bit. Getting close enough in town while they're awake might not be a good idea."

"They wouldn't recognize me, though," he said.

She glanced up at him from the fire. "I don't know..."

"Oh, don't start trading this 'worried-about-you' crap with me. You leading trolls on a goose chase is not exactly something I'd suggest. We'd at least have an idea of whether we even need to be following them."

Violet sighed slightly, and Patrick drew her over to the bed and sat her down next to him.

"If we both try to shoulder the 'trying to protect each other' stuff, we're just going to get in over our head. You know that's how it works," he said.

"Yeah."

"Why don't you get me to where they are and keep an eye on things, then? You'd be on hand then in case anything *did* go wrong."

"They may not say anything useful."

“No, but when is surveillance ever really not useful?”

“Fine, we can go.”

He put an arm around her. “Do you want to go eat before they think we’re not coming down again tonight?”

She smiled faintly. “That is tempting, I suppose.”

“Which?”

“Ha, both, I suppose. But food first would probably be good. They won’t serve all night here.”

The others had already gotten a table by the time they went downstairs to the dining room. Patrick pulled out Violet’s chair for her; she had known, she supposed, that he was used to formal manners, but for some reason she hadn’t expected them from him. The table cloths were linen, starched and pressed, though, and the place settings were matched.

“I guess the further west we go, the more familiar it will be, huh?” Andrew said to her.

“More or less. Go too far south and I’ll be on unfamiliar ground, but I’ve been through here a few times,” Violet nodded.

“So are we going to leave later in the morning so as not to be leaving with them?”

Cassandra asked.

“Probably,” Violet said. “I’ll go keep an eye out in the morning so we don’t leave before them or too long after.”

“I suppose we shouldn’t do any shopping until they’re out of the city.”

“Probably not. I don’t really know how they would react to seeing any of you.”

They fell quiet then as they ate; Violet was a little worried about having to explain her and Patrick’s going out, but the others went upstairs to their rooms shortly after eating. She and Patrick went up only long enough to get their cloaks and gloves, and then they headed back out into the dimly-lit city streets.

“You think this is a foolish idea,” Patrick said quietly to her as she walked.

“No. I just worry.”

“It’ll be all right.” He pulled her over closer a moment to kiss her cheek, and she smiled at him.

“I’m a little surprised you’d cut into what’s likely our only chance at a private room until we head back through here again,” she said.

“Yes, well, I somehow inherited that predilection to duty trait from my father,” he said, frowning slightly.

“I suppose that’s not necessarily bad.”

“Until it gets me killed.”

“Well, yes, that would be a downside. But I’m not going to let *you* run off by yourself into superior numbers.”

“Yeah, I seem to recall you already taking steps to prevent that.”

“I suppose I had a somewhat selfish motivation then, as well.”

He glanced at her. “I didn’t think you let emotion get in the way of work.”

“Some things are too strong to fight,” she said, “as stupid as that may sound. And... well, I do generally wig out after serious fights.”

Patrick reached over to put an arm around her. “That’s because you care about life and death more than some people.”

She sighed. “If you want to call it that.”

“Were you going to tell them what happened in Olloria, or just let that go and see if we

actually walk into any trouble from it?" Patrick said.

"Given that we're going to be only in a remote part of Olloria, the latter. I don't want to spread that information any further than it already is unless I have to."

"Do *I* get to know?"

"Heh. Maybe if you're awake long enough tonight."

The knight's horse was still outside the same tavern, and Violet hung back around the corner about a block off to give Patrick a brief description of the people he might see – de Matin, the Lady Heloise, Forwythe, or Björn. Then he walked on alone to the tavern, and Violet began looking for a suitable alleyway that would let her watch the building unseen.

She had been in the alleyway about twenty minutes when a slight noise a few yards away made her settle her hands on the hilts of her swords.

"I suppose it is damned near impossible to sneak up on you," a quiet voice said, "in your element *or* mine."

Forwythe. Violet swore inwardly. "Are you going to move where I can see you?" she asked, her tone bordering irritated and dangerous.

"I suppose I'd better." He moved cautiously closer, into her line of sight. "I don't think any of them know who he is, but I worked with Sutton before."

"*You* worked with Sutton," Violet said flatly.

"Heh. You've got that instinct that makes me immediately impossible to trust, hm? I suppose you wouldn't believe that I'm here because the king has asked me to be, either?"

"That's two of you now who've told me that," Violet frowned.

"Oh, so the elf has talked to you," he said. She didn't answer, so he continued. "I think he's more worried that you'll give him reason *not* to trust you, and going off with de Matin was a fairly good reason."

"If you haven't noticed, I'm a tad pissed off about the entire situation. It's into November already, and well past damn' too cold for travel like this so far north."

"You told him you didn't know where Sutton's bastard was when you came back nine years ago," Forwythe said.

"I didn't. Whoever plotted de Matin's course for this trip landed us in the village he happened to be in."

"The king thought you were trying to hide him."

"Ha, no. He ran off on me the first chance he could get that night. I don't really blame him – seeing a man like Sutton die when you can't prevent it... breaks something in you. So I doubt he was any more coherent for a while than I was."

"You're still debating killing me," Forwythe guessed.

"I don't trust the knight, but I don't know that he's really up to anything against Philip right now. And I don't trust you, and I'd rather not get into a confrontation with de Matin when I don't know if I should kill him or just take him back to Philip. And I'd rather not have to kill him in front of her, if it comes to that."

Forwythe sighed slightly. "The poor woman really does love him. They're headed to Vellaerinoth's lair, though I don't think they're going to go through the elven wood. And they want me to go in after a lichstone. And while I realize that working for the king is putting my life in his hands, that *really* isn't how I want to die."

"Ha, if he's awake, it'll probably be fast enough you won't realize what happened till you're already dead."

"Yes, well, hopefully he's not. And the lichstone damned well isn't leaving my

possession if I do get it out.”

“If they get to the point of getting the lichstone, they’re not reentering Pellevaera in their own custody,” Violet said. “Which may include *you* not doing so, as well.”

“You really didn’t need to get involved in this,” he shook his head. “I can just slip away from them when we’re almost back and deliver the stone to the king.”

“Well, there’s the whole not trusting you part,” she said.

“I suppose you didn’t believe the elf, either.”

“I’ll wait and see how much of what he told me is true first.”

Patrick settled at the bar in the tavern, close enough to the knight and his company that he could hear what they were saying, but not so close as to draw attention to himself. The knight, the lady, and the northman were conferring with several people he guessed to be local; he ordered something warm to drink.

For almost two hours he stood with a series of warm drinks; a few of the locals chatted with him briefly – the weather, the recent crop, the tax on iron. Mostly he just listened. He understood quickly enough what the knight was doing; he was talking to merchants in Genarvies looking for support for a new war against Pellevaera – a war to overthrow the king and put one with more favorable views of Genarvies on the throne.

Eventually they left; he waited a while longer so it didn’t seem like he was following them, then headed back to his inn. Violet joined him after about a block, and he put his arm around her.

“Do you want to know now or later?” he asked.

“Behind closed doors,” she said. The hand on her waist had slipped a little, and she tickled him. “That behind closed doors, too.”

“I suppose it is a *tad* cold to be removing the necessary articles in the street.”

The inn was quieter when they got back, the dining room emptied and the front desk clerk absorbed in a book. Violet stirred up the fire in the pot-bellied iron stove again once they were in their room.

“Heh, I suppose it really doesn’t feel that much warmer in here than outside,” Patrick said, sitting down on the foot of the bed to pull his boots off.

“Not yet,” Violet smiled. “Though I suppose you’ll get more bare skin out of me in, say, July.”

Violet climbed under the sheets without turning down the lamps, and Patrick joined her after a few moments. For a while they just lay snuggled together, waiting for the sheets and their extremities to warm up.

“So did you find out anything useful?” she asked him, settling her cold hands on the warmth of his chest.

“Yes. And do you *have* to freeze me?” he asked, moving her hands down to his sides.

“It’s the obligatory female thing to do,” Violet said. “So *what* did you find out?”

“He’s looking for financial backing and whatnot for another war in Pellevaera,” Patrick said.

“Bah.”

He settled a hand between her shoulder blades, under her shirt, working out her tension.

“I’m still cold,” she objected.

“Then we should work on that, huh?” he said, snuggling closer.

Violet lay awake into the wee hours of the morning. She had taken lovers in the past, but the growing conflict between her desire for something long-term and her fear of getting hurt had led to her putting men off for a long time. Probably twenty years...

But she hadn't worn him out. She smiled in the darkness. He thought he was getting old, but unlike a lot of the men in her social strata in Eberford, he hadn't fallen into the pattern of sitting around and administrating since the war ended. If he went back to Eberford with her, she'd have to find work for him, if he didn't first, so that the little paunch he carried didn't become more than just a sign of his maturity.

The smile faded as her mind drifted elsewhere. She hadn't told him about Olloria yet, and she wasn't sure if bringing up her discussion with Forwythe that evening would help anything, or just spread around the worry about its possible implications. The others had worked with them longer, but whether or not they knew anything...

She got up after a little while and walked down the hallway to the room Brinn and Cassandra were sharing; the younger woman, as she had guessed, was not asleep, and answered the door when Violet rapped lightly on it.

"Would you mind talking a bit?" Violet asked her. Cassandra slipped out into the hallway.

"How did you know I'd be awake?" she asked Violet; they had settled about halfway down the stairs.

"Because you usually are when I get up in the middle of the night to scout around. What do you know about Forwythe?" she asked. Cassandra shrugged slightly.

"He's a thief. I've heard rumors that 'assassin' has been tacked on at times, as well."

"Works for Philip?" Violet asked. Cassandra glanced at her.

"I've heard rumors to that effect. There are also rumors that he's the king's sister's bastard, though. So I don't know."

"Ah. Hm."

"So at what point do I tell him I'm pregnant again?" Cassandra asked tiredly.

"Again?" Violet asked, confused.

"The first time, the lady found out, and, well... She disapproved."

"Ah. I don't think he'll leave you, if that's what you're worried about. He just seems to have all the normal male concerns – providing for you, and so forth."

"Oh, I know. I just don't want him to panic every time something happens."

"If you *want* to stop and wait somewhere..."

"No, I think I'll be fine," she said. "I don't think it's really that much more likely to hurt anything. There's the risk of falling off a horse, but I could just as easily fall down stairs or something. And the women in my family never had trouble working at the same time. So traveling is, I think, relatively easier."

"All right. Do let me know if you need anything, or if we do need to stop for a bit. At the very worst we'll just intercept them on their way back."

"I'm sorry I haven't been much help so far as information. I know de Matin talks ill of the king a lot, but the lady has never trusted me, and they stopped talking in front of me years ago."

"Don't worry about it. If Forwythe really is working for Philip, I think we'll be all right when we do have to confront them."

"I think you're overestimating Andrew," Cassandra frowned.

"Oh, I'm not expecting Andrew to be our safeguard against the lady, if that's what you

mean. I think Mavyn can probably handle her.”

“Ah.” She leaned over slightly closer. “I thought you were telling Mr. Marshall ‘No.’”

Violet smiled slightly. “A no from me to Patrick isn’t a never; it’s more of a not right now. I’ve just been... reluctant, I suppose, to let myself get closer to someone I know I’m going to lose long before I get old. But if I keep doing that, I’m just going to be alone forever.”

“I suppose, for however much some of us are prone to envy elven and half-elven lifespans, they do have their drawbacks.”

“Some. Mostly in that you see a lot of friends die if you live among humans. Of course, it does mean I get to always date younger men, and that does have *some* advantages.”

“Until the younger men are octogenarians.”

Violet chuckled. “You never know.”

It was snowing when Violet got up the next day. Patrick had apparently been up for a while, and it was later than she normally slept, so she got up and headed downstairs. The others were eating, but she bypassed the dining room and headed out to see whether or not the knight’s group had left town yet. Once she had ascertained that they were still at their inn, as well, she headed back to her own to eat.

“Lovely weather, today, eh?” Andrew said as she sat down at the table.

“Terribly.” She settled a hand on Patrick’s thigh under cover of the table. “They haven’t left yet, so it should at least warm up a bit before we have to be out in it.”

“The horses aren’t really kitted out for winter,” Andrew continued. “Mostly it’s just blankets, but—”

“If you need the time or cash to get what you need for them,” Violet cut in, “as soon as they leave town, you’ve got free run of the market, all right? We do have a bit of a cushion for time.”

“All right.”

Violet walked most of the day, but later in the afternoon she pulled herself up behind Patrick on his horse.

“Are you all right?” he asked quietly, putting a hand over the arm she settled around him.

“Just a little tired,” she said.

“And is that the wounds,” he murmured, “or my fault?”

She smiled slightly. “A little of both, maybe.”

They stopped in a dense thicket of pines that blocked most of the wind, and Violet built a triangle of three fires for them to camp in the middle of.

“Is it really going to get that cold?” Andrew asked as they were cooking some of their salt pork over one of the fires. Violet just shrugged slightly.

“A better question,” Brinn said, “would be, what is out there that she wants fire between us and them all night?”

Violet smiled faintly. “Or, will you all be more likely to sleep if I do tell you, or if I don’t?”

“I don’t know,” Andrew frowned. “I have a pretty vivid imagination.”

Violet didn’t answer until she had the fires more built up, and sufficient piles of wood gathered.

“They have, out here in the wilds, a creature they call the neigeloup,” she said. “They’re not really as bad as most of the bigger creatures out here, like trolls or wyverns or whatnot, but

they tend to come in packs of about forty or more.”

“But what are they?” Brinn asked.

“Snow wolves,” Patrick said. “About the size of a horse. They’re wolves... but not really. More of a snow demon in the form of a pack of wolves. But they won’t come near a fire.”

“Oh.”

“They don’t come out in the day unless it’s snowing heavily enough to whiteout,” Violet said, “so I doubt they’ll be a problem yet this time of year except at night.”

“And if it whiteouts, we should probably off the road and taking cover with a fire anyway,” Patrick said.

“Oh, but that takes all the fun out of things,” Violet said, smiling. “There was never anything quite so *fun* as trying to moved three score troop through hills in a blizzard.”

“What definition of fun are you using?” Andrew asked.

“The one that leaves me all smug when generals are trying to figure out what the hell went wrong,” she replied.

The horses were restless, and Violet could tell that the others weren’t asleep for quite some time after they had laid down to.

“We’re safe inside three fires,” she growled after a while. “Stop worrying and sleep so we can make enough time to not be outside again tomorrow night.”

“Sure, sure... demon snow wolves,” Andrew muttered.

Eventually they all nodded off, and Violet started to get up to go scout around, but Patrick put an arm around her.

“Do you have to go tonight?” he murmured. “If there’s a pack of snow wolves out there, you *can’t* outrun them.”

She hesitated.

“We know where they are, hon.”

She sighed and lay back down next to him. “Fine. I just worry.”

“Well, you’re a woman. That’s expected.”

“Heh.”

He kissed her cheek, then her lips.

“Hon, it’s way too cold out here for that,” she murmured. “And the kids just went to sleep.”

“Mmm. Since when are *you* the stodgy one?”

“Do you *really* think you can keep it down enough not to wake them?”

“Maybe.” He kissed her again.

“Fine, but no additional clothing is coming off out here.”

“Oh, like I’m going to need that kind of motivation after last night,” he breathed, turning his attention to her neck.

Once Patrick had fallen asleep, Violet carefully, quietly got up and headed out of the firelight. She stayed along the edge of the road, under cover of the trees, heading west. There was a village about three miles further up, and though its inn didn’t seem readily sneaked through, the expected horses were in its stable, so she headed back to their camp.

She felt guilty about going, but she knew she wasn’t going to be able to sleep if she didn’t, and she knew she was going to be awake a while from the stimulation. Patrick would likely be angry if he woke up; she sighed, then decided to just let it go. She and he were going to have to have a talk, anyway. If they didn’t fall out of the initial pattern of frequency, they were

likely going to be starting a family soon, and she, at least, wanted to be back in Eberford before she was starting to have to deal with morning sickness or swollen ankles. Maybe she should stop by her mother's long enough to pick up the elves' contraception spell...

She winced when the first howl went up; that would likely wake them, and she'd get to have her confrontation with Patrick in front of everyone. She didn't wait until they got closer, but broke into a run immediately. She was about two miles from their fires yet; she used to be good for a four minute mile...

The winter air burned her lungs as she ran; she *really* was hating the cold weather. The wolves weren't running to catch her, at least not yet; she didn't know if they were aware of the fires she was running to. They came into sight shortly, flickering through the trees. She dropped her head and sprinted briefly; the wolves were catching up. They broke around the camp as she dove between two of the fires, rolling to a stop beside a glaring Patrick.

"Hi," she winced.

"Sure," Andrew said, backing towards the point in the center of the fires and pulling his blankets with him, "bring them *to* us."

The horses were pulling on their pickets; Violet picked herself up and added some wood to the fires. The wolves were circling, pacing on the edge of the firelight. She estimated them between forty-five and fifty.

"They'll go away when they get bored, or when the sun comes up," she said.

"Uh-huh. And you expect us to sleep with them staring at us?" he asked.

"They're neigeloup," Violet said, picking up a brand and tossing it out among them; the wolves scattered and back away from the flaming wood. "The fire will kill them if it touches them. So we're fine."

"Wait, flat-out kill them?" Brinn asked, confused.

"They melt," Violet said, smiling slightly.

"Oh..." Andrew's face mellowed. "I wonder..."

"Go to sleep, huh?" Violet said. "You can play with fire spells later."

He grumbled something under his breath. Mavyn had already lain back down, and the others soon – though somewhat reluctantly – followed suit. Violet settled on her blanket; Patrick was still scowling.

"And here I was thinking we were going to have to have a discussion about toning it down to avoid having kids before we got back to Eberford," she said quietly.

"I thought you weren't going to go," he said.

"What, and deprive them what's likely their only chance to see a neigeloup? The closest village will melt this one as soon as they find out about it."

"It's not funny, Violet."

"Then you probably won't consider it encouraging that I really have calmed down quite a bit since I first left the elven wood."

"No, it isn't."

"It does mean I don't go *looking* for them," she said. She leaned forward slightly. "I flushed a wyvern once, thirty years ago. That was not a fun day."

"Then why go out there, when you know this thing was there?" Patrick asked. "You knew it would chase you if you did."

"Because I'm not afraid of it. Two trolls was a bit crazy. I didn't mean to have to kill one," she said, her face falling, and she looked away. "But he hit me once, and at that point..."

"They say that's a latent elven trait, that tends to surface if only one parent is," Patrick

said, more quietly.

“Most half-elves never see a war, so it would be hard to tell. Maybe it’s tied to what makes some of us wander,” she shrugged. He reached over and stroked her cheek lightly.

“Why don’t you try to sleep some? You really probably shouldn’t have been running yet.”

He coaxed her back to lying down beside him, bundled under their shared blankets, and shortly she was asleep.

It was snowing again when Violet woke, and she swore. The fires had burned down some, but the wolves were gone, so she only fed up one of the three. Patrick had stirred when she got up, but the others were still asleep. She walked back over and sat down by Patrick once she made sure the horses were all right.

“Ugh, snow again,” Patrick mumbled.

“Yep.”

“Do we have to wait for them to get to the dragon?” he asked. “This weather is just going to get worse.”

“That depends on whether you think your word alone is enough to convince them we’re justified in bringing him back in bonds,” Violet said.

“Oh, you actually want to take him back,” Patrick said.

“Heh. You know I don’t generally take killing as the *first* option.”

“Sure. But we’ll see if he lets us.”

The forest turned to farmland over the next few days, and for over a week they were able to stay in village inns nightly without butting into the knight and company. The population became denser as they traveled, and soon the road was following the course of a river.

“So where are we?” Andrew asked when they took shelter from a cold rain under some pines along the road.

“Oh, we’ll hit Yenisberg tomorrow,” Violet said. “Probably the biggest town we’ll run into until we get back to Eberford.”

“How big?” Brinn asked after a moment. She shrugged slightly.

“Fifteen, twenty thousand people.”

“Oh.”

“Yenisberg is on the edge of the elven wood, isn’t it?” Cassandra said. Violet nodded.

“We basically follow the river through the wood at this point.”

“We aren’t going to have issues crossing the border into and out of Olloria, are we?” Patrick asked.

“Not in the elven wood, we shouldn’t,” Violet said. “The wood overlaps the border, about equally split between both.”

“I thought the elves didn’t like humans to travel too far through their lands,” Cassandra said. Violet glanced at her.

“They don’t always. If we stay on the river road and you’re with me, there shouldn’t really be any issues.”

“Will de Matin go through the wood?” Brinn asked.

“I don’t know,” Violet said. “If they don’t, we will get closer to Vellaerinoth’s lair first.”

“So you’re just going to stop checking up on them?” Patrick asked.

“Heh, I don’t really want to find out if I can get through a border crossing directly into

Olloria without going through the woods. That does have the potential to turn ugly.”

“Wait – what does *Olloria* have against you?” Andrew asked. “I know you’ve said Genarvies is uncomfortable with your work for Pellevaera, but Olloria?”

“When I first left the wood I went to Olloria,” Violet shrugged. “That didn’t turn out well, so I left.”

“That didn’t really clarify anything,” Brinn said.

“Wait – you said *he* knows why you don’t use your given name—” Andrew started with a nod at Patrick.

“Heh, all I know is that it’s because of what happened, not what actually happened,” Patrick said.

“Yeah, well, why stir the pot when it’s been forty years?” Violet said. She glanced up at the sky. “We’re probably going to have to keep going through this rain if you want to sleep inside tonight.”

“Erg, great,” Andrew muttered.

“Well, let’s get to it, then,” Patrick said. He reached down and caught Violet under the arms and pulled her up in front of him, then urged his horse back out onto the road.

“I am fine to walk, you know,” she said, frowning slightly.

“Yes,” he murmured, “but then they have to hear everything I’m going to tell you, and wooing with an audience is... awkward.”

“Ha.” She smiled slightly. “Not on the horse in the rain in broad daylight, hm?”

“No?” He gave her a squeeze. “You don’t think it’d work?”

“We’re not trying it with an audience.”

“Mm, well, I can agree with that.”

Yenisberg was visually bigger than many of the younger people in the group had expected, for they pulled up on the crest in the road overlooking the city, about two miles off yet, across the river on a series of rocky bluffs. It was impressively fortified, with extensive stone works and towers.

“Why is *this* side so heavily defended?” Brinn asked finally.

“Probably to protect against flanking,” Patrick shrugged. “The cliffs are a barrier to most troops, but... well, I think you have an idea of what the elven scouts can do.”

“Ah.”

“That,” Violet said, “and Yenisberg does not always back the king of Genarvies. They cover their bases.” She smiled slightly. “Yet another reason Genarvies doesn’t like me, I suppose.”

“How’s that?” Brinn asked.

“I had to go through Genarvies to get to Pellevaera from Olloria. I’ve worked for Yenisberg before.” She started down the hill. “They *will* lock the gates at dark, so we should hurry if we’re staying there tonight.”

“Wait, so you have friends here?” Andrew asked, urging his horse after her.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “It’s been over thirty years.”

“Oh.”

The road continued along the river, eventually leading them into a small town around the other end of the bridge from Yenisberg. The bridge was a serious affair – a heavy stone and iron structure with a draw span in the center for the boat traffic. It, like the city, was fortified, with crenellations and arrow slits lining its stone towers.

They arrived at the city gate shortly before they closed. The street traffic was fairly heavy, with horses and carts and coaches crowding it; Patrick reached down and pulled Violet up in front of him so she wouldn't get separated from them. She again directed them around until she found an inn she was familiar with to stay at.

"You want to go explore," she guessed at supper, the others shifting restlessly in their seats.

"It *is* a pretty big place," Cassandra said.

"They may kill you if they see you," Violet warned.

"I really doubt they'll be out and about in this weather," the younger woman said. "The lady is very finicky."

"Don't stay out long," Violet said, reaching for her glass. "The longer you're out, the greater the odds of running into someone you don't want to see."

Shortly after they had left, she stood.

"And where are you going?" Patrick asked her.

"To see who's in charge in the city right now," she said. "If de Matin is looking for support, he may be looking for him as well. So I want to go see if I can pull any strings yet, or if I should just stay in the shadows."

"And do you want company or not?"

"I wouldn't mind having you along," she said. "There may be others going through parts of Genarvies similarly to the way de Matin is. I don't know how much support he is finding, but I doubt they will raise an army for him without one taking the field in Pellevaera first. And for that, if they are truly seeking a lichstone, de Matin may be the key. So."

"They're likely to go back through Yenisberg if they succeed, eh?"

"Probably."

She led him out of the inn and through the city to a quiet street near the river wall. They came abruptly to a heavy, barred gate, guarded by half a dozen men on the ground, and Patrick easily picked out another dozen within immediate arrow range on the walls above. Violet stopped several paces off.

"Is Gregor Ulanik still lord-mayor?" Violet asked the guards calmly. One of them peered at her suspiciously.

"Who are you to be asking? We celebrated his fortieth year as such just last week!"

"Ah, well. A week ago we were still on the road from Welleston. Is he in?"

"Who are you to be asking?" the guard demanded again.

"Violet," she said, shrugging slightly, and then, with a nod at Patrick, "and Patrick Marshall."

"You seemed to imply you were better known here," Patrick murmured as the guard went to the gate and rapped on it, then conferred briefly with someone through a slit that opened.

"Oh, most of these men probably weren't born last time I was in Yenisberg," Violet smiled, "and the city has *very* well-trained guards."

"And this lord-mayor..."

"Yenisberg is an independent city, other than nominally belonging to Genarvies. Hence the walls, and such."

"You know him, though?"

"Helped keep him in office the last time the king decided he wanted to try to make Yenisberg more... cooperative. I *did* say I'd worked here before."

"Ah. But then you left?"

“Too close to Mother to really stay a spell.”

The guard returned. “Your request has been submitted. You’ll have an answer shortly.” She narrowed her eyes slightly. “That he’s in, or that he’ll see us?”

The guard didn’t answer, turning instead to return to his post. Patrick glanced at Violet, but she just rolled her eyes.

“What?” he murmured.

“Well, there’s a level of stubbornness *required* to become a guard in this city. Very lovely man ran them last time I was here, but I ended up hitting him quite a bit.”

“*Lovely?*” Patrick said, raising a brow.

“Nice calves, and such.”

“Heh.”

“You know I’ve disappointed quite a lot of men,” she said.

“Yes, and you tried damned hard to keep me on that list.”

“Trying to keep you off the list of men that broke my heart,” she said, smiling weakly.

“What are you two talking about?” the guard called over suspiciously. Violet frowned.

“It’s generally not polite to intrude upon others’ attempts to negotiate their closed-door activities,” she said.

“Oh, is that where this is headed?” Patrick murmured; the guard had apparently blushed under cover of his helm, for he didn’t speak again until someone on the other side of the door relayed a message to him.

“The lord-mayor will see you,” he announced.

Violet and Patrick were escorted through a series of courtyards, colonnades and arched tunnels before getting to the actual mayoral residence, which in turn meant being led through a series of halls, up several flights of stairs, and finally down a narrow corridor to a dimly lit study. A wiry, older man stood when they arrived.

“So it really *is* Violet. And I believe they said a Patrick Marshall?”

Violet nodded slightly; Patrick pulled off a formal bow, which made her smile.

“And what brings you back through Yenisberg?” he asked. Her smile faded.

“You probably know that I work, in some capacity, for the king of Pellevaera,” she said; he nodded, and she continued. “There are murmurings against him again, related to the war that put him on the throne twenty-some years ago. They have been looking for support throughout Genarvies for the backing to renew it. The ones in particular that I’ve been following—”

“I already turned them out tonight,” he shook his head. “If you wish them detained...”

“No, no... My king does not know that we are out here yet, I think – I have not had the chance to inform him. They have other pursuits yet that will further prove their treachery, and I would like that evidence to lay before him as well.”

He smiled slightly. “I did not think it wise to place myself on the other side of a war from you. I have heard of your work further east.”

“I do not make or break a war,” Violet said.

“No, but you make it damned difficult for the other side, as I recall. You were a great boon to us here before.”

“Yenisberg is quite capable of taking care of itself.”

“Perhaps.” He paused. “The way you present yourself, you make yourself sound like a spy. You should know better.”

Violet smiled. “It’s an unspecified commission. It’s difficult to say what I do when for him there is no set definition.”

“Are you heading into the wood, then?” he asked.

“If that is the direction the quarry goes. I would prefer that route into Olloria, but if they change their heading and return east, I think we most likely will follow.”

“The wood has been restless,” he warned. “Their oracle has been speaking darkly for several weeks now – granted, in the ambiguous riddles she always does, but I have heard that ‘wrath’ and ‘doom’ have been popular themes of late.”

Violet turned her eyes to the window for a moment, which overlooked the city to the south. “They may arouse Vellaerinoth,” she said. “And the anger may be ill-directed. I suppose we shall see.”

“The *wyrm*? Are they *mad*?” Gregor asked. Violet just shrugged slightly.

“Sometimes a desire for revenge pushes people a little bit past rational. I am hoping to stop them before they reach the dragon’s lair, but I need them to at least make the trip.” She paused. “If they *do* manage to get in and get what they want, I probably won’t confront them until much closer to Pellevaera. They have a mage with them, so it would probably be better for the city if you don’t try to assist... especially since you don’t want to be caught with them in town if the dragon comes looking for them.”

He smiled slightly. “Violet, dear, I *have* been running Yenisberg for forty years.”

“I know. But I’d rather not see more trouble come out of this than already has.”

He started them towards the door. “You know, if that king of yours is not showing you enough appreciation for your devotion...”

“You’re too close to my mother for me to work for you regularly, Gregor,” Violet shook her head. He laughed.

“All right, all right.”

Violet checked on the others when they got back to the inn; they were in a shared room again, and she was debating if the others were asleep enough for them to do anything. Patrick was just snuggly when she crawled into bed next to him, though.

“He looked about seventy,” he murmured to her.

“He probably is about there,” she agreed.

“And you...”

“Last saw him when he was about the age I last saw you till a few weeks ago.”

“You and he didn’t...”

“Ha, no. No, I’ve been very good about not sleeping with my employers.” She nuzzled his neck. “I don’t think anyone else I’ve been with is still alive, hon.”

“Oh.”

“It had been a long time before you.”

“Oh.”

She kissed his cheek. “Haven’t run into anyone else worth it in a long time.”

“Are you looking for something tonight?” he breathed, turning his face to hers.

“Only if you think you can without waking them,” she murmured.

“Preparing me for the eventual children, I see,” he replied. “I guess the practice wouldn’t hurt.”

One of the city guardsmen in officer’s insignia was waiting downstairs for Violet in the morning; Patrick was still cleaning up, and the others were still asleep. Her eyes narrowed when she saw him, as he looked familiar. He was maybe Patrick’s age, maybe a few years younger...

He drew himself up formally as she approached.

“A Wyclif, hm?” she guessed. “Went into the guard over his mother’s objections, no doubt?”

“Captain Nathan Wyclif,” he introduced himself, bowing slightly. “We had orders to report to you when the party of interest left the city, which they did, heading northwest once they recrossed the river, about twenty minutes ago.”

“And so why not just send a runner, Captain?” she asked, fairly sure of the answer already.

“A message with so much diplomatic baggage—”

“Your father never got anywhere, either, Captain,” she said, leaning forward slightly. “And he got himself slapped quite a bit. Try not to land *too* squarely in his footsteps.”

Patrick came down the stairs, and Violet shifted her eyes to him.

“Feel like looking for a horse?” she asked.

“Wait – for *you*?” he said. “When have you ever preferred travel on horseback?”

“Oh, I don’t prefer it. But I’m not going to make it that easy for the elves to evaluate me.”

“Do you think they really care?”

“It’s a step mostly taken to irritate my grandmother,” she smiled. “Anyway, this is Nathan Wyclif, a captain in the city guard. I got his father killed last time I was working here because the ass was too stubborn to draw back across the bridge when he had lost the barricades. Patrick Marshall,” she introduced him, and headed for the door. Patrick frowned briefly after her.

“So what *are* you doing here this morning?” Patrick asked the captain.

“Your quarry left the city twenty, twenty-five minutes ago,” he replied. “How old *is* she?”

“Somewhere past sixty,” Patrick shrugged. “You’d think when she’s concerned about them knowing that we’re following them she’d be less likely to toss names around.”

“Yenisberg does owe her quite a bit, whether she will accept it or not.” His eyes shifted to the door Violet had left through. “Sixty. Huh.”

“And not available.”

“Oh, I gathered that from the report the guards put in last night,” Wyclif said. “That’s actually *young* for most of the half-elves we get through. The city does get quite a few who are more comfortable among humans than among elves.”

“Well, I suppose you have work to get back to,” Patrick said, turning to head to the front room where breakfast was being served. The captain lightly caught his arm before he could go.

“The lord-mayor’s political opponents have already sent a runner to the king regarding her presence,” he said, more quietly. “By the time you return through here, there may be royal troops in the vicinity looking for her. He does not want to divide her loyalties. But use caution before you leave the elven wood on your return.”

Patrick nodded, then continued into the other room to eat.

Violet had gotten a very average horse, and once they had replenished their foodstuffs and other supplies, they headed out the city’s western gate and along the road that followed the southern bank of the river, heading into the wood two miles distant. A small building sat alongside the road where the trees began, and several elven guards were lounging out front. They stood as the horses approached, and Violet bared her head. She drew her horse up in the

road next to the hut.

“Where are you headed?” the station captain asked in elven, coming out of the little building.

“Just through along the river road,” Violet replied in the same tongue, leaning one arm down on her knee. “Probably back through in a couple weeks.”

“Business or pleasure trip?” he asked. Violet frowned at him.

“In *November*? That isn’t obvious?”

“Yeah, yeah. Your grandmother will wish to be notified of your presence in the wood.”

“That’s great,” Violet said, her frown deepening. “I don’t have time for a visit, and I’m really not intending to actually *stay* so much as go through, so she can just chew on that. And I don’t care if you tell her that, either.”

He waved them into the woods, and Violet pulled her horse around, pulling her hood back up.

“They knew who you were?” Patrick guessed as they followed her west along the road, into the trees.

“It’s the hair,” she said, reaching down to adjust the drape of her cloak over her leg. “It’s really uncommon among elves.”

“Ah.”

“That, and those poor buggers have probably been assigned to that post for a good eighty years. So they probably remember me because of the hair.”

“Eighty *years*?” Brinn said. She turned her head, smiling slightly.

“Yeah. Insulting a Peer’s daughter does have some lengthy repercussions when you’re an elf,” she said.

“A... peer?” Andrew asked. Violet rolled her eyes, turning them back to the road ahead.

“Elves have a monarchy, but their nobility is somewhat differently structured than most of the human kingdoms around here,” she said. “It’s a flat hierarchy – a noble is called a Peer. No dukes, barons, counts, earls, marquis – any of that mess. They form something of a council, do quite a bit of the more boring administration, and the king mostly serves to keep everyone playing nicely, break up dangerous accumulations of power, and run the army. So. Elven government in a nutshell.”

“And that’s what your grandmother is?” Patrick asked.

“Well, no... Grandmother is basically the equivalent of a Peer, but she’s technically a Magistrate. She actually runs a department.”

“So you’re not her favorite person, I would assume?” Cassandra said.

“Well, my mother’s little rebellion didn’t exactly stack the deck in my favor,” Violet smiled.

“Isn’t family fun?” Cassandra smiled wryly.

“Heh, I get along all right with my mother. It’s the rest of them who like to cause trouble when they remember me.”

“You know,” Andrew said, “some of us do get along fine with our relatives.”

“Then you apparently have a nice, uncomplicated life,” Violet said.

“Sure, up until *this* mess,” he muttered.

“Ha, if this is the most trouble you ever run into in your life, you’ve got it pretty easy,” she said. “And like a lot of the trouble that people get enmeshed in, it’s pretty much random bad luck.”

“As if that really counts for you?” Patrick said. “You seem drawn to political intrigue

like moth to a flame.”

“Well, I do get bored easily,” she shrugged.

“So what are you going to do if that trek through Genarvies got your name back to their king?”

“Set the lot of you east along the road and head back by myself,” she said. “Even if he hires elves to find me, I don’t think he’ll find someone who can both find me in the wilds *and* kill me.”

“Are you really sure of that?” Brinn asked.

“The elves who can do that are unlikely to take employment out of the woods, and if any do, they may be pricey enough that it wouldn’t be worth tracking me down to pay for.”

“And they wouldn’t just come after us?” Andrew asked.

“I don’t know. If we haven’t confronted de Matin by the time we return through there, I may have to follow them more closely. If they get their hands on that lichstone, there’s no way I’m going to risk them getting back into Pellevaera with it.”

The wilds had been an old-growth forest intermixed with scrub, but the trees of the elven wood, many of them two to three times as old, dwarfed them. The way stations and inns were evenly spaced along the river road, and they were mostly built into the boles of huge trees, often on bluffs overlooking the river, with the common rooms lined in stone among the huge, vast root systems, and the sleeping spaces built up into the tree. The weather in the wood was milder than it had been further east – still cold, with a bit of a wind from the river, but the cold was not as sharp, and the winds were not as biting.

Violet had sat up late with Patrick, about half a day from the Ollorian border, sipping an elven liqueur and watching him trying to manage one of the milder elven drinks. He was being rather cautious about it.

“I’m asking for a headache just trying this, aren’t I,” he said, and she smiled slightly.

“Maybe. Just take it slowly so you get an idea of where you’ll want to stop.”

“Somewhere around ‘still sober enough to get up to bed’ would be nice.”

The door open and shut heavily, and Violet sat up slightly in her seat against the side of the fireplace, watching the elven man walking across the room towards them. She recognized him – one of her aunts’ husbands. He stopped on the other side of the table from them.

“You know she won’t be patient forever,” he said flatly. Violet frowned.

“And I didn’t come into the wood on my own schedule, so she can just keep waiting,” she said.

“She’s really not convinced that you’re here on anything but your own whim.”

“The Oracle is seeing Vellaerinoth, isn’t she?” Violet returned. “Or does she really fear the priestess of Aurora that we’re toting? It’s not as though she’s going to return the cult to the wood and reopen that war.”

“You’re a very foolish girl, to talk of that so lightly,” the elf snapped. “And to bring a human... paramour... openly into the wood with you?”

“Yes, well, the wood has never proven particularly hospitable to me, and I’d rather continue the attempt to avert another war between Pellevaera and Genarvies, so if you all would just leave me alone for once, maybe that will go somewhere.”

“You know it’s the breeding which concerns her more than the race,” he said. Patrick frowned slightly, but Violet was amused.

“Does she even know who he is?” she said. “To bitch about something like that – at the

very least he and I are on equal footings, in those terms. Besides. It's not as though I'm going to find an elven or half-elven man who is going to suit my tastes. And I *know* my mother wants grandchildren. If you think my grandmother is stubborn—"

"If you knew who your father was, you would not be considering *that* so lightly."

"Yes, well, that is Exhibit A of Mother's stubbornness. I hold a commission from the king of Pellevaera, and I'm working under the functions of that commission in this trip, so if Grandmother really wants to complain about what I do or don't do here, she can address her complaints to him." She paused briefly, but continued before he could speak. "And if she does, she could let him know that this we should have this wrapped up and be back in Eberford by the end of March."

"Philip de Coeur is usually gracious enough to let us know when one of his operatives will be passing through our lands," the elf said incredulously.

"Oh, but he doesn't know I'm here yet, not that I know of. I really wasn't planning to end up here when I left Eberford back in August."

"And what are you doing?"

"Hopefully preventing a new outbreak of war between Genarvies and Pellevaera. If we manage to keep Vellaerinoth from being angered to the point of wrath in the process, I will be especially pleased."

"And you can do that all by yourself?" he asked doubtfully.

"Oh, not by myself. I do have Patrick and a few others with me, and I'm not looking to intercept a particularly large number of people. And there is the priestess of Aurora."

"The cult of Aurora died fourteen centuries ago," he said, leaning his hands on the table.

"Among the elves, maybe."

He was quiet a moment. "May I speak with her?"

"Well, she's asleep," Violet said. "And she doesn't speak, so it may not go anywhere."

Patrick cleared his throat.

"And his daughter," she added, "so you might be careful about your religious prejudices. No martyring of the first priestess of Aurora to be consecrated among humans, and whatnot."

"Wait – his daughter? Aurora's priestesses came almost solely from the Peerage—"

"Yes, well, as I said, Grandmother's assumptions about 'breeding' are foolish," Violet said. The elf was quiet a moment.

"Are you sure you're not related?"

Violet raised a brow at him. "Well, I know who his father was, and his father was *not* old enough to be mine. And I don't believe either of his grandfathers ever left Pellevaera, so there's not that, either. So even if there *were* some relation, it wouldn't be any closer than you and the aunt of mine you married."

"Wait," Patrick said, "is he implying that your father was from Pellevaera?"

The elf didn't answer.

"You seem to be handling that well enough you could probably finish the glass," she said, looking at Patrick's drink. "Besides, I've seen enough of his family to know that hair like this couldn't come out of it."

The elf turned to go. "She'll likely keep sending people to... talk to you."

"You know, I am willing to stop by my mother's long enough to let her know that Grandmother is harassing me again. So she should consider that."

He turned and walked back. "You can't just toe the line, can you?" he snapped.

"Whose line? I am not going to be miserable for her pride. And I know well enough I

would never be welcome working in my preferred occupation here. Everyone is going to be happier in the long run if the span of time between my visits to the wood *are* measured in decades or centuries. Except, maybe, my mother, but as long as Grandmother wants to make the family miserable in all her petty ways, things will just have to stay that way.”

“She is not going to just let you go.”

“No? Then let her fume. I do answer to someone else, and my work *does* come before her whim.”

He turned and left finally, and Violet sat back against the fireplace again, though she was angry now.

“What does she want you to do?” Patrick asked finally.

“Go down to Felinara and see her. I doubt she’d let me out of the city easily if I did.”

“And I suppose the rest of us would be unwelcome there, as well.”

“Oh, quite.”

He reached over and put a hand over hers. “If you *really* want to make her seethe, we could make things formal.”

“What, between us?” she asked, her face suddenly uncertain. His glance was affirmative, though he didn’t speak. She just laid her head on his shoulder, and he shifted to put his arm around her.

“Are you all right, hon?” he murmured.

“I wouldn’t do it just to spite her,” she said.

“Well, no, presumably you’d want to, as well.” He gave her a squeeze. “I’ve already dropped one daughter into that vague place in Pellevaera’s law that covers children born out of wedlock. I wouldn’t want to put any others into that difficulty.”

She turned to put her arms around him, and he realized she was crying. He held her more tightly.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, hon,” he said softly.

“No one’s ever loved me like this before,” she mumbled. He kissed her forehead, since her face was still buried against him.

“Well, I’ve never loved anyone else like I love you, so we’re both stumbling through this, eh?” He sat her up a little. “Why don’t we go to bed while I can still walk?”

She nodded slightly, and he stood. Then, somewhat to her surprised, he picked her up to carry her upstairs. She closed her eyes, laying her face against his neck, uncertain what would hurt more – inevitably losing him to old age, or knowing she had wasted at least a decade they could have been together.

Violet stopped on the road in the middle of the next afternoon, looking at the mile marker a few yards up the road. The others stopped beside her.

“So what are we looking at?” Andrew asked, leaning slightly in her direction without taking his eyes off the road ahead.

“The Ollorian border,” Violet replied. “I haven’t been in Olloria in any way, shape, or form in forty years.”

“Would you rather just wait and see if they come back through Yenisberg?” Patrick said, already knowing her answer would be negative.

“No. If they anger Vellaerinoth, he may maul most of Olloria and Genarvies looking for them. And wouldn’t that be a fun war, if they found out that his antagonists were from Pellevaera? So we want to keep the wyrm from ever having to be angry.”

“And her thing about that Psalter?” Brinn asked, nodding at Mavyn.

“Oh, not even wyrms will argue with the gods,” Violet said. “They’re too smart for that. If Aurora has had her on this road this long, he may even be expecting her.”

“Oh. Wonderful,” Andrew said. “So the dragon might be *waiting* for us.”

“Well, it would be better than us walking in unexpected and startling him, no?” Violet said. “Although I still hold by the whole avoiding getting close enough for him to ever even see us scenario, if that will work out so far as the goal of keeping him from being angry goes.”

“Well, then, dallying is not in our favor, is it?” Andrew said.

“I suppose not.”

Violet put her heels to her horse’s flanks and continued west along the road. She knew for certain that there was at least one elven scout following them, keeping tabs on their progress; she did not know if he had ready access to a full patrol of the Guard. She really didn’t want to have to find out, either way.

The Ollorian part of the elven wood didn’t appear to be any different from the part of it that was technically in Genarvies, but Violet was more nervous regardless. When she had left the wood, at twenty-two, she had gone west, into Olloria...

Violet did not sleep well on the Ollorian side of the border, and her appetite fell off. She knew she was worrying Patrick, but she wasn’t sure she could really do anything about it until they crossed the border back into Genarvies in a few weeks – or at least until they had resolved their business outside the woods and got back into it without incident.

Three days into the Ollorian part of the elven wood, Violet and Patrick were sitting up as was becoming their habit, Violet working nervously on a mug of something Patrick didn’t dare taste, and he trying to calm her nerves somewhat. An elven woman came down from the upstairs rooms, and Violet stood when she recognized her, meeting her halfway across the room to throw her arms around her.

“I suppose Grandmother has something to do with you being here?” Violet asked, leading the woman back across the room to the table where Patrick was still sitting; he stood as they got closer.

“You’ve made her quite angry,” the woman nodded.

“Mother, Patrick Marshall,” Violet introduced him. “Patrick, my mother, Rhaelania Llorelareth.”

He bowed slightly, and they all settled around the table.

“Your cousin Ialar stopped by recently,” Rhaelania said to Violet.

“Yeah, about that... Knowing you had a brother would have made that go more smoothly,” she replied.

“Well, Faelliar is generally an unbearable prick. I thought I would save you the trouble of having to find out for yourself. Besides, I would have had to introduce you.”

“So why is Grandmother being so much trouble when I’m here for work?” Violet asked.

“Oh, because of course, her agenda is more important than anything else in the world,” Rhaelania said, rolling her eyes. “No, in this your uncle will actually be useful, because her petty power games with the family could send things spiraling into disaster. So he will get the Peerage to pressure her into leaving you alone.”

“You didn’t have to come all the way up here to see me, you know. Once I found out how things went with Vellaerinoth, I could have squeezed in a trip down to see you.”

“Oh, but you wouldn’t have brought him with you, now would you?” her mother smiled

with a brief glance at Patrick.

“You do have a track record with human men,” Violet said, leaning forward slightly. “It was creepy enough when the guys stopping by to see you would hit on both of us.”

“Given who it was you killed in Olloria and why, I’m fairly sure we don’t have the same taste in men, hon, human or otherwise.”

“You never know.” She checked how empty her glass was. “So I’m guessing you didn’t come here just for the chance to ogle Patrick, as motivating as that might be.”

“Well, no. But what I wanted to tell you *is* for your ears only.”

Violet glanced at Patrick.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said as he stood, “I’ll go warm up the sheets.”

He kissed the top of her head and headed for the stairs. Violet let her eyes follow him a moment before shifting them back to her mother.

“He’s in love with you,” Rhaelania said. Violet smiled.

“For a while now. He’s a good man. His father made sure of that much, at least.”

“Yes, well, *that* is driving your grandmother batty – she can’t find anyone who knows who his father is.”

“Really?” Violet raised a brow. “Ialar recognized him. Of course, he probably had met his father, as well.”

“And you’re not going to tell me?”

“Only if you’ll be as stubborn about telling anyone his as you have been about telling me mine. It isn’t common knowledge, and his father would never acknowledge him to his face, though he told *me*.”

“You know I can keep a secret, hon.”

Violet scooted around the table next to her. “Jasper Sutton. One of the best knights in Pellevaera in the thirty years I’ve lived there. Died about ten years ago. He was an earl under Philip.”

“And his mother?”

Violet shrugged slightly. “I never had the opportunity to meet her. Patrick was fond of her; she died when he was about twenty. But she was, I believe, why his father’s wife never liked him. Understandably, I suppose.”

“And are things... serious?”

“Are you asking about the sex or the marriage prospects?” Violet asked, a little amused.

“I suppose either is likely to net me grandchildren, so I’ll take either,” her mother replied.

“Well, he’s *asked*, anyway. Probably would have kids already if the last war between Genarvies and Pellevaera hadn’t ended the way it did. There will probably be kids whether it ends up formally recognized or not, since I don’t really intend to let him go again. So.”

Her mother gave her a squeeze. “The reason your grandmother is nervous about you having children is because your father was John de Coeur.”

Violet was quiet for several minutes, staring at the drink in her hands.

“Are you going to be all right?” Rhaelania asked finally.

“Yeah. Just thinking that I would have been really pissed off to find that out if I hadn’t backed Philip in the war that put him on Pellevaera’s throne after his father died.”

“Ah.”

“It also means I will be that much angrier if Grandmother interferes in my trying to keep them from their attempt to overthrow him again.”

Rhaelania gave her another squeeze. “I think your uncle and the Peerage will manage to

keep her from interfering too much. The Oracle has been in a terrible state recently.”

“I did at least get to meet him before, as well. Did some work for him, actually. Did *he* know who I was?” Violet asked.

“He should have. If he didn’t, I’d have slapped the son of a bitch if I’d had the opportunity to see him. We were together nearly two years while he was out here.”

“Heh.” Violet finished off her drink. “I have been reluctant to let myself get that close to a human man for that long.”

“And this one...”

“Will be the first that wasn’t just a fling, really, I suppose. I already fell in love with him years ago, and so it was going to hurt regardless, so I figured I should at least take the chance while it’s there.”

Her mother nodded slightly. “I suppose you’re not going to have a priestess of Selene do the ceremony.”

“I don’t know if there’s even going to be one yet,” Violet said. “The whole staying together part, yes. But the rest of it, I don’t know. If we decide the ifs and whens, I’ll at least make sure that there’s time for you to get there for it. It is a pretty serious trip – upwards of three months unless you take one of the coaches.”

“At the very least you’ll let me know when the grandchildren start,” she said, narrowing her eyes slightly. Violet laughed.

“Oh, of course. You may be my excuse for living so far from the elven wood, Mother, but you are *not* my reason for doing so. I do miss you.”

Her mother stayed long enough to have breakfast with them the next morning, and then they went their separate ways.

“So why was she here?” Andrew asked as they continued west along the river.

“She’s my mother,” Violet said. “Since when does she need a reason?”

“Enh.”

“So where are we?” Brinn asked.

“Oh, a day or so from the edge of the wood. And then we’ve got a day or so across the heath to the hills where Vellaerinoth has his lair,” Violet shrugged.

“That close already?”

“Heh, I’m perfectly willing to keep us far enough away to not get eaten,” Violet said. “Or squished, or toasted, or shredded, whichever.”

“We’ll need to be close enough to intercept them, though,” Andrew said. She nodded.

“The river road is more direct, so we should have enough of a cushion to manage that.”

Everyone was nervous once they were out of the wood. Violet knew the odds of running into an Ollorian patrol were extremely low, but it still hung in the back of her mind; the others were thinking more about the dragon. Violet settled them on a hilltop about three miles from a large cave opening after a few days. It was cold, about eleven in the morning.

“And that’s it,” she said, looking across the vale at the cave.

“Any sign of them?” Andrew asked. She scanned the horizon again once.

“I haven’t seen any movement of that sort,” she said. “But they should stand out well enough.”

They settled to cook a bit of lunch; Cassandra sat down by Violet on the rocky perch she’d settled on while Patrick and Mavyn were cooking yet.

“Mavyn and I are going to walk over there after we eat and see about the Psalter,” she said quietly.

“Are you sure?” Violet asked.

“I think, even if he turns out not to have it, or won’t give it to her, she can keep us alive,” Cassandra said. “And she needs someone to speak to him for her. He *will* understand us, right?”

“I would think so. Assuming he’s even awake.” She was quiet a moment. “Do the others know?”

“Brinn and Andrew both wimped out on it already.”

Violet smiled faintly. “Well, then. I won’t be going with you, since I need to keep an eye out for our expected guests, but I do believe you’re right about her being at least able to protect you. Try not to just panic and run if you do find him, though. Wyrms are... huge. And it’s basically terrifying.”

“You’ve seen one before?”

“From a distance. Tunnaerial. In southwestern Genarvies.”

“Ah.”

“Do be careful. It is still a cave to be navigated.”

There was a bit of arguing before Cassandra and Mavyn headed across the heath on foot, heading for the cave. Violet was a nervous about what might happen if they woke the dragon up and it was angry, but she stayed settled on her outcrop of rock, watching for de Matin and company.

Mavyn had brought a small lamp for them, and she and Cassandra picked their way through the broad, open cavern which began the wyrm’s lair. Cassandra stopped several dozen yards in.

“Uh-oh,” she breathed, pointing out tracks on the floor to Mavyn. “We may *not* have gotten here first.”

The younger woman caught her arm lightly to start her walking again, more urgently now. The passageways in the cave were huge, and Cassandra began to get an idea of the scale Violet had warned her about. The wyrm likely stood thirty feet at the shoulder.

“Dragon?” she called softly when Mavyn’s lamp glinted off something metallic a dozen or so yards ahead. They could no longer see the opening through which they’d entered the cave. “Dragon, are you awake?”

Something leathery moved above them, and Cassandra’s heart quickened.

“I am now, little morsels,” a deep, reptilian voice hissed. The movement above them quickened suddenly. “The stone! What have you done with the stone?!”

Cassandra clapped her hands over her ears at the sudden booming echoes from the wyrm’s outburst, instinctively shutting her eyes, as well; she had a feeling that Violet, at least, had probably heard that. She heard the rustle of Mavyn’s skirts as she moved beside her, and she had a feeling that opening her eyes would probably be a bad idea. She eased her hands off her ears.

“My friend here is a priestess of a Aurora,” Cassandra continued, her voice quavering. “She came seeking the Psalter. If the stone you speak of is the lichstone, we had been pursuing a group seeking it, and had hoped to arrive before them to prevent them acquiring it.”

“Want it for yourself, do you?” the wyrm growled.

“No,” Cassandra said. “We want them not to be able to start a war with it. It is far safer with you than anywhere else.”

The wyrm did not reply; Cassandra finally dared open her eyes, only to see Mavyn's magic restraining one huge, clawed hand. She promptly fainted.

"You serve the Lady Aurora," Vellaerinoth said to Mavyn, bringing his head down into the illumination from her little lamp. She met his gaze steadily. He withdrew, disappearing into the dark reaches of the cavern, and Mavyn knelt beside Cassandra to see how she was faring. She loosened some of the clothing about her throat, and then the dragon returned. The book he set before her was small, easily held open in one hand, and seemingly radiant. Mavyn stood to curtsy before him, then took the book, opened it to the appropriate page, and sang.

Violet stood when the wyrm appeared from his cave; the other three were too dumbfounded to.

"Well, shit," she said, watching as the wyrm took flight. "If he's angry, it's way beyond too late for either running or hiding."

It took just a few minutes for the dragon to land again on the side of the hill; he eased down onto his belly, then reached up to lift Mavyn and Cassandra down from where they had been clinging to the horned spikes between his wings.

"And you said you didn't want to come with us," Cassandra said to her, wide-eyed, as she made her way across the little camp to collapse into Brinn's arms.

"The baby..." Violet heard him murmur.

"The baby is fine," Cassandra snapped. "This is entirely me panicking."

"So what part of this half-assed plan did I screw up?" Violet asked the wyrm, still standing her ground because she didn't think she could manage to do anything else and not have her knees give out in pure terror.

"Those whom you followed were faster than you thought," Vellaerinoth said. "But *this* journey was orchestrated by Aurora, was it not?"

"Mavyn's presence, perhaps. I'm inclined to chase down any son of a bitch who would risk unleashing a wyrm's wrath on upwards of three countries in an attempt to reopen a civil war," Violet replied.

"Good," he said, bringing his head down close to her to see her more clearly. "Because if the lichstone is *not* returned to me, I *will* come looking for it. Your quarry has apparently sped up. Save the wyrm Shallonis, and she may help you in your efforts to catch up to them."

"When do you want the stone back by?" Violet asked. "It's going to take anywhere from several weeks to a month and a half to catch them, upwards of two months to get them back to Eberford and into custody if they don't push us to killing them, and then that long again back."

"You are confident you will reacquire the stone?"

"It's frickin' December already," Violet said. "They're going to have me on the road through February. I'm damn' well catching up with them at the very least to make him pay for the misery that this trip has been. So yeah. The stone is something of an extra, but yeah."

Vellaerinoth smiled, and the knot in Violet's stomach tightened. "Save Shallonis, return the stone, and I will leave the wrath to you, hm?"

He backed down the hill a little ways, turned, and flew back to his cave.

"Patrick?" Violet said in a small voice. "I don't think I can move."

They headed south towards the wood again later that afternoon, camping in the lee of a hill by a spring. Violet was restless, pacing on the edge of the firelight.

"The lady has well enough magic to move them faster for a while," Cassandra called over

to her finally. “She can’t do it indefinitely, not that many people, because it will drain her, but she *could* give them a lead.”

“But why wait till Yenisberg?” Violet said, agitated.

“Probably because when we were in Yenisberg, your friend’s political opponents sent word to the king of Genarvies about you being in the country, and likely tipped them off, as well,” Patrick said. She swore.

“So what the hell was he talking about – save Shallonis?” Andrew said. “I thought you said they killed her over six hundred years ago?”

“They *said* they killed her. Doesn’t mean she’s actually dead,” Violet said.

“Do we even know where she is?” Brinn asked.

“And how would we save her?” Andrew added.

“As long as she is not dead, Aurora can restore her,” Mavyn said. All eyes but Violet’s turned to her, and they were quiet for several moments.

“That doesn’t help with finding her,” Brinn said finally.

“No,” Violet said. “But I can do that. She’s probably within a day or so of Hursten. I can wait for you there.”

“Do you really think splitting off by yourself now is a good idea?” Patrick asked.

“With what’s going on, the elves shouldn’t give you trouble about going back through the wood,” she said. She pulled off a pendant she had been wearing under her shirt and walked over to hand it to him. “And if they do, just show them that. I can’t cross into the human part of Genarvies with you all if the king knows I’ve been all the way across to Yenisberg. I need to know where she is by the time you all catch up with me so that we don’t waste any time.”

He pulled her down next to him to meet her eyes. “And if she kills you when you find her? If that dragon is alive, she has been so in whatever hole she’s in, unable to come out, for how many centuries?”

“I’d worry less about the dragon than the she-troll whose mate I killed in front of her, eh?” Violet replied, a little bitterly. “They have a head start on us getting back to Pellevaera and *using* that lichstone. I don’t want to have to kill something to extract it to take it back to the wymm.”

He didn’t answer; Violet put her arms around him and put her lips close to his ear.

“Philip is my brother,” she murmured. “I have to make this work if I can.”

He drew back slightly to see her eyes again. “Is that what she had to tell you?”

She nodded slightly. He drew her closer again to kiss her, then let her go. She stood, picked up her pack, and headed off into the darkness.

Violet knew that there were elven scouts following her movements as she headed back through the elven wood, but her concern was speed, not stealth. She was through the woods in barely a week, and she left the road several miles from Yenisberg, circling out into Genarvies across the fields, watching the troops that the king had moved into the area. They would have pickets out; the city was surrounded, though it did not seem to be under siege.

She slipped up the riverbank along the bluffs; it was late, about ten, and the clouds that had been dropping snow earlier still obscured the moon. The bluffs were steep, mostly granite, but they were scalable in several places; she had before. Once up the bluff, she continued up the wall, settled in one of the crenels at the top, waiting for the sentries to pass, then made her way silently, cautiously, to Gregor Ulanik’s study. She popped the catch on the window and dropped inside, freezing a moment when the guards briefly panicked.

“Violet!” Gregor exclaimed when he recognized her. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I take it the knight and company have been back through already?” she said. “I’ve got a dragon wanting to go recover his property himself, and if I don’t manage to do it for him, we’re going to have a wyrm rampaging. So.”

He sat back down at his desk. “They came through about five days ago.”

She swore.

“And you are alone?”

“I move faster alone,” she said.

“But with the sorceress…”

“Yeah, I can’t confront them. Not intending to yet. Closer to Pellevaera if I have to. A lich on the throne of Pellevaera would get bored very quickly, start looking for more minions. Not good overall.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Just keeping tabs. Maybe see if I can slow them down enough for the others to catch up.”

“They did… leave someone,” Gregor said. “If you’d like to speak to him…”

“Might not hurt,” Violet said.

“Captain?”

Nathan Wyclif stepped forward from his post along the wall behind the desk, and Violet followed him out of the room.

“How the hell did you get past the king’s army?” he asked her once they’d descended a flight of steps and started along one of the narrow corridors.

“Well, now, if I explained, what would be the point of being able to do it?” Violet asked.

“That sounds like bullshit,” he said.

“I’m just good at not being seen,” she shrugged.

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Oh?”

“Toting *that* mop of hair?”

“There is such a thing as a hood,” she said.

The passageways were getting narrower every floor down they went, and Violet recognized the stone when they got to the level the dungeons were on. It was warmer, two floors below ground, and she adjusted her cloak and gloves and scarf to accommodate the change.

“You *are* quite a temptation, aren’t you?” he said as they turned the corner into the first cell block.

“I do believe I’ve already mentioned that you’re not going to get anywhere with regards to that ambition,” she said.

“No? Do you think there’s nothing I could do for you?”

“Not that isn’t already being covered by someone else.”

“*Him?* He was not particularly impressive.”

“Well, then, you obviously have different taste in men than I do,” Violet said. She stopped next to him outside one of the cells.

“Violet,” Forwythe rasped upon recognizing her in the dim light.

“Did your men do that to him?” she asked Wyclif, not taking her eyes off the man in the cell, mentally cataloging his wounds.

“No, no. He was like that when they found him.”

“And why is he in the dungeon, then?”

“Because the lord-mayor thought you might wish to speak with him.”

“Well, yes.” She pulled her belt knife to slip open the cell lock.

“I do have keys, you know,” Wyclif protested as she opened the door to go inside.

“You’re not moving fast enough for them to matter,” she said. She dropped to one knee beside Forwythe to pick him up. “Did he come with luggage, or just as is?”

“As is. You can’t just – you can’t just walk out of here with one of our prisoners,” Wyclif protested as she started back up the hallway, carrying Forwythe.

“You have nothing to charge him with, no?” she returned. “And if Gregor is not keeping me here right now, I’m going to go find an inn. And he’s heavy. So I’m not going to wait long to find out.”

Violet was shown to a suite within the mayoral residence, and once inside it and alone, she cleaned and dressed Forwythe’s wounds herself.

“I didn’t think you actually believed me,” he said weakly, laid out on the bed, watching as she stitched up one of the gashes in his side.

“The part I’m more curious about is the rumor regarding your mother’s identity,” she said. “Particularly since Annette de Coeur has never married.”

He turned his eyes away a moment. “Mother never found a man she wanted to marry.”

“Oh, I know how that goes. Mine hasn’t either.”

“Your mother is not the king’s sister, though.”

“No. But I apparently am.”

His eyes darted to her face. “What? How the hell would I have not heard that—”

“It’s apparently an open secret among the older members of my mother’s family,” Violet said. “She only finally told me about a week ago. And the *only* reason I am telling you is because of the common blood.”

His breathing, shallow as it was, had quickened slightly. “John de Coeur’s and Jasper Sutton’s bastards... My God, that would terrify some circles, to know that you are working together.”

“Ha, would it be the working together part, or that he proposed that we formalize our personal arrangement?” Violet said.

“There are quite a few political consequences of that which perhaps you haven’t considered,” Forwythe said.

“Oh, I’ve thought about them. But I already know that when Philip dies, I’m going to leave Pellevaera. His father – my father – did have the opportunity to include me in the already messy succession, and for whatever reason chose to leave me unrecognized. Given who and what I am, that’s probably for the best.”

“And if your other half does not wish to leave?”

“Then I’m probably going to get pulled into another war of succession I’d really rather avoid. But I can damned well guarantee that neither I nor any children there might be by that time are going to be involved in it as contenders.”

“Do you really think you wouldn’t be one?”

“It’s not something I want to do with my life. And if you want to know how I handle other people trying to tell me what to do with my life, I’m sure my maternal grandmother would like another ear to bitch about me to.”

She was quiet a while, working on another gash in his ribs.

“Are you even going to ask me what happened?” he asked.

“Is any of it not already obvious?” Violet asked. “For some reason they decided to move faster, got in, got the stone, got out, and headed back.”

“Oh. I suppose not.”

“I suppose I could ask what triggered this half-mended thrashing,” she said.

“Heh. That was just me trying to keep the stone in my possession. But de Matin was rather insistent. At least he didn’t involve the lady in it.”

“So did you actually see the wyrm?” Violet asked.

“No. It was quite dark, and I’d rather not have, anyway.” He paused. “You were there when Genarvies’s army woke up Tunnaeriol, weren’t you?”

“Yep. That was as close as I ever wanted to be.”

“So how did you figure out that we had already been there and gone?” he asked.

“You know the lass that was working the bar back in Maresbrook? Dark hair, didn’t talk?”

“Vaguely.”

“Patrick’s daughter. That’s why he ended up there at the end of the war. One of those incidents of questionable judgment a fifteen-year-old boy sometimes falls into. Anyway, she’s a priestess of Aurora, and Vellaerinoth has had Aurora’s Psalter in his hoard since the war in the elven wood that wiped out her cult there. So she went in to ask for it from him.”

“She did *what*?” Forwythe exclaimed; Violet caught him as he half sat up.

“Hey, the stitches,” she said. “Yeah. Took Cassandra with her because she didn’t talk.”

“Oh, my God. That’s crazy.”

“Yeah, well, not really, since Aurora really does protect her from harm. So they went in, woke him up, and apparently explained both facets of why they were there. And then he came out to talk to us. So now, when I catch up to de Matin, there is this absolutely *fantastic* traveling weather, the whole treachery against Philip thing, and putting me face to face with a damn’ two thousand year old wyrm that he owes me for my trouble.”

“Face to face?”

“Yes,” Violet said. “Have you ever been so terrified that you don’t run because trying to move would just lead to collapsing to the ground in a fetal position? A wyrm like that is just mind-blowingly terrifying.”

“We... don’t have dragons like that in Pellevaera, do we? I haven’t heard of one, but...”

“The last was Illyrian, I think. Three thousand years ago. When there are too many people, it gets too crowded for a wyrm. So yeah, Vellaerinoth wants his lichstone back, or he is going to go tear up things looking for it. And he recommended we go find Shallonis in order to catch up to de Matin.”

“Shallonis?”

“The wyrm that went on a rampage and created the wilds of northern Genarvies about six, seven hundred years ago.” She tied off the last bandage. “Vellaerinoth apparently thinks she’s still alive. And that’s what I’m really looking for first – have to figure out where her lair is, see if she’s even still alive. I should be able to do that by the time the others catch up again. And then hopefully she will help us, if she is alive, and not just, you know, eat us.”

“Well, it *is* winter. And they do sort of hibernate.”

“Yeah. So hopefully she’ll be sluggish enough if I find her alive in her lair not to kill me outright. Patrick would be a little miffed if I went and did that.”

She turned down the lamps, stirred the embers in the fireplace once, and lay down on one

of the couches in the room to sleep. She would have to go out past the troops in the daylight tomorrow...

Violet was talking to Gregor and Wyclif the next morning when Forwythe awoke; the other men left after a moment, and she walked over to the side of the bed to talk to him.

“Patrick and the others should be coming back through here in about a week,” she said. “They may agree to take you with them if you don’t want to go back through the wilds alone. Gregor’s not going to hold you here, but he will let you stay here until you feel up to leaving.”

“You’re leaving, then?” he asked.

“I need to have everything ready for when they catch up with me. And I’m probably going to have to travel off the road for a while since someone tipped off Genarvies’s king about me being here. Apparently he’s still... uneasy with some of the work I’ve done.”

“Do you blame him? It takes elven scouts to get around you.”

“Heh. If you’re open with Patrick about who you work for,” she said more quietly, “he’s generally a good judge of whether he’s being conned. So they’d probably take you with them.”

“We’ll see. The others may be less willing for me to go along.”

“Because you’re creepy,” Violet said. “You just *ooze* the whole thief thing anytime you’re in a town – the gaze, the walk, the cautious hand positioning. So yeah, they may try to avoid you. But think about angry trolls and neigeloup and whether you want to be going through the wilds alone before you give up the idea completely.”

“Wait – neigeloup? I thought those were just a myth.”

Violet smiled slightly. “You city-bred boys are so amusing. Give Wyclif a hard time for me. I didn’t get to hit him while I was here.”

Having worked intimately in planning the city’s defense before, Violet knew about the passages which led from its fortifications to those of the bridge, and she took advantage of them to get across the river without having to go out through the gates. Because of the necessity of going through the city to cross the bridge, the king’s troops had not actually taken up positions across the river. She would have almost a week of mostly farmland before she got into the wilds; that would probably be the risk period in terms of Genarvies having someone find her. The wilds would be more than sufficient for her to disappear into without slowing her down.

Despite the pursuit, she didn’t dare camp outside at night, not in December, not alone. She could too easily freeze to death with the weather like it was – frequent snow, although not deep, and freezing rain. At the same time, inns were too much of a risk, at least until she did get into the wilds, where the villages were independent enough to be close-mouthed to inquiring agents of the royal house. There was, at least, an ample supply of large, hay-filled barns in the countryside she was traveling through.

By the time she reached the wilds again, she was certain someone was following her. She was curious about whether they would be able to keep up – or find her – once in the often trackless and unsettled areas of scrub and forest north of the road.

The village she stayed in didn’t give her any more than the usual number of curious glances at the appearance of a half-elf in their stretch of backwoods. The locals at the bar in the inn left her to herself, which she was glad for; she was missing Patrick, and she wanted to mope about it. After several weeks together, she had gotten used to the warmth at night, and between the loneliness and her frigid toes, lack of it was making her grumpy.

Welleston was much the same as she’d seen it last, several weeks before; it had a steady layer of snow now, but that was about it for changes. She was still behind de Matin and the

others, but not much. If Cassandra was right, the magic that had sped them up would tire the lady, and they would slow soon.

Violet had settled with a hot drink and some kind of stew in a dark corner of the front room of the inn she'd chosen when a heavily cloaked man entered, paused a moment, and then headed in her direction. She shifted slightly to free up the swords on her lower back.

"Outside," he growled at her. "Now."

"You might consider," she said, setting down her spoon slowly, "it wouldn't be a bad idea to declare yourself before making that kind of demand. You know, to avoid getting yourself killed on the way to the door."

"I believe you were warned about entering Genarvies again," the man said.

"Yes, well. When one is weighing arousing a king's wrath against a wyrm's, one generally goes for arousing a king's. I'm sure anyone in this area can tell you what happens when you make a wyrm angry." She leaned forward slightly. "So why don't you just go back and explain that I'm here trying to keep Vellaerinoth from going on a rampage from Olloria across Genarvies to Pellevaera?"

"Because the bounty is on your head, nothing else," he growled. "Outside."

"The kings of Genarvies do not have a good history with wyrms," Violet said, waiting yet at the table. If there was going to be a fight, it was *not* going to be on his terms, and his insistence on going outside made her all the more wary of doing so. She guessed that he was probably not alone.

"What the hell does it matter? You are not wanted in Genarvies, and the king wants you dead. End of story."

"Fine, if you want it that way, fine," Violet said. "But I am *not* going back outside in this kind of weather when my toes are already half thawed."

He swore and lunged at her; Violet slid off the bench, under the table, and rolled back to her feet on the other side of him, drawing both her swords in the process. He turned with a drawn blade, and the local men backed away from the pair, pulling the tables and benches back with them. Violet backed away cautiously.

"You're making this a lot more difficult than it needs to be," she said, "or is the money really all you're after?"

"Two thousand crowns? What do you think?" he said.

"And so when the wyrm gets impatient and starts looking for what was stolen from him on his own, he's going to tear up Genarvies on his way to Pellevaera," she reiterated.

"Not my problem."

Violet guessed him to be a former soldier, probably from the last war. He fought more like a bandit, though, and the focus on the money and lack of concern about the threat of a wyrm – which she expected would not go over with the people anywhere in the wilds – suggested that to be his most recent occupation. When she did finally kick him off her swords and throw the body out the door into the street, the expected three or four other men rushed over to it. She recovered her drink from her seat and headed up to her room.

Welleston's guards mostly looked the other way when Violet passed through the town the next morning on her way further east; she wondered if all her talk of the wyrm had won her some sort of support there. She felt hollow inside yet from the fight the night before, and Patrick's company was sorely missed. It was probably a good thing she had not mentioned her plans for Shallonis at all...

She was only a few days from Hursten, but the troll was between there and her. She spent one of the nights in the tower by the Bollesa River, the door securely closed and a fire kindled on the hearth. She didn't really remember the last stay there; maybe Patrick was right – that her awareness of the shortness of so many lives, when compared to the vast centuries of an elven one, was what made her so reluctant to kill, what made her handle the afterwards of doing so herself so badly. She was just a scout, not a soldier...

Hursten remembered her, and Violet tried to stay in the background of the comings and goings in the front room of the inn long enough to eat, but eventually about a half dozen of the village men settled in a row across from her.

"Why do you know about the wyrm?" one of them asked suspiciously. Violet pushed back her bowl after a moment.

"I grew up close enough to Vellaerinoth's lair to pay attention to the lore regarding them," she said. "You all seem awfully antsy over a wyrm that's been dead six hundred years. Understandably, I suppose... she did tear the area up pretty badly."

"What happened to the folk you were traveling with?"

"Oh, they'll be along in a week or ten days. I was going to wait for them around here," Violet said. "I move faster alone is all."

"So why head out here alone?" another broke in. "You know what's in these wilds, don't you?"

"Well, yeah... But I'm also keeping tabs on the group that stole a lichstone from Vellaerinoth. And what's in these wilds really doesn't compare to what's going to happen if he comes looking for it," she said.

The men fell quiet, and Violet reached for her drink.

"Yeah. And it's probably going to be a bit of everything between them and him that gets torn up. And of course the king of Genarvies doesn't care about that – he's just pissed off that I'm in the country at all," she said. "Sent some bounty hunters after me already."

"We were better off with Shallonis," one of the men grumbled.

"Oh, think hard before you say that," Violet said. "A wyrm is not a neighbor to be taken lightly."

"No, but these damned kings – six hundred years, and they've done nothing to help us recover from the mauling she gave these lands. What the hell good are they if they just keep sapping what little we've got?"

"Didn't even replace our nobles after she killed them," another added, "just rolled us into some 'County of North Bellosa' and left it at that."

"Hey, I feel for your problems, I do," Violet said, "but I'm really not here to stir up more trouble than I've already got. My current to-do list involves averting another civil war in Pellevaera, additionally avoiding one between Pellevaera and Genarvies, and getting the lichstone back to Vellaerinoth so that he doesn't get impatient and go looking."

"Wait, wait – you've *met* Vellaerinoth?" one of the men said.

"It *really* wasn't my idea," she said. "I wasn't intending for us to get close enough to be noticed."

"And he didn't just kill you?"

"One of the girls is a priestess," Violet said, "and he had a relic of her goddess in his hoard. So he wasn't immediately angry when he came out."

"A... priestess?"

Violet nodded slightly. "I'm not particularly religious. Don't know if she's just a gifted sorceress, or if there's really a goddess behind it all. Either way, he's not coming looking *yet*, but he'll only be patient so long."

Violet spent most of the next week thoroughly exploring the area around Hursten. Although it seemed like a cave big enough to house a wyrm would stand out and be easy to find, between the somewhat unpredictable terrain of the hills in the area and all the overgrowth of six centuries with very little clearing for farming, wherever the lair was, it was well obscured.

One of the local men settled at the bar next to her one night when she returned after another day of fruitless searching, and she braced herself for her turning down advances routine. That was apparently not what was in the forefront of his mind, however.

"You've been poking around these woods an awful lot," he said.

"Well, that is generally what I do for a living," Violet nodded.

"Aren't you worried that you'll flush something out?"

"Not during daylight. There don't seem to be any trolls or wyverns around here, and all the smaller stuff I can handle all right, anyway."

"Oh."

"You say that as though there's something out there you're worried I'll run into."

"You're not... looking for it, are you?"

"What, the lichstone? No, I know where that's headed."

"No..." He lowered his voice. "Her lair."

"Why, was it around here?" Violet asked. "I haven't seen anything even resembling a wyrm's lair."

"Oh... I thought maybe you were looking for the treasure."

"Heh, nah. I work for the king of Pellevaera. I don't need that kind of stuff."

"My gram used to say it was pointless to go looking, because Uther had it looted, anyway."

"Yeah, I guess sometimes just because someone is good at putting a kingdom together doesn't mean he's a good king," Violet nodded. "But I wouldn't be eager to run into a wyrm, dead or alive. Face to face with Vellaerinoth is going to be enough fodder for my nightmares for the next three hundred years."

"You don't think wyrms are... evil, do you?"

"Evil? Not really. They're just big, and used to getting what they want, or taking it if they don't. Probably the best way to keep strong magic out of hands that would otherwise cause a lot of mischief. They tend to avoid areas that get too crowded with people, anyway. Probably because there's not enough for them to eat, and if they start eating people, the people start trying to kill them."

"Yeah." He was quiet a moment. "So what are you looking for, then?"

"There is no *for*, really," Violet said, smiling slightly. "I'm just *looking*."

It took her another three days to stumble across the cave – literally, as she fell almost thirty feet to the bottom of a steep slope. Once her eyes had adjusted to the dim light, she realized the size of it. Then her hands started shaking. She wasn't sure how Cassandra had managed to willingly go into Vellaerinoth's lair with Mavyn – Mavyn, sure; she understood that, the confidence she had in her goddess. But Cassandra...

Violet stood rooted where she'd picked herself up for almost fifteen minutes, unable to

talk herself further into the cave. But Patrick and the others would be there soon – if this *weren't* the right cave, she needed to know, before they arrived, so that they wouldn't have to look more. The knight and the others were probably getting close to Pernham... She closed her eyes a moment, trying to calm her nerves, then started, slowly, cautiously, into the cave. This was *not* her idea of a good start to the year that had begun that day.

“Shallonis?” she called softly as she got further in. “Please don't eat me. Shallonis? Vellaerinoth suggested we seek you out...”

Eventually the cave grew dark enough that she could no longer make out the walls or the floor, and she edged carefully along to avoid falling again. Light would draw too much attention if the wyrm *were* there and alive.

“Shallonis?” she called again. She stopped, wondering for a moment if she was going to be able to find her way back out. “Damn it, maybe this *is* the wrong cave.”

The clawed hand that hit her came from behind, pinning her on her stomach, and a flickering amber glow soon became apparent on the walls – the light of the dragon's fire, seeping out between her teeth.

“I see no 'we,’” the wyrm hissed.

“The others won't be here till tomorrow or the next day,” Violet wheezed. The dragon increased the pressure on her.

“And why would Vellaerinoth send you to me?”

“There is a priestess of Aurora in our group.”

“Yes, yes,” she hissed, “but what do you want of *me*?”

“Speed. The Lichstone of Herodius—”

The dragon's claws closed around her, pulling her closer, and Violet cried out in pain.

“The fool lost the lichstone, and he would send you to *me* to get it back?” Shallonis growled.

“God, do you even *need* a healer?” Violet gasped. The wyrm cackled, setting her down in front of her face.

“What do you think, half-elf?” she asked, lighting up the cave. The dragon took up much of it; her wings were shredded, and gaping wounds lay open on her abdomen and neck; one eye was completely gone. “My wounds still ooze.”

Violet's eyes had welled up, between what was probably several broken ribs and the sad sight before her.

“How could they – how could they hate so much, to overcome the terror?” she asked.

“The villages that are left – they resent the king, but was it not their own people that did this?”

“It has been so long,” Shallonis said. “I no longer remember.”

“Oh.”

“No, these people, that have lived in my shadow – they were goaded. Only Welleston put up a fight.”

“And then Uther killed their leader, as well,” Violet nodded. She was trembling violently, uncontrollably, too terrified to get up and run.

“*What?!*”

“The current one is not much better. He aroused Tunnaeriol several years ago.”

“You say you have a healer?”

“In a day or two. They don't move as fast as I do.”

“And then you expect me to go help you get the lichstone back.”

“If my friends and I cannot catch up with them, they'll use it. And a lich...”

“A lich created by the Lichstone of Herodius poses a threat to even a wyrm,” Shallonis hissed. “But I will only help you catch up. I am long overdue to express my displeasure to the house of Uther of Loringal.”

Violet was dozing against the side of the fireplace in the front room of the inn when someone sat down next to her and pulled her close.

“Gah, don’t squeeze,” she gasped, flicking her eyes opened to see, as she expected, Patrick. He immediately relaxed his hold.

“What did you do now?” he asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Enh. Ribs.” She settled her face against his neck.

“How long have you been here?”

“About ten days,” she said. He hadn’t taken his things upstairs with the others, and she prodded him up off the bench. “Let’s get you settled in upstairs, and we can talk.”

He picked up his things and headed for the stairs, and Violet followed stiffly. She was quite bruised yet from the wyrm’s grasp, and she knew that several of the ribs were broken. Once up the stairs, she directed him into the little room she’d been staying in, and once he’d set down his things, he went down the hall, coming back after a few moments with Mavyn.

“Ribs, you said?” Patrick said as he shut the door. Violet sighed slightly and sat down on the end of the bed.

“Yeah, so I found her,” Violet said. Mavyn began helping her out of the outer layers so that she could work on her wounds. “She’s in pretty bad shape. I don’t really know *how* she’s lived as she is this long, but I don’t know *that* much about wyrms.”

“What did she do to you?” Mavyn asked, her brows rising at the bruising across most of her torso.

“Heh, knocked me down and grabbed me,” Violet said. “If she will help us catch up with them, we’re going to need to do something with the horses, Patrick. I think she’d eat them in the state she’s in.”

“I don’t think this place is really big enough to sell them,” he shook his head.

“Sell them?” Mavyn said. “And then what, we walk all the way back?”

“Do you have a better suggestion?” he said. “You’ve seen how Andrew is about them – if the possibility of them getting eaten in front of him is on the table, you know how that’s going to go.”

“That wouldn’t fix the walking back problem either,” Mavyn said, rolling her eyes at him. “No, I think I can walk him through the spell to shrink them – and then return them to normal – tonight.”

“So how was your trip?” Violet asked. “Did they give you trouble around Yenisberg, or just ignore you?”

“They didn’t give us any trouble,” Patrick said, “but it looked like he had serious plans for the city by the number of troops he fielded.”

“Oh, he’s going to have much bigger problems soon enough,” Violet said.

“What do you mean?”

“If we’re really going to go, you know, save Shallonis? She’s been in that cave for centuries, and saw it plundered by Uther. She may or may not help us, but regardless, is it not obvious where she’ll be going afterwards?”

“Oh.”

“So, yeah. I guess I’m going east again when I eventually leave Pellevaera. Genarvies is

going to hate me for a long, long time,” she said. Mavyn shifted one of her ribs, and Violet winced. “Troll give you problems?”

“Nope.”

Mavyn helped Violet back into her layers after she’d finished working on her ribs, then left Violet and Patrick alone in the room. Patrick sat down next to her on the foot of the bed, and shortly they were snuggled together, his arms tightly around her while she sobbed.

“They were still murmuring about it in Welleston by the time we went through there,” he said quietly. “Apparently he was known for banditry in the area.”

“As though that really changes anything.”

“So we had a chat with your cousin just inside the elven wood on our way back,” Patrick continued.

“Which, Ialar?”

“Yeah. He’s going to make an effort to get back to Eberford to let the king know what’s going on *before* we possibly show up there with people tied up.”

“Hopefully without repercussions from Grandmother,” Violet said. She was quiet a moment. “So you want to make things formal.”

“At the very least, it will make things legally easier for the children.”

“Yeah.” She rolled onto her back. “Just have to figure out *who* is going to do it, and then have enough time for my mother to be there for it.”

“I suppose the burden of travel is going to fall on her, with Genarvies the way it is about you.”

“Oh, please. Mother is barely into her eighth century. The travel won’t hurt her. Besides, I’m sure she’ll be happy enough to get away from Grandmother’s prying for a while.”

He kissed her forehead. “Do you want to go down with me to eat?”

“Sure.”

They headed back down to the front room, and Violet settled back into her seat by the fireplace. Forwythe had come with them, although the others didn’t seem very comfortable with him there. Andrew had a book on the table next to his bowl, and Mavyn was walking him through parts of the page he was looking at.

“So did Gregor give you any trouble about taking him with you?” Violet asked Patrick, nodding at Forwythe.

“Not really. Seemed rather eager to unload him, actually,” he said.

“Probably because he’s *creepy*,” Cassandra hissed.

“Heh, well, yes,” Violet said.

“Oh, as though you’re one to talk,” Forwythe said to Cassandra. “You’ve had at least half the same training I have.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Perhaps. But I doubt you acquired *yours* at finishing school.”

“Finishing school?” Andrew said. “What are you referring to, the petty larceny?”

“Book,” Mavyn murmured to him, “or she *will* eat them.”

“Fine, fine,” Andrew muttered, shifting his eyes back to the book.

“If you can teach him how to do it,” Brinn said to Mavyn, “why can’t you just do it yourself?”

“Just because I understand it doesn’t mean I can make it work,” she said.

“Are we going to be able to go tomorrow, then?” Cassandra asked.

“Probably. He *does* have an aptitude for it, if not much practice,” Mavyn nodded.

“Do we even know where we’re going?” Brinn asked.

“Oh, yes,” Violet said. “Quite well. The better question is, how far are they? They could be all the way to Pernham by now.”

“Do you think they’ll go back exactly the way they came?”

“I don’t know. But if they want to get across the border unseen, it’s probably their best option this far north.”

“What was that town we came out of the bog by?” Cassandra asked.

“Flederheim,” Violet said. “Unless she’s speeding them up still, I don’t think they’ll have gotten that far.”

“Well, if we want to set up an ambush, and not just walk up to them in an inn…”

“Heh. I’d be more comfortable setting one up if we did know where they are, and when they’d be through.”

“Well, now, if we do manage to overshoot them, you’ll be able to scout all that out, won’t you?” Patrick said. “This is all assuming that the whole idea even works.”

“If it doesn’t, well, yeah. Lich. Angry wyrms. Wrath, doom, and so forth.” She was eyeing the bar. “And, of course, having to tell my mother that she’d have to wait on the grandchildren a bit while all that got sorted out. That wouldn’t be pretty. Probably better not to go there.”

Patrick glanced at her. “Wait, how much did you tell her about us?”

Violet smiled slightly. “Oh, as if most of it wasn’t already obvious to her.”

“Yes, but most men’s mother-in-laws eventually, you know, die.”

She laughed. “Yes, but the trade-off is that you get me as is for the rest of your life. Besides, if something *does* happen to both of us, it means Mother will be around to take care of them.”

“God, and I thought watching de Marin and Heloise bicker was irritating,” Forwythe muttered.

“That’s because it was,” Cassandra said. “This only bothers you because you’re a bitter, lonely man. So just hold your tongue or go to bed.”

“And some days your condition is so damned obvious,” he returned.

“Oh, no, she’s like this most days regardless,” Andrew said.

“Enough already, Andrew,” Brinn said.

“Well,” Violet said, standing. “You all can bicker all you want tonight. I’m going to spend the next eight or ten hours pretending to sleep, since I already know damn’ well what we’re going to see tomorrow.”

It was snowing when Violet led the others out of the village the next morning, heading east along the road. She cut them north into the forest on one of the bends where they were out of sight of the town, leading them through heavy thickets of pine for almost two hours before stopping at the top of the slope that descended into the cave.

“The horses, Andrew,” Mavyn said once they had all dismounted and pulled off their baggage. He had brought a little wooden box for them, lined with wool, and after several minutes of concentration, he had managed to shrink them all down to about the size of large mice.

“So she’s down there?” Patrick asked quietly, peering into the darkness.

“Yeah. You didn’t want us all to go with you, did you?” Violet asked Mavyn.

“You had probably better,” she replied. Violet took a deep breath, letting it out slowly,

shakily.

“If you’ve got a light, we’ll want it,” Violet said. “I probably won’t have the concentration for a light spell down here.”

She made her way carefully down the slope, the others following; Mavyn pulled out and lit her little lamp at the bottom.

“Does she know we’re coming?” Mavyn asked.

“I did tell her. Something. I’m not entirely sure what,” Violet said.

Mavyn eventually took lead of the group through the cave; Violet attached herself to Patrick’s arm as they walked, not trusting herself to keep moving into the cave otherwise.

“So how did you manage to find this place?” Forwythe asked, his eyes drifting around the cave where the lamplight fell as they walked. “It is nowhere near as obvious as Vellaerinoth’s.”

“Vellaerinoth lives in a mostly uninhabited part of Olloria,” Violet said. “This area used to be much more populated. And I fell in.”

“Fell in? *You*?”

“Oh, my.” Mavyn stopped short on the edge of the large cavern where the wounded dragon lay. “You cannot manage even light, Violet? The lamp is not nearly enough for this.”

Shallonis shifted when they moved into the cavern, and everyone but Mavyn stopped moving. The young woman continued across the cavern, holding the lamp aloft as she went.

“Oh, but this will take a while,” she said.

“So this is your priestess, half-elf?” Shallonis hissed at Violet. “And what of the rest? Come to watch me rot?”

“They are here because they must be,” Mavyn said. “Light, Violet? She is really strained too much to ask it of her.”

Violet turned her back to the dragon, sat down, put her head on her knees, and covered it with both arms. After several moments she managed to pull up a light in the cavern. Patrick sat next to her and put his arms around her.

“This could take several hours,” Mavyn said. “You all may as well get comfortable.”

“Are you always so commanding, little one?” Shallonis asked, turning her gaze on her.

“I serve Aurora,” Mavyn said, putting a hand on the inflamed, torn flesh on the dragon’s abdomen. “She does not have time for me to be indecisive.”

“The elves destroyed the Cult of the Dawn centuries ago,” the wyrm said, turning her head so that her one eye could take in both Mavyn and the group by Violet.

“And it has not yet returned to them. She may not. They scorned her protection.”

“The Psalter has only ever been carried by her high priests. You must know that.”

“Well, now, in a following of one, that doesn’t leave much leeway for a hierarchy, now does it?” Mavyn said.

“And do you think the elves will not seek you out to destroy you as they did the last group to follow Aurora?” the wyrm asked.

“They damned well better not,” Patrick growled, and Shallonis shifted her gaze to him. Mavyn rolled her eyes.

“Hush, Father, hm? I don’t need her moving about. She’s big enough that I’m going to have trouble enough reaching things as it is,” she said.

Hours in the cavern with the dragon led most of them to relax somewhat despite her presence – except Violet, who remained curled in her ball to keep enough presence of mind for the light spell. Forwythe and Patrick had apparently met briefly during the period Forwythe had done work with Sutton, although the latter but vaguely remembered the episode, and they passed

the time reminiscing about their experiences with Sutton. Andrew was somewhat fascinated by the miniaturized horses, and he was talking to them quietly in their box. Cassandra dozed off against Brinn's shoulder.

Then Shallonis stood up, and the people fell quiet. Mavyn was backing away carefully to avoid any accidental squishing, and then Violet lost her concentration for the light. The amber glow from the dragon's internal fire washed over the cavern; Patrick pulled Violet to her feet with him.

"So why is she so petrified with terror?" Forwythe murmured to Patrick as they, as a group, backed slowly away from the dragon.

"She probably has a better idea of just what exactly that can do to us," Patrick replied. He stroked her hair softly once. "How far is Flederheim, Violet?"

"About three hundred fifty miles," she mumbled.

"All right. What are we doing, Mavyn?" he called over to her.

"Well, if Shallonis will accommodate us, we can head east. If not, we'll see if Andrew can unshrink our rides, I suppose," she said.

"Not in front of the dragon!" Andrew yelled. The wyrm chuckled.

"I have been in this cave for centuries, and all you would ask of me is a ride?" she said.

"Well, I would imagine you would need to go reclaim your hoard before that kind of gratuity would even be possible," Mavyn said, "and affording us the opportunity to prevent the ascension of a lich to the throne of Pellevaera is probably the most valuable thing you could offer us, regardless. The trinkets and treasures of a wyrm's hoard mean little to a human when faced with that kind of situation."

"And how far would you have me take you?"

"How far can you fly?" Forwythe asked. "You have been something of an invalid for quite some time."

The dragon stretched her wings, and Forwythe instinctively ducked. "You do not believe in the girl's goddess, then," she said.

"The town is called Flederheim," Mavyn said, "though I do not know if it was even extant the last time you were out and about. It is on the edge of a bog, several hundred miles to the east."

"It will be dark long before we are there," Shallonis said.

"Not necessarily a bad thing," Patrick said. "A wyrm in flight is going to make people nervous. A wyrm in flight in January is going to make them realize that it's probably not in a friendly mood. So the darkness will probably help."

The dragon settled cautiously on her stomach again, helping the people up onto her back in the space between her wings, where they could cling to the horned protrusions that ran along her spine. Violet took quite a bit of coaxing, and eventually Shallonis ended up settling her next to Patrick, where he could keep her steadied. Once they were all seated, she moved out of her cavern, through the tunnels, and came out into the snow that was falling steadily outside her cave.

"Oh, but this is awful weather," she said. "These people who stole the stone have most impolite timing."

Once aloft, she quickly rose above the clouds to get out of the snow, and in the sunlight above, her scales shimmered a shade of turquoise that had not been noticeable in the muted shadows of her cave, where she had appeared to be just a mix of darker greens.

"We aren't going to miss it with all these clouds, are we?" Brinn yelled over the wind.

“There may not even be clouds there right now,” Patrick replied. “If the dragon can’t put us exactly where we need to be, I’d imagine Violet will be able to get us there in short order.”

It was almost midnight when Shallonis settled in a field about a mile and a half north of Flederheim. The snow on the ground was to her obvious disliking.

“These people you are looking for are very impolite,” she said again, helping the people off her back.

“There are villages in the bog, but not many,” Patrick said, holding Violet yet to keep her on her feet.

“The town may have seen her,” Mavyn said. “We should probably hurry if we don’t want to get locked out of everything.”

Andrew set down the box of miniature horses and, one by one, returned them to their proper size. Once that had been accomplished, they started for the town to the south, save Mavyn, who stayed a moment with the dragon to thank her for her assistance.

If anyone in town had noticed the dragon as she flew over, they had not raised an alarm, and the group was able to find room in one of the inns. They had not been able to eat much during the long flight, and for a while they kept the girl serving the few remaining local patrons very busy, running back and forth between them and the kitchen.

“That seemed too easy,” Brinn said.

“What did?” Violet asked.

“Getting ahead of them once they had passed us.”

“Maybe. It took me nearly ten days to find that cave, though. And we still have to confront them. And that wyrm is going to go hunt down the king of Genarvies in the next couple days. So,” she said, “easy, sort of, maybe, but not inconsequential.”

“Wait, what?” Forwythe said.

“Which part?” Violet asked.

“Hunt down the king of Genarvies?”

“Well, he is the descendent of Uther of Loothingal, who overturned her hegemony on the region and nearly got her killed, and then had her lair looted, subsequently leaving her in that cave for centuries.”

“That is going to be messy,” Forwythe said.

“Better or worse than a lich?” Violet said. “Hell, the idea of a lich seemed to concern Shallonis when I mentioned it the other day. I do wonder if Vellaerinoth was content to let us go after it first in case it had been used by the time we caught up with it.”

“Just what exactly is so bad about a lich that it would make a *wyrm* nervous?” Brinn asked.

“Well, it’s not just that it’s a lich, it’s the particular lichstone in question,” Mavyn said. “Herodius was mage-king of what’s now Olloria for nine hundred years before they managed to kill his lich form. Every time a lichstone is used to create a lich, it gains – and retains – whatever power they had. And the next lich created with it comes into the possession of all that. Generally they’re just powerful sorcerers, since the magic involved in creating a new stone is intense. But sometimes, like with the Lichstone of Herodius, there are brilliant generals, politicians, or even priests in its lineage.”

“How old is this one?” Forwythe asked.

“About eight thousand years,” Violet said.

“And why hasn’t someone destroyed it?”

“That... would not be pretty,” Mavyn said. “Destroying an item imbued with a large amount of magical energy generally releases that energy into the immediate vicinity.”

“The Yndar Crater,” Violet said.

“How’s that?” Brinn said.

“Last time a lichstone was destroyed, it created the Yndar Crater in southern Olloria,” Violet said. “It’s about forty miles in diameter. And the Lichstone of Yndar was only on its second occupant. That’s been about four hundred years.”

“Oh.”

“Liches are basically undead, restored by the powers of the lichstone, and in possession of the powers of its previous hosts,” Mavyn said.

“So... eight thousand years... Ugh.” Forwythe settled his head in his hands. “That would have been useful to know before ever getting that close to Vellaerinoth’s lair.”

“Hey, on the bright side, you didn’t try to destroy it when de Matin took it away, and inadvertently devastated a large part of northern Genarvies and probably half the elven wood,” Violet said.

“No, but the lich could do that quite easily anyway, no?” Cassandra said.

“I suppose,” Violet said, “though it’s more likely to be predisposed to conquest than out-and-out destruction.”

“You grew up in – what was it, Maresbrook, right?” Andrew said to Mavyn.

“Yes,” she nodded.

“Then why the hell do you know so much about liches and lichstones and magic in general?”

“Because I’ve had a goddess talking to me since I was eight,” Mavyn said.

“Oh.”

“So what *are* we going to do now?” Brinn asked.

“Let our scout actually scout,” Patrick said, “and then see if we can’t pull off something without getting ourselves killed.”

“Heloise is not a trifle,” Forwythe warned. “She looks like a frumpy, middle-aged lady-in-waiting, but she is a sorceress of no small ability.”

“Oh, but Aurora is masterful at containing mages of that sort, as well,” Mavyn said. “If the spell books she left behind are any indication, she has little study in the way of dealing with the powers of the divine, and she should be quite easily neutralized, in that regard.”

Cassandra was stifling a giggle. “‘Frumpy’ – that is too good. I would love to see you say that to her face.”

“Heh, I wouldn’t,” Forwythe said. “I’m sure she would do something quite unpleasant in return.”

Violet headed out across the snow drifts the next morning, having taken the time to acquire a shearling vest to layer in addition to the rest of her winter clothes. She was debating whether snowshoes would speed her up or slow her down at this point, and she wondered if the wyrm were still in the area.

The road was heavily drifted in places, though the fields and copses she was walking through were more evenly covered, so she suspected that de Matin and the others would be slowed a bit on the trip from Pernham to Flederheim – assuming, of course, that they returned through the same gorge. There were other routes into Pellevaera from Genarvies, of course, but to do so without going through a major border crossing, they would have to go almost a hundred

miles to the south. The border was too populated south of Flederheim, and the north... well, the north was full of trolls, so that would be an unlikely route.

Late in the afternoon she spied a group on horses along the road, about a mile ahead, and she sped up a little, getting into the cover of one of the patches of trees to move close enough to see them. Once she had confirmed their identity, she made her way cautiously back through the trees until she was out of sight of the road, down a hill, and headed back to Flederheim.

Violet was amused that both Patrick and Brinn were uncomfortable with the idea of an ambush. They were both operating on the same definition of honor – the same sense of duty – that she had seen at play in her work with Sutton ten years before. She wondered if the king would take advantage of that nature in either men and give them the opportunity to put their innate tendencies to work.

In the end, as she had expected, both agreed to go along with the plan for the ambush, however. There was no change in philosophy in either case; it was simply the most practical solution for the situation when they didn't want to risk the sorceress having a chance to do anything detrimental that either Mavyn or Andrew wouldn't be able to undo.

They had settled on one of the copses just west of Flederheim, not only to avoid losing the element of surprise by spending a night in the same town, but also to avoid having to spend a night outside. Andrew was some ways back with their horses and Cassandra, and the others took up posts on either side of the road. Violet spent a little time camouflaging their locations so that they would not be immediately spotted by people coming up the road; they were likely to encounter them at dusk, which would help with that regard.

Mavyn sprang the trap when de Matin, Heloise, and Björn had ridden past half of their group, effectively encasing the sorceress in an invisible sphere which magic could not penetrate. Andrew handed off the horses to Cassandra and, in his own unannounced amendment to the plan, shrank de Matin and Björn's horses. Forwythe had been assigned to catch the lady's horse and keep her out of the way while Violet, Patrick, and Brinn handled the two men. Violet had suggested that Patrick and Brinn go after Björn, since she was confident in the ability of the two of them to either lock him down or kill him as the fight necessitated; that had left her with de Matin, mostly because she would most likely be able to take him alive.

Björn, however, quickly landed his axe on Brinn's ribs, which left Patrick alone with him, and Mavyn quickly ran to tend the younger man.

"You are a most troublesome little bitch," de Matin had snapped at Violet as she had drawn both swords.

"Yeah, yeah. Patrick, swap me," she called over. "He's likely to piss me off enough to kill him if he's going to talk the whole time."

They managed to trade opponents, and Violet with her paired swords was now opposite Björn with his twin axes. She knew that he had garnered his reputation through a decade of street and paid fights; he was apparently unaware that hers had been honed not scouting during the war, but from fighting on the barricades in the streets of Yenisberg thirty years before. He was good, but unused to fighting someone accustomed to fighting for her life.

Patrick had settled comfortably opposite de Matin; he was older than the knight, but not by much. The other was wearing chainmail, which he wouldn't have minded, given that the knight was undoubtedly well trained if Violet had initially preferred him as her own opponent, but he *had* served as a squire fifteen years, with all the training and experience which that role had entailed.

“Do I know you?” de Matin asked while they were still circling each other warily.

“Patrick Marshall. Served under Sutton his last fifteen years,” he replied. He stretched his shoulders. “Or maybe you’re too young to remember that.”

“No, no... I remember Sutton. A lapdog to the de Coeurs, father and son,” the knight said.

“And you were afraid *you* might kill him?” Patrick called to Violet.

“Ha, just knock him around enough to get him to shut up and play nice,” she replied, both swords locked with Björn’s axes. She kicked him back to free them up.

“Fond of Sutton, were you?” de Matin said to Patrick.

“I did work for him for fifteen years.”

“Everyone thought he was getting sentimental, taking a boy of common stock for a squire,” the knight went on.

“Oh, I was never officially his squire,” Patrick said. The knight lunged, and he dodged it smoothly. “He told me for most of those fifteen years that I was just a stand-in until he found a new one to replace me.”

“Then why didn’t he?”

Patrick parried the knight’s next cut, and for a few minutes both were silent, focused on their opponent and the slick layer between the slush in the road. Patrick had recognized the make of the mail de Matin was wearing and was waiting for an opening for a thrust that would be able to penetrate the links. Violet was still fighting furiously with Björn – they had moved off the road a little, into the trees; he wasn’t sure at that point whether either was ‘winning’ or not.

His opening appeared, and he slipped his sword neatly in, just below the ribs. He was fairly sure the wound was not a fatal one, and he caught de Matin’s sword arm at the wrist, snapping it as he pulled his own sword back out to make sure the knight dropped his blade. Then he caught the knight – who was quite startled by the blow – by the collar and pulled him across the road next Brinn, whose wound Mavyn had mostly closed. Patrick planted the knight in the snow and shifted his eyes to Violet to see how she was doing.

“Make sure he doesn’t die, or she’ll be pissed off at me,” Patrick said to Mavyn, then headed into the woods towards the other fight. Andrew had collected and was unshrinking the other two horses; Cassandra had led their own small herd closer.

Violet was bleeding in several places when Patrick reached her; the northman was as well, but more seriously. Patrick didn’t dare interfere, though, not while she was bleeding. He wondered if the northman realized that bleeding her meant that she would not stop fighting until one of them was dead or he ceded.

“Are you going to stop, Violet?” he asked quietly.

“Damn’ well guarantee *he’s* not going to,” she snapped.

Björn lunged at Patrick, as well, trying to pull him into the fight, but Patrick backed off quickly, and Violet drew the northman’s attention back to her. It was getting darker, as well as colder, and Patrick headed back to the others as the fight dragged out. Violet would have the advantage in the dark.

Brinn had found his feet again and was standing guard next to the knight; Mavyn was tending a minor injury one of the horses had sustained when shrunk.

“So if she knew Björn was the more difficult fight, why did she not set up to take him initially?” Brinn asked Patrick.

“Probably because she knows Björn will have to be killed to get him to stop fighting,” Cassandra said.

“Yes, but does he know she’s the same way once she’s blooded?” Patrick said.

“Oh, I doubt it,” Cassandra said. “But I doubt he thinks she *can* kill him.”

Another ten minutes passed before the sound of fighting stopped, followed shortly by the eerie, unsteady cackle. Patrick settled back against a tree alongside the road.

“And we should probably give her ten or fifteen minutes to be sane again,” he said quietly. “So, Andrew. Did you find anything radiating enough magic to make your mouth water?”

“What, you mean this?” Andrew asked, holding up an oblong stone about eight inches in length, which glowed red from the inside brightly enough to illuminate about three feet around it.

“That would be it,” Forwythe said.

“Yes, now just don’t drop it,” Mavyn said. “I think my goddess will be disappointed if she has to go through the trouble of both finding a new follower *and* finding one capable of recreating the Psalter.”

“And just what do you intend to accomplish by all this?” de Marin asked bitterly. “Do you really think I’m the only one involved in this?”

“Oh, do you really think the king didn’t know what you were up to when you left Eberford this summer?” Forwythe asked. “He didn’t get where he is today through luck, you know.”

“I told you we should have killed them before we left, Richard,” Heloise said. “You were risking too much thinking that the fire Drake would take care of it.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’d have wanted to draw out Violet earlier, and have Mr. Marshall and his daughter sprung on you unawares,” Forwythe said. “You probably would never have gotten out of Maresbrook.”

Violet staggered back to the road after about ten minutes, after she’d cleaned her blades; Mavyn met her at the edge to tend her wounds.

“And so how are things?” she asked Patrick.

“Contained for the moment, I think,” he said. “And we have a creepy, glowing stone.”

“Let the priestess carry it,” Violet said tiredly.

“But...” Andrew stopped. “Why?”

“Because she’s got that whole ‘goddess watching over her’ thing going,” Violet said. “Any of the rest of us are random wyrm fodder if he gets impatient and shows up suddenly.”

“Wait, Vellaerinoth *knows*?” Heloise asked nervously. “You said he didn’t wake up!” she snapped at Forwythe.

“I didn’t wake him up,” Forwythe said.

“I did,” Cassandra said, “since Mavyn wasn’t talking at the time.”

“*You* did?” Heloise said, flabbergasted. “I thought you had more sense than that!”

“Oh, please,” Cassandra rolled her eyes. “That’s what you said when I started seeing Brinn, as well.”

“So, ahem,” Brinn broke in, “what are you going to do about Björn?”

Mavyn straightened from where she was working on Violet’s injuries. “Andrew,” she said, motioning him over. “Bring the tan book.”

“You gave him my books?” Heloise gasped at Cassandra as Mavyn and Andrew headed off into the trees in the direction of the body.

“Don’t even start on that,” Cassandra said. “Given that whole ‘leave them for the fire Drake to kill them’ thing? No, I don’t think we have much of anything to really discuss.”

Violet stood. “We’re going to want to get back to Flederheim tonight. It’s going to start

snowing again soon, I think.”

Mavyn and Andrew returned after a few minutes, and after securing their prisoners, the group headed back into town.

Once back at their inn in Flederheim, Violet settled at the bar while the other sat down to eat. They had disarmed de Matin, and Mavyn had adjusted the magic containment sphere around the sorceress to a more manageable size, so their prisoners were eating with them, as well. Brinn and Andrew were both somewhat awkwardly quiet in the presence of their former employers, but Cassandra was in elevated spirits. Patrick was watching Violet with some concern, but she had her back to them.

“You know *why* she’s brooding,” Mavyn said to him. “She’ll get past it.”

“Yes, it’s more a matter of how much she drinks tonight in the process,” Patrick said.

“Mm. I doubt this bar is well enough stocked for them to have something elven,” Mavyn said. “So you probably don’t have much to worry about there.”

“And why are you two so glum?” Patrick said to Brinn and Andrew.

“Oh, let’s see. We last got paid in... July,” Brinn said. “We’re going back to Eberford, where at least my unemployment is likely to be concretely confirmed. And my father would probably kill me if I set foot in his house at this point.”

“Oh, hush,” Cassandra said. “If nothing crops up immediately, we can just go stay with my aunt for a while.”

“You know if we do that she’ll try to have you keeping house for her for the next forty or fifty years,” Brinn said.

“Not likely. Aunt Lucinda hates children.”

“But—”

“Hush.”

Violet went up to bed with the others, but in the morning when de Matin woke, she was sitting awake at the foot of the door to the room.

“Did you really think we were going to try to run?” he asked. She flicked her eyes from the window to him.

“I really wasn’t going to take a chance on that,” she said.

Patrick stirred, and she got up and walked over to his bed.

“Keep an eye on them so I can sleep,” she said to him, then stretched out in the warm spot he was vacating. He sighed at her as she drifted off, then pulled the blankets over her and headed for the washstand.

“So what does a half-elf see in a washed-up failure?” de Matin said to Patrick.

“Great question,” Patrick said. “I’m not going to ask her.”

“Everyone in Sutton’s command died with him,” the knight continued, “except you and her.”

“Yep. And I was bleeding pretty steadily by the time she got done telling me to stay out of it, too, or it would likely have just been her.”

“It just looks so suspicious, running away from a battle, and then not returning to Eberford...”

“Oh, I didn’t run away,” Patrick said. “Violet beat the shit out of me to keep me out of it. And I don’t really remember the next three or four weeks after that, and then there didn’t seem much point in going back anyway. I never actually held a commission in the army; I just worked

for Sutton. And with him dead, there wasn't really a reason to go back."

"You seem much calmer about this situation than she does."

"That's because she's pissed off at you about pulling her into this."

"I didn't *make* her follow us across Genarvies."

"You just don't do something so glaringly underhanded in front of Violet and expect her not to look into it. I mean, my God, she's a woman and a scout. That kind of combination just about makes it impossible for her to ignore anything like that."

"She makes her own trouble."

"Well, of course. She's a woman. But she's not going to overlook a threat to a king she has invested so much time and effort in backing."

The others woke shortly; Patrick let Violet sleep until they were ready to go downstairs to eat. They were quieter at breakfast, knowing they were facing a day of riding through the bog.

"Are you walking or riding today?" Andrew asked Violet.

"Walking until we're on solid ground," she said. "If we go through the Bracken again, I'll walk that, as well."

"If?" Cassandra asked. "How patient do you think that wyrm is going to be about getting the stone back?"

"Hopefully not too bad, because it's going to be March by the time we're back to Eberford. I could probably get the stone back to him by June at the latest, but I don't know how Philip will want to handle that."

"Or you could take the stone back now, and probably catch up with us before we get back to Eberford," Andrew said.

"Go back to see the wyrm alone," Violet said flatly.

"The stone is a large part of the evidence regarding how severe the case is," Forwythe said. "It is probably better to have on hand to show the king directly. Given how dangerous the damned thing apparently is, I doubt he'll delay its return much."

Violet muttered something under her breath.

"Yes, yes, it does probably mean another trip across Genarvies and into Olloria for you," Forwythe said.

"Yes, such a terribly fun trip," Violet growled, "when the king of Genarvies already has a bounty on my head."

"I suppose setting Shallonis on him doesn't exactly fall under 'making amends,' either," Cassandra said.

"Another thing I didn't need to be reminded of," Violet said. "And word of that will probably hit Eberford by the time we get back."

"Wait – Shallonis?" Heloise said. "Shallonis has been dead for hundreds of years."

"Well, no," Violet said. "Shallonis has been lying in her lair, rotting alive, for hundreds of years. And I believe our priestess has already been demonstrated."

"And you were upset about *us* potentially angering a wyrm?" Heloise said.

"Stealing a lichstone to potentially use it is, in the long run, a far greater danger than an angry wyrm," Violet said. "Shallonis will go be angry at the house of Uther of Loothingal a while, recover some of her hoard from the treasury, and then go back to reigning over the northern towns of Genarvies, more likely than not. A lich... well, that would be a much bigger mess to deal with."

"Still, a much more capable king than this one," de Matin said offhandedly. Violet settled a steely gaze on him for several long moments as the table fell silent, then stood and

headed outside.

“You know, I really doubt you can goad her into killing you,” Patrick said. “You can try, but all you’ll really accomplish is making her prone to leave you with petty discomforts.”

They stopped briefly in Maresbrook for Patrick and Mavyn to more thoroughly pack to leave; Mavyn’s mother was incensed at her departure, and she spent the brief time Patrick and Mavyn were there to collect the younger woman’s things throwing objects – crockery, mostly – at Patrick.

“There are days it is far too obvious that you were young and stupid at the time of my conception,” Mavyn said to him as they were leaving the village the next morning.

“How so?” Patrick asked.

“Mostly my mother,” Mavyn said. “I mean, yes, she’s fairly well endowed for a woman, but beyond that, she seems to have a rather limited appeal. I still don’t understand why the man who married her did.”

“Oh, but the part involving me is easy to understand,” Patrick said. “I was fifteen and drunk, and she was available. I don’t really think it’s that uncommon of an occurrence.”

“No, not really,” Andrew said, “though most of us manage not to get a child out of the incident.”

“Are you sure about that?” Patrick asked. “By the time I found out, she was fifteen.”

“I’m rather surprised by the idea of you drunk,” Violet said. “I mean, in my case it’s just a deficiency in human-brewed spirits, but I’ve never seen you drink to excess.”

“Probably because I haven’t really since. It didn’t really mesh well with Sutton’s schedule.”

“What, up at four and on the road before it was light out?” Violet said. “Yeah. I think he and I had an argument about that once.”

“The ‘stop moving out before your scout has’ argument?”

“Yeah.”

“That was more than once, I think,” Patrick said. “He was fairly consistent in his habits.”

“Yeah, it never stopped being annoying, either.”

“What, you couldn’t just get up earlier?” Andrew said.

“Depends how much middle of the night looking around I was doing,” Violet said.

“Oh, is *that* why we had that neigeloup harassing us?”

“Maybe.”

“So, through the Bracken, or around?” Patrick asked.

“Given the situation and the weather, through,” Violet said. “The Bracken will be warmer.”

The lack of visible bonds meant that when they rode through the gates into Eberford in early March, Patrick and Violet on either side of the knight and Brinn and Forwythe similarly positioned around the sorceress, the city guards left them alone. Violet led them through the city streets to a row of stately brownstones, stopping outside one whose windows were dark.

“You said you had a flat,” Patrick said.

“Well, it basically is,” she said. After a moment she continued up the street and cut down an alleyway, leading them to the yard in back of the house she had stopped before. “The stable may not accommodate all of them,” she said to Andrew, who was eyeing it.

“We passed a livery a few blocks back,” he said. “I can see what fits.”

“I should go report in,” Forwythe said. “I will drop by in the morning and let you know how that goes.”

“All right,” Violet nodded. She headed up the back steps to the kitchen entrance, pulling a note off the door as she unlocked it to let the others inside. She opened it while fumbling for a match to light one of the lamps. “Well, damn,” she said after a moment.

“What?” Patrick asked.

“My housekeeper quit again.”

“Maybe because you’re never here?” Cassandra said.

“Probably. Well, if you and Brinn want to set up in those rooms till we get this sorted out, I’ll go see what kind of space I have available upstairs for the rest of you.”

She locked de Marin and Heloise in a windowless guest room on the second floor, then found space for Mavyn, earmarked a room for Andrew, and finally led Patrick upstairs to the third-floor rooms she generally used for herself.

“You’re planning to keep them all here, aren’t you?” he said quietly as he set down his things where she directed.

“Until this is sorted out,” she shrugged. “If work doesn’t turn up for them immediately, I would be reluctant to turn them out.”

“You know most people leave the upper floor to the servants,” Patrick said.

“Most people here don’t grow up in dwellings built into trees, either,” Violet said. “I get antsy sleeping too close to the ground.”

He caught her around the waist to pull her close. “You’re assuming they’ll be let entirely off the hook.”

“Well, they *did* try to kill them. That should make it plain enough that they were not in on the conspiracy. So.”

“I hope you are not going to be too sorely disappointed in that regard.”

She kissed him lightly. “I’m worried less about them than about whether your return to Eberford will have unexpected consequences.”

“Oh.”

“I’m going to go make sure Cassandra and Brinn are finding the rooms all right,” she said, slipping out of his grasp and heading downstairs.

The house had never been anything more than a flat in her mind – she had rarely used more than the upper floor herself, and had furnished the other rooms mostly in hope that her mother might one day take the hint and come to stay for a while. But, having just managed accommodations for six other people beyond Patrick, she had to admit that it was not a particularly small house. Cassandra was taking stock of the pantry when Violet got back to the kitchen.

“So, are you *looking* for a housekeeper, then?” Cassandra asked, frowning at the mostly empty shelves she was finding.

“Well, yes, but I am not about to ask a woman of your standing to take it upon herself,” Violet said. “With people here, I’m going to need maids on staff, as well, and the horses—”

“Oh, please, Andrew would be hurt if you took that away from him,” Cassandra said.

“He might be fascinated with the magic, but he *loves* the horses. They’re like children to him.”

“I don’t have any food here, do I?” Violet said.

“You’ve been gone almost eight months, so... no.”

“Ugh.”

Patrick came back downstairs, and she shifted her eyes to him.

“So, make sure our unwelcome guests don’t escape,” she said to him, “and I’m going to go bring back dinner from somewhere.”

“Do you need someone to help carry?” Cassandra asked. “I can lend you Brinn.”

“Thanks,” Brinn said flatly, standing in the doorway to the hall that led to the housekeeper’s quarters.

“You could stay here and dust,” Cassandra said archly to him.

“Fine, fine.”

Patrick caught Violet’s gaze, and she walked over to him and kissed him again.

“Don’t start making concrete plans until you know how things are going to turn out,” he said to her.

“Oh, then what are you?” Violet asked.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, yeah. Check on them to make sure they don’t manage to kill themselves, hm?” she said. “We should be back shortly.”

March was warmer than February had been, but there was still a layer of snow and slush on the streets. Violet headed for a small delicatessen a few blocks over with Brinn trailing in her wake.

“And so why are you so glum again?” Violet asked, stopping briefly to wait for him to catch up.

“Because Cassandra deserves better than keeping house for someone,” he said.

“Well, yes. Although she’d likely be keeping house for you regardless, no?” Violet said. “I would imagine that you will find work soon enough, but until then, with her expecting a child in a few short months, I’m not going to say no if you want to stay a while. And I will be looking for a housekeeper.”

“She seems like she *wants* to, though,” Brinn said tiredly. “And I don’t understand that.”

“Hm. After gallivanting across three countries in the dead of winter and coming face to face with two wyrms, I could understand a woman wanting to just stay in one place for a while. Especially one who’s going to be tending to the demands of a very insistent child very soon.”

“Oh.”

“But if you want to go, I do understand. The need to have one’s own space, and such. The little apartment there will at least give you some privacy together, if not the same kind of space the second floor rooms have.” She stopped across the street from the delicatessen, waiting for the traffic to clear some. “And if you do find a new knight to work for and end up heading out all over and not want to have to maintain a place, she would be welcome, you know. It’s not like *I’m* ever home, which is probably apparent by now.”

“It’s more that... well... she *really* can’t cook.”

“Ha. I will keep that in mind. Tomorrow, if an appointment with Philip has to wait, two maids and a cook, at the least.”

Violet spent generously at the delicatessen, not sure how many people she’d be feeding for how long and uncertain as to the prospects of hiring a cook or having time to actually do serious market shopping herself. She and Brinn ran into Andrew on the way back; he had taken some of the horses to the livery, and he took a few of the packages to help carry them.

“What is all this?” Andrew asked.

“Supper. And possibly breakfast and lunch tomorrow,” Violet said. “I’ve been gone eight months. There is no food there, really. Were you even able to bed down the horses?”

“Well, better than nothing,” he said.

“If you have nothing better to do tomorrow, feel free to have supplies for them delivered. I don’t know how long this will take to get sorted out, and I’d rather have the horses taken care of than err on the side of not very long.”

Forwythe showed up in the middle of the morning the next day, and Violet settled him in the parlor.

“Where’s your other half?” he asked as she took a seat near the front window.

“I’ve been told I am... likely inept at hiring household staff, so he and Cassandra and Brinn are out looking,” she said. “So how bad are things here?”

“Well, Shallonis kept the king of Genarvies pinned in his capital for three weeks before cooling off and taking tribute. And so his ambassadors here have been rather emphatically demanding your head on a platter apparently for the past several weeks. The king suggests you wait three or four days yet before appearing for an audience so you can get a handle on the situation before you walk in there.”

“Ugh. I suppose he won’t take de Matin and the lady off my hands yet, then, either?”

“He wants to see you first.”

“Alone?”

“He didn’t specify.” He paused. “I didn’t actually mention him, if that’s what you’re thinking of.”

“Alone, then. I’d feel better with him keeping an eye on things here, anyway.”

“De Matin has allies yet in the city.”

“All the more reason to have Patrick here.”

“If he’s as much like his father as he seems to be, the king may develop plans for him, you know,” Forwythe said.

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with the marriage, Patrick’s occupation is really immaterial. I’d rather he do something he enjoy, and if Philip offers him something he wants to do, that’s fine with me.” Her eyes flitted briefly out the window. “If he sends us to opposite sides of the kingdom for extended periods of time, though, there may be some resultant grumpiness.”

“He knows about the relation, you know.”

Violet shrugged slightly. “That doesn’t really change much. I’m still determined to stay out of things if a war of succession ensues.”

“Even if it’s not between his sons?”

She shifted her eyes back to him. “We’ll see.”

Violet was restless rather quickly – the weather was getting warmer, and since she was uncomfortable leaving the knight and the sorceress in the house without at least two of her, Patrick, and Mavyn there, she spent more of the next several days inside than she might have otherwise. With a cook and maids, the house at least did not suffer under her meager housekeeping skills, and Cassandra was evidently working hard on Brinn to just stay there if the situation proved amendable. Patrick was similarly restless, Violet realized after a few days, but not so much to be moving as to just have something to do.

“So are you going to confess you fell into the blacksmithing because it was available, and you could, and you had nothing else to do?” she asked him early in the afternoon as she was digging through her closet for something moderately formal to wear to go see the king.

“Having no other way to make a living at the time was also a large part of it,” he said.

“You know once this is settled that if he doesn’t have anything he wants me to do, I’m going to drag you off somewhere for a while so I don’t get bored.”

“Or he’s going to send you to return that lichstone, and I’ll likely go with you if you don’t need to be moving too terribly fast and sneakily,” Patrick said.

“Erg. I’m inclined to take Mavyn if she’ll go if that’s the case,” Violet said, shaking out a suede jerkin that she hadn’t worn in several years. “I can’t really think rationally around a wurm, and I’d be more comfortable with her there.”

“We’ll see. I think she’s been looking for somewhere to start a proper shrine.”

“Yeah.” She pulled the jerkin on. “I may be back this evening; he may keep me through supper. I don’t know.”

“You’re not going to give me the ‘don’t wait up’ speech, are you?”

“Oh, hell, no. I don’t care if you sit up,” Violet said. “You’re going to worry regardless. By all means, go to bed if you want to sleep, but if you’re more comfortable staying up, I’m not going to tell you not to.”

She pulled a pair of boots out of the closet that Patrick could have sworn he’d seen before. They were cut similarly to cavalry boots, except the heel, which was of a walking design. She sat down to pull them on.

“I thought you said you got new boots,” Patrick said.

“I did. You saw them,” Violet said, her tone teasingly defensive. “But Genarvies’ ambassadors have been harassing him about me. I have something of an image to maintain.”

She stood again once the boots were on to buckle on her swords; Patrick stood to pull her close.

“You’re not so foolish yet as to not bail on the situation if things go horribly awry, right?” he asked. She kissed him.

“I’ll be coming home tonight one way or the other,” she said. “Philip is younger than I am, you know. And he apparently knows about the relation. So I don’t think nonverbally reiterating that I am not and have never been either a threat to or a candidate for his position would be a bad move.”

“I am going to say ‘be careful’ a lot.”

“I know.” She gave him a squeeze and kissed him again. “I should get going or he will end up keeping me later.”

“All right.”

Mavyn was waiting for her at the second floor landing as Violet and Patrick came down the stairs; the younger woman had a small bundle in her hands.

“You may want to take this,” she said to Violet.

“That’s not—”

“Yes, it is. You may not have to reveal its presence, but if you need it to prove the seriousness of the situation, you had better have it on hand.”

Violet sighed slightly. “You know, with my luck I’ll just drop it.”

Mavyn held up a small leather bag with a long shoulder strap. “I do think ahead.”

The lichstone had been wrapped in layers – velvet on the inside, then a blanket of unspun wool, then a linen shroud tied about it – and Mavyn slipped it into the bag before handing it to Violet.

Patrick accompanied her all the way to the cloak room to see her off, and then she was alone, outside on the front steps of the brownstone, the royal residence a half-mile walk. She could see parts of the castle from where she stood, depending on the angle of the street and the

height of the buildings at any particular point. The houses closer to the castle were larger, more ornate, on larger plots of ground, and the street traffic became much less busy, much less congested, as most of the area was taken up by the residences of the city's wealthy elite and various nobles from around Pellevaera who maintained a second home in the capital. She was drawing stares from the coaches as she got closer.

The castle guards recognized her – she had not been a frequent visitor in the past few years, but between the hair and the ears, she was generally hard to forget. They gave her only a very brief, almost teasing, hassle to get through the main gate, and then left her to show herself to the king's court.

The king was in conference with several men when Violet arrived; she held a finger to her lips before the royal guards at the door could announce her, then slipped in to stand silently in the shadows of one of the columns along the side of the room. It was an old game between her and the king – how long it would take him to notice her. The ambassadors from Genarvies apparently had not; she could hear them grumbling about her a few yards away.

The stately, ornate clock that stood against one of the columns on the other side of the room, where the king could easily read it from his seat, had counted close to thirty minutes before his eyes fell on her. He stood, eliciting silence from the rest of the room, and Violet melted back out of the shadows of her column and moved to kneel before him, laying both her blades, unsheathed, at his feet.

“How long had you been there?” he asked suspiciously.

“Your clock says twenty-eight minutes,” she replied without lifting her head.

“God damn it,” he swore. “I cannot for the life of me get it under twenty-five minutes.”

The ambassadors from Genarvies had stood when they saw her, but for the moment the king ignored their still silent objections.

“Well,” he said to Violet instead, “I understand that you have been doing work for me without me realizing it again.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So I got a letter from your mother,” he said, sitting back down. Violet cringed.

“I'm sorry?” she hazarded.

“No, no... it was quite amusing,” he said, pulling a creased sheet of parchment from an inner pocket. “There are all the usual salutations, and then, ‘My only daughter, of the tender age of sixty-three – sixty-four by the time this reaches you, I suppose – may soon be marrying and granting me my fondest desire, grandchildren.’”

“Oh, God,” Violet muttered, closing her eyes tightly. The king read on.

“‘She is unlikely, however, to arrange for a traditional elven ceremony with a priestess of Selene, given the shortage of priestesses of the cult outside the elven wood. I know that she has done work for you in the past, and given the extenuating circumstances and the likelihood that I will not hear of the arrangements in time to actually assist with them, I would consider it the greatest favor if you could perform the anticipated ceremony.’ And then she goes on for a while about such things.”

“A thousand miles, and she still manages to sink her teeth into it,” Violet muttered to herself.

“And so,” the king said, leaning forward on one arm towards her, “I have only one question at this point, since I thought you had given up on human men decades ago. And it is, of course, *who?*”

“Patrick Marshall,” she answered without looking up. He sat back, repeating the name to

himself, brow furrowed as he tried to recall why it was familiar.

“Wait – Jasper Sutton’s—” He caught himself and stopped. “You *are* going to set a date and time for this convenient for your mother so that your grandmother does not become involved?”

Violet’s eyes flicked briefly to where she had noticed Ialar standing among the people around the edges of the room. “Well, yes. But it may be a while yet.” She paused. “My God, I would never intentionally set my grandmother on an *enemy*, much less my king. I’m not *that* crazy.”

“So I’m assuming you’ve noticed how angry at you the ambassadors from Genarvies are,” he said.

“That was, I suppose, inevitable, sir,” Violet said more quietly.

“Was it?”

She was silent a moment, debating how publicly she wanted to explain herself, but reached for and pulled out the bundled lichstone anyway. She set it down gingerly, then carefully undid the strings holding the wrappings around it. Once the stone was unwrapped enough to be visible, she heard Forwythe’s muttered oath, though he was standing somewhere out of her sight. There were several sorcerers present on the court, however, and they audibly gasped.

“This is the Lichstone of Herodius,” Violet said quietly. “It was stolen from Vellaerinoth’s hoard sometime around the end of November. This is what I pursued back across Genarvies from Olloria, and what Shallonis was awakened to help catch up with. Those that plotted it would have had a lich on Pellevaera’s throne.”

“Awoke a wyrm just for that?” one of the ambassadors snapped, and Violet fixed her eyes on him before she spoke.

“Had we not gone to Vellaerinoth’s lair and learned that the stone was already gone, when he had awoken in the spring and discovered its absence, he would have torn apart Olloria and Genarvies in looking for it, and then there would have a lich on the throne of Pellevaera, and it took the aid of four wyrms to overthrow Herodius as a lich. And there were only two known living wyrms in the general area before Vellaerinoth suggested we seek out Shallonis. And since a lich’s only ambition is power, with the dragon’s anger likely having mauled the two countries to the west, it would have been poised to move that way.”

The room was quiet again for a while; the king knew Violet well enough to know she would be dangerous when angry. She had fixed her eyes on the stone again, her stomach in knots; she knew that if it were destroyed, everything would be over very quickly, and she *really* didn’t want that.

“So who is the ‘we’?” the king asked her finally.

“Me, Patrick Marshall, his daughter, and the three servants that had been left to be killed by a fire Drake.”

“Oh, so that dragon mauling a village out on the border was related to all this,” he said.

“That was the point at which we realized that we had unwittingly been pulled into the middle of someone else’s plot,” Violet acknowledged.

“And you didn’t just come tell me?”

“Well, it took two months to get there from here. Just bailing and letting someone else do the follow-up investigating seemed negligent.”

“I suppose that is what I’m paying you for, isn’t it?” He stood again. “All right, enough with the public raking-over-the-coals. Jervis,” he said to his secretary, “I’ll be in my study if

there are any more emergencies.”

He motioned for Violet to follow, and she sheathed her swords and carefully rebundled the lichstone and returned it to its bag before following him out of the room. She fell in beside him as they walked through the back corridors.

“So I’m told your mother finally confessed your father to you,” he said.

“‘Finally’ is a good term for it,” Violet agreed.

“I was surprised he didn’t spill the beans himself, so to speak, when you first showed up out here.”

“Hm, well. When I first came here I was fresh off getting into trouble in both Yenisberg and Olloria. Hiring me was one thing, but confessing relation to me at that point would have been politically messy.”

“Not even to you?”

Violet shrugged slightly. “Sutton never told Patrick, either.”

“I thought you didn’t know where he was.”

“I didn’t. I never bothered looking for him after he left – we didn’t exactly part on good terms. This trip just happened to land us in the village he’d ended up in. Apparently he’d been through when he was fifteen, shortly after he started working for Sutton, and had left a daughter there.”

“You seem to end up working with a lot of men with that failing.”

“If you’re including yourself in that list, it’s news to me,” Violet said.

“No, no. I’ve avoided it. But your father, Sutton, and this one you’re apparently going to marry...”

“I can’t believe she wrote you about it,” Violet said, wincing again.

“The cousin your grandmother sent out here brought it back with him. He seemed confident you had the situation under control.”

“Heh. Well, there’s still a wyrm waiting for the return of this stone.”

“Oh, he wants it back?”

“Using it turns someone into a lich, and the process is such that it overwhelms whatever is left of that person after death and turns them into a creature that feeds on power. Destroying a lichstone generally makes it explode.”

“Explode?”

“That’s what made the Yndar Crater.”

“The – holy hell.”

“Yeah. My palms are sweating with nerves that I’ll drop it or something.”

“So I’m told you have de Matin under house arrest.”

“Yes, sir.”

He opened the door to his study; Violet settled by one of the windows after he had sat down.

“You don’t trust Forwythe,” the king said.

“Well, no, but that’s just because he comes across as creepy,” Violet said. “He’s a little... over-trained, I guess.”

“Ha. Money well spent, I suppose. Annette was mad as hell about it, but she’d have turned him into a fop if I’d left her alone about it.” He pulled a stack of papers out of one of his desk drawers and flipped through it. “Hm. Pursued them across Genarvies, cut through the elven wood, apparently met with Vellaerinoth – priestess of Aurora?”

“Mavyn Apwyn, Patrick’s daughter,” Violet nodded.

“I thought that was a dead elven goddess,” he said.

“Well... I was under the impression gods don’t actually die,” Violet said. “She’s most certainly a priestess of someone, because she can manipulate healing magic. And she can actually sing from Aurora’s Psalter, so I’m inclined to believe the identity.”

“So then you find out that your quarry has been sped up, and you start back. Ran across Forwythe in Yenisberg, the rest of the group took him with them when they came through, a village called Hursten... And then the wyrm, a flight, an ambush, and the trip back. So what do you have to add beyond what Forwythe has told me?”

Violet shrugged slightly. “The Oracle in the elven wood was having premonitions regarding Vellaerinoth for several weeks before we got there. I... My memory is muddy so far as the meetings with the wyrms. Shallonis had been rotting alive in her lair for over six hundred years.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know *that* much about wyrms. Mavyn could probably give you the technical details.”

He sat back, quiet a while, sipping a glass of brandy and watching the fire.

“A son of Jasper Sutton,” he said finally, “and John de Coeur’s oldest child. That is going to make some people nervous.”

“How many people really know?” Violet asked. “Patrick has never been open about it, and, my God, I’ve known for maybe four months. It doesn’t *have* to be an issue.”

“No? Do you know just how often someone grumbles about the nature of our relationship?” he asked. “Some days I think the only one who really believes me is Irene, and she doesn’t even know your paternity.”

“I’d guess that would be because it’s been obvious to her that the nuances other people expect to be there aren’t,” Violet shrugged. “Besides, I’d imagine a woman like Irene doesn’t really have to worry about her husband’s fidelity.”

“Are you referring to her aging like an elf, or her viselike grip on my free will?” the king said flatly. Violet laughed.

“You understand exactly what I mean, then,” she said. She sobered again quickly. “I don’t know what all he told you. From what I gathered on this trip, de Marin was looking for support among the wealthier men in Genarvies to fund another war against you. I haven’t heard a name regarding who he intended the lichstone for, but there’s one very obvious one that comes to mind. So he’s been plotting against you – the estimate I got was a year and a half by the time he hit the border of Genarvies – and set things up to try to kill the people who had been working for him and Heloise Fontagne for the past six or eight years so they couldn’t tell anyone what little they knew about it.”

“The fire Drake seems like a rather roundabout way to do it, though,” the king said.

“Yes, and not particularly effective, since he unwittingly walked himself into the town with someone like Patrick and a priestess of a level of favor like Mavyn. Heloise was actually chiding him about it after we caught up with them.”

“Ha. That poor woman has been hanging on to him so desperately, and he goes and pulls her into something like this.”

“Can’t say I share her taste in men.”

“No? He was a favorite among the girls here.”

“Oh, he pissed me off well enough in two months of getting him to the border that if he *had* actually just been having trouble with the fire Drake like he apparently expected us to believe,

I'd have been inclined to let the thing kill him before dealing with it."

"You? Really? I have never heard you advocate someone's death, even Greneur's."

"Well, de Matin falls into that category of men who sees women as objects, not individuals."

"Ah. So he's not only a traitor, but he managed to uncover your most consistent pet-peeve, as well."

"That, and traveling a thousand miles each way in winter. And then there was the incident with the troll, and the neigeloup, and the bounty hunter. Not to mention coming face to face with not one but two wyrms. So while I'm unlikely to kill him myself, I'm not particularly disposed to saving his life right now, either." She paused. "A *favorite* among the girls here? How the hell did he manage that? After forcing himself on Heloise's maid for years, I'd think maybe some of that sleaze would have become more apparent."

"Heloise's maid?" His brow furrowed. "I'm not familiar with her offhand."

"She and de Matin's squire have been something of a couple for several years now, apparently. He is bitter and disillusioned and such, after working for a man like that for so long, especially since he seems to have gone into it because of his impressions of the knighthood as a child."

"Sutton?" the king guessed.

"Basically. The youngest son of Martin de Cheval. He is in a similar state of mind to what Patrick was when the war ended for him, I think, but without the added grief of the death of someone like Sutton."

"You give me the impression you like the servants far better than de Matin and his associates."

"The squire is cut from a similar cloth as Sutton. The maid I feel bad for – expecting their first child, and he is not optimistic about finding enough work again to even afford to formalize their relationship, much less support her. And then there's the groom, who apparently has a talent for magic, but is unlikely to ever get into the Academy. So, yes, not a bad a lot."

"Projects," he said, almost accusingly. "My God, some days you and Annette are too alike."

"Wait, what?"

"Projects. People you run into that you want to *fix*."

"Fix? But there's nothing wrong with them that steady employment isn't the entire solution for," Violet said. He just shrugged slightly, quiet again a while as he watched the fire.

"So I suppose I should take de Matin and his lady off your hands," he said.

"It would be appreciated. You do have more space, at least."

"I am somewhat surprised that you've managed to keep a sorceress of Heloise Fontagne's skill captive."

"The priestess has a sort of invisible bubble around her that keeps magic from getting in or out."

"Ah." He stood and walked over to her. "I'm curious about this son of Sutton's now, if you've taken such an interest in him."

"I'm not comfortable leaving de Matin and the lady there without either me or him there to deal with any problems," Violet said.

"And then there's the lichstone." He frowned slightly, looking at the bag she carried. "He would risk angering a wyrm to overthrow me. And the wyrm is aware of the situation?"

"I think so," Violet said. "I wasn't entirely lucid during the conversation."

“I suppose it would be difficult for anyone to be. And with Genarvies so angry at you, having someone take it back whom I trust to get it back there is going to be... awkward.”

“I would worry less about getting it through Shallonis’s territory than me crossing the Ollorian border anywhere outside the elven wood,” Violet said. “Between Shallonis and Yenisberg, I’d imagine the king is both sore about and cautious of his northern lands. So I could probably slip through there easily enough. I could go further north, through the troll country, but getting into Olloria along that border might be problematic for me.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that you can work something out to get it back. It’s dealing with the diplomatic fallout that’s the conundrum.”

“What part of ‘angry wurm’ do people not understand?” Violet asked.

“Some people think a wurm is all exaggeration,” the king shrugged.

“Ugh. But anyway, whenever you want me to head back with it, I can go. I suppose you have other people available who could, though.”

“Yes, but I don’t think most of them would understand just how dangerous it is.”

She nodded slightly.

“So, I’ll send a troop over tomorrow to collect the troublemakers. If you want to accompany them and bring your friend with you, we can probably make some more concrete arrangements that you can take your mother the details of on the trip out there.”

Violet sighed slightly. “At least she just wrote you and didn’t think to ship a priestess out here instead.”

“You know, I am inclined to reveal your paternity at this point.”

“That’s up to you,” she shrugged.

“So Irene and I have a running wager regarding whether or not a skirt will be involved in your wedding.”

Violet laughed again. “The last time I wore skirts regularly, I ran into the trouble I had in Olloria. But I do *like* Patrick. So we’ll see what I can come up with.”

The others were in the middle of supper when Violet got back to the house; she went upstairs first to put the lichstone down safely and change into other clothes before heading down to the dining room. They fell quiet when she settled into the open seat next to Patrick.

“Did I miss something?” she asked, sitting back tiredly after the cook brought her out a plate.

“Forwythe stopped by a little bit ago,” Patrick said. “He was uncomfortable about the stone’s presence becoming public.”

“Ah, that. Well, I didn’t leave it there.”

“The concern was more that someone may try to acquire it now that they know it’s in the city.”

She flicked her eyes to him briefly. “Oh, they damn’ well better know not to assault a woman’s home,” she said. “It may not be apparent, but this place *has* been modified for defense.”

“Oh, so it’s not my imagination that the third floor can be locked down?”

“Are you really that paranoid?” Brinn asked.

“After the problems I had in Olloria, I knew better than to leave my back exposed when I landed in the level of Pellevaera’s society that I did,” Violet said. “So I’ve taken some precautions, yes.”

“You’ve still never explained that,” Andrew said.

“What makes you think I’m going to?” Violet asked. “Given how many people have asked me whether I think it’s safe for me to cross the border there, I’m wondering whether it *should* be explained, or if I should continue my efforts for it to be forgotten.”

“Yes, yes, enough of that,” Cassandra said impatiently. “Are we going to be left alone to pick up the pieces and start over, or are they going to be looking for us as accomplices?”

“I *think* you all are going to be left alone,” Violet said. “Philip does panic occasionally with uncomfortable consequences, but I think he’s got enough tendrils in this feeding him information that he’s going to continue to act sensibly about it all.”

“Uncomfortable consequences?” Brinn said. “That’s a rather mild way of putting six weeks in the dungeons.”

“Six weeks?” Patrick exclaimed, and Violet winced slightly.

“It really wasn’t as bad as it sounds,” she said. “He wasn’t here when I got back, and I wasn’t entirely coherent at the time, anyway.”

“And the stone?” Mavyn asked.

“Is going back as soon as possible,” Violet said. “Explaining that a similar object made the Yndar Crater removes most of the allure it might have to sensible people.”

“I suppose it might. Most people might not realize the effort needed to destroy one, but at the same time, it’s not impossible for a short drop to fracture it enough to explode,” the younger woman nodded.

“And the... other guests?” Brinn asked.

“He’s sending people for them tomorrow,” Violet said. “Wanted me to come with them, as well. And possibly Patrick.”

“Dare I ask what for?” Patrick asked.

“Mother wrote to him,” Violet said with a grimace. “After I told her she wasn’t why I wasn’t living nearer the wood, too. And then she goes and does something so blatantly... mother-like.”

“Wait – wrote him about what?”

“The possible wedding.”

“Oh,” he said in a small voice.

“Yes, exactly. Kind of throws the idea of a small, intimate affair in the front parlor out the window. So tomorrow I suppose we’ll see how much of that can be recovered. Though he’s apparently not likely to keep *me* a secret now that I know, so I don’t know if that’s going to be an issue, either.”

“I don’t know that you would be that shocking a revelation,” Patrick said.

“No?”

“I had heard speculation about it before.”

“Ha, everyone *but* me seemed to have an idea of it,” she said.

“We still have no idea what you’re talking about,” Andrew offered.

“Her father was John de Coeur,” Cassandra said without looking up from her plate. He frowned at her.

“Well, *some* of us didn’t know,” he said sullenly. “And how do you *know* all this?”

“Because I pay attention,” she said archly. “And the Lady Annette has the same violet eyes.”

“Do you know what happened with her in Olloria, then?”

“No,” Cassandra said. “It’s far enough away that the gossip doesn’t leak over that often.”

“Oh, it’s been mentioned here, at least in some circles,” Violet said. “Just probably not in

the past twenty-five years or so.”

“Yes, well, I’m not *that* old, either,” Cassandra said wryly.

“So, any excitement besides Forwythe worrying about the stone?” Violet asked.

Cassandra frowned slightly.

“Well, my father has apparently heard that I am back in the city,” she said. “I’m not really inclined to talk to him at this point, either.”

“You’re his only child,” Brinn objected.

“Oh, and shipping me off to boarding school, then finishing school, and then to working for the... *lady* is such a wonderfully endearing chain of events,” Cassandra said flatly. “My God, he owns a third of the city’s mercantile shipping interests. He could have easily afforded to marry me off, and he wouldn’t even put forth that effort. So, no, I’m not inclined to see him.”

“Brinn, we’ve discussed the efficacy of arguing with a pregnant woman already,” Andrew said tiredly. “You know you’re not going to get anywhere. Besides, you’ve already killed what chance you had at him not paying to have you killed with the whole grandchild before a wedding thing.”

“You’re really not helping,” Brinn said to him.

“He does have a point, though,” Patrick said. “Introducing yourself may, at this point, be unhealthy for the next few... we’ll go with decades.”

“Oh, please,” Cassandra rolled her eyes. “You act as though this wasn’t my own doing. It took me long enough to get this much out of him.”

“You’ve never been threatened with castration by a sorceress, then,” Brinn muttered. “After her, the idea of your father is *really* not particularly intimidating.”

“Besides that he’s the richest man in the city who does not have a coat of arms, and that he’s despised me since I was born?” she said. “The deck was stacked against you before you ever met me, in that regard, dear. So no, not going to meet him any time soon. *Maybe* if it’s a boy, he’ll eventually come around, but not likely. I don’t anticipate anything from him.”

“Am I really the only one here who does not have family problems?” Andrew asked.

“Oh, that just means that your children will be hellions,” Cassandra said. He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Thanks.”

The next morning Violet took similar care with regards to her clothing as she had the day before, but Patrick noted when he got up that several subtle pieces of mostly leather armor made its way into her outfit this time.

“Expecting trouble?” he asked.

“Not really, but I’m not taking chances.”

“Expecting them to make an effort at acquiring the stone?”

“Oh, I’m not risking that. It’s staying here, with Mavyn, and the bag she had for it is going with me to make its location at least a little ambiguous. And, of course, they can’t be certain that I didn’t leave it with Philip,” she said.

“Are we walking or riding?” he asked.

“Riding. I asked Andrew to retrieve their horses. Do you remember Hank Andover?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I’m half expecting that’s who Philip will be sending. He’s moved up within the royal guard a bit since the war.”

She finished off the outfit with her swords again, and she and Patrick headed downstairs

to the front hall to wait for the troop to arrive.

“So this is basically what you do for him nowadays?” Patrick asked.

“What?”

“The occasional crisis control.”

“Pretty much.”

“And do *I* ever get to find out what you did in Olloria to cause you so much trouble?”

“Heh.” She glanced back up the hallway to gauge how alone they were at the moment.

“Told the crown prince I wouldn’t marry him, and ended up backing it up with a blade. So they weren’t happy.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So border crossings outside the wood are unlikely to go smoothly, I suppose.” She leaned over closer and gave him a squeeze. “I fell in love with you years ago, hon. Don’t take that as a threat to your well-being.”

“No, no. Just a little intimidating, sometimes, being involved with a woman whose social circles are so high up.”

“It’s the ears. Some humans are so fascinated with the elf blood that it opens doors that wouldn’t without it.”

“Huh. For me it’s always been the hair.”

“Well, at least you like it. It’s always been a pain for me – it stands out, and it’s got a mind of its own.”

A heavy rap at the door drew Violet’s attention, and she answered it with a hand on one sword hilt.

“Captain,” the soldier outside saluted her. “We’ve come to relieve you of the prisoners in your custody.”

She looked past him at an officer on a horse in the street yet. “Hank, you wuss, you *can* come to the door yourself.”

“And get pushed down the stairs again?” he retorted. “No, thank you.”

“We’ll be right out,” Violet said, and she motioned for Patrick to follow her up the stairs. She unlocked the second-floor room where the knight and the sorceress had been sequestered.

“Good news,” she announced to them, “you don’t have to stay here any longer.”

“I suppose that translates to, ‘You’re being transferred to the royal dungeons,’” de Matin said flatly.

“Hey, I don’t know where he’ll put you up there,” Violet said, “and that’s really none of my concern, so much as getting you out of my house and freeing up the room. So scoot; the horses are waiting.”

Violet and Patrick escorted them back downstairs to the waiting troop, and Hank Andover, knight-captain of the royal guards, dismounted briefly to greet Violet and Patrick while his men oversaw securing the two prisoners on their horses.

“You took your damned time,” he said to Violet.

“About what?” she asked, taking the reins of her horse from Andrew.

“Him,” Hank said with a nod at Patrick. “Sutton was working hard enough to fix you up before he died. Would have been a damned shame if it had all been for nothing.”

Violet raised a brow at him. “That’s jumping to an awful lot of conclusions.”

“Hey, you’re not the only one who ever went out boozing with him,” Hank said.

“Sure, make it sound as though I’m entirely inept at wooing a woman,” Patrick muttered.

“Oh, I know you were putting enough effort of your own into it. But of course, half of us

were moony eyed about her back then,” Hank grinned. “Sutton just wasn’t taking chances.”

“Prisoners are secured and ready to move out,” one of the soldiers reported with another salute.

“All right, boys,” Hank said. “Let’s get going.”

Violet and Patrick rode behind the troop through the city; they didn’t take the most direct route back, since staying in formation mostly required them to stay on the major streets.

“So do you think Sutton knew about your parentage?” Patrick asked.

“Given that he knew my name without being introduced? Probably. God, for all I know, there may have been a whole ‘look out for my daughter’ thing going on with how close he and the previous king were.” She frowned slightly. “I do hope that they’re not all just humoring me and I’m not actually considered inept.”

“Hon, you managed to kill a troll by yourself, and move almost twice as fast on foot as the average horse,” Patrick said. “If anything, I’d imagine the relationship just makes you easier to trust with the delicate work.”

“Enh.”

“Besides, trying to fix up a friend’s daughter with one’s son isn’t generally considered looking out for the daughter.”

“Ha. I don’t know about that. I’m rather fond of you.” She edged her horse closer to reach over and give his arm a squeeze. “So, looking forward to another trip with Genarvies angry at me?”

“No. I’ll go with you if I won’t slow you down to much, but I’m going to worry anyway.”

“Mm. I might at least have official paperwork this time, so at the most there might be an uncomfortable eviction from the country. And then we’d have to take it through troll country. But I think with Shallonis awake, we may be undisturbed on that road.”

He nodded slightly, his eyes fixed on the castle as they approached.

“What?” she asked.

“Never liked that barbican,” he said offhandedly. “Bad approach angle from a defensive point of view.”

“Heh.” She reached over to touch his arm again while they waited for the gates to open. “Hopefully we’ll never have to deal with that.”

“Yeah.”

They waited in the courtyard until a page led them up to a small sitting room. Patrick put his arm around her while they were waiting on the divan; Violet leaned over and kissed his cheek, and he turned his head to kiss her.

“Yes, yes,” a voice said impatiently from the doorway, “this is why the wedding arrangements are getting worked out *before* you go running off again.”

Patrick was blushing brightly as they both stood to bow to the king.

“The ambassadors from Genarvies left this morning,” he said as they resettled on the divan after he’d seated himself. “I wouldn’t put it beneath him to try to take the stone from you on your way there.”

“Enh. I’ll need to buy a better horse, then,” Violet said.

“You move faster than a horse,” the king said, confused.

“I’m not going out there alone, either.”

The king’s eyes shifted briefly to Patrick, then back to Violet. “He has military experience under Sutton?”

“Yes, sir,” she nodded slightly.

“This is the kind of job I normally would have given to him. Are you going to be difficult if I seek to acquire Mr. Marshall’s services?”

“That depends whether you’re planning to do so with regards to him working *with* me, or if you were going to send him off somewhere else,” Violet said. “*You*, at least, know why I’ve been so reluctant to get attached to human men.”

“No, no, the working with you idea,” the king said. “I’m not nearly foolish enough to cross a woman like *that* at this point in my life.”

They were all quiet a moment, and then Violet frowned.

“You want to talk to him alone,” she said.

“Well, yes,” the king said. “It’ll get nowhere with you in the conversation.”

“Fine,” she said, standing and heading out in the hallway to wait.

She was pacing restlessly when Patrick came out into the hallway about twenty minutes later with a pair of leather document wallets; he handed her one, and she opened it as they walked back down the hallway to leave.

“Ah, good,” she said. “Formal paperwork regarding the job with getting the stone back to Vellaerinoth.”

“Yep.”

“So did you and he come to terms?” she asked. “Since we apparently aren’t really going to discuss wedding arrangements.”

“He said he has sense enough not to interfere with a woman’s wedding plans, and that he will officiate if you want, but that it’s really between you and your mother.”

“Ha. Irene has him well trained,” Violet said.

“Heh, or he’s just learned how to avoid all the painful arguments by now,” Patrick agreed. He was a little sheepish when he continued, “He also wants to knight me when we get back from Olloria.”

Violet stopped him in the middle of the hallway. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. “It’s about damn’ time.”