

Prince of Thertine

by Grace Garner

## Chapter 1

"You great blundering idiot! Do you not know who I am?" I twisted in the saddle, pulling away. Sol whinnied, sidestepping. I kicked the boy in the stomach, trying to yank the reins from his grasp. The boy let out another piercing shriek, his greasy brown hair falling over his wild and tear-filled eyes.

"Please, please, you must help me!" he gasped. "The king's trying to kill me!"

He dared accuse my father?

"Are you mad? Let go!" I shouted, striking the boy. He hung on so that his knuckles whitened; one hand's fingers twisting around the bridle, the other clutching my knee, his torn, filthy feet brushing the ground. Sol's head bowed down with the deadweight. The nerve! I gritted my teeth,

patience long gone. I drew the dagger at my side, leaning forward.

"I said let go!" I struck at the hand grasping the bridle. The point dug in below the knuckles, and blood welled up around the blade. The boy gave a cry, his hand jerking back. I shoved my foot into his stomach again, and pushed other his hand off my leg. The boy's rags caught on a stirrup; they tore as he fell. I clapped my heels against Sol's side. The horse shot off down the path. My black hair lashed at my face as I glanced over my shoulder. The boy huddled on the ground, cradling his wounded hand, despair numbing his expression, crazed and tortured eyes following me.

*"The king's trying to kill me!"*

*That's ridiculous...isn't it? What profit would be in that?*

I urged Sol to gallop faster, my heart pounding hard.

*Of course it's ridiculous. The peasants are getting out of hand.*

\* \* \* \* \*

I dismounted from Sol, shaken and confused, as a host of servants swarmed up to me.

"Out of my way," I said, shoving the unfortunate man in front of me. The rest of the small crowd parted to let me pass, bowing and muttering 'your majesty's'. I brushed by them, having in mind to go to my quarters and change, then perhaps enjoy a quiet tea before going back to my studies...

A young servant girl halted at the sight of me, dropping into a curtsy. "Oh, sire," she said, sounding breathless "If it pleases your highness--"

"It doesn't," I interrupted, not slowing in my walk.

"Oh, but sire," she hurried after me. "There's a--"

"I don't care to be delayed at the moment. Return to your duties."

"But--but sire, there's a messenger--"

I turned on her, feeling annoyed, and not trying to hide it. "Tell him to wait."

"But Highness," the girl dropped into another curtsy. "He's from the King, your Royal Father!"

I stopped, staring at the girl's downcast eyes.

"Where's the messenger?"

"This way, Highness," The girl led the way to the inner bailey.

The messenger stepped up and bowed.

"Proceed," I said.

The messenger bowed again. "His Royal Majesty, King Karlin of Thertine, requests immediate conference with his son, Colin Retham, the High Prince of Thertine."

I let out a startled breath. A coldness fastened itself on me.

*What? Now? But I visited him just last week...*

The messenger coughed. I blinked, drawing myself up. "I will come as soon as can be made ready."

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The carriage clattered over the cobblestones. I reached my hand up to my head again, still unable to believe what rested there.

*It's true. It's really true.*

A thrill went through me, a smile spreading across my face.

*I **am** going to be King of Thertine!*

Of course I wasn't yet, fifteen years of age only brought on the deciding of who would be the heir. It could have been a sibling (if I had any, which I didn't), Duke, Marquis, an Earl even. In the rarest of cases, a peasant held the honor. But that hadn't happened for nigh on eight hundred years.

*It's me. I was chosen.*

I would return to my father's castle soon, this time to live there.

But I shouldn't be so relieved. I shouldn't have been so nervous. Who else would have been chosen? I was the High Prince, and only Prince, of Thertine. I had a bright mind, the best of tutors, and the all of the best resources at my fingertips. Who could be better suited for a King? I saw in my mind's eye some short, bumbling Lesser sitting here in my place. I found the picture amusing, and chuckled to myself.

*What's that?*

Some shouts came from outside. I started to lean forward.

Screech!

"Ahi!" the carriage lurched, throwing me off the seat so that I smacked my nose against the carriage wall. Hard. "Driver!" I yelled, not at all pleased. I heard his voice from outside.

"Hoy, you! Get out of the road!"

I scrambled up and pulled back the curtain hanging over the window. Another shout came from the crowd on the street.

"Ai! Get back 'ere you scoundrel!"

I looked to the front of the carriage. A boy, brown hair hanging over his eyes, skidded to a stop in front of the horses. He slipped. The horses reared.

"Tha's m'bread 'e 'as!" a large man broke from the crowd, waving a thick stick. The boy jumped up, terror in his eyes, trapped between the man and the horses. My soldiers started forward. The crowd's shouts joined my driver's. The man snatched up the boy by the collar.

"Ah'll teach you t' steal from me!"

A tall boy burst from the crowd. He let out a bloodcurdling yell and tackled the man. The crowd surged forward. So did my soldiers. Screams, clashes, blood.

I'd seen enough. I threw open the carriage door, stood on the step, and raised an arm.

"People!" I shouted. I almost couldn't hear my own voice. I waved for more attention. "People! Be quiet! Calm down!" the shouts and cries started to diminish. "Calm down! Please! People, stop!" The peasants lowered fists, standing back up, regaining composure. All was quiet,

except for a few whispers. I felt like an all-powerful god.

"Much better. Now please move out of the road." I waved my hand. The peasants drew back. I noticed the boy and his helper had disappeared. I gave what I hoped was a charming and gracious smile, and stepped back into the carriage. A servant shut the door, but I kept the curtain drawn back. I smiled again, this time to a pretty village girl. She blushed and dropped into a curtsy, as did the girls around her. I leaned back in my seat with a sigh of satisfaction as the carriage started again.

Yes, being a Prince, and even better--an heir, certainly had its advantages.

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I hurried down the corridor. I didn't expect I'd be able to do this again anytime soon; at least not for several months. It was rare enough to get away in the times before my Choosing, but after...

"Here, stable boy," I said "Get my horse out and ready."

"Yes highness."

"Hurry!" I leaned against the wall, waiting. I didn't have much time.

"Here, your majesty." The boy walked up and passed Sol's reins to me. I swung up onto Sol and trotted out into the courtyard.

"Hoy!" I waved at a young girl with long brown hair to get out of my way. She looked up at me with something that like defiance in her brown eyes. I hesitated, confused.

"Out," I said, jerking my head. She stepped to the side, watching me. I chose to ignore her. I rode up to the gatehouse and got a surprised look from the guards.

"Open the gate," I said, then added, "My Father has given me permission," They glanced at each other, but obliged.

I rode across the drawbridge. "One last time, eh Sol?" I patted his neck. I decided to relish this ride without attendants, however short it may be.

\* \* \* \* \*

I slowed Sol at the entrance to the forest. I remembered what had happened the last time I was here, and realized I hadn't told my Father about it. I shrugged. "It wasn't such a big deal...right, Sol?" I tried to reassure myself; the bazaar happening still haunted me. "He just didn't know I was the prince." I added, and urged Sol forward.

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"Whoa," I said at last, bringing Sol to a halt for a rest. He snorted and shook his mane. I looked up at the sky that peeked between the leaves to guess the time.

"We need to be getting back, Sol," I said, not fond of the fact. Some people said it wasn't wise for the Prince to go out alone. Hogwash, that. Or so *I* thought. Father had given me a little time today, but only a little. Being late to get back wouldn't help get me out again.

I sighed and started to turn Sol around. I froze.

"For the love of...!" I gasped aloud.

*"The king is trying to kill me!"*

I shivered. Nonsense. Complete nonsense. I slid off of Sol.

*It can't be...it can't...*

I took halting steps into the underbrush. Brown hair, dressed in rags. I stopped. The boy lay face down, one arm stretched in front of him as if he had died while crawling.

*He's not dead... is he?*

I stepped closer, feeling a growing sense of dread. The boy had been shot, beaten, stabbed...

*What's going on?*

I walked forward again, though part of me didn't want to. I could leave, go back to Sol. I didn't have to deal with this. In fact, I could have a servant and soldiers to come out and analyze it if I wanted. If I wanted. Did I want to?

I didn't stop. I bent down and touched the boy.

Cold.

*"The King's trying to kill me!"*

I leaped up and shot back toward Sol. Me? Scared? No, of course not! I just needed to get home...gather my thoughts...figure out what was going on...

I tripped.

A cry rang out. "ROBIN!"

"Yeeek!" I jumped up, half drawing my sword, visions of ghosts and zombies in my head.

Wham!

I slammed back onto the forest floor. "Get off me!" I yelled. Whoever--or whatever--it was didn't oblige. I kicked and shoved the thing--no, it was a person--off and ran for Sol. A shrill whistle followed me.

I vaulted onto the horse and clapped my heels against his sides. We shot down the trail. Yells! I started to glance over my shoulder. Someone burst out of the bushes on

the side of the path and leaped onto Sol. Sol neighed, spooked, his speed increasing. I gasped, trying to draw my sword. A fist crashed into the side of my head. I yelped, leaning far to the side. The person grabbed onto me, forcing a balance-and-wrestling match. I tried to fling him down. My foot jerked out of the stirrup.

The landing seemed to jar my insides loose. It didn't seem to bother my opponent, however, and he pinned me to the ground.

The sound of Sol's hooves grew faint and disappeared.

Shing!

A dagger. I stared at the grimy man above me.

"Bring 'im up, you two."

I started at the voice. The man on top of me began to rise.

"You don't resist, you don't try to get away, you don't get hurt. Leastways, not yet." The voice said. I nodded. Someone grabbed my arms and pulled me up. I looked around at the small group of ragged, dirty, men, women, girls and boys. They seemed to be mostly unarmed. I snatched my sword from its sheath.

Smack!

I fell, rolling, and jumped back up. I charged a man in front of me. The whole group closed in. Not one retreated.

"Back! Get back, all of you!" I warned, waving my sword around, and turning in circles, trying in vain to keep all of them in sight. They kept a distance from my weapon, but they didn't draw back. "Get back!" I said again. "I am Prince Colin!"

"I don't *care* who you are!" The same voice said. I turned to face him. The boy, towering above most everybody else, glared back at me, with his hands on his hips. A bandage mostly covered his left eye, but I could see a horrid scar running across the eye, discoloring it to a ghastly yellow-green.

Blind fury welled up in me.

"What's the meaning of this?" I hollered, "I warn you to tell your people to stand back!"

"Uh, ex-cuse me," The boy said, "You isn't exactly in a position to be makin' demands. I am."

I tightened my grip on my sword. "Who are you?"

"That's not important." The boy stepped up to me. His angry expression melted and twisted. "I want to know why you killed Robin." He said in a soft voice.

I stared. "Who? I haven't killed anybody."

"If not you personally," The boy said, anger returning to his face. "Then why di'ja order others to do your dirty work for you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" I said.

"I see." The boy looked at somebody behind me and cleared his throat.

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"Oww..." I shook my head.

"Has your memory come back?"

I jerked up. "Huh?"

The boy looked back at me. "I *said* has your memory come back?"

"If it's done anything," I groaned "It's left. Where am I?"

"If I tol'ja that, you'd run away."

I looked around. I was in the middle of nowhere, or rather, the middle of the forest. By the look of it, most of the group from earlier had gone to who-knows-where.

Maybe they were with my memory. I groaned, rubbing my forehead.

"You'll pay for this." I growled, "All of you. What do you want? A ransom?"

"Naw!" The boy looked disgusted. "I want you t' tell me what your fancy royal self wants from us!"

"At the moment, my 'fancy royal self' wants out of here." I said, "And you'd better do it quick or people will be out looking for me."

The boy leaned back, gazing at the trees. "I'd reckon they're doing that already."

I looked up as well. Pink fanned across the sky. I looked back at the boy. "So are you going to let me go?"

The boy looked at me with something like amazement. "Just how thick are you?" He asked, disgust in his voice.

"Watch your attitude!" I warned, "Remember who you're talking to!"

The boy ignored me. "Why did you kill Robin?" He asked me for the third time. He leaned forward. "I loved that boy," he whispered, tears in his eyes. "We were like family--we were family, and you better tell me why fast,"

"I already told you; I didn't kill *anybody*," I said, exasperated.

The boy nodded. "Well then, I reckon you'll be here quite a while,"

"Until you're caught," I growled.

"Caught, hah!" The boy laughed, all traces of grief gone. "You haven't done that so far!"

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Whaddaya think I live on?" The boy asked "Grass?"

"Thief," I said, reaching for my sword. My hand met air. The boy raised an eyebrow.

"Thought we'd leave your sword on you?"

I gritted my teeth. "What are you going to do, sell it?" I reached a hand to my head. They'd taken my heir crown too.

The boy shrugged, leaning against a tree with his arms crossed and behind his head. "Maybe. Or give it back,"

"You'll all hang for this!" I snapped.

"Oh, really? Who's fault is it, do you imagine?"

"What?"

"D'you think most of us want to live like this? We don't have any choice! Why? Because of you!"

"You're blaming me?" I glanced around the clearing. Most of the people didn't seem to be watching us.

"Yeah, you! Or your father, or whoever else is helping you,"

"What do you mean?" I spotted my sword leaning against a tree, my crown lying beside it.

"I mean you're all spoiled brats who don't care a copper about what other people feel or need, so long as you get your own way!"

How dare he insult me to my face? How dare he insult me at all? I let out a shout and leaped up, face burning. I sprang away from the boy. My head swam. I knocked over a woman, and grabbed for my crown and sword. I drew the sword while I ran, ducking under branches and struggling through underbrush. I couldn't hear a sound behind me.

Were they not even chasing?

My cloak caught in some bushes. I struggled with the clasp. Someone smacked into me, bowling me onto the ground. I slashed, heard a cry, and leaped back up. With a ripping sound, my cloak tore from my shoulders. That was fine with me. I just wanted to get out of there.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Please...please...*

I splashed through a stream.

*Please. A road, a path, a trail, I don't care! Just get me out of here!*

I tripped and sprawled on the ground. I waited, listening for pursuers. I couldn't hear anything. I staggered to my feet, gasping. My head throbbed, but I

didn't dare rest. I started to walk, trying to make sense of my surroundings.

Everything looked the same. For all I knew, I could have gone in fifteen small three-foot circles already. I could be in a different forest altogether. It could be a day later than I thought.

I groaned. Unconsciousness muddled a person's brain.

*Come on...would something please let me know where I am?*

I started to run again. Actually, it was more like a staggering jog.

"You don't have any idea where you are, do you?"

"Wha?" I gasped. The boy appeared in front of me from behind a tree. "You again!" I said.

"Yeah, me. Who'd you expect?"

"Well, I'd hoped for someone else."

"Hoping doesn't get you nowhere. We live out here; we know what it's like."

"Would you please either quite talking like a madman, or not talk at all?" I started inching to the left.

"So you still don't understand me?"

"How could I?" I pointed my sword at him. "I'm done with this. Get out of my way," He didn't move.

I made sure my crown was secure on my arm. "You asked for it," I said under my breath, and charged him. The next thing I knew, my legs were parallel with the ground. I staggered up. The boy looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"You really ought to learn somethin' about combat."

"I know combat!" I spat.

"Not well enough," the boy said, "You're playing by the rules; easy to predict,"

I stared at him. He took a step forward. I took a step back. He pointed to the left.

"That way's the road. I s'pose you can find your way back from there?"

I ignored the emphasis. "Why are you telling me that?"

"You ask too many questions."

"Well--"

The boy leaped forward. Going on instinct, I threw myself to the left, stabbing my sword at him. He seemed to change his direction in midair, flipping over the sword and swiping at my feet. One went out from under me. I staggered, but got back on firm ground, and charged him again.

"Yhip!" the boy chirped. I thought I'd got him when he fell to the ground. He rolled toward me. I stabbed at him again, scraping along his arm.

"Ow!"

I leaped in the air when he--again--tried to knock my feet out from under me. I ran, while I had the advantage, in the direction he'd pointed earlier. I glanced over my shoulder.

The boy sat up, watching me go, and not attempting a chase.

"Tell your father what I told you!" he called after me, "Maybe you'll actually stop shunnin' us!"

I didn't even try to figure out what that meant.

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"It's the Prince!"

"Prince Colin!"

I trembled with exhaustion, almost unable to drag myself into the outskirts of Hesston. Villagers gathered, wide-eyed, watching me, but keeping their distance.

"Prince Colin! Your highness!" a soldier ran up to me. "Where have--"

"Kidnapped," I said, swaying. "I'll explain later. Is S-my horse back at the castle?"

"I don't know, your highness," The man turned and yelled to a lower-class soldier. "Malak! Go inform the king that his son is found!"

"Do you have a mount for me?" I asked.

"Yes, of course, your highness." Again he yelled at another soldier. "Bring a horse for his majesty! No, not that old nag! Don't you have--" he walked toward the minor, raving about proper mounts for Princes.

I looked at the villagers, whose eyes were bugging out of their heads by now. A few did a few clumsy curtsies or bows, but most just stared. I caught sight of a familiar-looking girl with a long brown ponytail, but when I looked again she was gone.

## Chapter 2

"Colin, welcome!" My father turned to me, beaming.

"Hello, Father." I bowed briefly from the waist.

"You may go," Karlin said to the various servants surrounding him. They bowed and left the room, though I knew guards would remain right outside the door.

"Come closer, Colin," Karlin said.

"Thank you for granting my request for this private audience, Father." I said, doing as he ordered.

"Any time, Colin. Any time," He stood, facing me and smiling. "Now, what was it you wanted to see me about?"

I shifted my weight, fingering the jeweled hilt of my dagger. "It's...it's about our people." He was still smiling. "I've noticed...well, they seem discontent."

"They often are so," Karlin said "No matter how we serve them."

"Well, yes, but..." I struggled to find words.

"Being with them...or, with my kidnappers, they said...he said that is was our fault that they were the way they were."

"Our fault as in you and me?" Karlin's smile faded. "They are lazy, Colin. That's why they rob others, so they don't have to earn their own living," Karlin narrowed his eyes. "You didn't actually believe them, did you?"

"N-no," I stuttered, "It's not just them. A riot started the other day, practically for no reason, right after the Heirannouncement."

"Where was this?" Karlin asked, sounding surprised.

"It wasn't anything serious," I said, "They just didn't have good reason to start fighting...especially in front of my carriage."

"They blocked the road?" Karlin stepped toward me, "They blocked your way?"

"Well...yes," I said

"What! Why wasn't I informed?"

"I-I didn't think it was important enough to bother about."

"Colin, the peasants preventing Royalty from continuing on their way is no small matter! You will inform

me of any similar offences that may come about," Karlin started to pace, muttering to himself.

"Yes Father," I said, worried at his sudden angry state. I added, "I did set it right though. I sent them back."

"Good," Karlin stalked to a window.

I followed him, trying to get back on subject.

"Anyway, though it was a terrible offence, I noticed how they all looked starved and troubled. I wonder--"

"I'm needed at the Great Hall,"

"But..." I started. Karlin turned away.

"We can continue this discussion later. Guard!" The doors opened. Karlin stalked out; waiting servants trailed after him down the hall.

I was escorted to my quarters.

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Trials. Justice.

I sat in a chair to the right of my Father. An honor reserved for the Heir. A shiver went down my spine as I watched the girl screaming, struggling, begging, and weeping all at the same time. The defiant girl. The one with the long brown hair.

The one I had seen watching me.

My father went on to the next order of business, but I couldn't keep my eyes off the girl until the double doors clanged behind her. They sounded final. They were final. I realized that I'd been holding my breath, and I took a couple to make up for the one I'd lost. I licked my dry lips. My stomach felt queasy, and I gripped the arms of my chair, breathing hard. Without thinking, I leaped from my seat.

"Father," I said it louder than I meant too, and it rang out in the spacious hall. Every eye turned on me. Karlin looked surprised.

*Well, of course he does. I thought I would be too.*

"Yes, Colin?"

"Father, may I--" I intended to ask for permission to go to my quarters, but my mouth took over and this came out instead: "May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly," He still looked puzzled, but not yet impatient. As if apologizing for usurping my intentions earlier, my mouth froze.

*Too late for that, I thought, annoyed with myself.*

"Why must that girl be put to death?" I asked.

Various sounds of surprise went through the hall.

"Treason, Colin," Karlin said, raising an eyebrow "Did you not hear?"

"Yes, I heard," I said "But how could a ten-year-old girl be capable of treason? I did not see any evidence to back up the accusation,"

Another murmur came from the onlookers.

"She was accused by a reliable source, Colin,"

"A reliable source!" I started to get angry. "Well, what if she was innocent? Do have the right to take an innocent life?"

This time the murmur was more than merely audible.

"Every risk must be taken for the safety of Thertine," My father said, seeming gentle and calm.

A murmur of approval.

"Answer my question, if you will, Father!" I said, "Do you have the right?"

"I am the king, Colin!" Now my father's voice started to rise, if only to be heard above mine. "I have every right!" He lowered his voice, quiet enough to be heard by me alone. "Besides that, she has no family; no friends. Who will miss her?"

"Why does that matter?" I didn't lower my voice at all. "Maybe she does; ones that you don't know about."

"Are you saying you disagree with my sentence?"

"No..." I stopped. What was I *doing*? "My apologies, Father." My stomach churned. I stepped back. "I ask your leave to withdraw to my chambers. I--I'm not...feeling well."

"Granted," Karlin said.

I made a beeline for the door. The court split down the middle to make a path for me. I caught glimpses of surprised and confused faces. Thertine would have something to talk about tomorrow.

Once in my room, I sent the attendants away and sagged against the wall, my heart pounding. Why had I left? I now looked like a complete idiot. Then again, why had I asked about that girl? Heavens, I saw things like that every day. It had never bothered me before.

I sighed and drew my hand across my eyes. Reliable source...right. A rich noble, yes; reliable source, no.

*What are you making this big deal over that girl, Colin?* I chided myself. *It wasn't like she was anybody important.*

I sank to the floor. (No, that wouldn't do. I walked over to a chair and sat down.) No, no, it didn't matter. That girl had a life. Just like mine. Or, she used to.

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"Really, Colin," Karlin seemed concerned, "It is nothing to worry about. I have it under control. Turn your attention to other things."

"I--" I stopped. What use was there in arguing further? "If I'm going to be the next king, I believe I should understand such things, Father."

Arguing this over. Again.

*I am an idiot.*

"What is there to understand?" Karlin placed a hand on my shoulder, "This is a simple matter. The peasants must bend under our rule...if they did not, they would revolt against authority, and the entire kingdom would crumble."

I sighed and nodded. Karlin took hold of both of my shoulders and stared into my eyes, "Be sure you remember that. The King's motives are not to be questioned. Nor interfered with. Never. Not even by his son. It wouldn't be pleasant if the King suddenly found need to dispel the heir, now, would it?"

I stared at him. "N-no, Father."

*What was that supposed to be?*

Karlin smiled and released me. "Very good. Now return to your studies."

The king is to be obeyed at all times. I left.

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"A word, Lord Carn," I stopped the Lord in the inner bailey.

"Yes, your highness?" He paused in his departure.

"How do you treat your peasants? Are they content?"

"Well, I-" The Lord looked uncomfortable, "For the most part, yes, I suppose, but you know how they are sometimes, your highness."

"Yes, I know," I said, "I want you to be sure that they are not too hard oppressed. And make sure your soldiers don't harass them, or take more than they should,"

"Your Highness!" The Lord looked startled. "I'll try my best, but the King keeps strict restrictions on how we are to treat our serfs. I don't want to overstep."

I ground my teeth in frustration. "Very well, you may continue," I said and walked away.

I tried this with other Lords, with the same result. The King, the King, the King.

*Come on, Colin,* I told myself *You're overreacting.*

A few days later, I rode with my Father to a Lord's estate for the 'discussion of some matters.' On the way, I gazed out of my window at the surrounding countryside. A

young man stood beside the road, clutching a small bundle. Our eyes met. His face was thin, pinched, and streaked with dirt. His eyes seemed empty. I dropped the curtain.

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The moon rose high. I paced back and forth on the balcony.

*Just leave it alone. Just leave it alone. Politics, state, reason. What they deserved, what they were there for. Everyone has their place, everyone has their duty. Just leave it alone.*

I turned and went inside. I was ready for bed; I should be in bed. But was I? No. Sleep evaded me. Why?

I drummed my fingers on a small table. The wind stirred the trees outside. I lit the candle that sat on the table.

"Prince Coli,."

I whirled. No one stood by the door.

Thud.

I snatched a dagger from my bedside table and drew it, spinning around.

A figure crouched by the window.

"Who are you?" I gasped out, pointing my dagger toward them. "No sudden moves,"

The figure rose. His height would have prevented him from touching the top of the window with his hand.

"Answer me!" I said, "With one word I could call all the soldiers in the castle bearing down on this place."

"Then why don't you?" He sounded young.

"I don't see any need yet," I said, "The King doesn't ask for needless aid."

"You're not the King."

I tightened my grip on the dagger. "Well...I am nearly, and you better treat me as if I am."

"Fine, then."

"You're safe so long as you are agreeable."

"Then I'll be agreeable."

"Good," I stepped behind the table and scooted the candle forward.

"Come into the light."

The person didn't move at first, and then slowly stepped forward. He pushed his hood back.

Wait! Stop! Hold everything!

"You're...DEAD!" I squeaked. The girl didn't say anything. "Where did you come from?" I gasped, "What are you doing here? Why are you here? I've seen you watching me!" I added after a pause, "How did you escape?"

"Call it a lucky coincidence." she said. "In answer to your other questions Colin, I-"

"How dare you call me that!" I glared at her.

She stopped, not looking the least bit afraid, and asked "Oh, I'm sorry, did I get your name wrong?"

"No," I gritted my teeth, "But since when do you have the right to call me by my first name?"

"Oh," she said, "Then, in answer to your other questions *your majesty*, I've been watching you, because I had no other resource."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, "I've just about had it with trying to figure out you peasants' riddles."

"It means you're my last resort. So I was watching you to see if I had any chance to convince you."

"Convince me of what?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"So tell me already!"

"Stop interrupting me and I will."

I pressed my lips together.

"To be perfectly honest," she said after a moment.

"I'm not entirely sure. I do know though, that you...or your father...is up to something. Something, um, not good."

A memory echoed in my head.

*"The king's trying to kill me!"*

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I watch and listen. He seems to be getting very friendly toward Leamshi. And there's strange things going on in other countries."

"I haven't noticed anything." I frowned. Leamshi was the kind of country you didn't want to get mixed up with.

"I don't think he wants anybody to notice," The girl said. "Fortunately, most people don't suspect a young girl."

"So you are a traitor!"

"I didn't say that. It's just that a little girl doesn't have as much trouble finding out things when she's looking for information. And I have found information," The girl paused.

And paused.

And still paused.

"And?" I said at last,

"Oh, so you do want to know," The girl said. I flushed and didn't answer.

"All right then, how does this sound: Disguised messengers frequently running to and from Leamshi, and

conditions of the financial system and peasants getting worse every time a messenger returns."

"Very mysterious," I raised an eyebrow.

"Thank you."

"And how do you know that the disguised messengers really were disguised messengers and not what they were disguised as?"

"Following them," said the girl. She abruptly changed the subject. "Anyway, I've noticed that you don't seem entirely positive that whatever he's up to isn't good either."

"What do you mean?"

"You've talked to him about the...let's call it 'uncomfortable circumstances' he's pressed on the peasants."

I stared at her. "How do you know I've been talking to him?"

"I have resources."

"I don't buy that." I glared at her. She looked back at me, cocking her head. It maddened me. "All right, that's enough!" I said through gritted teeth. "You've accused and accused my Father, and maybe some of them have a basis...but Leamshi? Ridiculous! *Get out of my room!*" The

girl shrugged and went toward the window. She flung one leg over it and disappeared from sight.

I stared after her a moment. That was...easy. I let out a sigh. I probably shouldn't have let her go. I should have reported her. But I still didn't think she was worthy of death...did I?

"Creepy," I muttered to myself. "How does she--"

"Can I come back in now?"

I jumped "Wha--??" I ran over to the window and looked down. Her face looked up into mine a few inches away.

"How do you *do* that?" I gasped, looking at her dangling legs.

"Practice." she said, "But it's cold out here. Can I come back in?"

Dumbstruck, I backed away. She crawled back inside.

"So to continue," she said as if nothing had interrupted her explanation, "I thought you weren't all the snobby prince everybody seems to think you are--"

"I'm a WHAT?" I yelled.

"Well, you're not exactly what I'd call the nicest person in the world. Could you please stop interrupting and listen?"

I made my hands into fists and glared. She didn't seem to notice. "I thought maybe you weren't the snobby prince everybody seems to think you are," repeated the girl, "and would listen to sense. In short...I decided I would ask for your help."

"My help for what?"

She looked at me, her voice becoming very firm. "This is the last straw, Co--your majesty. We can't stand for it any longer. Your father has got to be stopped--whatever he's doing--or at least quit starving and working his people literally to death. Not to mention his other suspicious actions."

"'We'?" I asked.

"The others," she said "I believe you met one the other day?"

"My kidnapper," I grumbled. "I should have known you'd be in cahoots with him."

The girl nodded. "Well, I know him, if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean."

"So will you help?"

*"It wouldn't be pleasant if the King suddenly found need to dispel the heir, now, would it?"*

I shivered. "Do you think I'm crazy? No!"

"Oh," She stepped back, "You're...positive?"

"What am I supposed to do?" I waved the dagger at her.

"Maybe I don't agree with everything my father does. But then again, maybe I do. Maybe I love working people to death. Maybe I'm about to stab you!"

She glanced at the dagger. "And Leamshi-?" she started.

"Forget Leamshi!" I paced back and forth. "You can't expect me to leave here. I *am* going to be king! Maybe I could help you then!"

"That'll be too late-" the girl started.

I whirled around to face her. "Then too bad for you!"

We stood for several minutes just staring at each other. Or, she stared, I glared.

"I guess that's it then.'" The girl said. She turned to the window. "Bye." She hesitated. "I guess I was wrong about you. Sorry for keeping you awake." The girl disappeared.

I collapsed into a chair. The door to my room creaked open. I glared at the girl who peeked in. "What?"

She gasped and started, "I-I was just--they wanted me to--they thought they heard voices and sent me too--"

"Ridiculous," I interrupted.

"A thousand pardons, your majesty!" The girl gasped

"Is there anything you wish me to--"

"Build up the fire," I said. She curtsied and stumbled to the hearth. A moment later she stuttered,

"I-is there anything else?"

"No!" I snapped "Get out!" the sound of my own voice stopped me. The girl, eyes wide with fright, curtsied again and fled. I stared after her.

*"The peasants must bend under our rule...if they did not, they would revolt against authority, and the entire kingdom would crumble."*

Firm. Confident.

*"...or at least quit starving and working his people literally to death."*

Earnest. Desperate. "I'm not," I mumbled "She's a servant."

I shrank back into the chair, staring at the now-high flames in the hearth. Messengers. Leamshi. I bolted up and ran to the window. "Wait!" I called as loud as I dared. Silence. I sighed.

"Good grief, you nearly made me fall."

I started, almost falling myself. "Where are you? I can't see."

"Good. Then the guards can't see me either."

I looked down at the soldiers far below. "Come back up here." I said.

"Why?" the question startled me.

"Because I'm the High Prince and the Heir and I said so!"

"Just a moment," Indeed, a moment later I spotted her several yards below me, inching her way up. I backed away from the window. The girl poked her head up a minute later.

"What?"

"Come in here," I gestured. "But be quiet. I had a visitor a few minutes ago. She said they'd heard voices."

"I know," The girl said, once again dropping cat-like onto the floor "You didn't talk quietly."

"Yes, well..." I shuffled my feet. *Bother, what am I supposed to say?*

"What do you want?" The girl asked.

"Uh...for starters, um...why are you dressed like that?" I loitered for time, hoping a good way to explain myself would come up. A frown of confusion crossed the girl's face. She looked down at her pants.

"They're less troublesome than skirts. Especially for scaling walls."

"I take it that's a hobby for you? Along with using big words?"

"Well, I do it a lot."

I squinted at her, "Just how old are you?" The girl shrugged.

"I don't know. It's hard to keep track. I've been on the road for as long as I can remember."

"What about your parents?" Having tired of standing, I headed for a chair in front of the fire. The girl didn't speak for a moment.

"I...don't know. I can remember their faces, but...I don't remember what happened to them."

I turned around and looked at her. "You travel by *yourself??*"

"Usually. Sometimes I walk with my friends. I've got friends everywhere." She walked up to me and said, "Quit stalling. What did you call me back up here for?"

"Uh..." Taken aback by that sudden accusation, I backed away from her and sat down. "Let's say...if--but only if!--I changed my mind and said I'd go with you, what

good would it do? And what would it require me to do?"

The girl's eyes widened. A grin spread across her face. "Nothing required, your majesty. Only requested."

"Very well then, requested."

The girl plopped down in a chair opposite me. I started to protest, and changed my mind. "For starters," the girl said, "People may be more willing to rally with us when--I mean if--you join. It wouldn't seem so hopeless if at least one member of the Royal family could see what was going on. Also, since you're the King's son and probably familiar with his methods, you would be a huge help with battle plans--"

"Wait," I interrupted "Battle plans??"

She blinked. "Or technique, process, approach-- whatever you prefer to call it--for fighting back."

"Couldn't I just try to persuade him here?" I asked.

"You already tried that."

"Or maybe you could sneak back and forth?"

"No. The only reason I was able to see you tonight is because I never left the castle."

"Then where were you?"

"I...prefer to keep that to myself for the time being."

"Admit it," I slapped the arm of my chair "You don't trust me."

"Of course I don't," the girl said, "And you don't trust me either," She had a point there.

I gazed at the fire. "Are you...sure...about Leamshi?"

"About them plotting something, no. But sure about the messengers."

*All right, Father, maybe this will bring your attention.* I looked across at the girl. Our eyes met.

"Okay..." I said "But I might have to blame you for kidnapping me again."

The girl stood, frowning, and came up to me. "Is that a...yes?"

I stood up as well. "A temporary, unstable yes, yes. How do we get out of here?"

"You mean you'll help?" the girl looked up at me.

"Yes," I hurried over the word. "Do I have to spell it out for you? Y-E-S."

The girl threw up her hands. "Just trying to be clear and certain, that's all."

"Nothing's clear and certain right now. But I assure you - I am not going to war against my father."

"Understood, your majesty."

I sheathed the dagger I still held in my hand and asked again, "How do we get out?"

"I think you can answer that better than I can."

I leaned against the wall, thinking. "Was your hiding place some secret passageway we don't know about?"

"Sorry, Col--" I looked at her. "Your majesty, that only happens in stories...I think."

"You *think*?"

She shrugged. "Well, you never know."

"Hm," I mused, going back to thinking. "I don't think I could just ride out with you. You're known as a traitor now. Maybe the postern gate..."

"The what?"

"The postern. It's a-" I stopped. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you."

"Maybe you shouldn't, but would you if I said I wouldn't tell anyone else?"

"I might. But you might lie."

"I don't lie. Well...not most of the time."

I bit my lip. "The postern gate is a...well..."

"Back door?" the girl guessed. I looked at her.

"In a manner of speaking. It would be less conspicuous if we went out that way."

"That sounds promising."

"Then again, it would sound very suspicious if we were caught."

"Oh...darn. But we couldn't very well ride out the front gate, could we?"

"I could talk myself past the gatekeeper," I said, "But my father would know soon that I had left--without his permission."

"What if we use the postern?"

"Then we would hope to heaven no one sees us."

"And if no one did, it would give us a huge head start?"

"Well, I don't know about huge, but it would be some. But no one seeing us is kind of far fetched."

The girl snapped her fingers. "We'll use the postern."

I raised an eyebrow. "We will."

"It's vital that we get a head start."

"You do remember who you're talking to?"

"Yes, why?"

"You just ordered me to do something," I thought I stated the obvious.

The girl shrugged. "What are you going to do, execute me?"

I opened my mouth and found I didn't have anything to say.

"That's the way we should go," the girl repeated.

"Whatever," I mumbled. "I'm okay with using the Postern, but I'll be the one making the final decisions in the future. Understood?"

The girl fixed me with those big brown eyes of hers. It wasn't exactly a glare, but it wasn't a simple stare either. After a moment, she looked away and said "I know what I'm doing. We should start soon--it's after midnight already."

"How far is it to--wherever we're going?" I asked.

"I don't know. Why?"

I placed my hands on my hips. I wasn't going to walk.

The girl seemed to read my mind. "Do you have a couple horses?" She sighed.

What kind of a question was that? "Yes, the horses I have, but it won't be too easy getting them. And a Prince doesn't mess around in the stables," I emphasized 'Prince'.

It seemed to me that this girl was starting to get impudent and needed a reminder who she was messing with.

"I'll get them."

"How can you explain yourself to the servants when you're seen?"

"I don't think I'll be seen. Ishmael says I have a way of turning myself and whatever I'm carrying--or leading, in this case--invisible."

"Who says?"

"Never mind. I disappear, okay?"

"Not okay. Just do it without being caught."

\* \* \* \* \*

I crouched in the shadows, where I'd told the girl I'd wait. She'd left to get the horses. I didn't expect this expedition to last long, thank goodness.

*Getting horses without being seen. Right. Well, you can't say I didn't warn you.*

Sleep began to pull at my eyelids.

*Oh well. I'll be back in bed soon.*

I blinked hard, trying to stay alert. I could hear the soft voices of soldiers.

*You're not supposed to be talking; you're supposed to be watching.* I chided them in my mind. *If it were any other night I'd reprimand you for slacking on duty.*

Oh well, it was useful at the moment. I pulled the hood of my cloak to the side, wondering what the girl was doing.

*If she gets caught, I'll just slip back to my quarters. She'll be hanged for attempted horse stealing--no, she'd be hanged anyway, being recognized as the escaped traitor. Why'd I agree to this?*

Clacking on the stones. I straightened. A dark shape loomed out of the night.

"Hurry!" the girl pushed reigns into my hands "We've got to get out of here! Now!" She tugged at me. I saw with pleasure that the horse I held was Sol.

"Say, do you know you got--"

"Save it!" the girl hissed "Get on!"

"Why the sudden rush?" I frowned at Sol's bare back.

"You didn't get a--"

"Colin!" I jerked my head up at the improper use of my name. "They found your room empty! Everyone's frantic! Let's go!"

"Oh!" I led Sol down the passageway. The girl followed me. We descended some stairs, and made several turns, descended more stairs, made more turns.

"Here it is," I said at last, tugging on the metal bar of a door.

"You're not even guarding it?" the girl asked, sounding surprised.

"We--don't--in--times--of peace," I grunted, grating the bar back. "No--one--is--supposed--to--know--where--it is," The bar jerked backward. I slipped and fell. The door swung open. I looked at the girl "So realize you have a great privilege. Don't tell anyone else where it is--or even that we have one."

The girl pushed past me through the door and stopped. "Good grief, that's steep!" she gasped.

"It's like that on purpose. Go!" I pushed her. We stumbled down the rocky hillside. I mounted Sol for the swim across the moat.

"Hoi! Who goes there? Halt in the name of the King!"

"Darn!" the girl dove into the water, dragging her horse in as well. Sol splashed in after her. She surfaced next to Sol. "Get off!" she said yanking at my leg, "If they see who you are--"

"And get completely soaked?" I snorted.

"Yes!" the girl grabbed hold of my cloak and pulled me overboard.

Silence.

I surfaced a minute later, gasping. I couldn't waste time remounting Sol--the girl was getting ahead of me. It would be humiliating if she beat me to the other side. Keeping a firm hold on Sol's reigns, I swam up beside her. She glanced behind us.

"Darn, they're almost across the drawbridge. Hurry!"

We crawled up on the other side. I shivered. Water from the girl's wet hair dripped onto the ground. She leaped up from the ground and vaulted onto her horse. I did the same and we shot away.

### Chapter 3

Sunlight filtered through the leaves.

"Jeanie!"

My guide slid from the horse. "Hello, Mal!"

I dismounted from Sol, dead-tired, my clothes still damp from the swim across the moat.

The tall boy ran up. "There's some--" He spotted me and stopped.

"I don't believe you've been officially introduced," the girl--Jeanie, I supposed--said "Ishmael," she indicated the tall boy, "Meet Colin. Colin, meet Ishmael."

"Prince Colin," I corrected. The tall boy blinked, staring at me.

"Hi," he said. I nodded in greeting, trying to look at him without looking at his left eye. Not an easy thing to do.

"What were you saying, Mal?" Jeanie asked. Ishmael shook himself.

"Oh. A girl and her mother came here yesterday. They said they'd like to help if they could. I said they needed to wait 'til you came back to find out."

"All right, hang on--Travis!" Another boy who looked about 14 timidly approached. "Travis, tether these horses, would you, please?"

The boy nodded. I held out Sol's reigns, wondering why he seemed so familiar. He took one look at me and shied away, terror in his eyes.

"J-Jeanie!" he gasped.

Jeanie spun around "Travis," she said, placing a hand on his arm, "Co--he won't hurt you." Her gentle voice seemed to reassure the boy, and he carefully took the reigns from me. The instant he had them in his hand though, he leaped backward and fled, the horses trotting after him.

I frowned, disgusted that a boy his age would act this way. "What's wrong with him?"

Jeanie gave me a sharp glance. "Robin was his younger brother."

"Who?"

"The dead boy you found. Your father is responsible for the death of his entire family."

"Now wait a minute," I protested, "Why would he kill a family like that?"

"That," Jeanie said, looking me in the eye. "Is a very good question."

"I've never heard of this before," I said, "Stop looking at me like that."

Jeanie sighed. "I'm sorry. It's just..." she trailed off. "From what I can glean, they were killed because they had found out about the Leamshi messengers. Travis's father was in an important man. He would have been very influential," She paused. "But now we have you."

"Don't remind me," I muttered under my breath. If Jeanie heard me, she didn't show it.

"Be patient," she added. "It's going to take awhile for people here to trust you." She turned back to Ishmael, who stood watching the whole thing. "Sorry about that. Where are the new recruits?"

Ishmael jerked his head backward. "Over here," he said, leading Jeanie away. Not knowing what else to do, I followed.

A minute later, Jeanie asked "Putting them to work already?"

Ishmael chuckled. "She took one look at our clothes and declared that we needed better."

*I'm not surprised*, I thought, craning my neck to see around my acquaintances. I caught sight of a girl. Her head bent over coarse brown cloth, blond hair falling on either side of her face.

"Hello!" Jeanie said, stepping forward. A woman beside the girl stood up, startling me. I hadn't noticed her.

"Hello lass!" she said, green eyes sparkling. Red curls peeked out from under her cap. "Are you Jeanie?" she rolled her r's as if she, of all things, was from Cysaan. I frowned.

"Yes, I am. Ishmael told me you wanted to help us?"

I kept looking at the girl. "Ouch!" she muttered, glaring at a red bead trickling down her finger. She sucked her finger and wiped it and her needle clean on her dress.

"I'm Ronelle Stylwell, and this is m'girl, Alivia."

The women said. Alivia looked up and smiled. Her eyes were blue.

"Hi," Jeanie said. "You'll both be welcome here, no matter what you can do."

"We're both nurses," Ronelle said, "And seamstresses, as you can see."

"I can use the bow," Alivia said, speaking out loud for the first time, her voice resolute and charming; lacking the strong accent of her mother.

"The bow?" I said, "Why would a girl learn that?"

Alivia's gaze turned to me. Her eyes were piercing. "For meat of course!" She said, glaring at me. "Somebody has to do the hunting!" she put down her sewing "And what's wrong with women knowing the use of arms? I can use the sword too!"

"The sword?" I snorted. That was over the top. "And who taught you that?"

Alivia stood up, raising her chin. "Nobody. I taught myself."

"Oh, well--" I started

"That's good, Alivia," Jeanie interrupted, sending what might have been a warning to me with her eyes.

"Hello lad," Ronelle said, beaming at me. "Who are you?"

*She doesn't know who I am?*

I glowered. "I am Prince Colin!" I said, looking smugly at Alivia. She looked startled.

"Oh, lovely!" Ronelle said, not sounding the least bit intimidated. "That's wonderful!"

Alivia recovered, tossing her hair "Indeed it is," she said. "We needed someone to fetch the water."

"Ali!" Ronelle scolded "That wasn't polite."

Alivia shrugged "Well, he's rude too."

"Hey!" I shouted, glaring at her. She looked straight back at me, a cool smile on her face. Ishmael started to laugh.

"She's right," he said, grinning. "Ali, I think you'll be a good addition."

"I don't," I muttered under my breath. Jeanie glanced at me again.

"Welcome to the party," She said to Ronelle.

\* \* \* \* \*

I gazed up at the treetops, arms crossed across my chest. I sighed, and looked back at the rest of the group.

"So," Jeanie said "When they send their band out to Brunswik, we could cross the Fexel and cut them off at--"

I sighed again and shifted my weight to my other foot. My stomach grumbled. I cleared my throat. Six pairs of eyes turned on me.

"When's lunch?" I asked. Someone snickered.

Ishmael coughed "Ah...lunch?"

"Yes," I said, a trifle annoyed, "Lunch. L-U-N-C-H. You know, the meal eaten at noon? Food?"

"Whenever you want it," Ishmael shrugged.

"Well, then, I want it." I waited. Nobody moved. "What are you people waiting for??" I said, "So where is it?"

"Uh...Colin..." Jeanie started. A muffled laugh. Ishmael grinned, and gestured to the forest "It's out there. Go find somethin'."

"Wha--?" I spluttered. Jeanie shook her head.

"There's nothing here, Colin. You need to find it. Just don't get anything poisonous."

"I--I'm not going to go looking for it!" I gasped. This time two people laughed outright. I gave them the darkest scowl I could muster. Travis stood up, brushing hair out of his eyes.

"I could co--"

"I don't need *help* from *you!*" I shouted, turning on my heel, and stomping away.

"Don't get lost," Jeanie called.

"I don't *get* lost!" I shouted back, tromping through the underbrush. The only thing I could think of to be thankful for was that that snippy Alivia Stylwell hadn't been in that group. But no doubt she'd hear about it in no time flat. I kicked at some ferns.

"Isn't that what sassy girls are good for?" I stormed at the plants "Cooking? Swords! Hah! She thinks she can use a sword! Ridiculous!" My stomach grumbled again. "I know, I know," I told it, "You don't have to make such a fuss." Oh bother. Talking to my stomach and plants. What next?

\* \* \* \* \*

I sat down hard. "When I'm king," I grumbled, "I'll have strawberry bushes planted out here or something," I trailed a finger through the stream at my side. "No...On second thought, I won't be wandering in circles out here when I'm king."

*If I ever am king after this.*

I looked up at the sky--or tried to. I hoped it grew this dim in the forest long before nightfall, and I still had time to find my way back. Then again...did the

nocturnal creatures come out just when it grew dark, or when the sun actually set?

Rocks stabbed at me through my pants. I stood back up and tried a different place. No better. Something tickled the back of my hand. I gave a little yelp and brushed the spider off. I stood up again, feeling itchy all over. A chill wind blew. I rubbed my arms, wondering just how far I was from...whatever that place was called. Camp?

I studied the stream. Brilliant red and yellow flowers peeked out from under tangled grasses along either side.

"I dub thee Poppy-Garland," I said out loud, just for the sake of breaking the silence.

"Kind of a strange name for a brook, isn't it?"

I whirled. Alivia Stylwell stood with one hand on her hip, the other holding a bucket. I reddened, feeling relieved and disgusted at the same time.

"Maybe," I said, "But I may call something anything I like."

"You could at least call it something that makes sense," Alivia said "There are no poppies to be seen."

"Then what are those?" I gestured to the flowers.

She bent down. I fought a temptation to push her into the stream. "Those, as a matter-of-fact, are Heartsease.

Pansies. Which," she looked up at me, "look nothing like poppies."

"I wouldn't know," I said, blushing again. "I don't study flowers."

"Sometimes I wonder what you Regal people do study." Alivia filled the bucket with water. I scowled.

"Swordsmanship, for one," I emphasized 'swordsmanship'. Alivia didn't seem to notice. She straightened up.

"Are you lost?"

"What?" I blinked, taken aback. Alivia rolled her eyes.

"I said 'are you lost?'"

"Ah...no, of course not! What made you think that?"

"Well, nobody has seen you for hours," Alivia shrugged. "It sounded suspiciously like losing your way. I suppose you could find your way from here?"

"Certainly."

"Well then," Alivia swept her arm. "Lead on, soldier. Let us return."

"Uh..." I hesitated. "What for?"

"Maybe I am lost and need your help."

I crossed my arms. "Maybe I don't stoop to assist peasants. And maybe I like it here."

Alivia's eyes flashed. "Well then, farewell your Imperial Majesty. I shall depart," She did a deep exaggerated curtsy--it's a wonder she didn't fall over--and flounced away. I stood there a moment longer, fighting with myself.

"Wait!" I called, hurrying after her. She didn't look at me when I came up beside her. "I...uh...changed my mind." I said, "About coming back, I mean." She didn't say anything. I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering. My legs felt weak and trembly.

My cloak caught in some bushes. I turned and yanked on it, but the more I pulled, the more entangled it got. I disturbed a snake, and it slithered away. An exasperated sigh came from behind me. Alivia stepped up, and with a single jerk, freed my cloak.

"You didn't find a single thing to eat today, did you?" she asked.

"Of course not! There's nothing to eat here."

"Indeed," Alivia bent down and yanked a plant up. "Shallot," she said, tossing it at me. "Eat hearty."

I wrinkled my nose at the plant, disgusted, and considered throwing it into some bushes. I wondered if Alivia would give me something poisonous. My hunger overcame me though, considering I hadn't eaten all day. I followed Alivia as I brushed dirt off a leaf and nibbled at it, cringing a little at the sharp taste. I hurried up to walk by Alivia.

"You and your mother aren't from around here, are you?" I asked.

Alivia glanced at me.

"We're Cysaanian," She said, looking straight ahead.

"I thought so. About your mother, anyway," I said "But you sure don't look like you're from Cysaan. And why are you in Thertine anyway?"

Alivia gave an aggravated sigh. "My family, my business. I don't need to tell you."

"You do too! I'm your Prince!" I said, grabbing her arm. Alivia whirled around and slapped me. Not hard, but so unexpected that I let go of her.

"You are not my 'prince'," she said, "Very well then, I am only half Cysaanian in blood, and my father was from Thertine. We live in this horrid country--"

"Horrid!" I glared at her. She ignored me.

"--because my Cysaanians know what rubbish is going on in Thertine and didn't want her to marry a man from it so we are unwelcome in Cysaan. There. Satisfied? And don't go spreading it around either."

I stared at her a moment before I could find my voice. I started to say 'I can tell whomever I like,' but the fiery look in her eyes stopped me.

"Uh, sure," I said, "No problem."

We went on in silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jeanie nudged me. I strode out into the road. "Stop where you are!" I commanded. The group of soldiers laughed.

"Oh, that's fancy," One chuckled, eyeing me. "You telling us to stop. Out of my way!" He pushed me. I drew my sword.

"Half-wit!" I shouted. "Do you not know me?"

"Who're you calling half-wit?" He growled, drawing his own sword. A soldier from behind him shouted

"Lars, wait! It is the Prince!" Recognition dawned in my soldier's eyes.

"Heaven forgive me!" he cried, dropping to one knee.

"I swear to God, Prince, I did not know you!"

"That's obvious," I glared at him.

"I crave your indulgence, disregard this incident.  
You've been missing--"

"Silence!" I waved at the other soldiers. "You there,  
come here!" they obeyed. "Now, all of you lay down your  
weapons!"

"Sire--!" "Your majesty--!" "What??"

*"Lay down your weapons!"*

Wonder in their faces, they did as I said. I brushed  
my hair back from my face. Silent as a shadow, and more  
invisible than one, Jeanie and the others spread.

"Now," I said, "Tell me what you know of my father."

"...Prince...?"

I looked at the one who had spoken. "Since you seem so  
eager to talk," I said, "You may go first."

"I don't know what you mean, Prince."

"Are you aware of what my Father is doing?"

"No, Prince."

"Really?" From behind the soldiers, a hand emerged  
from some bushes, waved, then disappeared.

"I don't know..." the poor man stammered "Is there  
something specific you're thinking of?"

"Indeed." I tapped the ground with my sword. "For instance, the new slave trade, the increased tax, and the friendliness toward Leamshi."

"What? Leamshi? I am aware of the others, Sire, but--" he bowled over onto the ground. With startled yells, the others automatically grasped for their weapons that were no longer there. That gave Ishmael and his gang enough time to snatch them up from the ground. The soldiers were soon under control, three people to each of them.

"Isn't it interesting what they will do when I tell them too?" I asked Ishmael. He grinned and twirled his new sword. I addressed the soldiers. "Do you remember what I said a minute ago about my Father's doings? They're all true, and terribly suspicious. That's why I'm here. He needs to be stopped. I'm giving you the chance to join up here."

No one spoke.

"I suspected as much, ." I said "Thank you for the weapons. We'll be on our way now." I started to turn around. Ishmael stopped me.

"What're you doin'? That's it?" He whispered.

"What do you mean? What else is there to do?"

"We can't just let 'em go," Ishmael protested.

"Then what do you suggest?" I crossed my arms, trying to stare him down.

"Killing 'em."

"For shame!" I pulled away from him, angry and confused at this new point of Ishmael's personality. "What good would that do?"

"Less to fight later," He looked down at me, expressionless.

"I won't murder my Father's soldiers!" I turned away from him.

"Why? So they can murder more of us?"

"I said what I meant," I insisted "I'm done talking about this."

Ishmael frowned at me, but signaled to his followers. They released the soldiers.

"Return to your Lord," I said to them.

"But sire," One protested "What are we to tell him?"

"The truth of course," I said, "The truth," Ishmael's gang followed me into the forest.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What was *that*?" I demanded of Ishmael. He kicked at some leaves.

"What was what?"

"Th-that!" I spluttered in anger "Wanting to kill those soldiers! They were unarmed! And they hadn't *done* anything!"

"They do plenty." Ishmael said "All of 'em."

"Well--well--!" I stamped a foot. "I don't want a war! Killing them would be asking for one! We're not *murderers!*" Ishmael looked at me. "A-at least, I'm not," I stammered. "I...uh...are...?"

Ishmael sighed. "Yeah, I've done it before. Fighting is kind of a...necessity when you live like I do. It's become a habit...I'm...I'm sorry."

"I can't believe I'm working with people like this." I moaned. Ishmael kept talking.

"My family used to be...uh...infamous thieves, let's say. They--we, I guess--encouraged fighting." He pointed to his eye. "I got this when I was five. The merchant's boy had nice little bag of coppers. But he also had a knife." I stared at Ishmael. "Eventually," he said "We were caught. My grandfather, aunt, and I were the only ones who got away," Ishmael looked at the ground. "After that, I...met a blind beggar. He set me...right, I suppose you could say. I tried to earn a living, but..." he looked up at me. "'Vagabond', 'dirty, lying, thieving li'l urchin', 'rogue',

even 'evil-eye' were some of the titles I was given," To my extreme surprise, Ishmael chuckled. "I guess I can't really blame 'em for 'evil-eye', can I?" He grinned at me.

I didn't laugh, starting to feel very uncomfortable. "Uh...yeah...well..." I mumbled.

"Oh, there you two are!" we turned to see Jeanie coming up. "We need to start rounds with the people. I don't think the King will simply sit back and let us roam free much longer."

"Yes ma'am!" Ishmael snapped to attention and gave a comical salute.

Jeanie jerked her head. "Sire, you're with me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now don't you act all high-and-mighty, Colin," Jeanie murmured as we stepped up to the backdoor of the farmhouse.

"But I'm the--" I started.

"That's precisely the point." Jeanie said, "We're supposed to be helping these people. If they're going to trust you, you need to be kind."

"I *am* kind."

Jeanie looked at me. "If I may say so, you're not. You're a snobby, stuck-up, unpleasant-to-be-around sort of fellow."

I came infinitely close to clobbering her. "I could have you hanged for that!"

"You could have me hanged for a lot of things," Jeanie said, rapping on the door. "Unfortunately for you, you're here, and not at the castle. I'll give you this, though; you agreeing to come here is promising."

"I should think so--" I started. The door opened. A tired-looking woman stood in the doorway.

"Yes? Who are you?" she droned out, looking as if she were beyond caring.

"Please, ma'am," Jeanie said, "We need to ask you a favor."

"You poor girl," the woman said, her look softening. "Are you hungry? I don't have much to spare but--"

"Ma'am," Jeanie interrupted, smiling. "Before you decide to feed us there's something you need to know."

"Yes?"

"We're..." Jeanie glanced at me "A rebellion."

The woman looked confused. "You're a which?"

"Rebellion," Jeanie repeated. "We're rebelling against the King." The woman's eyes widened. "There are a large number of us already."

"You're part of it?" gasped the woman, "At your age?"

"Please don't judge me by my age," Jeanie said. I noticed she didn't mention about her being in charge of the whole thing. "The reason we're here," Jeanie continued, "Is we need supplies. We understand you don't have much, but if you could spare anything..."

"Child," the woman sighed, "What hope has a rebellion against the King? He's too strong, not to mention merciless. I don't see how you could succeed."

Jeanie grinned. "We didn't either. But now..." she looked at me. I spoke up.

"I am Prince Colin,"

The woman's jaw dropped. "Wh-what?" she gasped "They said you'd been kidnapped! Imagine, twice in a single week--"

"Well I wasn't," I said. Jeanie jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow. I coughed. "Ma'am,"

"Th-this isn't a prank of some kind?" the woman gripped the doorframe. "Not some childish trick?"

"Trick?" I started "Why, you--Ow!" I rubbed my side, glaring at Jeanie.

"It's the truth ma'am." She said. The woman studied at me. "You certainly look it..." she murmured.

"Can you help us, ma'am?" Jeanie asked. The woman clapped her hands.

"Oh, yes! Of course of course! Wait here a moment!" The woman disappeared inside.

"Take easy, would you?" I muttered, still rubbing my side.

"No." she whispered back. The woman returned and held out a small sack of potatoes.

"I'm sorry...it's all I could spare."

"This is wonderful." Jeanie smiled at the woman. "Thank you!" She poked me.

"Yes...er...thanks," I mumbled, poking her back.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Three more," Travis said, smiling. "We have three more."

"Good," I closed my eyes, wishing for a nap.

"And more suppliers too," Travis continued.

"Nice," I sighed, opening my eyes again. "How much can they add?"

"I don't know."

"I thought you were supposed to keep track of that?" I straightened.

"I am. They didn't tell me. They don't know either."

"Oh," I noticed a jagged scar running across Travis's left palm. He rubbed it with his other hand. "Say, where did you get that?" I asked. Travis glanced at his hand, and then hid it behind his back.

"Barbed wire." He said, not meeting my eyes. "There was a fire...I need to go check with Jeanie about the plots." He hurried off, slipping his hand into a pocket.

I frowned after him. Fire? What did barbed wire have to do with fire? I shrugged, sighing again. Three weeks, goodness knows how many members, supplies aplenty...we weren't doing that bad. But I was so *tired*...Thertine buzzed with curiosity and excitement. Lords fumed and stormed and demanded a change. I wondered how my Father handled all this. I wondered how he felt.

I decided not to think about that. One of our members had been hurt badly in a 'raid' on soldiers. He died soon after. 'Less to fight later,' Ishmael had said. I didn't want it to come to that. Rebellion, sure. Raids, why not? Anger, of course! But killing I wouldn't stand.

I shook myself and headed off to find Jeanie. I wanted to be around somebody right now. Anybody. I received a few small bows as I passed people, but most just ignored me. It

made me angry, but I figured there wasn't really anything I could do.

"Jarius!" Jeanie's voice cried. I turned toward it. "Oh, Jarius! I didn't know you were around here!" Jeanie clasped the hand of a boy a bit taller than her. I stopped. All peasants were ragged, especially the beggars, but this...the boy's black hair draped over his eyes, hiding a good deal of his face. He was barefoot and filthy, and what he wore looked more like an old ripped curtain than clothes.

Jeanie turned and saw me. "Colin!" she cried, beaming, "Come here!" I obeyed, much against my will. "Jarius," said Jeanie, "This is Colin--the Prince of Thertine."

Jarius looked at me. No, he didn't merely look, he didn't even stare; he *bored* at me with his dark eyes. What I could see of them.

"Colin, this is Jarius. I met him years ago on the road." I nodded. Once. "Will neither of you say anything?" Jeanie asked, looking confused. Jarius looked away. "Oh, come on." Jeanie said, "You could at least say 'Hi'."

"I could," I said, "But I don't want to at the moment."

Jeanie frowned "Why not?"

"Who is this person?" I asked her.

"I told you. Jarius."

"Jarius who?"

"Colin, what are you getting at?" Jeanie crossed her arms. "You don't know anybody else's last name around here."

"I don't like the look of him."

"Colin!"

Jarius's head snapped back around. "I am Jarius." he grated out, his voice low. "And that's all you need to know."

"No," I said, "What's your last name?" Then I added, mocking "If you have one."

"My name is my own business. Prince." Under normal circumstances, 'Prince' would have been added as a sign of respect. But he scorned me. I became convinced of it when Jeanie said

"Jarius..."

"Yes, I'm the Prince" I said, "Which is why I have the authority to demand of you your last name."

"Please..." Jeanie said

"You have no authority over me." Jarius said, his black eyes glittering.

"You're walking on thin ice!" I warned.

"Really?" Jarius turned to fully face me. "To me it looks like solid ground."

"Is that a challenge?" I demanded.

"If you wish to take it that way."

"Then I take it that way, and I accept it, and you are obliged to answer!"

"Very well then." Jarius backed away a few steps. "You can fight me if you dare."

"I dare!"

"Stop it!" Jeanie yelled, stepping between us.

"Jarius, please," she said to him. Jarius gave me a cold glance, and turned away. "Colin, can I see you a minute?" Jeanie yanked me a few feet away. "That was completely uncalled for!" she hissed.

"I'm the Prince. I can do whatever I want."

"Colin! I thought you wanted to help your people!"

"I do,"

"Then act like it!"

"I am!"

Jeanie stared at me with disbelief. "Oh, right," she paused, then said, "Actually try, Colin, would you?" she went back to Jarius. I went back to moping.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Colin?"

"What," I looked with annoyance at Travis.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Oh," He came and sat beside me. "Jarius isn't so bad," he said, starting to rub his left palm.

"Whatever," I eyed his hand.

"I've talked to him."

"Sure."

"Really, Col," Travis shifted his weight. "He doesn't talk much. I think he's lonely."

I snorted. "You would think that, Trav."

Travis sighed. "I tried to find out what's bothering him."

"Bothering him."

"Yes. He's always staring into space or at the ground. He wouldn't say anything when I asked him."

"Maybe he just wants to be left alone."

"I know."

"You know what?"

"That he wants to be left alone. Colin, could you try to be friends with him?"

"Friends with him?"

"Yes, why not?"

"He didn't exactly make that easy before."

"You don't--I mean, that was just the first time."

"And the last," I grumbled "Leave me alone."

"Col--"

"I said leave me alone!" I stood and walked away.

"Colin!"

"What?" I turned. Alivia Stylwell ran up to me,

"Do you know where Jeanie is?"

"No...what's wrong?"

"We went out on the rounds; not a single farmer could contribute."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. They said they didn't have anything to spare and slammed the door in our faces."

"What...did they say anything as to why?"

"No. They seemed frightened out of their wits."

"Come on, there's got to be some reason..."

"I don't know."

"Jeanie!" I called, half running. "Jeanie!"

"What?" Jeanie stood up, Ishmael beside her.

"What're you yellin' about?" he asked.

I gestured to Alivia.

"We're out, Jeanie. Everyone's said they can't contribute," she said

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I don't know. The King must be doing something."

"Darn," Jeanie thought a moment, "All right. We need to send some people to villages...preferably Hesston to see what we can find out."

"I'll go to Hesston," I volunteered.

"Colin," Alivia rolled her eyes "That's your home town. If somebody's going to recognize you, it'll be there."

"I know!" I said, "But I know best how to converse with Higher people. I'd mess up with peasants."

"Right," Jeanie said.

"I'm hungry," Ishmael commented.

"Too bad," Alivia said "Mama won't let you have anything till dark."

Jeanie sighed a little. "Ishmael, can't you stay on subject?" She turned to Alivia and me, giving an amused smile and a slight eye-roll that only we could see.

"Alivia, how about you go with Colin?"

Alivia eyed me, "So long as he minds his manners."

I scowled.

"Ishmael, could you--" Jeanie turned toward Ishmael. He wasn't there. "Where'd he go?" she started. A loud crack echoed across the clearing, followed immediately by a yelp.

I spun around to see the missing person streaking toward us. Ishmael skidded to a stop when he reached us, blowing on an impressive welt on his knuckles.

"What on earth did you do, Mal?" I asked.

Ishmael glanced behind him. "...let's just say Ronelle has a better eye on her wares than most of the merchants I've met."

Alivia burst out laughing.

## Chapter 4

"How do I look?" I asked, pulling my hood down lower. Alivia glanced at me.

"Like a mysterious stranger."

I frowned and pushed the hood back up. "How about now?"

"Like a fairly wealthy peasant who has a striking resemblance to Prince Colin."

"Great," I kicked a pebble and it skittered off the path.

Alivia patted my arm. "Don't worry, dearie, I don't think anyone will suspect."

I slapped her hand away. "Easy for you to say," I said. "If anybody recognizes you, it will just be as the pretty seamstress's daughter."

"Humph!" Alivia frowned and ran her fingers through her hair, but even she couldn't hide the small tint of blush that lighted her cheek.

Travis took no notice of our bickering, humming to himself, and looking as beggar-ish as he could. Which was good, as that was the plan. Alivia would converse with the peasants, I with the merchants, and Travis would beg, as he had plenty of experience, and listen for anybody to make any comments on sudden food shortages.

I sighed and kicked at another pebble. Raising my eyes, I caught sight of the Hesston gate. My heart jumped as a cart rumbled up from behind us. Alivia tugged on my sleeve and we stepped out of the way. We kept on a minute later. We were close enough to the gates to see the glint of the guards' helmets.

"Good night, Colin. Don't be so tense. You look like a fugitive."

I tried to relax my facial expression, muttering. "I am a fugitive."

"That's precisely my point. Travis," Alivia stopped. "I think you'd better get away from us now."

Travis nodded and went on ahead of us. Alivia and I waited a moment before continuing.

"I've never had need to act before," I said, eyeing the soldiers. "What do I do?"

"Don't look at them, for one," Alivia said. I shifted my eyes away. "Pretend they're not there."

I frowned. "Why wouldn't they be there?"

"Colin, that's why I told you to pretend."

"But then I'd look confused..."

"Unbelievable..." Alivia sighed, "Pretend you don't care less whether they're there or not."

"Okay..." I swung my arms at my sides, looking here and there at nothing in particular.

"If that's the best you can do," Alivia shrugged and stepped away from me. I started to follow her, then shook myself and continued in my own direction.

We would meet back at noon.

\* \* \* \* \*

I shifted from foot to foot, sometimes leaning against the wall, sometimes giving little smiles to passersby, wishing I had a pastry, wiping the sweat that trickled down my forehead.

*This is getting tedious.* I thought as the shopkeeper across the street gave me a third suspicious glance. I considered giving him an apologetic smile, and decided against it. He didn't own this wall, and I had no reason to apologize.

I caught sight of Alivia walking down the path.

*Thank goodness.*

I hurried after her. "Where on earth have you been?" I demanded. "Where's Travis?"

Alivia jerked her head back. "He's behind me."

"I ask you again; where have you been? I've waited and waited--"

"Patience, dear Prince, patience." Alivia glanced over her shoulder. "Wait till we're outside."

"What's wrong?" I asked, stepping around a puddle.

"Wrong? Who said anything was wrong?" Alivia whirled around. "That's ours!"

I spun around. Alivia held ragged girl by the hair.

"If you had asked first," said Alivia, "I would have gladly given you a few." Alivia held out her other hand, beckoning with her fingers. With a dark scowl, the girl flung several coins at us. Alivia released her, and the girl scuttled back into the crowd. People around us dove for the coins, but Alivia snatched them up first.

"Thank you very much," she said to the peasants with an over-sweet smile. "But I can retrieve money myself," Her comment was returned with blank stares, and the people, muttering, went back to whatever they were doing.

Alivia grabbed my wrist and yanked me through the city gate.

"Hey! Ow! Stop it!" I jerked my hand from hers.

"Where'd that money come from?"

"Look in your pocket," Alivia stormed up a small hillside with me panting after her, "and you'll find out," She dropped down onto the ground with a thud.

I came up empty. "They're mine?" it was both a question and a statement. I held out my hand. Alivia dropped them into my palm, glaring up at the sky. I pocketed the coins, frowning. "Hey--"

"Hay is for goats."

I blinked. "What?"

"Nothing."

"What are you so irritable for?" I crossed my arms.

"You shouldn't have been carrying money like that for one," Alivia said. "That was very conspicuous."

I fingered one of the coins. "Sorry. I don't know anything about acting inconspicuous."

Travis came up over the hill. Alivia sat up. "What did you find?" she asked.

"Sudden tax increase," Travis said, sitting beside Alivia. "They don't even have enough to store anymore."

Alivia looked at me.

"Same here," I said.

"Same with me, too," Alivia said. "So our new burning question is: why?"

"Oh, yes, like we didn't know that," I said, then added, "It's simple; he's making sure we don't have any new members, or any supplies."

"How do--" Alivia started.

"My Father's arresting anyone suspected of helping us," I interrupted, "Plus cutting off our food supply for insurance."

"It doesn't really matter why, does it?" Travis asked.  
"We still have to do something."

"Right, Trav," Alivia stood, brushing her skirt off.  
"Let's get back to camp."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jeanie sighed. "Well, we couldn't hope to be left  
alone forever,"

"Ali? Ali!"

Alivia turned. "Yes, Mama?"

Ronelle gestured. "Come here a moment. Stay put, the  
rest of you!"

Worry crossed Alivia's face, and she scrambled up to  
go to her mother. Jeanie stood, eyes following them as they  
hurried away.

"Back to our problem..." I said. Jeanie sat back down,  
still looking in the direction Alivia and Ronelle had gone.  
"We can't just stay here, can we?" I asked, hoping to prod  
the discussion back into the spotlight.

"What else would we do?" Robert, a member of Ishmael's  
gang, asked.

"I don't know." I looked toward Jeanie. "Aren't you  
the one with all the bright ideas?" I asked, "Say  
something."

"Well, we could go to the Cysaanian boarder."

"You mean the mountains?" Ishmael scratched the back of his neck. "What for?"

"We might find some sympathizers there, not to mention provisions."

"We don't need to go yet, do we?" I asked, not liking the idea of running away; even if it was just to 'restock'.

"That's just it. We're running out. Fast."

I frowned. "I thought we were being careful."

"'Careful' doesn't make them last forever. But still, I was sure we had more than we do..."

"Lassie!" Ronelle ran up. "We have a problem," She took a deep breath. "A sickness."

My stomach twisted.

"What is it?" Jeanie jumped up.

Ronelle held up her hands in a helpless gesture. "I don't know. Three have it now."

"Can I see it?"

Ronelle hesitated. "If you want, but if I were you I'd keep a distance."

I hopped up. "I'm coming too."

"All right, but just you two."

Ronelle led the way through the trees, gathering her skirts in one hand and stepping over, under, and around, with nimble little springs.

We came to a small clearing. Alivia crouched over somebody; when she caught sight of us she straightened.

Ronelle held a hand up. Jeanie and I halted.

"I think it's what the Mortonson's had, Mama," Alivia whispered, not to disturb the motionless personnel.

"Why is that?" Ronelle stepped over to her. They bent over a person together. I couldn't hear what they said. Jeanie looked around the clearing.

"What do you suppose we do, Colin?" she asked. I shrugged.

Ronelle tapped my arm. "Lad, would you go with Ali?"

I blinked. "Uh...sure. What for?"

"Come on," Alivia gestured to me. I followed her.

"What are we doing, if I'm allowed to know?" I asked.

"We're gathering plants," Alivia said.

"What for?"

"'What for'? Colin, just how thick are you?" Alivia pushed plant leaves aside, examining the ground.

"Very," I eyed her. "If you told me what you were looking for, maybe I could help."

"I doubt it."

I kicked at the dirt. "Well, I could try."

Alivia continued on ahead. "Well then, look for bright pink blossom clusters with fern-like leaves."

I scanned the area. "Negative,"

"What?"

"Never mind,"

I soon stopped looking, and just followed Alivia like an obedient dog. I began to wonder why Ronelle wanted me to come with her in the first place.

"Oh!" I said to myself, bending down and yanking up a plant.

"What did you say?" Alivia looked up at me, twigs caught in her hair.

"Nothing," I said. Alivia's eyes brightened at the plant in my hand.

"You found shallot!"

"Yes...I'm hungry. So?"

"So you recognized the plant I gave you that first day. So you're not completely hopeless."

"Thanks," I grumbled, picking at the leaves.

Hours passed. At least I thought it was hours. I dragged my feet, the only thing preventing me from asking

for a rest was the humiliation of giving out before a girl did. Alivia would get a kick out of that.

"Alivia?" I asked at last.

"Hm?" Alivia answered in an absent-minded way, pulling some tree branches out of her way.

"I've been thinking--"

"A miracle."

I chose to ignore that comment. "I was wondering, do you know what happened to Travis?"

Alivia looked over her shoulder at me. "What do you mean?"

"Has he always been so...hunted looking?"

"Why do you want to know?" Alivia peered at me. "I met him about the same time you did, Col. Why would I know anymore than you?"

"Because," A slight flush warmed my face, "You've talked to him. You can talk to everybody. I can't."

"And you want to?"

My face grew warmer. I scuffed the ground with the toe of my boot and didn't answer.

"I'll tell him that," said Alivia, "And then you can ask him." I looked up. A small smile, drifted across Alivia's face. "You know," she said, her head tilted. "I

really do think you're--" she cut herself off. "Yes! Hurrah!" Alivia cried, diving into some bushes.

"Huh?" I shook myself, running up to her. "Ali, what are..." I stopped. I'd never called her 'Ali' before.

Alivia didn't seem to notice.

"I found it!" she cried, backing out of the underbrush and turning a shining face to me. "See?" She parted the branches.

"Um...see what?" I asked.

Alivia pointed at a tall bushy plant with small white flowers. "Feverfew," She grinned, "Hold these branches, would you?" I grabbed at the thorny twigs. Alivia jerked off several small twigs covered with the flowers and put them in her basket.

She stood up. "Come on, now we've--good night, we've found the jackpot!" Alivia crowed, skipping over to another spot.

"What?" I followed her, shoulders sagging.

"Pokeweed," She said, plucking berries off the plant. Alivia turned to me, brushing hair from her face. "I think we've got enough now." She stood for a moment, looking all around.

"What are you doing?" I moaned.

"Memorizing this place. Come on, let's get back to camp."

I nodded, relieved. My shallot hadn't been very filling.

Not five minutes later, I spotted bright pink. "Look," I said, pointing. Alivia raised an eyebrow.

"Hmmm...All at the same time. Strange."

"Meaning...?" I asked as she bent down.

"You found yarrow," Alivia added the pink blossoms to her basket. "Now we've certainly got enough. Come on, let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mama?" Alivia hurried through the clearing.

"Oh, Ali, Colin, thank goodness you're back," Ronelle took the basket from Alivia. "Thank you. Four more are down."

"*Four?*" I gasped.

Ronelle nodded. "One of them is Jerry Cruning--the first one to come down."

"He--he has it again?" stammered Alivia.

"Aye. It's worse this time. Come and see."

I followed Ronelle and Alivia to a small boy. His skin was a ghastly yellow, beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Jerry?" Ronelle bent down next to him, touching his forehead. The boy's eyes opened. They too had an unnatural yellowish tint.

"My head hurts," The boy whimpered.

"Aye, I know," Ronelle said.

"Mama, we found feverfew," Alivia said, digging around in the basket.

*We?*

"Here," She held out the small branches. Ronelle took them. As she plucked the leaves off, the air filled with a strong pungent smell. I coughed, eyes watering. Ronelle looked at me. "You can go if you want, Lad."

I nodded, grateful, and stumbled off.

I found Jeanie sitting against a tree, sleeping. I sat down beside her. I stood back up a moment later.

"Good heavens," I grumbled to myself, "I'll never be comfortable out here." I scratched my cheek. When my hand came away, stringy black grime was smeared across my fingertips. I frowned, wiped my hand off on my shirt, and then rubbed the rest of the crushed mosquito from my cheek.

Movement caught the corner of my eye. I turned my head. At the sight of me, Jarius froze. His eyes flashed from me to Jeanie, and he spun around and went back the way he had come.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't see what good we're doing by staying here."

I stepped forward from the trees. Jarius leaned forward in a look of intense concentration. His low voice continued. "The sickness--whatever it is--has been here for five days now. More people are coming down with it--our situation is just getting worse--" He looked up and saw me. His eyes hardened; his face becoming an unreadable mask. Jeanie turned.

"Oh good, you're here. Come sit down." She patted the space next to her. I obeyed. Jarius, on the other side of Jeanie, started to stand.

"Where are you going?" She asked. Jarius stopped.

"I--" he looked at me.

"Jarius? Something wrong?" Jeanie tilted her head up to look at him.

Jarius sat back down with a thud, looking at the ground.

"You were saying?" Jeanie said. Jarius shook his head and didn't answer. With a frown, Jeanie turned to me. "And what say you?"

"The mountains, I guess." I said, "Like," I glanced at Jarius, "he said, we're not doing much good here anymore and the longer we wait the more people that come down with this...thing..." I scratched the mosquito bite on my cheek.

"And dying," Added Ishmael.

"Dying?"

"Jerry Cruning. Sarah Mente."

Jeanie pondered a moment. "Mal, could you go ask Ronelle if the sick are able to travel?"

Ishmael jumped up. A minute later, he came running back. "Ro says they can, but it'll be slow goin'."

"And if we wait, more people will come down with it," I added.

Jeanie nodded. "Right. Let's do it. Are you all in agreement?" Yes's and head-nods went around the small council circle. Except for one. "Jarius?" He nodded. Once. A jerky movement.

I stood up. "Let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

I hauled a thick branch up from the ground. A sharp stump of a twig scraped my hand. I sucked in my breath and accidentally dropped the branch. Again.

"For the love of--" I straightened, gritting my teeth. Forget it. It could continue to lie there and rot. I'd simply find other branches.

Some movement caught the corner of my eye. I turned. Jarius. I looked away from him and walked toward a promising branch. I bent over to pick it up. Maybe he would to away. Jarius's gaze did all but bore a hole in my back.

He didn't leave.

I picked up more wood. "What do you want?" I asked at last.

"Nothing," his breath hit my cheek.

"Ahh!" I jumped, startled. Jarius stood right beside me.

"Did I scare you, prince?" he looked at me, hands hanging motionless at his sides. "Do I scare you?"

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I wanted to walk away from Jarius. But how could you walk away after a question like that? "No," I lied. Those eyes were inky black wells. Anything could come from them. Anything.

He continued to look at me. Would he not go away? "You are a liar," said Jarius.

"You don't scare me," I said.

"I didn't mean that. You are a liar. Your father is a liar. You're all liars."

"Well," I tried to act nonchalant, "Aren't we all-knowing today? What's the matter? Didn't you get enough sleep last night?" I mentally kicked myself.

*Wrong thing to say, Colin. Wrong thing to say!*

Jarius's eyes glittered. "No. I did not. I never do." He frowned, looking confused. "I never do..." He jerked, and his face once again became a mask. "You are a play-actor." He said.

"Isn't that the same thing as a liar?"

Jarius continued to look at me. "You think you are great, don't you?"

"I-" I started to answer.

"You are not," Jarius interrupted. "You kill. You destroy. You never listen. It's because of you I am here now."

"Stop blaming it on me!" I yelled, surprising myself. "It wasn't me! I'm here, aren't I?" Adrenaline started to build up in me. I breathed hard. I wasn't just scared of

him, I realized. I was downright terrified. I edged away from him, feeling like a cornered animal. "What do you know? I've never had contact with the real world. I could never prevent anything, never do anything. But I'm trying now, all right? I'm going to be king!"

Jarius didn't change his expression. "You are no king."

My temper broke. I swung my largest branch like a club. Jarius ducked, slipped to the side, and pounced. I staggered sideways with the impact. I dropped the stick. Jarius held onto me like a leech. I twisted, grabbing at him.

"Get off of me, you—" I flung myself to the left, smashing Jarius into a tree. He growled low in his throat, his hands slipping. I pushed away from him. Jarius crouched on the ground.

"That...was...way out of line," I gasped,

"You are no king," said Jarius again, "Not really. You are just like your father, and the ones before him. I don't trust you."

I clenched my fists. "Jeanie does."

"Yes. Jeanie," For an instant, something akin to pain flitted across his face. It vanished before I could

completely take it in. "Yes," said Jarius again, "I know Jeanie does. But we are not talking about Jeanie, are we?"

"I must say," I said, "I do begin to doubt her judgment, considering she's friends with you."

Jarius snarled and leaped at me. I jumped backwards, but not far enough. Jarius grabbed my hair and yanked my head sideways. Pain exploded at the side of my mouth. I spun around, grabbed Jarius by the middle, and threw him onto the ground. Blood streamed from my lip. Jarius jumped back up. I flew at him. We both toppled over onto the ground, limbs flailing, hands clawing.

Jarius suddenly rolled away from me and got to his feet. I jumped up too, and started for him again. Jarius jerked one hand up, the other snatching a sheathless dagger from somewhere in his clothing. I froze.

"You realize I could have used this? I take my revenge, one person at a time," Jarius held the dagger up. "I don't trust you. I'm watching you, prince." With that he turned around and ran.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our slow procession wended through grassy plains. We were avoiding all civilization, and consequently the healthy hadn't eaten all day. Insects buzzed in the tall

grass. I kept disturbing grasshoppers, and they would hop onto my boots, arms, shoulders. Some were as long as my pointer finger. I slapped them away, thinking about the fight with Jarius. I didn't remember seeing him since then, which was fine with me. And that threat...the comment about taking revenge, 'one person at a time'. What kind of human being was he? How could Jeanie stand being around him? I hadn't told her about the fight, and if she noticed my broken lip and other minor injuries, she hadn't said anything.

I sighed. My head pounded. The area around and behind my eyes hurt. My legs trembled as if with exhaustion, but we hadn't been walking all that long yet today. I'd felt woozy the day we'd first set out too, but I'd gotten over it by the yesterday morning.

A shout came from up ahead. I lifted my eyes. A scout Jeanie had sent when we first set out two days ago came running toward us.

Jeanie picked up her pace. "Is that you, Landan?"

Landan stopped in front of us. "An army..." he gasped "Soldiers..."

Nausea struck me like a wave. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck.

"Army?" Jeanie looked startled. "What army?" Landan shook his head, "No, not army..." he corrected himself. "Camp...of the King...they're just sitting...a day's walk..."

My back ached.

"Do you know what they would be doing?" Jeanie was talking to me. My eyes wouldn't focus. I squeezed them shut for a moment and opened them again. I shook my head.

"Could be that they're waiting to meet someone." I mumbled, rubbing my forehead.

"Who would they be waiting to meet?" Jeanie asked. I shrugged and closed my eyes, scratching at the mosquito bite.

"Could we get around them?" Jeanie asked the scout.

"Not without going long out of our way." Landan said. "They have people posted all over the place. It's like they're afraid of discovery."

"I don't know if we could go around, then. It'd take too long." Jeanie looked behind at the long strangling line, which was welcoming the unexpected rest. "But we can't go back either. And what would they be doing? Colin?"

My vision swam. "I..."

"Colin?"

I think she tried to catch me.

\* \* \* \* \*

I blinked, focusing my vision. Black sky. My head throbbed. "Oh..." I closed my eyes.

"Colin? Are you awake?"

I opened my eyes again. "Unconscious twice in a single month. Imagine that," I said to Alivia.

"What? Are you delirious?" Alivia said it to herself more than to me.

"No," I said, brushing her hand off my forehead. The world turned. "Whoo..." I waited till it stopped, then asked, "How am I?"

"You're not as bad as some," Alivia said, "Though you've been in unconcious for a while. That's what's puzzling. You're having the symptoms of a relapse."

"A wh..." Nausea hit me, and I didn't finish.

"This sickness--yellow fever, Mama and I call it--sometimes when people catch it, they feel sick briefly, seem to get better, then it comes back worse than before."

I lay there looking up into the sky. Then her words sunk in.

"I did feel funny yesterday...was it yesterday? No, the day before...wait..."

Alivia interrupted me. "Funny as in...?"

"Sick."

Alivia smacked her forehead. "Good night, Colin! Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"I didn't know I was supposed to."

"Oh, right. I suppose it never occurred to your Royal Highness that you should report feeling ill while yellow fever is running around."

"Watch your tongue, girl."

"Well! If that isn't...!" Alivia stood up, ruffling her skirt. "Fine! Just *be* that way!"

"I will, thank you."

"You're welcome!" Alivia turned and stomped out of my line of vision.

I closed my eyes. I began to regret snapping at Alivia-the-nurse when my stomach wouldn't let me sleep. I turned onto my side and vomited.

A moment later someone touched my arm. "I'm only giving you this because Mama said too." Alivia said pushing a rough wooden cup into my hand.

I started to drink out of it. I coughed and spluttered at the bitter taste.

"Don't you dare spit it out."

"Sorry," I coughed. I managed to drink the rest of it.

"Use this if you're gonna throw up again," Alivia took the cup and handed me a rough basket. The foul smell coming from it made me guess someone had already used it. "'now try to get some sleep' as a nurse would say." Alivia said.

"Aren't you a nurse?"

"Yes, but that was only the nurse part of me talking. My other self is still mad at you."

"Oh," I decided to try and ask her. "How long was I unconscious?"

"Two days."

"Have we decided what to do?"

"No," Alivia walked away before I could ask her more questions. I rolled back over.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I woke up, it was still dark. Or, more likely, dark again. Or perhaps dark thrice over.

I started to sit up, and the world (what I could see of it) spun. I blinked, waiting for it to stop. I heard voices. I stood, feeling weak and dizzy, and made my way toward them.

"It makes me nervous just staying here. We're bound to be found out."

"But what are we supposed to do, then?"

"I don't know...I don't know..."

An inspiration struck me. "We just have to get around them, right?" I asked.

"Ah!" yelped Alivia, jumping. I raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, lad! You're up!" Said Ronelle. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," I said, wondering what kind of a question that was. "None of you answered my question."

"The answer's 'yes', Col." Said Jeanie, smiling.

"Then," I came forward and sat down. "What if we did a distraction?" Blank stares, "I mean, if I went out and let them catch sight of me--"

Various exclamations of surprise.

"You can't go, Lad," Said Ronelle, "You just got up! Someone else should."

"Well, I'd be the most effective." I said, "They'd recognize me and be after me in an instant."

"But would that be enough to distract them?" Jeanie asked.

"How many horses do we have?" I asked. Everyone looked at everyone else.

"Uh...maybe ten?" guessed Ishmael.

"Hm..." I thought aloud. "Maybe...if riders were stationed around their camp...and they took off chasing me...and I yelled to the others..."

"What are you saying?" Alivia asked.

"We could give them the impression that we were going to attack them or something."

"Would they fall for that?" Jeanie asked.

"Even if they didn't completely, they'd be wary. At least if they're smart they'd be wary."

"Are they smart?"

"I think so."

Alivia snorted. I ignored her.

"Well," Jeanie sighed. "I don't think we really have any other choice." She added "That doesn't mean *you're* the one going."

"I'm fine," I said. "And if I don't go, I don't give any of you permission to ride Sol," And I leaned back with my arms crossed across my chest.

Ishmael snorted with laughter. "You're actin' like Ali."

*Brilliant.* I stole a look at Alivia. She had a small, sour smile on her face.

"I'm not the one to decide whether you're 'fine' or not." Jeanie looked at Ronelle. Ronelle frowned, came over, and put her hand on my forehead.

"There's no fever," she said, "But other than that I can't tell you anything, except he's probably wobbly from not eating anything."

"Wobbly, yes," I said "But I'd be riding Sol, not walking."

"I want to go too." Alivia piped up.

"No!" chorused everyone except her. She scowled. I could read the unspoken words in her face. *"We'll see about that."*

*Don't you try, girl.*

## Chapter 5

I crept forward, gripping Sol's bridle so tight that my fingernails dug into my palm. I could see campfires and tents.

No guards.

I stopped, scanning the area. A man bent over one of the fires, scraping a pan.

*C'mon, do something that tells me what you're doing here.* I thought, pleading. Of course he didn't.

*'People posted all over the place', huh?* I crept a little closer to the ring of firelight. I just needed to hear the--

I shuffled through some leaves. The man jerked his head up.

*No, not yet!*

At that very opportune moment, a snake slithered out in front of us. Sol snorted, rearing. The man jumped up with a shout. Armed people instantly burst out of several tents.

"Darn you, Sol!" I yelled. I swung onto him, clapping my heels against his side. We ran off--but not too fast. Sounds of pursuit came from behind. I looked over my shoulder and let the riders get a good five-second look at my face. I turned back around and we made for the checkpoint.

We galloped out of the trees several minutes later, heading towards the hills.

"Come on...where are you..." A dark figure rose up on one of the hills.

"Hoy!" I shouted, louder than was necessary. "They're roused! Rally the forces 'round Eastward!" Nonsense, of course. But my pursuers didn't know that...I hoped.

I swung Sol to the left, looking behind me as I did so. The riders split--two going toward the rider I'd shouted at, two still after me, and one turned and rode back the way we'd come.

"Good, good," I said to myself. "Now to shake these two off..." After much winding, turning, and circling around the hills, my chasers fell back, and then disappeared. I reined Sol in and sat listening at the foot of a hill. The only thing to be heard was the whispering of the wind in the long grass. I dismounted, giving Sol a breathing space. It would have been wiser to let him rest while staying mounted, but I felt confident that the Prince of Thertine had taken care of his opponents. I stroked Sol's neck, looking up at the stars. I wondered how my associates were getting on; if Jeanie and the rest were making their way past...

A distant horse's whinny cut the silence. I stiffened, waiting. No more sound followed, and I relaxed again.

*I bet Father's camp is in an uproar.* I thought, smiling. I thought I heard a distant beating.

I frowned, straightening. Nothing. Sol snorted and lifted his head, ears flicking around.

*I wonder if--*

With a yell and a thud, the silence shattered. I shrieked with surprise as a shadow from the top of the hill flew over me. The mounted soldier spun around, bearing down on me. I leaped onto Sol, shouting, "Go, go!"

Good old Sol. He bolted as if a demon was after him.

But the other horse did too.

\* \* \* \* \*

We splashed across a stream, dark shapes looming up in front of us.

*Good heavens, another forest? Or is it the same one?*

I looked behind us. The soldier spurred his horse again. Sol's sides were heaving, but we couldn't stop. They were gaining.

I turned around again, just in time to duck under a branch. I began to think we would make it.

I swung Sol right, then left, hoping to shake off, or at least slow down the soldier.

Sol stumbled. Something struck me. I cried out, jerking forward. I hit the ground. My ankle twisted. A black shape flitted. A yowling snarl; Sol screamed. A shout. Pounding. Silence.

I lay, grimacing. Water from the puddle I'd landed in seeped through my clothes. My head spun. I opened my eyes a

crack and looked around, not moving my head. Dark, spidery, tree branches twisted above me. The sound of wings soared over my head and disappeared. Bushes rustled, the wind whispered. Leaves twirled over the ground, jumping and flying with the gusts.

I rolled out of the puddle and sat up, looking around.

"Sol?" I whispered, heart pounding. The horrible sound of the snarl echoed in my ears. "What on earth..." I wrapped my arms around myself, shaking. But not with cold. "You're all right, you're all right," I whispered to myself. My arm hurt. I held it out in front of me. Two gashes ran down from my shoulder. Two gashes. From what?

I shut my eyes, but they popped back open again with the protest that I couldn't see anything that might be sneaking up on me.

"Oh, stop it!" I clapped a hand over my mouth, startled at how loud I'd said it. Nothing happened. Annoyed with my cowardice, I shook myself and started to stand. Pain shot up my leg. I groaned.

*Now what?*

I leaned against a mossy tree and lifted it up. "Good work, Colin. A cut arm and twisted-if-not-broken ankle." I grumbled, lowering my leg again. An owl hooted. I couldn't

stay here. I pushed off of the tree, and limped in a direction I knew--or guessed--that led away from the direction Sol and the soldier had run.

\* \* \* \* \*

I crawled up a small hill. Lights came from behind it. I peeked over the edge. Firelight...a camp?

*Of all the...I didn't go in a circle, did I?*

No. This was no Thertine encampment.

*Where am I?*

I squinted at a soldier standing by a fire. A red-and-yellow snake twisted across the crest on his cloth jerkin.

Leamshi. My hands twisted the grass beneath them, tearing it.

*I've got to know why they're here.*

I slipped back down the hill and went around it, staying in the shadows. Voices. I froze and lay still. A small group of soldiers walked past me and disappeared into the darkness. I made a mental note of the outpost, and got onto my stomach in the grass. I plotted a track that would lead closer to the camp. A warning bell went off in my head.

'This could be disastrous!' it cautioned.

*Yes, well, so could not knowing what they're doing in Thertine.* I answered it.

I wriggled forward a little more, the grass rustled. The soldier turned. His hair sharp-cut black hair seemed to gleam in the firelight. His narrow brown eyes reminded me of someone. He gazed out at the hills, fingering the hilt of his curved sword.

He saw me!

No, wait, he didn't. Did he? I squinted, confused. He seemed to be looking straight at me, but he didn't set up an alarm. I didn't move, hardly daring to breathe. He looked away. I crawled to the side, not taking my eyes off him. Some scraggy-looking bushes weren't far away, and I made for them. When I reached them, I crouched down and waited.

The cloth door-covering of a large ransack shelter not twenty yards away from me moved. Out came a tall brown-haired young man, who looked to be in his twenties, in full armor. The guards posted at the sides of the doorway saluted. He saluted back and stepped to the side. Someone followed the young man. My breath caught in my throat.

Karlin, King of Thertine, my Father.

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting out the breath I'd been holding. When I opened them again he still stood there beside the young Leamshin. They were talking, but I couldn't catch what they said. The Leamshin threw back his head and laughed. It was a clear, merry laugh, like running water, but I didn't like it. The Leamshin slapped my father on the back.

Karlin looked indigent for a moment, then cracked a smile. The Leamshin spoke to one of his guards, and they handed him a rolled piece of parchment. He unrolled it, gazed at it, then laughed again and showed it to my Father. Karlin didn't laugh, or smile, but nodded. I leaned forward in a feeble attempt to see what was on it. The Leamshin, as if knowing my plea, turned, revealing the small thin lines sketched on the parchment. I reeled back, in shock.

The Bluejay! Technically it was the sign of Royalty in Thertine, but more often thought of as the sign of Thertine itself. But the Bluejay wasn't the only thing on that banner. The Leamshin Snake was with it.

In the sketch, the Bluejay clutched the Snake in its claws, but the Snake reared back up and bit the bird's shoulder.

Leamshi and Thertine. The same banner. I closed my eyes again. The Leamshin suddenly spoke loud and clear.

"The United Realms of the Innovative Vision welcomes you."

*The united what of the whicht?* I thought. But the Leamshin kept talking.

"As the first to...ah...join this movement," The Leamshin laughed again. "You will receive certain privileges according to the state of your section..."

*What in Thertine is he talking about?* I wondered. I'd seen enough, however. It didn't matter what the United- whatever was, so long as I was correct about what it meant. I backed away.

"Kligh pakun," The low voice came from right behind me. I froze. A hand grabbed my shoulder and hauled me up. I turned to look the Leamshin soldier in the face.

Great. I would have punched him and made a break for it, but a call came from the camp.

"Halli matuur, Philkhan?" The leading Leamshin asked. My captor, keeping a firm hold, yanked me toward--I guessed--his captain.

"Hey! Ow!" I protested, hopping mostly on one foot. "Take it easy, would you? I'm not going anywhere."

"Colin!" My Father looked aghast. Whether that was good or bad, I didn't know. "What are you doing here?" He asked as I was brought up in front of them.

"What are you doing here?" I shot back.

"I believe I have more of a--"

"Enough," The Leamshin said. I expected my Father to protest, but he fell silent. "Your son?" The Leamshin asked. Karlin nodded.

"What are you doing, boy?" The Leamshin asked me.

"Eavesdropping," I said at once, raising an eyebrow.

"I see," He waved his hand. "We'll see to you later. Your Father and I are discussing something," He said something to Philkhan he started to lead me away.

"Wait," my Father stepped up. I thought he would scold me or something of that sort, but instead he just said.

"What happened to your arm, boy? Cougar get you?"

*Cougar?*

I shrugged. "It was dark."

"Never mind," he waved his hand in the exact gesture the Leamshin had done a moment ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

Philkhan seated me on a rock, and walked a small distance away. Only then did I begin to worry. Bother. What

could I do now? Vital information I had here, though it made our cause even more hopeless. I laid my head on my fists. Thertine and Leamshi. How was I going to get the news to Jeanie?

I raised my head again. A small soldier came out from a tent.

Wait, that was no soldier!

I jumped up from the rock, making Philkhan start forward and grab me. But I hadn't planned on running away.

"Hummer!" I shouted, excited. "Hummer!" The person started and spun around. His eyes got big. He backed away a few steps. "What're you scared of?" I asked him. "It's not like I have a weapon or anything. They took that from me, of course," The Duke's son stood where he was.

Philkhan said something unintelligible to me and pushed me back down on the rock, an obvious gesture of 'Now stay there!'. I remained seated, but still looked toward Hummer. I tried a question.

"What are you doing here?"

Hummer looked around himself, then hurried up to where I sat.

"What do you think I'm doing?" he hissed in my ear.

"Thertine's joined URIV, I'm here to help fight."

"Ure-iv? What's that?"

"U-R-I-V." Hummer backed away again. "If you don't know already, I don't think you should."

"What are you talking about? I'm the Prince of Thertine."

"You're crazy if you think that. By birth, yes, but now you're little better than a wolf's head."

"Hummer! You don't--"

"Don't call me that."

"But..." I stopped, "You don't like your real name."

"That's right."

I stared at him. He looked at the ground.

"I'd rather not be called by my nickname by a traitor."

"Traitor!" I started to stand again, but Philkhan glanced at me. "Hu--you don't have any idea what's going on! You don't know what I'm fighting for."

"You're going against the King. Your own father."

"If you would just listen--"

"I don't want to listen. I always listened!" Hummer stammered and fell silent.

"What's that supposed to mean? Do you even know what you're fighting for?"

"The King agrees with it; my father follows him and so do I."

I tightened my fists on my rock-seat. "You were always like this," I gritted my teeth. "A mindless zombie, always doing what everybody told you to without question, never making choices for yourself--"

"That was perfectly fine with you before! Always ordering everyone around," Hummer clenched his fists. I glared at him.

"I thought we were friends." I said.

"Ha!" Hummer gave a short high laugh. "Did you? Maybe to you, but not to me."

I took a deep breath. "If you'd said things like this to me any other place, you'd be charged with something akin to treason."

"I know!" The-boy-I'd-called-Hummer turned and stalked away. "But this isn't any other place."

My hands stopped clenching at the rock. I found myself trembling. The Duke's son always was a quiet sort of person; never saying more than necessary, never using a loud voice. And now this. I closed my eyes.

*Does everyone think of me this way?*

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's a movement, Princeling," The Leamshin, who'd given his name as "Leyron" leaned toward me, hands clasped on the table in front of him. My Father stood to the side. "There will be no one ruler--in fact, no 'rulers' at all," Leyron continued. "Merely overseers, to govern the people and make contact with the rest of the world. You understand, there will be no countries. We will be a network--a single nation."

"Isn't that the same thing as a country?" I interrupted yet again, determined to be as annoying as possible. But I began to deem my efforts useless against the Leamshin. He smiled at me, as one would to an extremely stupid person you felt sorry for.

"A nation, a country," Leyron waved a hand. "Does it matter? A single mass. A network. Race will not matter. None shall be higher than others. The more intellectual of us will be given certain privileges--"

"You just said nobody will be 'higher' than anybody else," I said, hoping to trap him in his words.

"And I hold to that. Understand; rights will be given to those who have the mental capacity to grasp certain concepts."

I sat up straight.

*Rights, eh? And what kind? Human?*

"And those who play your little game the way you want them too?" I asked out loud. I noticed Karlin jerk out of the corner of my eye.

"Those who understand the system join; otherwise we would not be URIV. I am the main overseer, and I find members."

"You said there would be no one ruler."

Leyron did something that could be called a smirk. He didn't miss a beat.

"I am not a ruler. I am an overseer, and as the first URIV member, I found the concepts by which we follow--"--  
*Made up, you mean.* I thought--"And as the only one who can fully comprehend them, I have the most rights at the moment."

*Oh, stop with the fancy words, would you?* I thought.

"Your Father has given his services to URIV," said Leyron.

*To you, you mean.* I thought.

"And URIV has found,"

*You again, you mean.*

"His troops and country sufficient for its purposes, and with Thertine's official help, we will continue our domination."

*What? Official help? Domination?* I frowned, confused.

"You would also be a useful person to contribute to URIV," Leyron went on.

"Me." I said.

"Yes. Not only are you a great warrior,"

*And how do you know that, I wonder?* I thought.

"But you have the promise of good overseer skills, and are familiar with the rules of state."

*Lovely.* I sat back with my arms folded. I wouldn't contribute with this ridiculous conversation any longer. Leyron rose.

"I see you understand."

I snorted. "Oh, so now you're a puppet-maker, puppeteer, veil-thrower, and mind-reader. Very impressive."

"I also see you are one of those who are not converted easily. You may retire for the night."

"I am eternally grateful," I said, rolling my eyes as I stood.

"You are welcome," said Leyron, and he took up a quill pen and began to write.

My 'escorts' appeared on either side of me. I looked at Karlin's scarlet face, and said with a sweet smile.

"Goodnight, Father," He didn't answer, but his eyes burned with a ferocity I'd never seen before.

I breathed deep when I got out of there. "'You may retire' indeed!" I complained to my 'escorts', though they probably didn't understand a word I said. "Who does he think he is? Actually, I know that already. Never mind." I succumbed to silence and worry.

*What did he mean 'official help'? We've been helping unofficially? When? How? And what were we helping with? Domination?* I stared into space, thinking. I and my escorts were near the edge of the camp. I frowned and kicked at the ground, which is the reason I didn't see at first what happened.

"Gaah!" with a clatter of armor the escort on my left fell. I stopped and stared at the arrow in his neck. The other soldier gave a shout and started to draw his sword. He never finished. I took advantage of my sudden freedom, sprang away from both of them, and made a break for the hills. My left leg with the injured ankle buckled. Another soldier grabbed my arm and jerked me back. He ducked behind a tent, dragging me down. More soldiers appeared and

without a sound headed in the direction the arrows were coming from. The arrows stopped. The soldier holding me got to his knees and peered around the tent. His comrades melted into the darkness. More soldiers came running and stood watching at the edge of the camp. I yanked my arm out of his hand.

Clunk! My soldier fell forward.

"Good night Colin, you idiot, run towards me next time, would you?" Alivia yanked me to my feet. She held a sword. "Hurry while they're distracted!"

"What are you doing here?" I gasped.

"Heroically rescuing you. Come on!"

"Just a minute," I said, and took the sword of the fallen Leamshin. I turned to Alivia and nodded. We ran through the camp, with me stumbling behind on my bad ankle.

"Alivia Stylwell, I told you to stay with Jeanie!" I said.

"Good thing I didn't, huh?" Alivia said.

"That's not what I was--"

"Hei kel! Snan!" Leamshin soldiers ran toward us, drawn swords in their hands. Alivia let go of me. She stood with her hands and sword behind her back, watching the soldiers come. At the last moment, she let out a yell and

leaped forward. Her sword flashed, and one soldier fell. I stared, open-mouthed. Another fell. I came to my senses and ran up beside Alivia.

A minute later Alivia grabbed me again and we ran again.

*Wait!*

I pulled my hand out of Alivia's and stopped.

"Not that way!" I protested.

"What do you mean? Come on!" Alivia grabbed me again, but I stood my ground and ducked behind a shelter.

"There's an outpost that way," I whispered, "I saw it earlier." My gaze flitted about the camp. "This way," I whispered. We ran, stooping low, out of the camp.

I stumbled along behind Alivia, feeling light-headed.

"Alivia...please...I can't..." I tripped. Alivia skidded to a stop.

"You can rest for a minute," she said "But we're not safe yet."

"I know," I sat up, rubbing a hand across my forehead.

"It's not that I'm tired. My ankle is--"

"You hurt your ankle?" Alivia knelt down beside me.

"Yes," I said "They bound it up, but I can't run on it..."

"Oh," Alivia rose, turned in a circle, then squatted back down. "How'd you manage to get yourself captured?"

"I fell off..." I stopped. "Wait, have you seen Sol?"

"Who? Your horse?"

"Yes."

"No."

I groaned. Alivia jumped up. "You can tell what happened later," she said. "We have to go."

I nodded and stumbled to my feet.

A few minutes later we had gotten under the cover of the trees, and Alivia said we could stop. She walked around, peering into the darkness, while I leaned against a tree.

Something dawned on me. "I've killed someone," I whispered. Alivia looked at me.

"What did you say?"

"I've killed someone," I repeated, swallowing.

"Well...yes," she said, looking confused. I shook my head.

"I've never..." I stopped. Alivia came beside me.

"I know," she said. "I know," I glanced at her, half expecting her to be mocking. She wasn't. Her eyes held sympathy. I shook my head again.

"Is that you, Ali?" A voice whispered.

I jerked my head up.

"We're here, Mal," Alivia whispered back.

Ishmael came into the small clearing, followed by someone in shadow.

"We've gotta go," Ishmael said, "They're coming."

I pushed myself away from the tree.

"Colin hurt his ankle," said Alivia.

Ishmael took my arm.

"Ouch!" I yelped. He let go. "Sorry, I'm hurt there too," I tried to smile.

"Ah." Ishmael took my other arm.

"You are? Oh well, never mind," Alivia gestured to us and led the way. I took a sidelong glance at the person that had come with Ishmael.

"How many of you are there?" I asked Ishmael.

"Just us three," he answered. "Alivia did most of the work, me and Jarius are just the backup."

Jarius. I glanced back at him. He didn't meet my eyes.

"Alivia did most of the work...why?"

"Well..." Ishmael wrinkled his forehead. "'Cause she's the archer... 'cause she doesn't look like a vagabond so she went into the camp..."

"'Cause I talked them into it," Alivia said over her shoulder. Ishmael grinned.

"Yeah, what she said."

I smiled, and looked at Jarius again. He started to fall behind, glancing from side to side.

"Did we get through?" I asked.

"Did who?"

"Did the others get past the camps?"

"Oh. Yes."

"Good. Alivia, how far are we from them?"

"You don't want to know."

I raised an eyebrow. "How encoura--"

Jarius let out a shout. Ishmael let go of me and leaped sideways. I fumbled with my 'borrowed' sword and drew it. I saw Jarius, dagger in hand, jump onto the back of a soldier, snarling like a dog. The soldier yelled and grabbed at him. Jarius stuck to the soldier like a leech. He grabbed the soldier's hair, jerking his head backwards, drew the dagger across the man's throat, and jumped down as he fell.

Jarius turned and saw me staring at him. He stared back.

"Why did you come with Ali and Ishmael?" I asked him.

"Because Jeanie told me too," He answered, and turned away.

"Done," Ishmael took my arm again. "Let's go before more find us."

## Chapter 6

I let out a moan. The foot prodded me again.

"Get up, get up, lazy bones!"

I rolled over onto my back, squinting up at Alivia.

"Ah! He lives!" she sprang up. "We shall leave you behind if you don't get up...now!"

"Good," I grumbled, but staggered to my feet anyway. I glanced around. "Where's...that boy?" I asked.

"Jarius," Ishmael corrected.

"Jarius then."

"He went on ahead early this morning to let Jeanie know we got you away."

The conversation I'd had with Hummer came back to me. I looked at Alivia. "Why did you...get me away?"

"You're part of our team, are you not?" Alivia asked, cocking her head and frowning.

I looked at the ground. "I guess so."

"What's wrong?" Ishmael asked me.

"Nothing."

"Well then," said Alivia, after examining my face, "Let's start. We'll be back by noon, I think."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wait a minute," Ishmael said, stopping.

"What is it?" I asked.

"D'you smell that?"

I sniffed the air. "Smells like--" I started.

"Smoke?" Alivia said, finishing my sentence for me. She stood stalk-still, staring ahead.

"So?" I looked from one face to the other.

"That's not wood-fire smoke!" Alivia broke into a run.

I looked at Ishmael. "What's the matter?"

"I dunno," He started forward again. "But if it's got Ali worried, then I am too."

The smell grew stronger.

"We're almost there," Ishmael said. Alivia had disappeared ahead of us. The smoke hung in the air in small clouds. It stung my eyes. I coughed.

"Hello?" Ishmael called. I stepped on a charred stick. A scream came from up ahead.

"Ali!" I gasped, breaking into a run. We came upon her at the edge of a clearing. Her eyes were wide with fright. One hand covered her mouth, and other pointing ahead of her.

Ishmael swore. Alivia grimaced.

"Sorry," he apologized.

"Wh-what happened?" I gasped, staring at the wide circle of scorched earth and plants. And bodies. I shuddered.

"M-mama? Jeanie?" Alivia called, swaying. I took her arm. Ishmael stepped into the clearing, picking his way through ash and stooping to examine burned remains.

"Mister? Miss?" A timid voice came from right behind us. I spun around, Alivia followed more slowly. A small girl with ash streaked across her cheeks stood there clutching a ragged corn-husk doll. Alivia knelt down.

"What are you doing here? What's your name?" she asked her.

"Rosemary," the girl said. Ishmael appeared by my side.

"Do you know what happened here? Where did everyone go?" Alivia asked her.

"I was playin' with Jenni," Rosemary said, staring at Alivia with big blue eyes. "There was a big boom. The sick tent blowed up and the plants got fire," Tears filled Rosemary's eyes. "Everyone was shoutin' an' I didn't know where to go 'till the nice boy founded me. He pickeded me up an' start to carried me away," The girl sniffed and held up her doll. "I tol' him Debbie was gonna get burneded up, and he got her for me."

"Do you know where everyone went?" Alivia asked again. Rosemary wrinkled her nose and thought. Then she burst into tears.

"Boy took me...I'm hungry, and I trieded to find Mommy but I can't!" she wailed. Alivia hugged her.

"Its okay honey...its okay," she crooned. "We'll get you back."

"What's 'back'?" Rosemary lifted her tearstained face from Alivia's shoulder. "'S it like honeycake? 'Cause I like honeycake."

"I'll try to find some like honeycake," Alivia said, trying to smile, and she picked Rosemary up.

\* \* \* \* \*

"ROSEMARY!"

"MOMMY!" Squealed Rosemary, struggling. Alivia set her on the ground, and mother and daughter ran toward each other. The mother snatched Rosemary off the ground and hugged her tight.

"Rosemary, Rosemary, oh my baby, where have you been?" she sobbed.

"Found someone at last," I said, sighing with relief.

"I can have honeycake, Mommy," Rosemary said, grinning. "'Cause 'Livia promised."

"Livia?" The woman looked up. "Oh, thank you!" she said, coming over to us. "I've been so worried..." she stopped. "Are you Prince Colin?" she asked me. I nodded.

"Thank heaven!" the woman sighed, squeezing Rosemary again. "We didn't know what had become of you three..."

"But ma'am," interrupted Alivia "Jarius was supposed to come back and tell you we were successful."

"Well..." the woman perched Rosemary on her hip. "I don't know about any Jarius..."

We three glanced at each other.

"What happened?" I asked.

"We..." The woman hesitated. "We don't know. There was an explosion and plants caught fire..." The woman looked down, her grip tightening on Rosemary. "So much fire..."

Alivia stepped up to her. "Can you take us to Jeanie?" The woman looked up and nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I knew it! I just knew it!" I stormed around in circles, despite the severe complaining of my ankle. "I knew he couldn't be trusted! The sneaky little...twerp!"

"Colin..." Alivia protested, "We don't know for sure..."

"No, of course not!" I slammed a fist down on the small wobbly table, "Just as we don't know rabbits don't sprout wings and fly to the moon!"

"I would think somebody would have seen them by now," Travis commented. I spun around and stabbed a finger at him.

"I don't want any smart remarks from you!"

Travis looked down at his hands. I spun back around to face Jeanie, caught my foot on the table leg, and lost my balance. I sprang back up before anyone could move. "What more do you need? Nobody saw Jarius since yesterday besides

that sick person, who said he lit a pouch that, you said, Ali, had Ro's salves in it."

"Based on the description he gave..." Alivia said.

"Well," I said, addressing Jeanie again. "What's going on in that genius brain of yours, now that your...friend has left? Not to mention Thertine and Leamshi. What do we do now?"

Jeanie stared at the ground, her head propped in her hands. "I don't know," She said at last, her voice soft, eyes dim. "You think of something Colin. I don't know." Jeanie stood up and started away, arms wrapped around herself, eyes trained at the ground. Alivia gave me a look of distaste, and followed. Ishmael shifted his weight.

"Well..." he coughed "Em..." Then he too went after Jeanie. Travis looked at me, rubbing his left palm.

"Col..."

"Don't." I moaned "Just don't."

"But Col..."

Rage filled me "I said don't!" I yelled, "Leave me alone!"

Tears filled Travis's eyes. That enraged me more.

"Get out of here!" I screamed "Out of my sight!"

Travis froze for an instant, and then leaped up like I'd prodded him with a red-hot iron and shot away. I collapsed to the ground, head in my hands.

Silence followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

I lifted my head and looked around. The breeze played about my face, tousling my hair. I sighed and got up, feeling as though I were several years older.

I found Alivia first; by the stream I'd named Pansy-Garland. I swallowed and opened my mouth. And I closed it again. I tried again.

"A-Ali..."

She started like a rabbit.

"I'm..." I stopped. "I'm...s--sorry, Ali. About...earlier." My face grew warm.

Alivia looked at me with surprise. "I...that's all right, Colin," She said.

I looked at the ground and mumbled, "Thanks."

"No problem." I looked up. Alivia's eyes were shining. I smiled. We were both silent for a moment.

"Listen," Alivia said "Do you know where Mama is?"

"No," I said, "In fact, I haven't seen her at all since we got back."

"Neither have I," worry crossed her face. "But maybe others know..." Alivia hurried away. I went in search of Jeanie.

It was half an hour later when I ran into her.

Literally.

She stumbled back, then whirled on me, half-crouching with both hands in front of her. Then she saw me.

"Oh," she sighed, relaxing. She lowered her arms and stood back up.

I couldn't help but grin. "I don't know how you do that," I said.

"Do what?" she asked, not meeting my eyes and picking at a loose thread on her sleeve.

"Go into defense mode that fast."

"Mm,"

My smile faded. "I'm sorry, Jeanie," I said. A moment passed before she looked up with something that may be able to be called a half-smile of amazement.

"Thanks," she said.

I frowned, puzzled.

"Thanks?"

"For apologizing," she said "I must say Colin...I didn't expect you to."

A smile spread across my face. "You didn't tell me how you get into defense so quickly," I said.

"Want me to teach you?" she asked.

I bowed. "I'd be honored...if you don't spread the word around that the Prince of Thertine is being tutored by a ten-year-old peasant girl."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Jeanie said, her face solemn.

"Jeanie! Colin!" Alivia ran up to us, panic in her face and tears in her eyes. "I can't find Mama anywhere. Nobody knows where she is, nobody's seen her...Jeanie, have you seen her?"

"Ro? Not since last night...after the fire started," Jeanie said.

"Like Jarius..." I whispered to myself.

"What did you say?" Alivia looked at me.

"Nothing," I said hurriedly. Too hurriedly.

"You did too!" Alivia said, worried beyond the point of sensibility. "You did too! What was it?"

I looked away.

"Calm down Alivia!" Jeanie said. "Colin? Do you have an idea of where Ronelle is?"

"N-not really," I stammered "I was just thinking..."

"Thinking what?" Cried Alivia, her voice shrill.

"Calm down, Ali!" Jeanie said again.

I shuffled my feet. "It's just...Ro went missing the same time as Jarius and--"

"Colin Retham!" Alivia shrieked, on the verge of screaming. "How dare you! You know Mama! She wouldn't--she doesn't--"

"You wait just a minute!" I said, starting to get angry. "You told me to say it!"

"Well!" spluttered Alivia "You knew that--Mama doesn't--you shouldn't have thought--Jeanie, help me!"

"Calm down, Ali," Jeanie said again. "I won't deny that the same thought crossed my mind--"

Alivia said something unintelligible, and then burst into tears. I stared at her, shocked. She sank to her knees, face hidden in her hands, shaking her head back and forth. Jeanie knelt down by her, and looked up at me.

I hung back a minute, then crouched down and put an arm around Alivia's shoulders. We stayed that way for a long while.

"Oh! Uh..."

I looked up. Ishmael and Travis stood a few feet away, looking as awkward as I felt. I mouthed 'Ro is missing' at

them. Ishmael's eyes widened, and he nodded. Travis didn't look at me.

Alivia brought her hands down and used her sleeve to wipe tears from her face.

"I'm all right," she whispered. We got up from the ground. Alivia gave Ishmael and Travis a shaky smile.

"Mal, Travis," I said. "I'm sorry for losing my temper earlier."

Travis looked up and smiled.

"Aw, that's okay," Ishmael shrugged.

"Thanks," I said. "Now," I got into professional mode, "You've all heard about Leamshi and Thertine," this reminder had an immediate sobering effect. "And..." I stopped. Something tugged on at the back of my brain.

*Leamshi and Thertine...Leamshi and Thertine...They've joined...officially joined...it's official...official help! Domination! Official help!*

"Jeanie!" I yelled.

"I'm right here. You don't have to shout."

"Leyron said Thertine's joined URIV, and with their official help they would continue their domination.

*Continue, Jeanie! Continue! With 'Official help', and--"*

"Slow down, Col!" Said Jeanie.

"We can't understand a word you're sayin'," Said Ishmael.

I took a deep breath, trying to contain, or at least control, my excitement.

"Leyron is the lead Leamshin. He told me that with Thertine's official help they would continue domination."

"Okay, we're followin' you so far," said Ishmael.

"I noticed 'official help'. That means we've been helping unofficially."

"Right," Jeanie nodded.

"I just realized. I didn't really pay attention, but my father's forces were usually less than they should have been," I looked at my friends. They were all looking at me with 'so what' expressions. "Don't you see?" I said, agitated. "Jeanie, you remember what you said back when you first talked to me? There are strange things going on in other countries. That's what you said!"

A strange look came into Jeanie's eyes. "Yes..."

"Leyron said 'we will continue our domination'! Continue!"

"Colin!" Jeanie gasped. She stared at me with a wild look. I took a step back and stared at her, unable to look

away. Her eyes. The image of the soldier at the edge of the Leamshin encampment flashed through my head.

"Leamshi..." I almost couldn't hear my own voice. "Jeanie? You're...you're...a Leamshin?" I could see Ishmael, Travis, and Alivia out of the corner of my eye. They were looking at me and Jeanie with excited faces. They hadn't heard what I had just said. Jeanie nodded, ever so slightly.

"Yes," she said in a clear voice. She stepped back and looked at Alivia, Travis, and Ishmael. "I'm actually surprised you haven't noticed before. Colin's just discovered I am a Leamshin."

They were a picture of shock.

"You...you didn't tell us, Jeanie," Alivia stammered out at last. "Why?"

"Because. That causes bias. You wouldn't exactly rush to make friends with a Leamshin, would you?"

"Well...no," said Alivia.

"And you, Colin," Jeanie looked at me, "You wouldn't have come out here if you had known, would you?"

"Yes I would," I said. Jeanie continued looking at me. "Probably anyway," I said. Jeanie raised an eyebrow. I kicked at the ground. "Well...no," I muttered.

"See?" Jeanie shrugged. "Even Colin admits it."

"How...silly," Travis said, not without disgust.

"About what?" asked Jeanie

"About bias," he answered.

"Well, I appreciate that," Jeanie smiled. "As I said, I'm a Leamshin, and I was remembering..." she was silent for a long time. At last Alivia spoke, in a voice without doubt.

"URIV has already taken control of countries, hasn't it?"

Jeanie looked up. "Yes. The question is...which ones?"

"Smaller ones, I'd say," I said, "Takhan, Melri, countries of that sort. Control of the large ones would be too obvious."

"That makes sense," said Jeanie.

"Wait," Said Alivia, her forehead crinkling. "Didn't you say earlier that Thertine was the first one to join URIV?"

"Yes," I said "But Leyron kind of laughed when he said it...I guess, in an ironic way, he was saying Thertine was the first one to willingly join."

"Hm. Do I ever feel special," Said Ishmael.

"We've got to go back to Thertine," I said.

"What?" said Jeanie.

"Go back?" Said Ishmael.

I nodded. "We can't abandon Thertine now that we know that it's more than simply bad government. They've got to be stopped."

"How?" asked Ishmael.

"I...don't know," I sighed "Chances are we can't do much of anything. But we certainly can't do anything while hiding in Cysaan."

"Let's go, then," This came from Travis. We all turned. Travis held up his hands. "Why are you all staring at me? There's nothing we can do here. If we're going to stop URIV, we have to go where it's happening."

"Well, what about asking for help from the other countries?" Asked Ishmael. I shook my head.

"Thertine isn't...well, on friendly conditions with the other countries." I said, "We're not enemies...but we're certainly not friends. I don't think they'd listen to us."

"Shame," Said Ishmael. I shrugged.

"Then back it is...I say," Jeanie looked around at us. No one protested. She nodded, once, put her fingers in her mouth, and whistled.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Back, back!" Jeanie shouted, "Draw back!"

"Come on, come on, go, go!" I yelled, waving my arm, drawn sword in hand. The troop of soldiers advanced, calm and silent. Unlike us.

Jeanie came up beside me. "Colin, that's everyone! Let's go!"

"Where on earth did they come from?" I yelled at her as we weaved through the prairie.

"I don't know!" Jeanie glanced over her shoulder. She grabbed my arm and swung into some bushes, dragging me along with her.

"Jeanie! What are--?"

"Ssshhh," she breathed. "We can't shake them off. We need delay them."

I didn't argue. We crouched, waiting, watching them come. Jeanie touched my arm and whispered, "Ready? Go!"

I let out a yell and leaped from our hiding place. Jeanie followed like a shadow.

Chaos followed. I struck blindly, wondering if we were being the least bit successful. Jeanie wound in and out, rolling and stabbing at feet in a strange, jerky style; a tiny slippery fish no one could quite get their hands on.

Seeing her small form slide from side to side like she did made me feel like the broadside of a barn.

As if to emphasize that sentiment, a soldier flew into me, knocking me over. He raised a fist, and for the briefest moment of time, hesitated, staring at me. I threw him off.

A hand grabbed the back of my shirt and hauled me up. I spun around and planted a foot in the person's stomach.

"Ahck!" Ishmael yelped, but he didn't let go.

"It's me!" I shouted, as we both fell to dodge sword swipes.

"I know!" he shouted back. "We're going now!" I fended off more swords as Ishmael tackled two soldiers. Then we both ran for it.

I realized seconds later that Jeanie wasn't with us.

"Jeanie!" I shouted, spinning around. Ishmael grabbed me.

"She already left! Come on!"

"So. We're here. Now what?"

*My sentiments exactly, I thought. The only problem is it was my idea to come back, and I ought to know the answer.*

"We...attack the castle," I said, and sighed. "I don't know," I leaned back and closed my eyes. We were silent for several minutes. I sat up.

"We can't really do anything unless we know what this...United-whatever-its-called is planning on doing next, right?"

"I guess," said Jeanie. Alivia didn't say anything, wrapping cloth around a gash across Jeanie's forehead.

"Then," said I, thinking out loud "We find out by...sending people to...sneak around?"

Ishmael raised his hand. "I second that suggestion."

"It wasn't supposed to be a 'suggestion'. Just an idea," I said.

"Then," said Ishmael, "I propose that it be a suggestion and I second it."

Jeanie smiled. "Look as if your idea is promoted, Colin...oh, thanks, Ali." She said to Alivia as she

finished. Alivia nodded and sat down, staring at the ground.

"All right," I took a deep breath. "How about you choose some people, Mal. You know them better than I do."

"I'm going," said Alivia. We all looked at her.

"You...you are?" I said, frowning. "Why?"

"I just am," She stood and walked away.

"I don't think that's--" I started.

"Let her," said Jeanie, watching Alivia vanish into the trees. "Now that Ro's gone..." she trailed off.

"It's all right with me," said Ishmael, shrugging.

"I'll go see about the sneak-arounds."

I laughed. "You know Jeanie," I said when he had gone; "You still haven't taught me about your fighting method."

"So I haven't," said Jeanie. "All right then. One." She held up a finger. "Always be on the alert. Never let your guard down for an instant."

"Okay," I said, though I thought to myself that I already did that. "Tip read and filed. How--" I was knocked flat. "Ow!" I glared at Jeanie, who had already jumped back up and leaned against a tree. "What was that for?"

"You let your guard down," She said. I looked at her for a long moment.

"All right," I said, standing back up, and planning on watching Jeanie's every move. Only she didn't move.

"So," I said, "All five senses must be in tune to my surroundings at all times?"

"Basically," said Jeanie, "Though I've gotten to the point to where I can almost do that subconsciously."

"Lovely," I said "And is there a Tip Number Two?"

"Yes, and plenty after that."

When she didn't continue, I ventured, "I've watched you. Your swordsmanship is...unusual. Where'd you learn it?"

Jeanie frowned "Easier asked then answered." She said "Here and there...I've worked on it over the years. I've watched several nobles' sons at their lessons, and I've picked certain things up."

"Such as...?"

"Never ever do what your opponent expects you to."

"Ah, and that's Tip Number Two?"

"I suppose."

"Care to demonstrate?"

"Certainly," Jeanie drew her sword, and I drew mine. "If you put my fighting in words," said Jeanie "Instead of 'left, right, dodge, up, parry, down, thrust!' it'd be..."

she suddenly came at me, illustrating her words as I frantically tried to prevent an untimely death. Her dialogue went something like this, only much longer. "'Up, left, spin, leap to the right, duck, spin, leap to the left, parry, dodge, whirl around, thrust!'" with these last three words, Jeanie spun around me and tapped my back. "You lose," she announced.

I turned, feeling quite breathless. "Fascinating," I said, looking at her with new admiration.

"Thank you," said Jeanie, bowing. I grabbed my chance and leaped at her. She dropped to her knees and her sword met mine. Her eyes sparkled. "Nice try. Very nice try." She said, and went back to her lecture. "In short, with my style, your body moves more than your weapon does."

"Very impressive," I frowned, "But you will notice that I am nearly twice your size and can't jump around like that?"

"You exaggerate," said Jeanie "But it's true you're taller and heavier than me. In that case, when you're fighting a small opponent, you bear down on them, not 'jump around'."

I sheathed my sword.

"Have you had enough for one day?" asked Jeanie.

"For now," I said, "For now."

\* \* \* \* \*

I sighed and kicked at some leaves.

*Am I ever bored. This is the sort of day you're supposed to go out on rides.*

I bit my lip. What had happened to Sol? I thought about my father's theory of a cougar. I touched the bandages on my arm. The gashes were healing, but slowly. I couldn't shake the memory of the snarl and Sol's scream.

I thought I heard rustling behind me. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. I whirled around. The rabbit shot away.

I let my breath out, shaking my head.

*I'm too skittish.*

I jumped. A faint, shrill whistle pierced the air.

I gasped. "That's it--the 'urgent'!" I took off in the direction of the sound. I struggled through thorn bushes.

"Of all the...ways...to come from," I grumbled to myself as I sucked on my cut fingers. "It had...to be...the thickest bramble thicket..." My clothes were tearing. "That I don't know a short way around..."

When I at last got through the thorny copse, I'd begun to think it would have been quicker to take a long way

around. I stopped for breath, glancing around me. I stood in a dense, dark pine grove. Wasn't there a pine grove near the edge of the Degin Wood?

The signal came again. I ran forward and stumbled into broad daylight. Trees started again at the other side of the river--the Klast?--that lay ahead of me at the foot of the slope. Figures fought on the Eastern bank, across the river. Soldiers. Alivia and Ishmael.

The Klast wasn't wide. I bounded down the hill and dove into it. The current struck me like a brick wall.

*Colin, you fool!* the thought fled through my head as I tumbled head over heels. Or maybe it was heels over head. I couldn't tell.

I came to my senses and started to swim. I couldn't find the surface. My foot brushed something solid. I struck out with my hands and got a handful of grit which the current whipped away. My chest hurt. I flailed and grabbed at the wall again. This time I made contact with a hard root. I hung onto it with both hands and pulled myself up. I reached one hand up. My other hand slipped. I flailed and grabbed at the root. When I had it, I held onto it in a death grip, staying as close to the earthen side as I could. I reached one hand up again.

It met grass.

I pulled myself out of the water, coughing and spluttering, my lungs burning. Thank goodness, I was on the East side! Alivia and Ishmael were outnumbered more than three to one.

I staggered to my feet, drawing my sword, and lurched toward the group of fighters with a choked yell. A good deal of the soldiers spun around. Some ran forward to meet me. Ishmael fell to the ground, gasping. A nasty gash ran from his thigh to his knee. He looked up and saw me. Alivia let out a cry,

"Colin!"

Ishmael reeled up and tackled a soldier.

*Remember what Jeanie said, remember what Jeanie said,* I thought to myself. My sword clashed with a soldier's.

*But she didn't say what to do when your opponent is the same size as yourself.*

"Let GO!" Alivia yelled. I saw her deliver a well-aimed kick at the soldier's shin out of the corner of my eye.

"Gkesg!" he yelled. Ishmael fought with four soldiers at once. I grappled with two more. I began to despair.

*We can't keep this up.*

One soldier grabbed my arm and wrenched it. I jerked back with a gasp. He didn't let go. The other soldier twisted my sword from my hand.

Ishmael gave a cry, I turned around in time to see him crumple to the ground, unconscious. Soldiers held Alivia too.

"Well, well, Colin. Fancy meeting you here."

My heart stopped. He was here?

"All right, all right, you caught us," I glared at my father, trying to cover my surprise. "What do you want?"

"Me? Why, I want you to come home, Colin."

"Very funny," I smirked "You want me home? I'd have thought you were furious,"

My father shook his head. "It was the foolishness of youth that drove you away to join this band of rebels. Your training was too unexciting, perhaps?"

"It was exciting enough, trying to figure out what you and your goons were up to," I said.

"Up to?" Karlin smiled sweetly. "I don't know what you mean," he changed the subject. "Colin, why don't you stop this cat-and-mouse game? You and your rebels can't keep dodging us. Much less defeat us. You and I both know that."

"I don't."

"Well, it doesn't matter whether you know it or not. Look here," My father reached into his horse's saddlebag and drew out a piece of canvas. He unrolled it and held it up. The blue-jay and snake were on it in full color.

"So it's official, then," I said.

"Colin? What is that? Is it the..." Alivia faltered and trailed into silence.

Karlin spoke to me while he rolled the flag back up and put it away "Allow me to be hypothetical. If I told you, Colin, that if you assisted me and came over to my side, I would let your girlfriend here go free," He gestured to Alivia "And if you didn't, I'd kill her, what would you say?"

Horror washed over me. I couldn't speak. Alivia spoke before I could, anyway.

"His girlfriend?" She shrieked. "Why, you smelly old sock!"

"Coward," My voice was quiet, but it silenced Alivia. I struggled to talk over the lump in my throat. "You're a coward to threaten to kill a girl!"

My father rolled his eyes. "Would you have me kill her, or let her go free?"

My voice shook. "What do you want me to do?"

"Colin!" Alivia gasped. Her soldier slapped her.

"How about tell me where your little rebel settlement is?" Karlin asked. "If you tell us where to go, I'll give you a chance to try and warn your rebels. To do so, we'd tie you to some tree, take your dagger and put it a few feet away from you. You'd have a chance to get free and warn the rebels while I go back for more men."

Alivia looked at me, pleading with her eyes.

"No," I whispered, "I won't tell you."

"Very well," A soldier dipped a needle in some liquid, and slipped the end into Alivia's arm. She looked up at me with a shaky smile.

"You know Colin," she said "I used to be afraid of needles. I drove Mama crazy, 'cause I never would--" Alivia stopped. She blinked a couple of times, slowly, then slumped to the ground. I started shaking.

"I'll give you another chance, for the life of...whoever that is," Karlin gestured to Ishmael.

"No," I gasped. "I won't."

The soldier injected Ishmael. An extra horse was brought forward and Alivia and Ishmael were slung over them like bags of flour. Soldiers grabbed me and pushed me to the ground.

"Hey..." I said, dazed and confused "What are you doing?"

"We're making sure you don't go to warn the rebels too soon," my father said coolly.

"What?"

"You see, Colin. I didn't need your help. I just gave you the chance to come over on the winning side."

"What...?"

"I thought you would be a little more careful in deciding what to do. It seems you have forgotten your little ex-friend...or perhaps you just hadn't considered him at all? Oh, well. It doesn't matter," Karlin paused and looked at me. "I already know where your camp is."

"Y-you're bluffing!" I gasped, though a dread started to seep into me. 'Little ex-friend'?

"Have you really not...oh, never mind. For now," My father unrolled the map he'd taken from the saddlebag. "I'll show you this is no bluff," He pointed at the map, and talked like I was four years old. "See this circle? That's the city Hesston, where you live. Now, see this green part? That's the forest. We are here. See? Good. Now, if we are here, then your camp..." My father paused to take an ink bottle from the saddle bag. He dipped his finger in

it. "Is...here," He made a blue splotch on the map with his finger. "Am I right?"

This was unreal. I closed my eyes. "I am going to pass out."

"Go right ahead, and leave the rebels to us." Karlin mounted his horse. He paused "You do remember, Colin, that that was all hypothetical? If I were you, I'd hurry and warn my fellow rebels. Be sure to do so before nightfall. Your two companions were given a sleeping potion. It wouldn't go well for them if they were still alive when you lose this play-war. Of course, it won't go well with them anyhow," He gestured to his soldiers. As they rode away, he called over his shoulder. "Unfortunately for you, if you'd done me a good turn as I asked, your friends wouldn't be captured right now."

\* \* \* \* \*

I turned my head and stared at the knife a few feet away.

So. I thought.

Thick rope bound my legs together, and my arms were tied behind the tree.

*I'm supposed to get free with that...tiny...little... thing.*

I took a deep breath and tried to twist around so as to get the knife in front of me. I stretched my feet out. My boots brushed the handle of the knife. I tried again. The knife scooted further away.

"Of all the stupid..." I gritted my teeth in frustration.

*Jeanie, keep everybody together until I get there.*

I brushed the knife again. The handle turned towards me. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck. An ant crawled up my shirt. I set my boot on the knife and tried to drag it towards me. Instead I ground it into the mud.

I rested while I glared at the knife and plotted how I would break it to pieces after I'd used it.

*If I ever get that far.*

I shivered and went back to work. Several minutes passed before I had the knife worked back out of the mud. Several more minutes passed before I had it near me.

I frowned. Now I came to the real problem.

*How am I supposed to use it?*

I wriggled my fingers, feeling the many knots in the rope around my wrists. My hands could move

somewhat...enough to handle a knife if I could get a hold of it. Maybe.

My back hurt. I looked up at the leaves of the tree.

*How long have I been here?*

The shadows began to deepen as I leaned to my right and bent my legs as much as I could. They started to cramp. Grimacing, I aimed a kick at the knife. I missed. I muttered to myself and kicked again. My boots made contact with the handle. I sat up straight again and craned my neck to look behind the tree. The knife lay near the trunk.

*I might be able to reach it...*

I stretched out my arms and hands. No. The knife lay too far to the left. I scooted myself around the trunk. The bark grated into my back as I leaned back and felt for the ground with my hands. My fingertips brushed the earth, but they didn't go any further. I sagged against the tree and closed my eyes.

*This isn't going to work. Idiot. Idiot, idiot...*

A caw came from above me. I looked up. A blue-jay stared back at me. It fluttered to another branch, cocked its head and cawed again. Then it took to flight. I watched it go.

"Fine," I muttered and stretched back again. I could almost hear my arm muscles screaming at me, protesting they weren't made to bend like this. I touched scraggy dry grass. Then cold metal. A shoulder muscle convulsed. I ran my fingers along the blade and curled them under it. An involuntary jerk from my arms made me lose hold of the knife. I sat back up, took a deep breath, and went down again. I found the knife quicker this time, and when my arms convulsed again I didn't let go. I gripped the knife hard and relaxed my arms. A hot flash, followed by a cold one, rippled up them.

I breathed deep, taking a few seconds to regain my composure.

*I have it! I have it!*

I turned the knife in my hands to get a good grip on the handle, and took aim at a length of rope.

I yelped when it stabbed my hand instead. I felt blood trickle down my palm. "Easy Colin, careful..." I told myself as I found some rope and slid the knife edge along it.

That rope cut through all right, but another length between my wrists didn't.

The knife edge grew dull. I tried pulling on the half-cut rope between stretches of sawing, but that wrenched my already-sore arms and I soon gave it up. But when at last I cut through, the knots dissolved.

I pulled my arms around with relief and massaged them before starting on my legs.

At last I staggered to my feet. I nearly lost my balance stretching. I started back as fast as I could, but I'd lost most of the feeling in my lower legs, and it took a while to regain them. I crept up to the river and looked at it with dismay.

*Surely there's someplace shallower?*

I started down the bank.

*Someone really should build a bridge,* I thought, not wishing to try another swim.

It soon became clear though that I had no choice. I stood staring at the water before I plucked up enough nerve to try. I sat down and slipped my lower body into the water, gripping the bank hard. The current whipped against my legs; trying to tear me away from the side. I turned so that I faced the opposite shore and pushed off the side.

I went under.

I flailed, and once again the river threw me around like a toy. I thought my lungs would explode.

The current threw me up against something bony. I grabbed at it. A tangle of branches met my hands. I pulled myself up them until I poked my head out of the river. I coughed up what seemed bucket loads of water. Taking jagged breaths, I squinted at the shore in the dim light.

*Which is the west bank?*

I looked up. Shards of golden and soft pink rose-colored light fanned across the sky.

*There,* I thought, and began to crawl hand-over-hand across the branches to the west bank. I slipped and plunged back over the side. I struck out with both of my hands. One grabbed a single twig on a thin branch. I took hold of the branch with my other hand too and stuck my head above the water.

My branch stuck out from the main dam. Careful to not pull it out, I crawled my hands along it till I pulled myself up to the branches again.

I collapsed on the wet ground a few minutes later.

*I would bet anything that that water drops thirty degrees at night,* I thought, shivering. Horror washed over me when I realized what I had just said.

*At night?*

*"If I were you, I'd hurry and warn my fellow rebels before nightfall."*

*Oh no!*

I leaped to my feet and began to run.

## Chapter 8

My teeth chattered as I raced through the trees. The trees scattered strange jagged shadows in the bright moonlight. I could imagine the rustle of leaves were savage beasts intent on stopping me. I couldn't be stopped. I wouldn't be stopped. Father knew where the camp was.

I slowed my charge, glancing around me. The woods looked very different; either because of the light, or

because I was in a place I'd never been in before. I wanted to think the former, but I couldn't afford too. I stood still, shivering. A sharp breeze chilled me even more. I bounced up and down on my toes.

*I'm lost. I realized.*

*Why did you have to get lost right when you're in a dreadful hurry?*

"The bright side of it is," I said to myself, "Father might be lost too."

*Don't count on it.*

I started off again, walking this time. My stomach twisted with hunger. I rubbed my hands together, then reached up and covered my ears with them.

I stopped again some time later.

*C'mon, c'mon, there's got to be a sign around here somewhere...*

I took a few more steps, biting my lip, and stared hard around me. Still nothing looked familiar.

*Honestly, Colin, do you think a nut like you would actually recognize a place in this forest?*

*Oh, shut up.*

I tried to find the moon.

*Letsee...*

I pointed one finger out, turning in a slow semi-circle.

*Okay...that way's north...I think...*

I frowned.

*Are you sure?*

*Yes! Well, sure enough. Just go!*

I took off running. It had to have been at least an hour already since I'd got free of the tree. I had to get there first...I had to!

*Oh, please let the camp still be standing when I get there...*

I tripped and fell with a splash. Leaping back up, I would have started running, except for the stream I had fallen into. I stared at it, then at the tree by its bank. Hope swelled within me.

"Hello, Pansy-Garland!" I cried. I would have hugged the stream if I'd been able too. I sloshed out of the water started running again, veering to the right. A stitch began in my side.

*Okay, I thought, heart pounding now I've just got too...*

I let out a yell of triumph. "Hello, crooked-branch-tree!" I crowed, dodging the overhanging limb.

I knew my direction now!

*Alivia and I went this way!* I skidded to a stop and started walking to preserve my pitiful sense of direction.

A swish and a thud.

"Stop where you are!"

"Yi!" I gasped, jumping.

"Who are you?"

I squinted at the shadowy form in front of me. I recognized his ratty attire.

"Are you attacked?" I blurted,

"What do you mean? Who are you?"

"It's Prince Colin, Robert Jensen," I said, smiling as relief washed over me. "And I am freezing and hungry, and have urgent news so you jolly well better let me pass."

"Colin?" Robert stepped forward, peering into my face.

"We were wondering where--"

"It doesn't matter," I said, the urgency of my information coming back to me. "My father is coming. He knows where we are. How, I don't know. Take me to Jeanie!"

"The king? What?" a puzzled expression came over Robert's face.

"Take me to Jeanie!"

"Yes! Right away!" Robert turned and ran. I followed, the stitch in my side returning.

"Jeanie!" Robert hollered, running by various crude shelters. "Jeanie!"

"What? What's going on?" Jeanie's small form dropped out of a tree.

Robert skidded to a stop.

"Jeanie," I gasped out before he could answer.

"Karlin's coming...knows where we are...somehow..."

"What? Here?" Jeanie only waited long enough for me to nod my head. "Robert! Wake everybody!" she ordered "But quietly! We don't want to give the king any extra clues as to where we are. Tell them to get weapons! Colin! Come with me!"

Jeanie turned and strode away, calling in a soft voice into shelters. "Wake up, wake up! We're evacuating!" The camp started to stir; people jumped up, tying bundles. Somewhere a baby cried. Jeanie looked at me. "Colin, we've got to get out of here, but we need--"

She didn't finish. The most horrible sound possible that we could have heard at that moment rang out.

Shouts. Screams.

"Colin!" Jeanie snatched her sword from its sheath, as I did mine. "You know the methods of your father best! Handle the counter-attack!"

"But--but I--" I stammered. But Jeanie ran off and disappeared. I snapped out of my stupor.

"To arms!" I shouted to anyone who could hear me, and ran in the direction of the cries. "Bring anything you can use as a weapon! Ward them off and gather at the...the..." I searched my mind. "The Meeting point!" That would have to do.

*Heavens, I hope people heard me.* I thought, and smacked into an armored man.

"Ah!" we both yelled. I bounced backwards and the man staggered. He took a swipe at me. The weapon glittered in the dark. I dodged and lost my balance, falling onto my back. My sword flew into some bushes. The soldier leaped forward, his sword whooshing down. I crashed my feet into his knees. He yelled and fell forward. I rolled out of the way as he landed where I had been a moment before. I lurched to my knees and seized the soldier's right wrist with both hands before he could stab at me with his sword. The soldier sat up and grabbed the sword hilt with his left hand as well as his right.

We struggled there, him trying to stab me and me trying to stab him with the same sword. I threw myself to the right, twisting his right wrist at an odd angle. He cried out, but didn't let go. The sword-edge scraped across my forehead. I sat down and kicked his stomach with both feet. The sword slipped from his hand. We both made wild grabs for it. I reached it first.

Blood dripped down my face from my cut as I got to my feet a moment later, panting. I wiped it away with my sleeve. A gleaming figure came running through the forest. I waited in ambush.

I leaped out, stabbed at him, then slipped though the darkness, making my way to the Meeting point. I reached the small clearing. No one could be seen.

"Hello?" I whispered, "Its Prince Colin," When no one answered, I stepped out into the clearing and allowed the moonlight to illuminate my face. Another person stepped into the clearing.

"There are at least twenty of us scattered around here," he whispered. I hurried across the clearing to him and we both retreated to the shadows.

"We all know this forest better than the King," I said. "Go north and get ahead of his troops. We'll meet

them in ambushes when they come to that point. Tell everyone you meet along the way. Try to avoid fighting on the way there."

"Yes sir," The man raised his voice slightly and called "Did you all get that?"

Various 'Aye's' and 'yes's' came from hidden places.

"All right, go!" I said. Only the quiet rustling of leaves indicated their departure. I waited a while before I started out. Maybe they could move like phantoms, but I sure couldn't.

I felt confident that if we didn't attack him for a while, my father would start to feel sure that he had broken us. Then the sudden rush on them would catch them off guard. The worry was if the Leamshin Leyron lead this attack, and not him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ready?" I murmured, for the most part to myself; I couldn't give us away.

*Jeanie, where have you gone?*

I listened to the sounds of the soldiers whacking their way toward us. My grip on the sword tightened.

*Don't blow it, Colin.*

Sweat trickled down my cheek. Or was it blood?

"Ready," I said to myself again. The glitter of armor came closer. "Now," I whispered and leaped out.

Something careened into me. An involuntary cry broke from my lips. The memory of the cougar came on me. Panic seized me. I thrashed and struck out with both arms.

Cries came from around me. The weight at last rolled off of me, and I staggered up from the ground. A soldier lay by my feet, dead. Relief and annoyance washed over me. But I didn't have the time to be aggravated at myself. That could come later.

\* \* \* \* \*

I shrank against a tree, gasping. My partially-healed ankle throbbed. I wanted to close my eyes and go to sleep. I shook myself.

*Get out there, Colin. Those are your friends!*

*This is stupid. Stupidly hopeless.*

*So? What of Thertine?*

*What of Thertine? What of Leamshi? What of URIV?*

I found my eyes closing. I forced them back open and stepped away from the tree. I wished I had my own sword, but it was still in some bushes somewhere.

*Where are you, Jeanie?*

I listened to the cries and shouts coming from ahead of me.

*Please come back.*

I took a shuddering breath and made my way forward. I stumbled into the main battle. Somebody pounced toward me. I dropped to the ground and swiped at his feet. The soldier yelled and fell. I jumped onto him.

How long would this night last?

I lay interlocked with the soldier. Perspiration beaded on my forehead. I found myself wanting to see the face of my opponent, and then being glad I couldn't. A split moment came when we both relaxed.

A strange yodeling cry broke the thick air. Instantly other voices joined it. My heart leaped into my throat. I reared up, and I and the soldier started to struggle again. The soldier rolled over on top of me. His hands grabbed my throat. I choked and kicked, my hands clinging to his in a desperate attempt to make him let go. The world spun.

A loud crash. The soldier yelled and the weight lifted off of me. I opened my eyes, coughed, gurgled, and sucked in air. Shouts of the soldiers mingled with the strange yells echoed around me. My vision cleared and I rolled over, grabbed a fallen sword, and jumped to my feet.

The sudden motion made my sight cloud again. I blinked and gasped until my eyes focused.

The soldier lay dead. A person stood, watching me. The moon came out from behind a cloud. He was dressed in bright-colored clothes, the like of which I'd never seen before.

"S-stand back!" I warned. "Who are you? Where did you come from? What are--" I faltered. Curls fell around the person's face; the moonlight illuminated twinkling eyes.

"R-Ronelle...?" I breathed. She laughed.

"Ach, didn't expect to see me in these things, did you lad?"

"But...but..." I stammered, "Look out!"

Ronelle whirled around and smacked her sword hilt against a man's helmet. He fell. I grabbed Ronelle's arm and pulled her into a clump of trees, where hopefully the fighters would ignore us a while.

"Where on earth have you been?" I asked, my voice husky.

"I went to Cysaan, lad," Ronelle said. "These are Cysaanians, all that they could spare."

"How did you--I thought they--"

"They do," Ronelle said, "But as I am Cysaanian m'self, I reckoned they might listen to me."

"Oh, Ronelle...but you said...I thought...I mean, we thought you..." I stopped, unwilling to tell Ronelle what we had assumed. "Why didn't you tell us?" I finished instead.

"You would have tried to stop me."

Well, that was true. I looked at the ground.

Ronelle gripped my arm. "What's happened?" she whispered. "Where's m'girl?"

"A-Ali?" I shuffled my feet.

"Aye, Ali. Where is she?"

I swallowed. "Kar--my father has her and Ishmael." Ronelle's hand slipped off my arm. "I'm sorry, Ro."

She stared at the ground, her face twisting.

"It's my fault," I said.

"What do you mean?" Ronelle looked up at me, frowning.

"Jarius betrayed us," I said. "He told my father where we were camped. He caught Ishmael and Alivia down by the river, and told me that he would kill them if I didn't tell him where the camp was," I paused. Ronelle didn't say anything, so I went on, "I didn't, and he gave them some potion thing that made them sleep," I fiddled with a loose

string on my shirt. "He said he had just 'given me a chance to come to the winning side', and wouldn't have taken Ishmael and Alivia if I had," Ronelle still didn't say anything. "Alivia...she isn't dead," I said. "At least...I don't...think so. My father said...he said..." I faltered again.

*"Of course, it won't go well for them anyway."*

"Something that makes me think they're still alive," I finished lamely.

"What did he say?" Ronelle asked, looking up at me.

"I'd rather not tell you," I said.

She frowned. "All right then, I can't make you," She shifted her sword from hand to hand. "It's not your fault he took Ali and Ishmael."

"Is too," I said.

"No lad, it isn't. You did the right thing."

"Even if it didn't do any good? And, in fact, made things worse?"

Ronelle sighed and said, "We need to get back out there."

I nodded, noticing she hadn't answered my question.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I believe this group of..." The Cysaanian's face twisted as he struggled to find the right word. "...enemies have been successfully scattered," He said, accent identical to, if not worse than, Ronelle's. It took great effort on my part to understand what he was saying.

"You can't imagine how grateful I...I mean we...are." I said, still unable to process that help had come. "But if I may ask...how did Ronelle convince you to come? I thought you...um...didn't like Thertinians," my face grew warm, "Not to mention prejudiced against Ronelle for marrying one of us."

"That is true," said the Cysaanian, without the slightest hesitation. "And it took a while, but she finally got it through our thick heads..." --My eyebrows shot up in surprise at that comment-- "...that this concerns all of us. We sent out scouts and found that what she said was true. How URIV has gotten so far without detection I don't understand," The Cysaanian fingered his sword hilt and frowned at the ground. "Where is Ronelle anyway?"

"I don't know," I groaned and rubbed my forehead. "I don't know where anybody is right now."

"Yes, well, we can look soon. It will be dawn in about an hour."

Sweet relief poured into me at those words. I had begun to wonder if the sun had disappeared. I found myself feeling very tired with the realization that I hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours. The Cysaanian must have noticed.

"Here Lad," he said, with a kind smile, "Why don't you rest until then? I'll wake you when need be."

"Thanks," I mumbled, too exhausted to complain. I tried to stifle a yawn, failed, and sank down at the foot of a tree with my head under a bush.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunlight splashed my face. I jerked, and one hand shot up to shade my eyes. Sounds hit me. Birds, running water. I squinted and looked up. A dark silhouette loomed above me. I gasped, started to leap up from the ground, reeled, and promptly smacked my face against the tree trunk. I fell backward into a bramble bush.

Choking sounds came from above me. I looked up at a young Cysaanian.

"Ah-are you all right?" he gasped, and then pressed his lips together, face twisting.

"Go ahead and laugh," I mumbled as I pressed my hand against my nose in a feeble attempt to stem the flow of blood. The Cysaanian did so, offering a hand to me. I

grabbed it, and he hauled me up. The bush snagged my skin and clothes, trying to prevent my departing. I staggered to my feet. The Cysaanian released me, looked at his hand which now had blood on it, and went into another seizure of laughter. With my hand still over my nose, I looked at him, at the tree I'd slept under, the thorn bush, down at my clothes--now more torn than ever--and found myself cracking a smile.

"I apologize," chuckled the Cysaanian, straightening up.

"That's all right," I said, "I guess seeing someone do something as stupid as I did was pretty funny," The Cysaanian laughed again, clapping a hand over his mouth. He let it drop once he'd gotten a hold of himself.

"We've gathered your people over this way," the Cysaanian said, pointing. "Do you wish to come?"

"Yes, of course," I looked up at the sky. "How long did you let me sleep, anyway?"

The Cysaanian shrugged. "Oh, perhaps three hours."

"Three hours!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, you were tired."

"Well I know that," I grumbled.

"And it would appear you are still tired."

I blushed. "Sorry," I said, "We fancy castle people are used to sleeping at least eight of the hours out of twenty-four."

The Cysaanian grinned. "Well, fancy castle person, your court is away over here."

"Lead the way," I said. The Cysaanian bowed a little too low to be serious, and lead me in a Southerly direction.

"What am I to call you?" I asked, suddenly realizing I didn't know his name.

The Cysaanian smiled. "Carklitkya," he said, swinging his arms.

I frowned, taken aback. "What? Really? Ca...Carl...Cark-lit-ka?"

The Cysaanian grinned again, seeming to enjoy my attempt at pronouncing his name. "Carklitkya, he corrected, almost singing the word.

"Carl-Cartlikitia?" I tried again  
"Carlikta...Carklikita...oh, hang it all!" I gave up. "Can I just call you Cark?"

"Simple-minded Thertinans," teased the Cark-boy.

"Thertinians," I corrected, hiding my own grin.

"...oh..." he frowned.

"Can I call you Cark?"

"As you wish," said Cark, shrugging. He pushed a branch out of the way. Either he let go of it too soon, or I ducked too late.

"Ye-ouch!" I hollered, and my poor, mistreated nose started to bleed again.

"Sorry!" apologized Cark, though he looked more amused than sorry.

"Don't mention it," I grumbled, ducking under the branch. "Are we almost there?"

"Indeed, indeed," Cark pointed. Ahead of us I could make out a small group of people. I sped up my pace.

"Excuse me," I said to the people. "Do you know where Jeanie is?" My only answer was blank stares. "Never mind," I pushed past them. "Jeanie?" I called. I didn't see anyone else, and stopped to look back. The people were still staring at me. "You sure know how to make a fellow feel uncomfortable," I told them. They didn't divert their gaze. "Never mind again," I said, annoyed. I walked away, determined to not look back. "Jeanie!" I circled a thick patch of oaks. Somewhere up ahead, a baby wailed. I followed the sound.

I came upon a small clearing. A few people sat in it, including the child that was crying. He...or perhaps it was a she...sat on the ground with tears making clean streaks down his dusty face. Something came into my throat. I couldn't move, completely at a loss. I felt someone ought to comfort that child. Pick him up and hug him.

I even felt that perhaps I ought to.

*No. That's Alivia's department. Not mine. What would people think if the son of the King went to one of their children? No.*

I managed to lift my feet, feeling as though they were weighted down, and backed out of the clearing. Where had Cark gone? I longed for someone familiar.

I stumbled away from the clearing until I couldn't hear the sobs of the child any longer and down on the ground. I ignored the best I could the wetness that seeped through my clothes, and laid my head in my hands.

*What's going on? Where is everybody? Where are you, Jeanie? Would someone come get me out of this mess? Cark? Anybody?*

A tug came on my sleeve.

"A-are you crying?" a small, inquisitive voice asked.

"What?" I looked up in surprise.

"Oh," the girl looked at me long and hard. "I know you," she said at last. "You were with 'Livia and talkeded with my Mommy."

"What...?" I asked again.

"Please, mister," said the girl-who-recognized-me, and tears came into her eyes. "I'm lost, and I trieded to finded Mommy but I can't!"

I had a flash of déjà vu, and realization dawned on me. I began to laugh. I didn't mean to, but I couldn't help it.

"Again? You're lost again?" I laughed until I cried, and I hardly know why. Rosemary stopped her own crying, and looked at me in bewilderment.

"'ve you been drinking 'a devil?" she asked in a solemn and reproachful voice.

"Be-en drink-ing the wha-ha-ha?" I giggled, tears streaming down my face.

"Mommy says men who acteded like this 've been drinking 'a devil!"

"Oh!" I gasped, and understanding what she meant sent me off laughing again. Rosemary began to inch away from me.

"I'm all right," I gasped, struggling to control my laughter. "I'm all right," I said again, and took a deep breath.

"Good," said Rosemary, "'Cause Mommy doesn't want me talkededing to a man who--"

"Don't, don't!" I cried, choking down a giggle. "You'll make me start laughing again!"

Rosemary clapped a hand over her mouth. That made me chuckle again. I took a deep breathe to regain my composure.

"So," I said, "You're lost?"

Rosemary nodded, still keeping her distance from me.

"Well, I don't exactly know where everybody is either...where was your mother when you last saw her?"

"I don't know!" Rosemary tried to roll her eyes, but ended up merely cocking her head. "I'm lost."

"I mean...oh dear..." I didn't have a clue as how to tell Rosemary what I meant. "What did the place look like? Who else was she with?" I asked.

"She talkeded with..." Rosemary squinted her eyes and looked up at the sky. "Gee-anne."

"Who's she?" I asked.

"Gee-anne," said Rosemary, with the same I-just-told-you look.

"What does Gee-anne look like?" I revised my question.

"She has brown hair with a...horsey-tail."

"What?" I desperately wished for Alivia's prestige on dissecting little kids' language.

"A horsey-tail," Said Rosemary. "Like this," She gathered some of her hair in her fist.

"Oh! I see!" I felt triumphant. "You mean a pony-tail! You mean Jeanie!"

"NO!" shrieked Rosemary, stomping her foot. "Her name's Gee-anne!"

I tried to explain to her. "It's Jeanie. That's kind of like Gee-anne. You just heard wrong."

"No!" Rosemary stomped both feet in turn. "It's Gee-anne! Gee-anne! Gee-anne!"

"Is not!" anger bubbled up in me. "Jeanie!"

"Gee-anne!"

"Jeanie!"

"Gee-anne!"

"Jea--" I stopped. I realized what an idiot I must look arguing with a three-year-old on how a name was pronounced. "Whatever," I growled.

"Not whatever! Gee-anne!"

"Yes! Sure! Whatever you say!" I hollered. Rosemary calmed down and gave me an angelic smile.

"Gee-anne," she said sweetly.

"Oh, shut up," I grumbled, and stalked off, once again taking up my search for my leader. Rosemary's footsteps padded behind me.

"Who do you think you're following?" I turned on her.

"You," said Rosemary, and she smiled at me again. "I'm lost."

"Oh, go get lost somewhere else," I spun around and walked off again. A snuffle came from behind me, followed by a wail. I decided to ignore it. That decision lasted all of one second. "Oh, good grief," I moaned and turned back around. I picked Rosemary up from the ground, and her cries ceased.

Once again she smiled at me. She sighed with contentment. "You're nice," she murmured. "I like you," Rosemary closed her eyes in time to miss the sudden tears that welled up in my own.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Col, is that you?" Travis came running up to me.

"Yes, at last!" I let out a sigh of relief. "I don't have a clue as to--" I stopped. Travis gazed at my face with a wondering look.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," said Traivs.

*Liar.*

He looked at the sleeping Rosemary in my arms and changed the subject. "I know that girl," he said. "The girl from the explosion."

"Wait," I said, surprised at this new information.

"That was you? You got her out? You never told us!"

Travis blushed, and he rubbed his left palm. "Well..." he muttered and looked at the ground.

"Never mind," I said. "Can you take me to Jeanie? Do you know where she is?"

"Oh," Travis looked up. "Yes...Where have you been? Ca--Car--" a frown crossed Travis's face. He gave up and said "The Cysaanian was supposed to come get you."

"He did," I said, "And I, of course, being me, promptly got lost," My attempt at dry humor was lost on Traivs.

"Oh," he gestured to me and we started walking. "Where is he...the Cysaanian...anyway?"

"I have no idea," I said. My arms were aching from carrying Rosemary, and I didn't feel very agreeable. Travis seemed to pick that up from non-audible clues, and didn't say anything else until we (at last!) came to a small clearing.

"Jeanie's around here somewhere," said Travis, sweeping his arm in the air.

"Could you take...this...girl?" I groaned, "And find her mother?"

Traivs nodded and took Rosemary from me. She sighed and stirred in the transition, but didn't wake up. I found Jeanie leaning against a tree with her eyes closed. I tapped her on the arm.

"'Tis me, the Hopeless No-sense," I said into her ear. Jeanie didn't jump as I'd hoped she would, but only opened her bleary eyes and blinked at me.

"Oh!" she gasped and pushed away from the tree. Networks of thin scratches ran up and down her arms.

"What happened to you?" I asked, steadying her with one hand.

"I might ask the same of you," said Jeanie. "You have blood all over your face."

"Huh?" I put a hand up and traced the dry crust. My nose. I'd forgotten it. A giggle burst out of me. Tears followed the giggle.

"What's wrong?" Jeanie asked.

"I don't know," I groaned, rubbing my forehead. "I think I'm still tired."

We started to walk as I gave her an account of what had happened with me last night.

"Good work," Jeanie sighed. "Well, I gathered the people unsuitable for fighting and tried to get them out. That's easier said than done though. Soldiers running wild through the woods, terrified mothers, slow and terrified children..." She stopped and sighed again, "Only a little while ago, after the Cysaanians found us, did I find out about Ro," Jeanie closed her eyes and sighed. "I'm glad she went..."

"Me too," I said. "Is she around here somewhere?"

"Colin?" Jeanie opened her eyes and looked at me.

"What?" I felt uneasy.

"Col...they found...Ro...Ronelle is...dead."

"What?" I reeled, hit a tree, and slid down to the ground. "But Alivia," I moaned. "She wanted to see Alivia."

"What? Did you see Ronelle before...?" Jeanie stopped.  
I nodded.

"I was going to get Alivia," I whispered. "I was going to get Alivia back for her."

"Colin, what do you mean?"

I looked up. Jeanie had tears in her eyes and a confused look on her face.

"Oh..." I gasped. She didn't know. "Jeanie, earlier, before the battle, I found Alivia and Ishmael fighting soldiers by the river. My father took them."

"But you?" Jeanie sat down beside me. "What did you do? What happened?"

I told her. "Oh..." Jeanie rested her head in her hands and stared into space. "Oh, wow."

"I was going to get Alivia back for Ronelle," I said again. "I will get Alivia back for her."

"I see," Jeanie murmured. A moment later she blinked and sat up straight. "Wait, what did you say?"

"I'm going to get Alivia and Ishmael back," I said.

"What? Col, are you serious?"

I felt insulted. "Yes, of course I'm serious."

Jeanie stared at me with such surprise I wondered if I had grown rabbit ears. "Why?"

I stared back at her. "They're my friends!"

"When?"

"As soon as possible."

"How?"

That question stumped me. "Uh..."

"And what about Thertine?"

"I..." I dropped my eyes.

"And what would you do, anyway? Besiege the castle single-handedly?"

"No," I said, and added with authority, "You would go with me."

"'You' as in me, or 'you' as in the rest of us?"

"Either one. I don't care."

Jeanie sighed. "Colin, I know how you feel, but what good would it do getting them back? It is much more than possible that we would lose more than we gained...if we gained anything at all."

"But..." I protested without having anything to say.

"I mean, would we have any chance at all?"

"But, Jeanie!" I searched for an argument. "Of all the--of course we've got to try!"

"We do?" Jeanie's face was all seriousness. No joking, no anything. My mouth dropped open.

"Well I--good night, Jeanie!" I gasped, borrowing Alivia's exclamation, "They're your friends too! Are you suggesting we don't do anything?"

"Not suggesting, presenting the option," She said

"But...there shouldn't even be an option!" I said, starting to get angry.

"Here's how I see it, Col," Jeanie doodled imaginary lines across the dirt. "One, we try to get them back, and risk losing many, many, people, with the possibility of not saving them after all and being completely abolished, or they already being dead when we got there. Two, we don't do anything and probably lose two of our friends," Jeanie droned out the second option as if she reciting a rule, but I saw tears in her eyes. I sighed. Then something hit me. I jerked up.

"Lose two of our friends, and information," I gasped. Jeanie looked up, frowning.

"Huh?"

"Ishmael found something," I said.

"WHAT?!" Jeanie leapt to her feet, eyes blazing "What was it? How do you know? Why on Earth didn't you tell me that before?!" She yelled.

"He used the 'urgent' signal," I said, answering the second question, and feeling smug about knowing something she didn't.

Jeanie plopped back on the ground, anger and frustration in her face, "Oh, well *that's* helpful," Uh-oh.

"What?" I asked, my momentary satisfaction gone.

"When you got to him and Alivia, they were fighting soldiers, right?"

"Yes..." I started; then it dawned on me. "Oh bother..." I groaned "I've never felt so stupid. Of course. Calling for help," I sighed.

"I didn't say *that*," Jeanie said "It could go either way," A moment of silence. "So," she said "We possibly march up to the castle and Robin-Hood-like rescue the maiden and knight in distress, or we possibly lose everything trying, or not even try, and possibly--probably--losing great friends, plus lose possibly vital information that possibly isn't there."

I made a face. "I'm getting tired of 'possibly's'."

"Me too." Jeanie said "But it's all...*possible*."

"Oh, stop it!" I scowled.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. Every inch of me screamed that we couldn't just let Alivia and Ishmael go.

Or, almost every inch. Another part of me said 'You can't do this. When you fail it, you'll lose everything.' I struggled with myself a few moments.

"Jeanie..." I said at last. She looked up. I took a deep breath, and told my common sense to get lost. "I say, if we can think up a reasonably good plan, let's...get them back."

A smile flitted across Jeanie's face. Then she startled me by calling me a name she hadn't in a long time. "Yes, your majesty," She hesitated, and startled me again by grinning. "That's possibly a good idea."

I stuck my tongue out at her.

Chapter 9

"I don't get it," I watched Jeanie. "You said you had an idea...?"

Jeanie looked up. "Yes, I do. What don't you get?"

"Why you're digging around in a trunk of old clothes."

"Because..." Jeanie grunted and tugged. She held up a dress, cocked her head, studied it, then tossed it over her shoulder and went back to the trunk. "It's part of my idea."

"What, the trunk?"

She set a green cap with a crumpled feather on her head and looked at me again. "Which are you trying to be: Dense or clever?"

"I don't care. You pick," I sighed. "However, if you simply told me, or somebody else, what your bright idea was, we would stop guessing! Not to mention that you're keeping us all in suspense for not telling."

Jeanie studied me with half closed eyes, as if thinking.

"Hm...nope, uh-uh," She said. "You'll have to find out later."

I sighed again and gave up. I leaned the wall of the cave and closed my eyes.

I was in the middle of a half-dream about talking rabbits with pink carrots (who knows why), when I heard Jeanie say,

"Aha!"

I opened my eyes. She held up a tattered old dress.

"Nice gown," I frowned. "And is that part of your plan?"

"Yes," Jeanie folded the dress and put it beside her. She produced a floppy cap that probably used to be white and an apron. She leaned back and looked at her collection with satisfaction.

"They're a little big for you," I commented, just to break the silence.

"As a matter of fact, Dear Colin, they are much too big for me," Jeanie opened her eyes very wide and nodded at me.

"Quit talking in body language," I said. "I prefer verbal."

"I'm trying to break it to you as gently as possibl,."

Said Jeanie.

"What?" I looked at her, then at the clothes-that-were-too-big-for...her? An unpleasant idea dawned on me.

"You can't be serious!" I gasped.

"I'm very serious."

"No!" I spun around and folded my arms. "Not in a million years."

"Then I suppose you weren't serious about trying to get Ali and Mal back?"

I grimaced. She had me there. I turned back around, but kept my arms folded. I forced myself to ask.

"So what exactly is your plan?"

"Well the rough plan is: One. You dress up in this and get into the castle."

I started to ask why I had to dress in that, but decided to wait.

"Two. You let some of us in...somehow."

"That doesn't sound very stable," I interrupted.

"I know. Be quiet. Three. We split up and look for Ali and Mal. Four. We set Ali and Mal free. Five. We ride back here like the wind."

"Oh, sure," I said, "All nice and planned out in simple little steps."

Jeanie remained unfazed. "You know, you really ought to take a nap."

"I will as soon as I have time." I grumbled.

"So," Jeanie thought out loud. "All we need is a way into the castle."

"Right," I slapped a hand against the frigid wall of the cave. "And all we need to get dressed in the morning are clothes."

"We have the clothes, Colin. We need a way."

"Oh, stop it!" I glared at her. "Why can't the rest of you come through the main gate with...whoever goes in first?"

"You, you mean."

"If I agree to being made look like an idiot."

"Co-!" Jeanie stopped herself, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again. "We can't come in with you. One person is risk enough. And you will be the one to go, because you're the best one for the job."

"How's that?" I asked.

Jeanie counted out reasons on her fingers. "One, you know your way around the castle best, therefore having more knowledge about how to get us in. Two, you know how your father's servant girls act."

"Well then, why do I have to go dressed like a girl?"

"I don't think anybody would suspect you to be dressed like that, if they suspected you sneaking in at all. And it's more conspicuous than...say...a soldier wandering around."

I searched for another argument, but came up empty. So instead I said. "We still need a way for the rest of you to get in."

"True..." Jeanie frowned. "I suppose you could go by yourself...but it'll probably take more than one to get them out."

We both were silent for several minutes. My mind seemed all foggy and hazy. I couldn't think. I rubbed my forehead and held in a groan.

*Come on, Colin. A way in. You need a way in. Don't you know a way in?*

I jerked my head up and snapped my fingers. "The postern! Of course we could use the postern!"

A smile lighted Jeanie's face. "Oh! Then you don't care whether more people know about it? I kept my word you know, and didn't tell anyone."

"Only a few people that we...or I...can trust."

"Are you sure?" she teased. "It's possible that--"

I laughed, and would have thrown something at her if I'd had anything throw-able with me. Instead I pushed her.

"Stop it with the possibles!"

"Yes sir," Jeanie picked up the clothes at her feet. My spirits fell.

"Are you sure I have to wear those?"

"Entirely," Said Jeanie, holding them out to me. I didn't take them.

"Do I have to put them on now?"

"When were you thinking we would try the plan?"

"Well...tonight."

"Then yes."

"But it's only the afternoon!" I protested. "It won't take me that long to get dressed."

"To get dressed, maybe not, but to turn you into a girl, yes."

I dreaded those words.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You've been in here for ages. What are you do--" Cark stopped dead at the sight of me, his eyes widening. I leaped toward him, tripped over the skirt, and fell. Being deprived of the dramatic gesture of covering his mouth, I yelled up from where I lay.

"Don't you dare laugh!"

Cark must have heard the murder-if-you-disobey-me in my voice, because he didn't. Instead, he clasped his hands behind his back, pressed his lips together, and stared at the ceiling while I got up from the ground and stormed back to Jeanie. She watched me with an amused expression on her face.

"What's so funny?" I glared at her. "Have you ever had to dress as the opposite gender?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Said Jeanie. "And I am right now, in case you don't remember. Turn around, please."

I did so.

"Well...it's different for girls!" I snapped.

"I agree with that," said Cark. He now had sympathy on his face. Jeanie didn't say anything, and continued working with something on the back of the dratted dress. Cark watched us for a few minutes with his head cocked, and then asked,

"Am I to assume that this...um...peculiar costume has to do with the plan?"

I glowered and didn't answer, so Jeanie did for me.

"Colin's going to sneak in dressed like this, then he's going to let some more of us in, we're going to find Ali and Mal, rescue Ali and Mal, and run back here."

"All...right," said Cark. He studied me and asked, "Can I tell the others?"

"Yes," said Jeanie. Cark exited.

"Terrific!" I pounded a fist into my palm. "Now the whole camp will be laughing at me."

"Some night," Said Jeanie. "But the others will admire your bravery."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you making fun of me?"

"Partly," Jeanie came around to the front of me and grinned. "You have to admit though, it is rather funny."

"Is not," I refused to think about my humiliating situation being anything related to anything related to humorous.

"Suit yourself," Jeanie shrugged and handed me the cap, which she had washed earlier. I stared at it, and pretended not to know what it was for. Jeanie didn't comment. She took the cap back from me and set it on my head. She stepped back and surveyed me.

"I'll be right back," she said.

"Oh, joy," I answered, without enthusiasm. I didn't look forward to tonight.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're shorter than 5'10". You're timid. You've never touched a sword in your life. You never speak unless spoken to. You know nothing but work. You--"

"It sounds like you're trying to brainwash me," I said to Jeanie. "I've heard each of those 'tips' 'facts' or whatever you want to call them at least three times."

"I am. Being coached on being a servant girl isn't nearly the same as being one," Jeanie reminded me. Again, at least for the third time.

"They're close," I watched the road from our hiding place. The mile-off towers of my father's castle gleamed red in the sunset. "Should I go now?"

"Whenever you think best, Colin," Said Jeanie. "So long as you're conspicuous,"

"So long as I'm not caught," I added. Cark tapped my shoulder.

"You make a very attractive girl," he said, grinning. "So long as you act like one, you'll be all right."

"I'm honored," I made a face, but I felt more confident. I was glad Cark had come with us; and even

though at first I was nervous about being seen with more people, Cark proved to have the surprising agility in the forest that Jeanie said all Cysaanian soldiers had.

I slipped--instead of tramped, a marvelous improvement--out of the dense undergrowth. I glanced back and Cark gave me a thumb up. I smiled and tip-toed close to the road to lurk behind a tree. The procession started to pass by me, and I watched it as a lion watches a herd of gazelles, waiting for the best moment to add one more person to the honorable Lord Genralin's party.

I spotted a small gap in the row of soldiers some way down the line. The space came up beside me. I glanced at the soldiers to see if any were looking toward me, gave a small prayer that the twilight would hide my joining, and stepped out onto the road. I flitted through the space.

"Where did you come from?"

I jumped, heart stopping, and stared into the face of the soldier. "I-ah-" I remembered my 'place' and lowered my eyes. "N-nowhere, sir," I gasped, breaking into a sweat. The extra hair under my cap that one of the women had donated felt as heavy as a knight's helmet.

"Nowhere, eh?"

"O-or," I stammered. "From my mother and father, sir, if you prefer to look at it that way." The man laughed.

Another soldier fell in beside us.

"What're you pestering the girl for, Jeremy?" he asked.

*My savior!*

"Pestering, Mark? Who's pestering?" said Jeremy in an offended tone. "We were just having pleasant conversation."

"Pleasant? Didn't sound it," Said Mark, and he made a big show of whispering in my ear, but made his voice loud enough for Jeremy to hear. "If that blockhead is bothering you--"

"Who's the blockhead?" interrupted Jeremy. He grabbed my arm and pulled me closer to him. He winked. "Don't listen to him," he said, speaking in the same volume that Mark had used. "He's deceitful. Besides, I'm *much* more charming."

"Charming? You?" Mark punched Jeremy's shoulder. "It is obvious that I am more handsome."

"Charming is better than handsome!" said Jeremy.

"Ha! Charming and handsome go hand in hand!" said Mark. I held in a groan. I knew I should be grateful for the change of subject, but how I wished the topic hadn't

changed. I didn't have the least idea of how to act, or what to say. I hoped that I simply wouldn't need to speak.

My wish wasn't granted.

"Here Jeremy," said Mark, interrupting the argument. "Let's let the lass choose."

"Fair enough," said Jeremy. "So lass, who's more charming? Me or Porridge-face here?"

"Who's more charming?" countered Mark. "Me or skunk-cabbage?"

My face flushed. "I...I..." What should I say? Jeanie hadn't coached me on how to talk to love-sick soldiers. I imagined that I was Mark or Jeremy. It didn't help. "I don't know," I said at last.

"What!" Said Jeremy.

"It appears you and I are equals in her eyes at the moment," said Mark. "Only time will tell which of us wins her heart."

Oh bother!

*This is not what I need.*

"So, fair maiden," said Mark, offering his arm. I pretended to not see it. "What's your name?"

"Mary," I blurted out the first name that popped into my head. Boy, if Jeanie had known it would come to name-giving...

"It befits you," Said Mark.

"What's with all the poetic speaking?" asked Jeremy. He looked at me. "Told you he was deceitful. He never acts this way in real life."

"What? Why, I do it oft," Said Mark.

"Yes, very oft," Said Jeremy, mimicking his friend. "For oft does a 'fair maiden' catch your wandering eye."

"Why, what nonsense!" Mark laughed.

"You weren't talking like this earlier," I said, and then mentally punched myself for speaking up.

"Well..." Mark looked uncertain, then he laughed again and gave me what I thought was supposed to be a soothing pat on the shoulder. "Sweet Mary," I held in another groan. "Understand that sometimes I cannot help it if the crude language of my unexceptional comrade rubs off onto me."

"Unexceptional comrade?" cried Jeremy, and he said to me. "See, Mary? See the way he treats others? You deserve much better. May I be so bold as to suggest--"

"Much better?" said Mark. "I may remind you that--"

I craned my neck and looked toward the front. The castle wasn't far. If I could just endure this a little longer, then--a horrid thought struck me. What if these two loonies followed me once we were in there? What if I couldn't shake them off? What if--

*Calm down Colin. I interrupted myself. Sooner or later they'll have to report to their captain. You can slip away then.*

*Probably.*

We thudded across the drawbridge. Mark and Jeremy fell silent. Mark quickly moved back to his place, but Jeremy leaned toward me and whispered. "I'll see you later, okay sweetheart?" I couldn't help grimacing. Jeremy apparently didn't see. He winked at me again and moved to his place.

We were at the gate. We were through the gate. I started to creep away from the party. Wait. If I made such an attractive girl as all *that*, either Mark or Jeremy or both were sure to be watching me. I walked as slow as I dared, and the gap between us widened. I ducked to the other side of a wagon. Someone called out; our party stopped.

I began to inch to the side. Someone shouted orders. People moved about. I struggled out of the throng and fled

down a dark corridor. I stopped for breath, and couldn't resist turning around, pointing in the direction that Mark and Jeremy were, and making vomiting motions.

That done, I looked around to get my bearings. I realized the Postern was on the other end of the courtyard--the opposite direction I had run. I sighed in frustration. I couldn't try to get back across now. I turned back around and slipped down the corridor. I needed to be careful. Servant girls didn't wander around at night. It wasn't forbidden...but they didn't.

My feet kicked up straw. I came to a doorway and peeked in. The hallway went on as before, just with a roof. I went in and felt swallowed in darkness. I groped my way, hoping I wouldn't stumble over any broken footstools or something like that.

Skittering noises came from ahead and behind me. I shuddered. I didn't have a fear of mice and rats, but I didn't care for them either.

I came to some stairs. I paused and listened before starting to climb them. Maybe I could see a way from up there how to get to the Postern. Despite Jeanie's confidence, the few weeks of living here wasn't enough to get to know a castle like this, especially when all I did

was walk the same corridors over and over again. If I could get to a place I knew...and recognize it in the dark...

Would these stairs never end?

My head poked out into open air. I glanced around, my eyes taking their precious time to adjust. I didn't see anybody, and scrambled up out of the stairway.

The crisp night breeze blew across my face. I took a deep breath, glad to not be in the stifling air of the passage below. I looked around. I stood next to a wall, the night sky like a black blanket spread to as far as I could see. No stars were visible, though I thought I could see a faint glow where the moon was supposed to be.

I walked along the wall, holding one hand out to brush it.

*This dress is stifling. How do girls stand it?*

"Who goes there?" A voice called from in front of me.

*Oh, nuts.*

I waited to make sure the voice had been speaking to me before I said. "It-it's only...me."

"And who might that be?" a small light flared up, and someone made their way toward me.

"Phyllis," I said, before remembering that my name was supposed to be Mary.

"What're you doing up here?" I could make out the speaker's features in the weak light of the candle. He looked to be an old guard, or guardhouse keeper, or something.

"I-I lost my way," I said.

"Where were you trying to go?"

"The Eastside," I said, "I sleep...near the stables."

"All that way? Girl, you are in the exact opposite direction."

"I'm new," I said.

"Well, then," the man grunted. He jerked his head and walked down the way. I followed him. We came to a guardhouse. The man kicked the door open. He set the candle on a table and went over to a corner.

The skirt of my dress caught on a splinter in the door frame. I tugged on it. When it didn't come loose, I leaned down closer and worked it backward off the splinter.

*Stupid thing.*

Creak.

I looked up. The man held a trapdoor open with one hand.

"There's stairs going down," he said, pointing. "Go down them and to the left. Just follow that hallway. Go

down the second flight of stairs you come to. They'll be on your right."

"Thank you, sir," I said and stepped over to the door. The man squinted his eyes at me.

"Awfully large for a girl, aren't you?"

I slouched my shoulders. "Yes sir," I said and stepped down the stairs before he could comment further. I heard him muttering above me,

"Food rations...long hours...loss of sleep...lost girls being caught by the guardhouse keeper instead of the guards themselves...what's the world coming to?"

The door slammed shut and darkness engulfed me.

\* \* \* \* \*

I snuck down the hallway.

*If I'm not turned around, the Postern should be...*

I froze. Voices. I waited. The voices didn't get any louder. I kept going, as soft as I could. My breathing seemed loud. I peeked around the corner. Soldiers! I grimaced. Two of them, talking to each other, and didn't seem to be in a hurry to move on.

*What are you doing?*

I stared at them. Surely they would move soon...maybe...eventually...I hoped...I drew back into the

shadows, debating on what to do. I looked around. With a gasp, I looked around the corner at the soldiers again.

*Oh-!* I didn't have a word in my vocabulary strong enough to explain my feelings.

The guards were at the Postern.

Guarding it?

Why?

Maybe because Jeanie and I had escaped that way.

*Well, there goes your handy-dandy plan. Just sneak out in the morning then. Find a place to sleep and--*

I didn't move. I couldn't leave Ishmael and Alivia here. I would fight them! My hand strayed to my side and met fabric. Oh, right. I was a girl. I didn't have weapons. I frowned, thinking that the life of a girl must be dreadfully boring.

*No wonder Alivia taught herself to use weapons.*

Maybe I could just find Alivia and Ishmael by myself?

*Oh, right, sure. You can search all the dungeons all by yourself, steal the keys all by yourself, get them out of their cells all by yourself, and get them out of the castle all by yourself, not to mention the guards you eluded--all by yourself.*

I wished my mind would shut up. I studied the soldiers and counted them several times.

One, two.

*There's two. Just two.*

One, two.

*Only two. Yes, just two. Right? Good night, Col, don't you know how to count?*

A wild plan began to take shape in my head. I could do this...then this...then...

*I am insane.*

I stepped around the corner before I could convince myself to back out of it.

"Excuse me, sirs," I said in a loud voice. They jumped, whirled, and relaxed when they saw me.

I walked up to them.

"What d'you want?" grumbled one. "What're you doing out here?"

"Nothing..." I stood very close to the one who had spoken, lifting my hand ever so slightly.

"Oh! Well if it isn't Mary!" said the other soldier. I grimaced, and turned around. Maybe Jeremy would work better...he would be more off his guard.

"Who?" muttered Jeremy's comrade.

"Oh, a girl I met on the return journey," He leaned down closer to me. "What do you need, Mary?"

I walked up close to him, took his arm, and turned him around. "Can you help me?" I whispered in his ear.

"Of course, Mary. What do you need?"

I glanced over my shoulder at the other soldier, who stood with a scowl on his face. I leaned over a bit, as if about to convey the greatest of secrets. Jeremy leaned to. Wow, did this ever make it easier. I whispered in my quietest voice.

"I just need to..." I grabbed the hilt of his sword and meant to whip it out. It stuck. I spun around, still holding the hilt, and Jeremy spun with me. He crashed against the wall, letting out a shout.

"Mary, what are you doing?"

*Sorry to spoil your dreams, lover boy.*

I jerked the sword free, dealt his head a hard rap, and spun around to face his partner. He leaped toward me. I ducked, swinging at him. I missed, and aimed for his sword. It jerked from his hand. The soldier turned and fled, yelling for backup all the way.

It hit me that the others might not be here yet. I grabbed the bar of the door and hauled backward. The bar fell with a clang, and I threw the door open.

"Jeanie! Cark! Anybody! Get in here!" I whispered as loud as I dared. Shouts came from far behind me.

People burst from the shadows outside of the door and pushed into the hallway.

"Colin, what did you do?" gasped Jeanie.

"No time!" I did a quick head count. Jeanie, Cark, Travis, and somebody I couldn't remember the name of. "This way!" I fled down the hallway.

\* \* \* \* \*

Crash!

A table flipped over onto its side. Jeanie dodged the soldiers and literally slid across the room to another table.

"Find them Col!" She yelled, grabbing a vase and flinging it at the soldiers.

"But-" I protested,

"Go Colin! Go, go!"

I obeyed, running from the room. Distant shouts came from everywhere. And non-distant shouts came from right ahead of me. They mustn't find Jeanie! Not yet!

I turned into a right hallway, and stood there panting. The clattering footsteps got louder, and torchlight danced on the wall. I let out a high-pitched girly scream, raced from the hallway, and ran in the direction of Jeanie. As I expected, the soldiers turned and shot down the hallway I'd screamed in. I spun back around and continued running. I stumbled down stairs, a stitch beginning in my side. The air got damper with each step. The shouts got fainter.

I slammed into a wooden door. A loud crack snapped in my ears, and the door shot open. With a frightened yell, a little old man started to leap a little too quickly from his chair, tipping it and him over onto the floor. I jumped over to where he lay, holding the sword at his throat.

"Don't you move from this spot!" I threatened him, not trying in the least to act like a girl. "Don't you move!" The man, his eyes wide, nodded. I gave him no more heed and stumbled from the room. The walls and floors were slick, and a rank and moldy smell assaulted my nose. *This* was where we kept prisoners?

I careened around a corner, and ran smack into a man. He yelled, and held a drawn sword. I didn't bother with formalities, and slashed at him. Our swords clashed, and I

could see the shock on his face of this onslaught coming from a girl.

*Too bad for you, buddy.* I thought, and threw myself against him. He stumbled backwards and cracked his head against the wall. He jangled as he fell. Keys. I knelt by him and jerked at the ring. His complicated belt didn't show a clasp to undue it, so I sawed at it with my sword and took the keys that way.

"Hey, who's that? Halt!"

My first impulse was to run, but I reconsidered that. I dropped the sword and stuffed the keys up my sleeve. I stared at the soldiers who came up to me.

"Who are you? What's happened?" they shouted.

"Th-th-they I-I--" I stammered, pointing at the prison guard with my eyes as wide and innocent as I could make them.

"Speak up girl!" hollered one of the guards. I pretended to faint and fell to the ground, my shin smacking into the ground harder than I liked.

"Of all the--" the guard swore.

"Oh, just leave her be," said the other. "Is this the prison guard? The keys are gone!"

This time both the guards swore, and they took off. I opened my eye a crack, looked around, then scrambled to my feet, rubbing my sore shin.

*I'm getting good at this, if I do say so myself.*

I hurried in the opposite direction the soldiers had taken, gripping my sleeve with my hand to prevent the keys from jangling.

I passed cells, peering into each one in turn, sometimes daring to call out, "Hello? Is anybody in here?" So far they were all empty. My footsteps echoed. The torches were scarce.

Scuffles. Soft footsteps. I stepped into a dark corner. The footsteps got louder. A small figure stole toward me, the head glancing back and forth. The person seemed in a dreadful hurry, and they were breathing hard. I stared hard at them. They came closer and passed me.

"Travis?" I whispered. The person jumped.

"Who said that?" said Travis's voice.

"It's...me," I said, not willing to give away my identity just yet...just in case. I stepped toward the person.

"Who are you?" he gasped. I felt almost positive it was Travis.

"Colin," I said, praying I wasn't wrong.

"Oh!" Travis gasped. "Col, I've found Ishmael! And he thinks he knows where Alivia is! How are we going to get them out?"

"Yes!" I remembered just in time not to shout. "I've got the keys, Trav! Lead on!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello?" I called in the softest voice I could manage. "Mal, are you in there?" no answer. I looked at Travis.

"He...he was in there..." he said.

I called again. "Ishmael! Are you in there?" Still no answer. "Are you sure this is the right cell?" I asked Travis.

"Yes! I marked it!" said Traivs, pointing to a 'x' scratched on the metal. He peered into the cell. I did the same.

"I wish there were torches near!" I grumbled, and jerked the keys from the dress sleeve. I fumbled with them, chose one at random, and tried it at the lock. It didn't fit. I tried another. And another. And another.

I muttered to myself, gritting my teeth in frustration.

"Can I see?" asked Travis.

"Be my guest," I said, handing the keys to him. Travis studied them, and slid one into the lock and he twisted it. With a metallic screech, the lock turned.

Clang!

"How did you do that?" I asked, jerking on the bars to figure out how they opened.

"Well, the keys are numbered and--"

With more screeches, the door eased back. "Never mind," I said, grimacing at the noise. I squeezed through the narrow crack I'd made and took cautious steps forward. A dark shape slumped in a corner. My hair prickled at the thought that this might not be Ishmael, but a real traitor. Some bloodthirsty lunatic who--I pushed those thoughts from my head.

"Hello?" I knelt down by the figure and reached out a hand. It was Ishmael.

"Is there someone there, Colin?" whispered Travis from outside.

"It's Ishmael all right," I said. "But he's unconscious. What I would give for light..."

"Just a minute," Travis hurried away.

"Wait, where are you going?" I gasped, panicking. Travis returned, bearing a torch. He stepped in, handed it to me, and stepped back out.

"I'll watch for people," he whispered. I nodded and turned back to Ishmael. My hand flew to my mouth. Filthy. Blood. Beaten.

Tortured?

"H-he-" I struggled to find my voice, swallowing the bile that rose in my throat. Blood. "He's chained." I choked out. "What key should I use?"

"Try the one after the cell key," said Travis.

"Which is that?"

"It has...X34.5 on it."

I sifted through the keys. "Say again?"

"X34.5. It's near the middle."

"Found it," I took the two keys on either side of it and tried them. The second one worked...after shoving and twisting until my hands were scraped up. I pulled the chains off of him.

"Mal?" No answer. I stood and threw torchlight through the cell, searching for water. Nothing.

"Colin," came Travis's voice. "I think you'd better hurry..." I went back to Ishmael.

"Mal?" I shook him. His skin was hot to the touch.

"Ishmael, please wake up," I pleaded.

"Someone's coming!" Gaspd Travis. I jumped up, ready to confront whoever dared interfere with our rescue. To my surprise, Travis squeezed into the cell, jerked the door shut, snatched the torch from my hand and clamped it upside-down on the floor, snuffing out the light. We retreated to the back of the cell next to Ishmael, and waited in silence. The footsteps came closer, paused, and went on. I waited a long while before whispering,

"Terrific. We're without a light...again. Now what?"

A stirring came from beside us before Travis could answer. We were both on our knees in an instant.

"Ishmael!" I whispered.

"Whoa!" Ishmael jerked upright. "Who's there?"

"It's me and Colin," said Travis.

"Can you walk?" I asked.

"I doubt it," said Ishmael.

I grimaced. "Can you try? How badly off are you?"

"What do you think they've been doing?" snapped Ishmael, "Having tea with me?" I opened my mouth and closed it again. Ishmael sighed. "I'm sorry," he said, "I don't feel very good..."

"I don't blame you," I said. I took his arm and hauled upward. Ishmael staggered to his feet, swayed, and slumped against the wall.

"Mal--" Travis started.

"Gimme a minute," muttered Ishmael. He took a deep breath and pushed off the wall. "Have you found Ali?"

"No," I said. "Travis said you might--"

"They dropped her off before they did me," interrupted Ishmael, limping toward the door with me and Travis on either side of him. Travis slid the door back.

"This way...I think," Ishmael led the way down the hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

I shifted my hold on Alivia. Travis led the way, climbing steep steps. We stepped into a room with lit lamps. It was empty.

"So just what are we trying to do now?" asked Ishmael. He seemed to be getting stronger, and walked with only the support of his own legs. Before I could answer, a blood-curdling scream came from down the hall.

Ishmael froze, his body stiffening. He looked at me with wide eyes.

"That sounded all the world like--"

"Good night!" I shouted. "I forgot about Jeanie!"

"You did *what*?" Travis spun around.

"She was fighting off soldiers in a room and--"

Ishmael raced away in the direction of the scream.

"Where am I? What's happening?" Alivia gasped. I jumped, and set her down. She stared at me. "Who are you?"

"It's Colin as a girl," I said. "Quick, can you walk?"

"I think so," Alivia got to her feet. "So you're a girl, eh?"

"There's no time," I looked at Travis. "Can you watch her? I need to find Jeanie..." Travis nodded, and held out the sword he'd been carrying for me. I took it and ran down the hallway. It was all too familiar.

A shrill voice came from behind me. "That's him! That's him!" I spun around. The old man I'd threatened earlier ran toward me with a whole group of soldiers after him. His wheezing was almost louder than his shouts.

*That's 'him', eh? So much for my disguise,* I thought. I turned tail and ran. I couldn't go where I'd last seen Jeanie, so I ran in a random direction, hoping to lose the soldiers. I threw a door open and ran into a room. My skirt caught on a nick in a table, which flipped it over, which knocked me off my feet. I silently cursed the skirt,

grabbed a handful of the fabric, and ripped a long stream of it off.

I wore pants underneath the skirt...mostly in defiance, as if to say Jeanie couldn't turn me completely into a girl.

Jeanie.

I ripped most of the rest of the skirt away, then leaped up and continued my retreat, feeling freer than I ever had since sneaking into the castle.

\* \* \* \* \*

I threw open the door of the Room. Jeanie lay crumpled on the floor. Ishmael lay near her, holding his side and breathing hard.

The soldier in front of them turned around, blood-stained sword in hand.

Soldier?

"My, Colin, you are dressing oddly these days." My father said. He didn't appear to be very surprised to see me. A thousand things to say flooded my mind, but what came out I hadn't intended to say at all.

"How dare you."

His eyebrows shot up. I said it again.

"How dare you."

My father recovered. "It's quite simple, really. You invaded my--"

"Shut up!"

This comment caught him by surprise more than the other, if possible. I slammed the door shut with my foot.

"Shut up! Just...you...you..." I fought for words. "Get out of here!"

My father played with his sword, swinging it back and forth. "I have the authority to order you away, not the other way around."

"Why?" I choked out.

He frowned and stopped swinging his sword. "Why what?"

"Just why?" tears swam in my eyes. "Why are you like this?"

*I want to know you, Father.*

My father frowned, taking menacing steps toward me.

"You, of all people should know that."

I backed up, a few steps at a time, until the cold stone wall met my back. My father advanced every time I retreated.

"Thertine is crumbling--"

"And that's your fault for trying to impress Leamshi!" I said.

"Don't accuse me, boy! Impress? Pah!"

"Yes impress!" I drew myself up. "It might be all very well for you and the other 'important' people, but what about the peasants? They are--"

"There to do as I please, regardless of the outcome."

Karlin interrupted.

"They're people!" I shouted, getting angry. "You can't use them like horses!"

"I was helping Thertine to grow strong!"

"You said Thertine is crumbling." I pointed out.

"And guess why that is? Some people went about stirring up the people to revolt against the thing that was meant to protect them!"

"Protect them?? You just said they were to do as you pleased, regardless of the outcome!"

"I should have known." Karlin said, a sickening picture of shame and pity. "You simply aren't mature enough to understand the rules of state."

"Maybe," I said. "But I'd rather have a conscience and sense of justice than understanding."

"Justice as in...?"

"Fairness, not taking advantage of those weaker than you, rewarding those who do good works, and punishing those who--"

"My dear Colin," said my father, his tone of voice portraying that I was anything but dear. "Sometimes it just doesn't work that way."

He lunged. I dropped and rolled, knocking my father's feet out from under him. He bounced off the wall, fell, flipped over, and swung his sword at me. I met it with my own, and the impact jolted up my arm. His gloved hand shot over and grabbed my right wrist, twisting it.

I gasped, but refused to let go of my weapon. I jerked back, wrenching my wrist even more. My father got to his knees and leaned over me, his sword at my throat. I stopped struggling.

"Sometimes," he said, a determined but remorseful look in his eyes. "It just doesn't work that way."

Something bowled into him. He shouted; the sword scraped across my neck. I got to my knees and lunged toward my father, bashing my sword hilt across his forehead. I looked up. Ishmael held a sword. He drew it back.

"Mal, no!" I screamed. The sword froze. Ishmael took one look at my face and flung the sword away from him.

"Sorry," he said.

"Were you stabbed?" I gasped, staggering to my feet.

"Not bad," Ishmael shrugged. "Took me out for a little though," What remained of his shirt he had wrapped around his side.

"Jeanie!" I gasped and raced over to where she lay.

"She's bad," said Ishmael, kneeling next to me.

"Really bad."

"I can see that," I said, swallowing.

Faint shouts. I looked up at Ishmael. He got up, walked over to the door, and peeked out. He slammed the door shut and grabbed an overturned table.

"Help me!" he hollered. I didn't have to ask. I jumped up and grabbed the table too. We shoved it against the door. A chair and side-table followed.

"We've gotta get out of here!" panted Ishmael. I noticed his hand gripping his side.

"How?" I panicked as something started to bang against the door. "There's no other way out!" Ishmael ran over to the lone window in the room and looked out. And down.

"There!" he said, pointing. I ran over to him and looked down too. A balcony lay below us.

"Are you insane?" I squeaked. "That's at least a hundred foot drop!"

Ishmael looked at me, eyebrows raised. "Hardly. I'll go first, and you throw Jeanie after me,"

"B-b-but..."

"Relax, I do things like this in Hesston all the time!" said Ishmael, and jumped out the window. I gasped. Ishmael landed on his feet and fell, rolling. I stumbled over to Jeanie, picked her up, and went back to the window. Ishmael had his arms outstretched. I forced myself to let Jeanie drop. He caught her and fell again.

"Now you!" He called, "Fall feet first and let your knees buckle."

"B-b-but..." I stammered, positive that the fall would kill me.

"Now Col!" shouted Ishmael. The sound of splintering wood from behind made my decision for me, and I leaped out of the window.

My legs received a painful jerk, and I couldn't help falling down, whether or not I wanted to. I lay for moment, thinking every bone in my body would be broken.

"Get up!" Ishmael grabbed my arm. I came to life and jumped to my feet. We ran across the balcony. Soft silk

drifted across my face as we stumbled into a room. I ran into something and if fell with a crash and a clatter.

A shriek came from our left.

"'Scuse us, ma'am!" said Ishmael.

We burst out of the room and into a hall. Torches were burning, and I got a good look at Ishmael. He staggered and almost fell. I held out my arms.

"I'll take Jeanie,"

He handed her to me without argument, and we continued down the hallway.

*To the Postern.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Tree branches slapped at my face, underbrush curled around my ankles. Invisible daggers stabbed at my chest.

Where had Ishmael gone? I sagged against a tree, my legs trembling with fatigue.

I couldn't run any further.

Jeanie was choking, gasping, struggling for breath. Her whole body shook with the strain, eyes staring up into space. I laid her full out on the ground.

"It's okay, girl...it's okay Jeanie...it'll be all right..." My hands wouldn't stop shaking as I took off her

outer jacket. She was so small...so small...Jeanie started choking.

"C'mon...c'mon..." I grabbed her hand with one of my own, and pressed the other on her chest. "C'mon..." my patience wore thin.

"Stop it!"

As if by magic, Jeanie 'stopped it'. She started gasping again.

But she didn't stop. My hope began to ebb. "Come on!" I said again. Her shaking slowed. Her gasping didn't. Not good! "Do you want me to give up, Jeanie?" I threatened her. "Is that what you want?" My eyes started to tear up.

*Someone help me! I don't know how to revive dying people...*

*No! Jeanie's not dying!*

"Jeanie," I leaned close to her "We made it out, Jeanie. Ishmael and Ali escaped." I added a silent '*I hope.*' "Its okay, Jeanie. We're okay Jeanie. Can you hear me? We made it Jeanie." She didn't respond. "You're strong Jeanie! You can make it! Just...keep breathing..." I gave up trying to revive her. I buried my face in my hands instead.

"Jean..." I started to sob, and didn't even try to keep quiet. So what if they heard me? The rebellion was breaking up anyway.

*Why did I leave her in that room? Why didn't I leave her with Ishmael? He would know what to do in a situation like this.*

*Do you always have to mess up everything, Colin?*

## Chapter 10

I limped through the forest, cradling Jeanie in my arms. I didn't know which way I should go, and I chose random paths. Speckles of light patterned across the ground, reminding me of the day Jeanie had led me to this place.

"Setting them to work already, eh?"

Jeanie's voice sounded so loud in my ears that I felt sure I had really heard it. I raised my head and looked around, half expecting to see Alivia bent over her sewing. Of course I saw no-one.

But I did recognize this place. I knew that if I thought about it, I could easily find my way to the camp from here, but I didn't want to think. I wasn't even sure I wanted to get back to camp.

I bowed my head again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"She's dead," My voice, matching my feelings, felt wooden and dead itself.

Sorrow and pity came over the woman's face. Cark looked as if he had been punched.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, and held out her hands as if to take her. I didn't let go of Jeanie. If I let her go, I would know she wasn't coming back. How could I know if she was really dead? I was no physician. Never mind how cold she was, never mind how pale.

The woman didn't seem puzzled at my behavior. I wondered if she got reactions like this all the time. The woman took Jeanie's wrist. I pulled away.

"Col, let Phyllis see Jeanie," said Cark.

Phyllis? My mind skipped back in time, and the old guardhouse keeper's face loomed before my own.

*I'm a fool, I thought, Giving two different names. A surefire way to get caught.*

A weight fell from me. I blinked and shook myself. Phyllis ducked into the tent. I looked down. I no longer held Jeanie. I started after Phyllis, but Cark stopped me and said something I couldn't understand. He said it again, slower.

"Yoou...neeed...to...sleep,"

I shook my head. "I dowanu," I mumbled, thinking about my short nap in the forest earlier after I'd tried to revive Jeanie...

\* \* \* \* \*

A cool breeze fanned my face. I opened my eyes and gazed at the tree trunk before them. Warm and comfortable, I wondered why I felt so depressed and ready to cry. I blinked and sat up. The bright moon made spooky shadows.

Severe hunger pains stabbed me.

"Ohh..." I moaned, leaning forward with both arms wrapped around my middle. I grated my teeth together in an effort not to vomit. When most of the dizziness passed I

got to my feet, the strange heavy feeling still clinging to me.

*What's happened?*

I wondered where I might get some food at this time of night. I didn't like my absence of memory. It made me uncomfortable. I squeezed my eyes shut and thought hard.

Alivia and Ishmael! We needed to get them out...no, wait, didn't we do that?

Alivia and Ishmael?

I opened my eyes and looked around. I froze at the sight of a tent.

Alivia and Ishmael...Alivia and Ishmael...Jeanie!

My insides wrenched. I let out a dry sob and leaned back against the tree, one hand to my forehead.

"Colin?"

I looked up and saw Cark coming toward me.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked. I didn't answer. I didn't know what to answer. 'Yes' would be a lie, and 'No' would make him try to help me feel 'all right,' and he couldn't do any good.

"Col?"

I shrugged.

"Are you hungry?" Cark put a hand on my shoulder. Hungry? Yes, I supposed I was hungry. I was hungry earlier, though now I didn't think I could eat. "This way," Cark said and I allowed him to lead me over to another patched and baggy tent. "Wait here," he said and ducked inside.

I did. What else could I do? I couldn't sleep, I couldn't think, and I doubted I would be able to eat anything that Cark brought back.

He brought back a small sack.

"How long has it been since you have eaten?" he asked. I shrugged, keeping my eyes trained on the ground.

"You do not know?" he sounded puzzled. I shrugged again. "Any idea at all?" I shrugged again. "You can not just forget," said Cark. I didn't give any sign I'd heard. Cark stood there tapping one foot. When I glanced up at him, he was frowning at the ground with his empty hand on his hip. "Well," Cark said at last. He stepped over to me and pushed my shoulder down until I sat. Then he handed me a biscuit. "That's all until I find out if your stomach can stand any more."

Cark sat down opposite me, his head in his hands, and closed his eyes. I fingered the biscuit but didn't bite into it.

"It's my fault," I said suddenly. I had to tell someone.

"Hhmm?" Cark opened his eyes.

"I left Jeanie in the room with all those people," I didn't know if Cark would understand what 'room' I was talking about, but I didn't care.

"I left her then, and then I took her when I should have given her to Ishmael. She wasn't dead yet, he would have known how to save her if anyone at that place could. Or he could have at least taken her to someone who could save her. I, of course, got lost." My throat was sore from unshed tears. I swallowed, turning the biscuit over and over in my hands. Cark touched my knee.

"From the way I understand it," he said. "You and Ishmael were ambushed when you reached the forest. I don't think it is easy to arrange life-saving plans for someone else while running for your own. And Ishmael told me that Jeanie was pretty far gone by that time."

"But what about the room?" My voice wavered.

"I would say she knew that you were better equipped than her to find Alivia and..." Cark struggled to pronounce the name. "Izsh-may-al, and time was running out."

"But..." I stopped. What good was there in arguing? It wouldn't change anything. Maybe Cark was right, but I shouldn't have left Jeanie then even if I was 'better equipped' to find Alivia and Ish--wait. Alivia and Ishmael? I'd almost forgotten what we'd gotten them back for! I jerked my head up. "Did Ishmael find anything?" I said so fast my tongue tripped over itself.

"He..." Cark slowed. "Yes. It isn't good news. He caught a soldier and put on his armor. Then he was able to get close enough to the main tent to overhear that...URIV is going for Haiasi-Divad."

My breath went out in a *whoosh*.

"Why Haiasi-Divad?" I choked out. "You mean they're going to attack?"

"Yes," said Cark. "Their numbers have been greatly diminished because of a plague that's just passed." A plague? I hadn't heard of this.

*Thertine is far too disconnected to the rest of the world.* I thought.

Cark continued. "URIV, Ishmael believes, is going to masquerade that they are there to help Haiasi-Divad get started again."

I felt a rush of anger. "Of all the dirty low-down-" I interrupted myself. "You mean, URIV is going to force Haiasi-Divad to join it?"

Cark sighed and shrugged. "What else?" A long silence followed. "Eat your biscuit," he said. I looked down at it, and felt my hunger returning. Another memory came to me as I nibbled it.

"Does Alivia know about...Ro?"

"Yes," said Cark. "Travis told her."

Travis. The perfect person for comforting.

"How did she take it?" I asked.

"Not very well," Cark sighed. I finished the biscuit, and on Cark's instruction, drank some water. Then, also on Cark's instruction, I went back to bed. But Jeanie's death still hung over me and I couldn't get to sleep for hours.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Better," said Ishmael, raising himself up on one elbow. "But if you want to know the truth, that can be translated as 'not very good'."

"Mm," I scuffed one boot across the floor. "How about you, Ali?" I lifted the divider sheet and peeked through at her.

"I'm okay," Alivia whispered. She stared up at the sloped roof of the tent.

"Look," I shifted my weight from foot to foot. "We need to talk about what to do about Haiasi-Divad."

"We don't know already?" Ishmael looked at me with his eyebrows raised. I shook my head.

"Do you think you two would be up to moving so we could talk in private?"

Phyllis appeared at my elbow with both hands on her hips. "If you think you're going to be 'moving' these two anywhere you're plumb wrong!"

"I think I could walk, Phyl," Ishmael offered. "We'd just be going where there wouldn't be any interruptions. Right, Col?" I nodded. Let Ishmael fight this battle for me if he wanted.

"Humph," Phyliss pulled her eyebrows further downward than I thought possible.

"What exactly is wrong with them?" I asked with a sigh.

"They're both weak," said Phyllis with great authority. "Ishmael here has been beaten and stabbed both in the side and his arm. Alivia has been beaten and burned on her hands, arms, face, and legs."

"Look," I said, "I just wanted--"

"No!"

I rubbed my forehead. "Fine," I turned and walked out of the tent. Almost immediately a yelp came from behind me.

"What do you think you're doing? Get back in bed!"

I peeked back into the tent.

"Well," said Ishmael as he picked up Alivia. "It seemed that as you weren't going to let us out, we had to leave on our own."

Phyllis spluttered something unintelligible.

"We won't be long," Ishmael assured as he stepped around her. Alivia started to laugh as they came out.

"I can walk, Mal! Put me down!" she giggled.

"Yes, miss," said Ishmael as he complied.

Phyllis stalked from the tent, her face red. "You'll kill yourselves!" she protested.

"Look," said Ishmael. "We're just gonna be--" he looked around, and then whispered to me. "Where're we gonna be?" I pointed, and he said out loud. "We're gonna be just over there. Relax; we'll be back in a jiffy."

I doubted Phyllis would 'relax', and heard her mutter something that sounded awfully close to "Impudent rascal,"

as we started off, followed by what could have been a chuckle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ishmael frowned. "If we're takin' a vote, I'm with Ali."

"So am I," said Cark, whom I'd invited into our little circle.

I slumped. "I don't like the idea of running away either, but what other choice do we have?"

Ishmael clenched his fists and kicked a tree. I wondered if he wished it were me. "Goin' to Haiasi-Divad."

"Col," Travis started rubbing his left palm, watching Ishmael. "If URIV gets Haiasi-Divad, nobody will be able to stand up to them."

"I'd say that's true already," I muttered.

"Colin Retham!" Alivia stamped her foot. "I'm just about fed up with the way you've been acting!"

I glared at her. "Can you blame me?"

"Wait..." Travis bit his lip.

"Yes, I can!" Alivia strode up, glaring down at me.

"Snap out of it!"

"Who do you think you are?" I shouted, leaping up. "My mother?" to my surprise, tears filled Alivia's eyes.

"It's obvious you need one, your very royal highness!" she yelled, raising a fist. Ishmael stepped between us.

"Now listen you two-" He started.

"No, you listen!" I turned on him. "We can't go to Haiasi-Divad!"

"Colin?" Cark looked uncomfortable. We ignored him.

"Why?" Now Ishmael started shouting. "You're scared?"

"Ishmael...?" Cark tried again. Again we ignored him.

"You bet I am! But it's better than being foolish!"

"Are you suggestin' that I'm foolish? Goin' to Haiasi-Divad is the only way to stop this!" Ishmael anger burned in his eyes.

"Yes, I'm suggesting it! I-"

SMACK

I staggered backwards, blood filling my mouth. A strangled scream.

"STOP IT! ALL OF YOU STOP IT!"

We spun around. Travis had jumped up, tears running down his face. "Don't you understand?" he sobbed "Can't you see what's happening? Stop it!" His eyes locked on Ishmael. "Mal...stop it..." Travis whimpered. He stood breathing hard, then spun around and ran.

"Oh..." Ishmael breathed, leaping after him. They both disappeared from sight.

A bird chirped.

I sank to the ground, wiping the blood trickling down my chin. Alivia sat down beside me. "Oh...dear," She said at last.

I sighed. "I'm...I'm sorry, Ali." I looked up at Cark, who had his hands clasped behind his back and shifted his weight back and forth. "You too, Cark," He looked at me and half-smiled.

"I'm sorry too." Alivia looked at me. "Haiasi-Divad--" she hesitated. "It's..."

"I know, Ali. I just don't see what chance we have."

"A better chance than if we run to Cysaan," said Cark.

"Maybe," I sighed.

"May I suggest something?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter what I say, you'll suggest it anyway," I smiled. So did Alivia and Cark.

"Well, then, Haiasi-Divad needs to be warned. I propose we send someone," he said.

Alivia nodded her agreement.

I shrugged. "If they could get there fast enough, it would certainly help. But who would we send?"

"Oh!" Alivia looked at me, the familiar 'I dare you to object' in her eyes.

"Absolutely not!" I stood up.

"Oh? And why can't I?" Alivia folded her arms.

I looked away. I didn't have an answer other than the one running through my head.

*No, Alivia, not you too...*

Alivia started listing off reasons for her capability.

"I'm an excellent rider, not to mention fast. I'm light and therefore easier on the horse. I don't lose my way. I am capable of defending myself. I-" She was interrupted by Cark's laugh. I didn't answer, my back still to her.

"Colin?...what's wrong?" Alivia stood and came beside me. I didn't look at her.

"We've been dying off like ants next to an anteater's den," I muttered. I kicked a pebble and watched it skitter across the ground and smack into a tree.

"...Are you comparing me to a dead ant?" Alivia asked. She wasn't teasing me. I nodded. Cark looked uncomfortable again. The snap of a branch brought my eyes up. Ishmael walked slowly toward us, one hand on Travis's shoulder, the other to his side.

When they'd got within earshot, Travis stated, "I only came back because Mal said you'd stop fighting," He plopped down on the ground. I tried to smile.

"Sorry, Trav,"

Ishmael came a few steps closer, limping, and looking sheepish. "Sorry about the lip Col...I guess I hit you pretty hard."

"You did," I wiped my mouth again. "But I was being a jerk...and being stupid."

"Huh?" Alivia wrinkled her forehead.

"What's that mean?" Ishmael asked. I glanced sidelong at Alivia.

"It means we're going to Haiasi-Divad."

"Ah," A faint smile spread across Ishmael's face. Cark gave a sigh of relief. Alivia nodded.

"Yes," she said "And I'm going ahead to warn them."

"Now, wait a minute!" I protested "I didn't say that!"

"Why not?" Ishmael looked between me and Alivia.

"Well, I--" I stopped.

"Col," Alivia said "I understand why you don't want me to go...but I'm the best qualified, and if I don't go, I'll most likely be killed anyway. If I do go there's a chance."

"But you're hurt!" I protested.

"That's why I'll be riding a horse, half-wit!" Alivia grinned. Cark chuckled. I looked down at my hands.

"Oh..." I hated to say it. "All right..."

"Well then!" Ishmael squinted at the sun. "Great coppers, look at the time! Let's go!"

\* \* \* \* \*

We buried Jeanie under a pine tree a few hours later. I felt that all my hopes were buried with her. I relayed the plan to the Cysaanian troops and the pitiful remains of our own. A good deal were as critical of Alivia riding to warn Haiasi-Divad as I was. Especially Phyllis. But Alivia just tossed her hair at their remarks, said "Huh!" and paid them no mind.

"How do you do it, Ali?" I asked her when I caught a rare moment of her resting with Phyllis nowhere to be seen.

"Do what?" she propped herself up on one elbow. I looked down, embarrassed, but forced the words out.

"You're hurt, Jeanie's dead, your mother's dead, URIV is progressing and has progressed a good deal under our noses and...you're so cheerful."

Alivia didn't say anything for a long time. "I guess..." I looked up. "I guess it's because...even if the

world is completely dark a little light will scare a good deal of it away."

I didn't even bother to say 'huh?' and just looked blankly at her.

A wry smile twisted a corner of Alivia's mouth. "I'm sounding like Mama,"--she blinked away tears-- "Aren't I?" she twisted a corner of the blanket in her hands. "I don't feel like being cheerful. At all. But...do you hear that?"

I could. Somewhere in the distance a child laughed.

Alivia smiled and wrapped her arms around herself. "I love them," she said, and this time I don't think she tried to keep tears from filling her eyes. "I love them with all my heart, and if there's anybody worth being cheerful for, it's them. They don't understand what's happening, and they shouldn't have to." She paused, thinking. Her eyes opened wide. "Quick! I think Phyllis is coming back!" she lay down and closed her eyes.

I snuck out of the tent, thinking about what Alivia had said. She loved children. That was who she was fighting for.

What about me? I loved Jeanie.

And Jeanie was dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We need to bring them," I said, squinting. The sun beat down cruelly everywhere, even under the trees. "They don't have anywhere else to go, remember?"

The Cysaanian cocked his head at me. "All right, we will take the women and children," he said. "Where should we put the weaker ones?"

I sighed. The thick air seemed to be clogging my lungs.

*Can't these people leave me alone?*

"How about the center," I said, without thinking about it. "Look, don't you have some other person to ask? You have a captain, right?"

*I'm tired and hot and I want you to leave me alone.*

The Cysaanian blinked at me. "Well, yes..." he said. "But we assumed you were the General. You're the Prince and--"

"I know. I'm sorry. Never mind. Go ahead. I'll be...around," I turned away from the Cysaanian and started in the direction of where I'd last seen Alivia.

*General, eh? Just because Jeanie's dead.*

I rubbed my wrist across my forehead, wiping away sweat I'd earned just by standing. A mosquito buzzed next to my ear. I slapped at it.

*Even if Jeanie is--was--five years younger than me she had a knack for planning...hey, that's it. I could pretend to be Jeanie. That way I-*

I shook myself. Childish. Pretend to be Jeanie? No doubt I'd fail that too.

I peeked into the tent. Phew! If possible, the air was hotter and more humid in here than out. Alivia folded something up in a napkin and put it into a satchel. She straightened up and glanced around the now-almost-empty tent. She spotted me.

"Hello, Colin."

I acknowledged her greeting with a nod.

"I'm about done," she said, brushing damp hair from her face. I nodded again. Alivia picked up both the satchel and a canteen and swung them over her shoulders.

"Do I go ahead and start?" she asked.

I nodded again. "I think they've got a horse picked out for you," I said, gesturing. She followed me out to where some Cysaanians were talking together and looked to be very busy, though I couldn't figure out what they were doing.

"Where's Tiyrventy?" I asked them. They looked amused. No doubt I'd terribly mispronounced their leader's name.

"Krli," said one, pointing.

"Thanks," I mumbled, embarrassed, and went in the direction he'd indicated.

I found Ti-riv-whatever next to the few horses he had brought from Cysaan.

"Are one of these for Alivia?" I asked him.

"Aye, this one," Said Tiyrventy, stepping over to a saddled small white horse with one brown patch on her neck and another on her leg. "I know she doesn't look like much, but she's as light-footed as a daisy and as swift as a shooting star."

"Oh, she's darling," Coed Alivia, petting the horse's nose. "What's her name? Does she have a name?"

"Nestari," said Tiyrventy. "I believe in Thertinian it means 'Windfire'"

"Lovely!" Alivia smiled.

"She can be a little high spirited when being ridden," said Tiyrventy, "Which is no problem for us, but I don't know if--"

"Of course I can handle her!" Interrupted Alivia, looking very annoyed.

"I thought you would," said Tiyrventy, a slight smile at the corner of his mouth.

Feeling a little forgotten, I put in, "And she's the fastest of the horses?"

"Aye, indeed," Said Tiyrventy. "The only one faster I know of is Kviltdest, but he's in Cysaan."

Alivia mounted Nestari. "I shall be on my way!" she said in a heroic voice. Then in her normal voice she added, "Just due northwest, right?"

I nodded, a sudden sick feeling twisting my stomach.

"Be careful Ali,"

"I will. Hurry and catch up!" Alivia turned Nestari around, kicked her sides, and they loped away. I watched until the trees swallowed her up. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"She'll be all right, lad," Said Tiyrventy.

I turned away, embarrassed again. "Yes, I know."

\* \* \* \* \*

I reached down and patted Petshtre's dun-colored neck. I desperately missed Sol, with his golden coat instead of this grayish brown. The only friend I'd had back in Hesston...

I squinted out at the parched prairie stretching in every direction. Blue mountains rose out of the horizon in the West. I glanced over my shoulder at the wilting caravan

straggling out behind me. A shrill child's voice broke the silence.

"Mommy, I'm thirsty..." Immediately other voices joined.

"Me too!"

"I am too, Mommy! When can we have a drink?"

The voices chorused, "Mommy, when...when...when?"

I grimaced. We were all thirsty. It just so happened that the driest part of Thertine was also the quickest way to get to Haiasi-Divad. I gave a deep sigh and touched the half-empty canteen at my side. I nodded to Tiyrventy.

"Go on. I'll catch up in a minute."

I reigned in Petshtre--how I missed Sol--and waited as the Cysaanian soldiers went around me. Soon the circus of children came up, still asking for water and their embarrassed mother trying to explain there wasn't any...

"Excuse me," I said. They stopped, and the mother looked up at me. I took my canteen from my shoulder and held it out to her. "It seems your kids are thirsty," I said.

The mother blushed. "Oh, no, we won't--"

I fought an impulse to agree. "Will too," I interrupted and handed the canteen to her. "We should come

to the river dividing Haiasi-Divad and Thertine sometime tonight," I glanced at the eastward sun and rode back to my place at the front, my throat feeling very dry.

Behind me came clamors of, "Ohh, Mommy, was that the Prince?" and then "I get the first drink!" and "No, me!" and "But I asked first!" and "That's not faaaaiirrr!"

I smiled to myself.

## Chapter 11

"Halt! Who goes there?" A voice pierced the darkness.

"Is this the city of Aiyoysha?" I asked.

"It may be, and it may not be. I ask again...who are you?" The flame of a lantern lit up several yards away, near the dark gate.

"We are from Cysaan," I said. Tiryventy glanced at me. "Why did you call to us in Thertinian?"

The man with the lantern came forward. I dismounted. So did Tiryventy.

"Troops of Thertine and Leamshi are in battle with our own this very moment," said the Haiasi.

"Oh-!" I started. Tiryventy acted faster.

"How long have you been in battle?"

"This afternoon," said the Haiasi, "A girl on horseback came in and warned us. Her horse was wild and foaming; she said she'd raced URIV here and that help was coming. They came soon after, but we were not unprepared."

"Alivia's here? Hurrah! We're the help!" I said all in one breath. The Haiasi looked closely at me.

"You don't speak like a Cysaanian."

"I'm...not," I said. "To tell you the truth, I am Prince Colin of Thertine--"

The Haiasi started back, hand on his sword hilt.

Tiryventy flung an arm between me and the Haiasi.

"This boy is on our side," he explained, "He rebelled and resisted URIV."

"Very well..." The Haiasi relaxed his hand, still eyeing me.

"I'd like to see Alivia...the girl..." I said, "Can you take us to her?"

"She's inside. I don't know where," the Haiasi led us to the gate of Aiyoysha. He muttered to another guard and they cranked the gate open.

We entered the city. A lone woman in the street gave a cry at the sight of us and dropped her bucket. Our Haiasi friend hurried up to her and said something. The woman's eyes widened. She catapulted toward us, flung her arms around Tiyrventy, and burst into tears. Tiyrventy, looking surprised and uncomfortable, tried to pry her arms off while speaking to her in soothing tones.

"It's all right...we're here to help...is there--it's all right--is there a girl by the name of Alivia here?"

The woman just shook her head and continued to spew unintelligible words. Tiyrventy looked at me. "I think she only speaks Haiasi."

I looked up and noticed the noise the woman was making had aroused some people. They poked their heads out of windows and doors, blinking sleepily in the half-light of street lamps. "Excuse me!" I called to them. "We're from Cysaan-" One of the gatekeepers shoved up beside me and started to call out to the people in the soft wispy language of Haiasi-Divad.

"Ayshi uon hoosis Cysaan hsyion..."

The people were silent when the Haiasin finished. I was beginning to feel genuinely uncomfortable when an eager voice called out.

"Colin! That's you, isn't it? I'm here!"

I looked up and around.

"I'm here, Colin!"

I caught sight of a waving hand from one of the second story windows. Alivia's face was shrouded in darkness.

"I'm coming down, wait a moment!"

The hand disappeared. Alivia bust out into the street a minute later.

"There are precious few Haiasin soldiers, Col!" she called even before she reached us. "Bless their hearts, even ill ones went out along with small boys I swear can't be more than ten or eleven and--"

I caught her shoulders "Slow down, Ali!" She stopped, and glanced around at the people who still weren't saying anything.

She muttered something under her breath then asked the Haiasi guard, "Can you tell them this is the help I told them about? And they are completely trustworthy? And that they don't have to be so silent or suspicious?"

"You can leave out that last part," I told the Haiasin, rolling my eyes. He nodded and relayed the message. A door slammed and a middle-aged woman came up to us.

"You go help my husband and son, yes?"

I nodded, surprised that she would speak in Thertinian.

"This is Hyspida," said Alivia, then added in a mutter. "She knows some of you are from Thertine."

Hyspida nodded.

"Okay. That's great." I glanced around at the Haiasians. "I just wanted to see if you'd got here okay, Ali. We need to go now."

Alivia nodded. "And drop off the women and children you brought? Hyspida can help with that. Right?" Hyspida nodded again.

"Right. Okay. Thanks." I called back to my people. "If you're not eligible for fighting, please come up here. Hyspida will help find places for you." People strangled up to Hyspida, who began dividing them into groups. I caught the eyes of Ishmael as he got put into a group. We smiled at each other and waved. Curious women began to wander into the street. I went back to where I'd left Petshtre.

"Can you tell us where the battle is?" I asked a guard. He nodded. "All right!" I called to our soldiers. "Let's go!"

"Wait a moment, Colin!" Came Alivia's voice. I turned around. Alivia held up a hand.

"I just need to grab something, and--"

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Alivia looked at me in surprise. "I'm coming with you, of course."

I stared at her. "You are doing no such thing!"

"Am too!"

Wounded, worn out, recently experienced a ride at break-neck speed, and she thought she was coming to fight? Something swelled within me. If Alivia, with all she had been through, thought she could keep going...

I put my hands on her shoulders. "Alivia Stylwell," I told her. "For once you're listening to me. You are staying here."

She opened her mouth, and then closed it again. She looked down at the ground and scuffed one toe across the cobblestones. She looked back up at me, and put her hands on my arms.

"All right," she said in a soft voice. She pushed my hands off of her shoulders and threw her arms around me. I stood there in complete surprise as she said, "Be careful," before I could hug her back.

"I will," I said. I turned from her, thinking of the first time I saw her and she'd stabbed herself with a needle. I mounted Petshtre and called out "All right men, let's move!"

"'Bye! 'Bye!"

I glanced over my shoulder. Rosemary stood beside Alivia, waving her hand high.

"When's he coming back?" I heard Rosemary ask. Alivia gave her a lopsided smile.

"Soon," she said, and when she looked at me again tears filled her eyes. "Soon," she said again.

I turned Petshtre around and galloped to the front.

\* \* \* \* \*

I never before knew just how black the night gets. The stars and moon shone in a cloudless sky. They should have cast light, but it all seemed black. All you could see were seemingly shapeless shadows, boiling, darting. Screams and shouts echoed everywhere. If the night of the attack on our camp was the longest one of the year, then the sun must have exploded several hours ago and we would never see the day again.

I leaned against the red rock in the center of the field. At least I guessed it was the center. Battlefields can't possibly have one.

We were losing and I knew it. Badly. There were soldiers not only from Leamshi and Thertine, but I saw uniforms and armor styles that of Takhan, Melri, and other's I'd never seen before. What could the meager remains of a rebellion and Cysaan do?

The remains of a rebellion. A rebellion of Thertine. Thertine. What had happened to Thertine? I could remember it happy and merry.

Couldn't I?

I straightened up, tired of thinking, tired of fighting, tired of everything. Tired of living, almost.

*And I'm only fifteen. What's the world coming to?*

I pushed off of the rock.

*How handy. If there ever was a time to be tired of living, this is it. I'm going to get my wish.*

But I was going to get my wish standing and fighting, not leaning against this rock wishing I didn't have to lift my sword again. In the poetic sense, Thertine needed me, and I would die defending it. In the non-poetic sense, I was going to fail again whether Thertine needed me or not.

Again I thought of Alivia; of Rosemary, Travis, and Jeanie and I made up my mind.

Non-poetic or no, I wouldn't back down. I gazed at the figures in the field, rubbed my hand across my forehead, and then took the plunge.

\* \* \* \* \*

I spun around, lifted my sword and froze. So did the person I was facing. Dark eyes glinted out from underneath a face-concealing helmet.

"Fa...fa...ther..." The word fell in quiet pieces from my mouth. I backed away, my stomach quailing. I didn't want this. Karlin didn't move, watching me. I continued to back away. I turned when the distance between us widened to four yards. Behind me there came a strangled croak.

I didn't even think about it. I dropped and rolled. The sword tip whistled a mere inch from my ear. I leaped to my feet, sword held up in defense.

Yes. It was my Father.

"What are you doing?" I gasped. He didn't answer, but attacked again.

Karlin was horribly strong, no denying it. I ducked and twirled around Karlin the way Jeanie had taught me, but lacking one thing. Karlin noticed it.

"Why don't you fight back, boy?" his eyes narrowed behind his helmet. A strange thought stuck me.

*Hiding. He's hiding.*

I told the truth. "I-I don't want to,"

"Ha!"

I dodged again. I wanted to run. I wanted to get away. But I couldn't turn my back on...this...man...during battle. I didn't know if he would kill me. And I didn't want to find out.

"Fight back, coward!" My Father snapped.

"I don't want to," I said again. My voice came out strangled and broken. He said something else, but I couldn't hear what it was.

I continued to say over and over, "I don't want to. I don't want to," The only part of him I could see were his eyes. Again the thought came to me.

*He's hiding.*

*From what?*

The fighting spirit of the two armies had been reinforced when the sun rose at last. I had almost wished it was still dark. With the darkness you could snatch a small breathing space every once in a while, but in the full daylight when everybody can see you and everybody

knows who you are, then *not a chance* are you getting a rest, however small it may be. But when I remembered the feeling of being suffocated in thick gloom and not knowing if someone was sneaking up on you, I had decided I preferred the light after all. Now again I wished it were dark. I wouldn't have recognized my father.

His attack on me intensified. I continued to back away and block his thrusts, and all the while searched for an escape route.

'Leave me alone!' I wanted to say. 'Leave me alone!' Karlin paused his attack. I found myself again leaning against the rock in the center of the battlefield.

My father spoke to me. "Had enough, boy?"

*When was the last time he called me by my name?*

"E-enough of what?" I stammered.

"This," He swept an arm across the field. I shook my head.

"Why not?"

"Because you're wrong. URIV is wrong." Here we were, the same old argument. Couldn't we think of something else?

"Why?"

"Because it isn't just. It's taking advantage of others. Besides that, you have only to look at what's been happening to Thertine to become part of URIV."

"It was necessary,"

"Exactly!" I said, "All the wonderful talk of URIV is a rubbish heap if the hardships on everybody but you and your friends were necessary to become part of URIV."

"Hardships," My father put one hand on his hip.

"Spare the rod and spoil the child."

"Continually use the rod and kill the child," I shot back.

*How am I doing, Jeanie? I am acting clever? Wise? Or just plain stupid?*

My Father shook his head. "So you won't relent?"

"No."

"So be it," His eyes locked on mine. "Goodbye, Colin."

"Goodb-?"

His sword jabbed into my right hand, then reversed direction and struck my sword hard. It twisted from my hand and fell. Karlin thrust again.

I screamed. I don't know if it merely echoed in my head, or if I actually cried the word, but I heard it ringing in my ears all the same.

"FATHER!"

Ripping, searing, burning chill.

A yell. The clash of metal. I slumped to the ground, sweat beading my face, gazing at the brown grass as it started to turn red.

My sword. I felt I *must* get it back, though I didn't know why. I rolled over, attempting to reach it.

A voice screamed "Don't move, Colin! For pity's sake, don't move!" followed by a pained cry. I blinked, struggling to match the voice with a face...I dragged my eyes up, watching the small figure dart around the larger one...the redness...the smell...I gasped.

"Travis!" I choked out "Stop! He's too strong! He...Jeanie..." I struggled to sit up.

"Colin! Don't move, I tell you!" Travis yelled, ducking. He dodged the sword edge, but not the handle. It caught Travis under the chin, sending him flying backwards, hitting the stone with a crack. Karlin spun around, eyes raging. He advanced to me.

"Father..." I whispered. He opened his mouth to speak, raising his sword.

"NO!!" But this was Travis, not him. Travis bounded up, pushing off the rock with his feet, crashing into Karlin.

"You rotten urchin!" Karlin snarled "Must you always be getting in the way?"

"Of course, if it pleases your majesty," Travis said.

"It doesn't!"

I grasped the hilt of my sword. "Umf..." Since when was it so heavy? I struggled to raise it.

*Whoosh*

A blur jumped out of nowhere, knocking my weapon away.

"Well done, Jarius," Karlin said, holding a squirming Travis in his arms. My mouth dropped open. Jarius crouched a few feet away, his eyes darting from me to Karlin.

"You...you..." I sputtered, trying to come up with a suiting insult. Karlin didn't give me the chance.

"I have this beggar under control," he said "but as he takes up both arms, I want you to do something for me."

Jarius didn't answer. Waiting.

"Kill Colin."

I gasped. "Father...you wouldn't really..." I trembled, unbelieving. This was my father? *My father?*

"No, I wouldn't," Karlin answered me "That's why I'm telling Jarius to do it. Speaking of which...Jarius!"

Jarius crept toward me, dagger in hand. I locked eyes with him. "Jarius," I started, unsure of what I was going to say. Then it came to me. "Jarius, you can kill me if you like, but it won't make any difference." He blinked, his face expressionless, but I knew him well enough by now that that meant I'd struck a chord. "Jeanie told me," I said "I don't know the details, as she didn't, and no one else does except you." Jarius hesitated.

"Jarius!" My father glared at him. Jarius continued forward and put the dagger at my throat.

"Jeanie didn't love you any less. This won't help, Jarius." I felt amazed as another thought entered my head. "Whatever my father promised, what good will it do, with the knowledge that what you've done is wrong. You know it's wrong. And think of this Jarius--"

"Jarius!" My father said again.

"If he can turn against his son for power--"

"You turned against me Colin!" My father snarled. I ignored the interruption.

"--then what possible love and satisfaction can he give you?"

"Jarius!" My father yelled, almost howling now. I added one more thought.

"I know whatever me and my family did to yours was wrong, and I'm sorry, Jarius." I looked at him. His eyes were on me, but he wasn't looking at me. I think I saw a glimpse of tears. He screamed and reeled backwards. Jarius leaped up and jumped for my father. Karlin dropped Travis to defend himself.

"No! Jarius!" Travis and I shouted at the same time. Travis bounded up. My father kicked Jarius down. Jarius leaped again. Travis snatched up his sword.

My father grabbed Jarius's arm. I don't think Jarius ever even saw the sword.

It plunged into his chest.

A gurgling choking gasp.

My father threw him. His body thudded against the ground.

Karlin spun to meet Travis and threw him off as well.

"Jarius," I whispered. He didn't move. I gave an enraged cry and rolled over, snatching up my sword. I jumped up, racing to and leaping upon the unsuspecting monster. I had but one intent.

To kill him.

Then I saw his eyes. They were wide, surprised...and terrified. My rage, if not my anger, evaporated. The monster was my father once again. I struck the hilt of my sword between his eyes.

Karlin fell, cracking his head against the ground. He didn't rise.

I stood, trembling. Travis stared at me. "Col..."

I turned away from him and half-ran, half-stumbled over to Jarius.

Dead. I sighed, drawing a hand over my eyes. "I'm sorry, Jarius," I whispered, "I really am." I surveyed the battle field, turned back around, and started back towards Travis.

I dodged around a Leamshin. He spun and struck at me.

*For Travis.*

I dropped to the ground, kicked his feet out from under him, and grabbed the hilt of his sword.

*Jeanie is dead. The others aren't.*

*So who are you fighting for?*

He pulled back and grabbed at my own sword.

*Alivia. Ronelle. Ishmael.*

Still on the ground, I reared back and kicked his stomach with both feet.

*Jerry Cruning. Cark. Robin.*

He fell backwards. I grabbed a nearby rock and threw it.

*Sol.*

It smashed into his head.

*Thertine.*

I staggered upwards.

"You better sit down Colin," Travis appeared at my side. "How on earth you're walking and fighting after that--"

"I'm all right." I interrupted. The fact of the matter was, I couldn't even feel my wound at the moment, just anger. "We don't have much of a chance, Trav. In fact...I don't think we have any."

Travis dodged and struck, then turned to face me. "You mean as we are?"

I frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"--I whacked a Leamshin--"Yes, as we are."

The Leamshin stabbed at me. I met his weapon with my own, dodged around him, and stabbed him in the back.

Travis jumped toward me a minute later. "So rouse your people," He said, and disappeared back into the battle. My eyes widened.

*What? 'Rouse my people'?*

I spun around.

*Rouse my people.*

I could see the large rock to my right. I ran to it and started to scramble up. I'd stick out like an elephant among an ant colony; perfect for an archer's target practice.

I tried not to think about that.

I placed my feet on a ledge, and held up my sword. I would have but a couple seconds.

"Men!" I shouted "Men of Thertine!" I got some attention. "Why do you fight against your people?" I spotted Travis looking at me. "URIV does not build, but destroy. You've seen it happening," Travis jumped forward and started to fight off people, delaying the clock. "You can turn back! Fight them and end-" My time ran out. A Leamshin leaped up, grabbed my boot, and yanked. I fell, hit the rock hard, and flew off, landing on my face. But at the same time, I heard...

Shouts. Uproar.

Something had happened.

I slashed at the Leamshin and he fell. I made up my mind. I didn't intend to die. Not yet. I glanced around. Chaos erupted around me. People shouted at each other, glared at each other, and turned in circles looking lost.

I didn't get much time to watch. People, mainly Leamshins, surged toward me.

*Oh...dear...!*

My swordsmanship may have been good, but it wasn't that good. I turned and fled, ducking under and leaping over swords and arms and legs.

A scream came from my right.

Travis!

I spun around, searching wildly with my eyes.

*Where are you?*

I bowled into an opposing soldier, knocking him over.

The scream came again. I spotted Travis rolling on the ground, his arm a tangled bloody mess. I charged a few people and got through them.

Nausea hit me.

I felt as if everybody had decided to separate me and Travis.

My ears began to ring. The noises around me became muddled and confused. I tried to get past a Leamshin. He wouldn't let me through. We fought. My side burned. My vision blurred. I killed the Leamshin.

*What was I doing?*

I looked around me in a daze.

A scream?

Travis?

My legs gave way and I sank to my knees. The world spun. A pair of feet strode toward me. I looked up into the swirling face of the URIV ringleader, Leyron. Something shining in the sunlight fell toward me.

And the world plunged into emptiness.

Chapter 12

Silence.

I didn't want to open my eyes. Every limb seemed to be a deadweight. Even the slightest of movements felt like lifting fifty pounds.

Dizziness enveloped me. My tongue felt like a block of wood.

*Where am I?*

I could remember Leyron above me. Didn't he kill me? Was I dead?

A spasm of pain tore across my middle. No, things weren't supposed to hurt when you were dead, same as

dreams. Right? Of course, how was I to know? I had never been dead before. But how could things hurt if I didn't have a body anymore? Besides, Leyron should have killed me. Why wouldn't he? So I must be dead, right? But things weren't supposed to hurt...

The air was stuffy and hot. I let out what I meant to be a moan, but ended up as a sigh. The warm air of my sigh hovered around my face.

Huh?

I opened my eyes. Cloth tickled my face. A crack of light shone in to my right. I could see nothing else.

I started to call out 'help!' but I didn't get past the 'h'. I grimaced. My side burned. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of my head. I had to get out from under here.

What was I under, anyway?

I squirmed a full three seconds before I had to stop. Nothing I knew hurt worse than this. I wriggled again and found I could move my arms. All right, good. My right hand hurt bad, but I pushed the thing on me with it anyway. It moved the slightest bit and no more.

My arm flopped back down. I breathed hard.

*This shouldn't take so much effort.* I thought, scaring myself.

I pushed up again, this time with my left hand too.  
Nothing happened.

*Don't push up, push away.* I thought.

I obeyed. The thing moved to the side. After three more tries, the thing slid off of my face. I shut my eyes to the sun's glare. Again I wondered,

*Why aren't I dead?*

Something moaned. At first I thought it was me, but when it came again I knew it wasn't. I opened my eyes.

Leyron.

His face, a few inches from my own, was contorted. It was he who was on top of me. An arrow protruded from his back. I looked to my right. There was the rock. I began to feel sure I had a magnetic attraction to that rock.

We were still in the battlefield. I could see nobody. Nobody standing and walking around, that is.

*What happened?*

I wondered if maybe all of us, every single one, was either badly wounded or killed. But no, that never happened, did it?

*If that didn't happen, what did?*

Leyron moaned again. My stomach lurched; my vision blurred, swirled, and began to go black. A voice jerked me back to consciousness.

"It's hopeless...we've crawled all over this place. I don't think..."

Again I tried to shout for help. Again I failed. But this time I at least got out a squeak.

"What was that?" a second voice asked. It sounded familiar.

They'd heard me! I called out again. Leyron moaned.

"It's from over here," the first voice said. A nerve-wracking thought struck me.

*Who won?*

"I'm here!" I managed to croak. A joyous cry came.

"Colin!"

"Is that you, Cark?"

"I'll say it is!" Cark came into my line of vision, his face beaming, and one arm bandaged. He knelt down by me. "We thought you must be dead when we couldn't find--how are you?"

"Hurt," I closed my eyes, and thought.

"Tired...anxious..."

"Stop talking," Cark said, "We need to get...whoever this is off of you," Cark's partner appeared on the other side of me. They lifted Leyron off.

"It's Leyron," I managed to say, "The URIV leader."

"Really!" Cark's companion's eyes widened. "Well!" He shouted at someone I couldn't see. "Over here! We've found survivors!"

"Can you walk?" Cark asked, taking my hand.

I frowned. "No!"

He nodded, looking worried. "All right. We'll carry you to--"

"Cark..."

"What?"

"What's happened?"

A smile spread over Cark's face. "We won, Colin. You did it!"

I drew in a long breath, shock numbing even the pain in my side. We won? Really? How? When? Wait...I did it? "M-m-me?" I stammered. "What did I do?"

"What? What did you do?" Cark let out a laugh, shaking his head in disbelief. "What did you do? You don't know what you did?"

"Well..."

"Listen!" Cark leaned close to me. "That little speech you did; it turned the world upside-down. Nobody knew who to fight anymore. Everyone was shouting at each other, everyone was...was...it was chaos!"

I couldn't speak. I watched people come and lift up Leyron from the ground. Cark continued to talk, but his voice seemed from far away.

"The cards were turned! Completely turned, I tell you! Tiyrventy gathered everyone and--"

"Carklitkya," someone interrupted.

"Oh, right." Cark stood up. "Where are you hurt, Colin?"

"I..." I blinked, my head pounding. "The main one you can see--my side,"

Cark relayed the information, and they began to lift me.

"Ohh!" I gasped. Again the world swirled and went dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

My pulse pounded.

"Hello? Where am I?" I opened my eyes. A woman hovered above me. "Where am I?" I felt panic. "Where is Father? Alivia? Cark?"

Why wouldn't she answer? Something cool pressed against my forehead, and the woman left me.

"Wait, come back! I need help! I don't know--"

"Shh, you're all right."

"Phyllis?"

"That's right. Now just calm down. You're wounded and have a fever, but that's all. You'll be all right."

"Fever? Where's Cark?"

"He's here."

"Can I see him?"

"Not just yet, dear,"

A part of me objected to being called 'dear', but I didn't care enough to protest. "What about Alivia? Where's Travis? And Father? He stabbed me. He didn't care. And then he killed Jarius. Leyron was shot--"

"You're all right, dear. So are Alivia and Travis and your Father."

"He stabbed me. He tried to kill me. Why did he do that? He's my father."

"You're all right."

"He's my father."

\* \* \* \* \*

I stared up at the wooden beams above me for a long time. Just resting. It seemed like such a long time...

The door creaked, and a woman appeared by my bedside. Seeing me awake, she called over her shoulder and Phyllis came in to the room.

"How're you feeling?" she asked.

"Better than I've felt for a long time," I said, "A long time..." I sighed and shrugged. "So how am I really as opposed to how I feel?"

"You should be partly healed by now. It's been eleven days since the battle. Try sitting up."

I obeyed. My side ached, but I managed to keep a straight face.

"Good," said Phyllis. "You're better off than some. I don't know if you remember it or not, but you have eaten several times this week."

I thought for a moment then shook my head. I slowly swung my feet over the side of the cot.

"No you don't," Phyllis held up a hand.

"I'll just see if I can, and then I'll lay right back down," I promised. I stood up, swaying. I stood a few more moments after regaining my balance. Phyllis jerked her thumb and I lay back down.

"Could I see Cark?" I asked, "Or Alivia, Ishmael, Travis..." I stopped. Travis! "How is Travis?" I sat up, "He's not..." I couldn't finish.

"He's fine," said Phyllis. "His arm is broken and badly mangled, but he isn't...gone,"

I sighed with relief and leaned back. "So can I see someone?"

Phyllis nodded. "I suppose so. I'll be back in a few minutes."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello, Col,"

"Travis!" I sat up. "I'm so glad...I heard you scream and..."

Travis nodded, looking sheepish. "Well, it hurt," He held up his bandaged arm.

"I'll say," I said, "I won't be mad for being scared to death then."

Travis smiled and put his arm back in the sling. "We were all worried about you, too."

"Come over here," I said. Travis obeyed and sat on the edge of the bed. "Could I ask you a...personal question?"

He looked at me. "I guess so," he said, rubbing his left palm.

"I asked you before where you got that scar," I said, "I'd still like to know...but just out of curiosity. You don't have to answer,"

Travis gave me a shaky smile and shrugged.

"Robin and I were playing in our nursery," he said softly, "He was six, I was eight. I looked out the window and saw a lot of horseback riders coming toward our house. We were curious, so we both started downstairs. When we were almost to the parlor, I heard Mother's voice coming from outside. It was shrill and frightened. We kept going, and everything got louder. People shouting, crying..."

"When we went outdoors, Mother was being held by soldiers. She saw us and screamed at us to run. More soldiers started running toward us and...I panicked, I guess. I grabbed Robin and yanked him back inside. There wasn't anywhere else to go, the place was surrounded. I dragged Robin to the kitchen and we hid in a partially empty cupboard. We were there a long time, and I didn't dare look out until I heard something odd. Crackling and snapping. Smoke poured into the cupboard when I opened it. I screamed, grabbing Robin again, and we ran. We got out of the house somehow. It was dark, but there were still some soldiers scattered around. They saw us and yelled. We cut

across our land, and came to a barbed wire fence. The fire was spreading from our house to the fields--an accident, I'm sure. And the soldiers were coming at us. I pushed Robin through the fence and climbed through myself. But I was hurrying and I caught my hand on it." Travis hesitated, then held up his hand for me to see. He half-smiled, "It bled like crazy. After that, we wandered the streets until ...Ishmael found us."

I wondered if there was a catch in his voice when he mentioned Ishmael. I decided I had imagined it.

"I'm sorry," I traced imaginary patterns on my blanket. "Why do you think the soldiers wanted you too?"

"Probably in case we knew about Leamshi too," Travis said. "They were right. I knew, but I didn't know what it meant at the time. I forgot about it until Jeanie brought it up."

"Ah," I leaned back and gazed up at the ceiling.

"I need to tell you something, Col," Travis said, his eyes downcast. "A couple things, actually."

"What?"

"I asked Phyllis to not say anything about them to you..."

I shifted my weight, wishing he could get to the point. When I got my wish, I instantly took it back.

"Ishmael died,"

I sucked in my breath. I couldn't have felt any colder if Travis had just dumped a bucket of ice-cold water on me. I fought tears, feeling enormously sorry for myself for losing another friend. I wanted to shut out the world, and sink into--Travis's face twisted and he bit his lip, and I forgot about my dramatic act. Ishmael and Travis.

"I'm sorry Travis," I said.

Travis's voice trembled. "H-he was like the family I'd lost...especially after Robin...Robin..." He stopped, rigid as an oak staff.

Guilt overcame me. "I'm sorry," I said again, "For that too."

"It wasn't you," whispered Travis. Silence enveloped the room. At last Travis heaved a shaky sigh and said, "Well, that's number one."

I curled my fist around a corner of the blanket. I'd forgotten there was a number two. I braced myself for the worst and said,

"And?"

I take that back. I merely tried to brace myself for the worst.

"Alivia,"

"Alivia!" I shot upwards as best I could while still sitting down. "That--that--defiant...parrot! What'd she do? I told her to stay behind!"

"She did, Col."

I stopped, at a loss. "Don't tell me she's..."

"She's not."

"Then what...?"

"After you turned URIV's own army against itself, a portion of those still with URIV came here to Aiyoysha."

A shudder went through me. "Whatever for?"

"We don't know. Perhaps to get hostages, perhaps just to get supplies before drawing off...we don't know. Anyway, they attacked...or simply 'came' is more like it. They weren't expecting a fight other than the few soldiers left here. They did fight back of course--that's where Ishmael...Ishmael...you know--but it wasn't enough. Then Alivia rallied the women and URIV was driven away."

"Good for Alivia!" I beamed. "I can toss this at her whenever I tell her to stay behind. She won't have a good excuse now."

"Colin, Alivia's dying,"

I stared at Travis, my mouth slightly ajar. I closed it with a snap. "Oh."

Travis twisted a loose thread of his shirt around one finger. "There's one more thing."

"I thought you said there were just two."

Travis studied me, forehead wrinkled. "Yes, well...your father is being held across the city, along with Leyron. They want you there as soon as you're well enough."

"Leyron's alive?"

"Yes,"

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Travis frowned. "Colin, are you all right?"

*"Is there anything else?"*

Travis gazed at me. "No."

"Fine then. I'm tired. Please go."

"Col, what-"

"Go!"

Travis went.

\* \* \* \* \*

I made my way through the hallways and stopped at the next door. I checked the marking carved in the wood with

the sketch on the torn piece of paper I held in my hand. They matched...more or less. Ah, well. I was tired of looking. I knocked on the door.

It opened, and a maid poked her head out.

"I want to see Alivia," I said, not hoping for her to understand me.

"Oh, sir," she said, surprising me. "I don't think you can..." she trailed off, took a good look at my face, and asked, "Are you the Prince?"

"Yes,"

"All right," she held the door opened. "She's unconscious, though."

"I don't care," I stepped into the tiny room. The maid, apparently unworried about offending me, sat down in a chair by the door and picked up a small book. Instead of reading it though, she watched me. I went over to the bed. And stopped.

Beads of sweat stood out on Alivia's face. Her skin had a gray cast to it. Her breathes came in slow gasps. Trembling, I reached out and touched the bandage wrapped around her forehead.

"You cut her hair," I whispered.

"Aye, sir," said the maid from behind me. "It was in the way."

"In the...!" I balled my hand into a fist and closed my eyes. I took a jagged breath and stood silent, looking down at Alivia. I touched the blonde locks cut short above her ear, then turned around and left the chamber.

The maid's voice came from behind me. "I really am sorry about your sweetheart, sir. It was amazing; the way she gathered us to fight. She was a courageous girl."

"Was?" I spun around, not bothering to argue about the 'sweetheart' part, and glared at the maid.

"She is a courageous girl," the maid corrected herself.

I turned back around and ran from the building.

\* \* \* \* \*

I limped past the guard and up to the tall door, hand on my side. I could almost hear Phyllis now.

'What?' she would say, 'You ran for *how* long? Tsk, tsk. I *told* you to be easy on yourself, but no, I should have known you would-'

I shook myself. What did I care about Phyllis? I hesitated, with one hand in the air to push open the door. Botheration, I did not want to go in there. I lowered my

hand, then lifted it again. Whether I wanted to or not, I had to.

Had to? I lowered my hand. Whoever said I had to? But it wasn't like he could hurt me any more, right? I lifted my hand.

And lowered it. Whether he could or not, I still didn't want to see him. But I *should*...I lifted my hand. And lowered it. Up, down, up, down.

I could see the guard out of the corner of my eye looking at me with both eyebrows raised.

Blushing, I pushed the door open before I could stop myself and stepped inside.

*Phew*...I looked around me in awe. The Haiasi must sure be proud of their Capitol Hall. Lively murals covered the high walls, and two intricate statues were on either side of the door I had just come in. I stood motionless, at a loss.

"Are you the Prince Colin?" A loud voice boomed in the spacious room.

"Whaa?" I gasped, jerking my head around. A man in uniform leaned over a banister at the top of a stairway. "I...uh...yes?" I said when I remembered his question. My voice didn't carry and I had to say it again, louder.

"You need to come up here," he said.

"S-sure," I trekked up the stairs, and the man led me down the hallway. Our footsteps seemed as loud as thunder, and they cascaded off the walls behind us long after we'd passed. The man stopped at a door.

"The authorities are in here," he said.

"Are they?" I whispered, more to myself than to him.

The man continued. "Just sit down in the chair in the corner and wait till they're finished. They're probably questioning the URIV leaders."

I vaguely wondered if the man didn't know, or just didn't think about, that one of the 'URIV leaders' was my father. Or maybe he was just being polite. Or sympathetic.

I stood frozen at the door, and I don't think I would have budged another inch if the man hadn't swung the door open and pushed me inside.

They didn't even glance back. My father and Leyron stood in front of a desk in the small room. I skittered past a few guards and sat down in a chair. I watched the 'URIV leaders', not listening to the actual conversation going on. My father stood with his shoulders sagged. Leyron, however, had crossed his arms and he tapped the

floor with one foot as if he was annoyed with the whole business.

*What am I doing here?*

I squirmed in the chair, feeling strangely exposed.

*Don't turn your head, Father, please don't turn your head.*

He didn't, and I sank into my own thoughts like one would into a dark hole as the time went by. A voice yanked back out.

"--nce Colin?"

I jerked up. "Huh?" Everyone looked at me. "Wha...I-oh!" I jumped up, my face reddening.

"Prince Colin," the interrogator said again, "We understand that you were the one to decide what to do with King Karlin, here?"

Still in a daze, I said, "Do you?" I mentally slapped myself for giving such an unintelligent answer. "I mean--yes, I think--I mean that's right."

I think the interrogator looked a little sorry for me. Leyron though, I am sure would be saying something along the lines of, "How sad. What an idiot," if he had been allowed to talk.

"M-may I see my fa--I mean, the King Karlin alone?" I asked.

"I wouldn't advise it," said the interrogator.

"I'd still like to," I said. The man looked at me for a long time.

"Very well," he said, and gestured to a small side-door. "You may go in there. Just shout if you need anything."

*Like, 'Help, he's killing me?'* I wondered as I stepped into the little side room. My father went in after me. The door closed. I stood in awkward silence, shifting my weight. Why had I asked to see him alone?

"I..." I started, and stopped. "What do you want?"

"You're in charge," said Karlin, leaning against the wall. "You don't need to ask me that."

"I want to know," I said. He didn't answer. "Look, I'm sorry. Can't you see that? I didn't want to go against you."

"Honor thy father," Said Karlin.

I bit my lip. "I don't want to argue."

"Too late,"

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. "Please, Father--"

"Don't call me that,"

I opened my eyes. "What?" Karlin stood before me, towering above me, and more terrifying than I'd ever seen him look.

"From this moment on, Colin," he said. "I am disowning you. Not from my possessions, I have no power over that anymore, but from me. I refuse to acknowledge you as a son of mine."

I opened my mouth but no words came.

*I don't want this. This isn't what I wanted.*

"You've brought this on yourself, Colin," Karlin turned around jerked open the door and strode out.

I bit my lip, fighting tears.

"Prince Colin?"

*Come on, they're waiting.*

I pushed my grief aside. There would be time for sadness later. Right now I had a job to do.

I went into the other room. They all looked at me, waiting. "I..." I stopped, unable to get any words out. I looked at Leyron, then at my father. I gritted my teeth in the effort not to cry. "He can live," I muttered at last, "In Thertine. In Hesston. Under close watch."

"Very well," the interrogator wrote something down on a piece of paper. "Escort the prisoners to their room," He said to the guards. "Meanwhile," he said after they'd left. "We have other things have to work out, Prince. It will take the rest of the day. We have a room prepared for you."

I nodded.

The man gestured. "Pull up a chair."

I did so. "Just out of curiosity," I managed to say after a several minutes, "Did you decide what to do with Leyron?"

"Since he technically didn't commit any crimes, he will be kept in prison for the remainder of his lifetime instead of executed."

I looked at my hands and tried to say 'oh'. But the words didn't come.

\* \* \* \* \*

After I 'worked out' a few things with the interrogator, there were things I had to 'work out' with the king of Haiasi-Divad, and then the king of Cysaan, then Melri, Takhan, and the rest. All in all, it was five days before I headed back to the other side of Aiyoysha. Five blurry days. I couldn't remember much about them, just talk, talk, talk, writing things down, more talk, treaties,

etc. Thertine was at peace with the other countries now. I knew that was a good thing, but I couldn't feel joyful.

I counted in my head.

*I've lost Jeanie, Ishmael, Alivia, Ronelle, Jarius...and now Fa...* I grimaced, and didn't finish my thought.

I stepped in a puddle and water splashed my pants. I lifted my eyes and spotted the gate. I went through it and down to the makeshift shelters and tents that were housing those who weren't sick or wounded.

I stopped at the edge. I didn't want to see anybody. Not yet. They would ask me how it went.

I went around the encampment and walked away from it. I sank down at the foot of a lone tree a little way away from the camp, and for the first time since that first day at the Capitol Hall, I dropped 'business' and let my emotions flow.

*He rejected me. He rejected me. I didn't want this to happen, Father. It's not my fault. It's not!*

I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand, but it didn't stem the streams.

I had been excited to move in with my Father when I was chosen for the heir. I had wanted to know him. And I

still did. It seemed so ironic that the training and moving in should have been the perfect opportunity to do just that. Instead, it was the wedge that drove us apart. That and Jeanie.

*I don't regret it, Jeanie. I don't. I just wish you could have asked someone else. Someone who would have done a better job, like saving you instead of letting you die, Who would that someone have been?*

I looked around, positive that I wasn't the one who had thought that.

*"Then, in answer to your other questions your majesty, I've been watching you, because I had no other resort."*

No other resort. I had been her last resort. I leaned back against the tree.

*Fine then, Jeanie. Knowing you, you must have looked long and hard before coming to me. At least it's over...and the right side won.*

I walked slowly to 'my' tent and collapsed in the chair in front of it. For the first time in years, I found myself thinking about my mother. She'd died of a fever when I was small.

*Would she have been as distant as Father? Would she have gone along with this URIV thing?...Would she have had any other choice?*

I sighed, shaking my head.

*Strange, where is everybody?*

I looked around, puzzled.

*Oh well.*

I put my head in my hands and stared at the ground.

*I guess we'll be going back to Hesston tomorrow or the-*

"Colin?"

My heart stopped.

*What?*

"Colin!"

*No, impossible...*

I slowly...very slowly...lifted my head. A thrill surged through me. I shot from the chair, unbelieving, but unmistakable...

"Alivia Stylwell!" I choked out, crushing her in a hug. "You...you...quit scaring me!"

"Dreadfully sorry," said Alivia. Her voice was muffled but I didn't let go. I looked up and saw Travis standing a little ways away. He smiled at me.

I smiled back and laid my cheek on Alivia's hair.

\* \* \* \* \*

I ran a hand along the stone garden wall as I walked. A breeze, fresh and cool, brushed past me and I breathed deep. In a few minutes I would go to the Hall to meet with my friends, but for now I could just walk and remember. This was my father's castle garden, or used to be. Technically, I supposed, it was mine now. I was to be coroneted tomorrow. I gazed down at the garden path as I walked.

*Coroneted.*

My Father was confined to a room now, and we warned him that if he protested or tried to aggressively interfere with anything he would be moved to the dungeon. I turned a corner and headed back towards the castle. I decided to stop by the stables. Much to my joy, a farmer had arrived a week before with--surprise of all surprises--Sol in his tow. The farmer had found Sol lying in his fields, wounds across his back and a sprained ankle. The farmer, being a kindly person, couldn't bear to leave Sol there, even though the farmer was in poverty. He'd also found cougar tracks in a streambed not too far away.

A servant girl hurried across the path in front of me as I left the stables. She tripped and fell. I ran up to her.

"Are you all right?" I asked, taking her hand and helping her up. The girl looked into my face and gasped.

"Your highness! I--I--yes, your highness! Quite!" She pulled away. I smiled.

"You don't have to be scared of me. I don't bite."

"W-well," stammered the girl, her brow furrowed in confusion. "No, of course...not..." She backed away, staring at me. I gave her a small wave and went into a side door of the castle.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Colin! Are you sure?" Alivia stared at me.

"Quite," I said. "My Father chose me only because he felt sure I would do well in following in his footsteps. And, I'm sure, because I was his son. That's not the traditional way to choose an heir. He should have chosen one who would be a good King."

"We are well aware of that, Colin," said Alivia. "But why do you think you wouldn't be one?"

I scuffed the toe of my boot on the floor. "You know me. I'm rash, quick to act, slow to think, and don't take advice as well as I should."

Travis rubbed his left palm. "Then who would be King if not you, Col?"

"I've thought that over, too," I said. "As the leader of Thertine at the moment, though not King, I think I have the right to chose who would be the heir."

Alivia crossed her arms. "And who is that?"

I looked up. "Travis."

Travis's eyes widened. "M-me? Why?"

"You care for people, Trav," I said. "I've learned to do so in the past few months, but as far as I can tell, you've lived your whole life like that."

"B-b-but..." Travis stammered and then fell silent. Alivia spoke for him.

"But Travis--no offense, Trav--doesn't know anything about...about...all the rules and things that you know, Colin," Travis nodded in agreement, not looking the least bit offended.

"That's what I would be here for," I said, looking at Travis. "No one's going to force you, Trav. But of all the people I've met in my whole life, I've never met anybody

like you." Travis blushed and kept his eyes downcast, still rubbing his palm. "Would you consider it?"

"Consider it, I--I guess so..." Travis looked at me, a small frown on his face. "Colin, haven't you always wanted to be King?"

"Yes..." I murmured. "But I don't think I can be a good one. Not like you Travis."

"Ali?" Travis turned to Alivia. She threw up her hands.

"I don't know, Travis. To be sure, you're caring to everybody, and understand peasants...but would the people accept you?"

"By rights, Travis is a Lord," I reminded them. "My father took away the land with an unsatisfactory reason...according to our laws, anyway."

Neither Travis or Alivia answered.

"Think about it," I said again. I stood and left the room.

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I traced the design carved into the balcony railing. I could hear laughing and shouts coming from behind me, but they seemed a long way off. I looked down into the moonlight-bathed courtyard.

*Right...there. I'll put up a monument for Jeanie right there. Then some there for...the others. Yes.*

The first thing Travis had done as King was send out a proclamation. Any peasants starving or abused would report to the nearest Helping House, where Travis would post people to assist whoever needed assistance.

It felt strange, having a lifelong dream blown away with next to no warning. But I didn't regret it. Only a strange hollow feeling dwelled where the dream used to lie. I felt sure I would cease to even think about it as time passed.

A hand touched mine. "Colin?"

"Hm?" I turned to look at Alivia.

"You okay?"

How did she do it? I almost suspected her of mind-reading abilities. "I guess so..."

"Colin?" Travis joined me and Alivia. I couldn't help but smile. It seemed like these two could communicate with telepathy.

"Hi Trav. Yes, I'm okay. I just...can't believe it's over," I blinked away the tears I felt coming into my eyes. Travis laid a hand on my shoulder.

"No," he said smiling. "It's just beginning."

I rolled my eyes. "That's so...so un-original of you."

Travis laughed. "I know. But it's true."

Alivia leaned against the railing, looking out into the night. "That's Travis for you. Borrowing expressions and never making up his own."

Minutes of silence followed, broken only by the merrymaking in the dining hall. I believe the inspiration hit us at the same time. I straightened.

"Say, would you like to..." I stopped. Alivia and Travis looked at me, each other, out into the night, then back at me.

"I will if you will," Said Travis. Alivia laughed, her eyes taking on Ronelle's sparkle.

"Yes, let's!"

Not five minutes later we three shot from the gate. No attendants, no bodyguards, no cares, no nothing. Just the three of us, the trio of friends, riding like there was no tomorrow.