

THE UNICORN THRONE

The Four Kingdoms Book Two

By Chrys Cymri

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For Ruth

For the journeys we've taken together,
and those yet to come.

CHAPTER ONE

‘And these knights, Your Majesty,’ Pealla said, moving one of the markers across the board, ‘could be placed along the border here, with messengers to advise us once King Anton begins his move.’

Fianna nodded as the Colonel released the small pewter knight, then glanced up from the map of the Four Kingdoms at the knights. When she’d been younger, she’d played at planning battles, moving her troops against the Third Kingdom. Now that war might be truly coming, she knew that the capture of a marker meant blood and death. The General and his first officer seemed unperturbed at the eventuality, and Arwan even looked cheerful. Of course, they were all at least twice her age, and she was the one who had chosen to fight rather than accept Anton’s terms for the merger of their kingdoms.

Abruptly she pushed away from the table, marching across the wooden floors to the large window. The thin glass panes held back little of the winter chill, and Fianna crossed her arms over her chest as she studied the courtyard below. The horses had had their morning exercise, and most were back in their stables, a wooden building which rested against the castle walls. In the otherwise empty exercise yard the Prancer was circling the long fence, his strides smooth and strong.

‘There was a time,’ Pealla said at her shoulder, ‘when you enjoyed discussing battle plans.’

Fianna looked up at the older woman. ‘That was before knights died in my service.’ She glanced away. ‘As you nearly did.’

‘But I did not.’ Boot heel scraped against floorboards as Pealla too looked out the window. ‘I have your Champion to thank for that.’

The Prancer had increased his pace to a gallop. Those either free of or hiding from their duties stood nearby, watching as the unicorn's muscles rippled under his light grey coat. Silver horn gleamed even in the dim day, and ivory tail flicked against a blast of wind. Sand flew from silver hooves as he neatly changed direction. Fianna smiled as several stable hands shook their heads in disbelief. The Prancer might now be larger than any stallion in the stables, but he was many times as nimble, and he made even the best bred horse appear an ordinary nag.

‘If only he would agree to breed one of our mares,’ Pealla mused beside her. The second-in-command of the royal armies was descended from a family of horse breeders.

‘Have you asked him?’

‘That I did. And he pointed out that he had as little wish to cover an equine mare as a human would. Horses, he informed me, are a different and lesser species than the People of the Trees.’

Fianna shared a smile with the Colonel, easily imagining the unicorn's haughty tone. ‘His pride will be his undoing.’

The unicorn finally slowed to a trot, then a walk. A dark-haired man detached himself from the watchers, hurrying up to the Prancer with a blanket which he threw over the broad back. The unicorn obviously made a remark. Jeremy grinned, then laughed, reaching up to punch the grey-white shoulder. ‘My squire has an easy way with my Champion,’ Fianna said.

‘Aye,’ Pealla replied, with a mother’s quiet pride in her son. Then she nodded back

at the map on the table. 'Your Majesty, shall we continue?'

'I still think we are ill-advised to meekly await an attack,' Jerome growled. The General hulked at the opposite end of the table, his broad shoulders reminding Fianna of the Sacred Mountains. He could be just as immovable. 'Anton broke guest law. He dared to raise sword against a delegation which entered his city and castle at his invitation. We should avenge this insult to our Queen and our Kingdom. Anton might have the greater number of knights, but if we can gain the dragons and the unicorns to our banner--'

'But we would still be at the disadvantage if we took war to them.' Fianna strode back to the table. 'Remember what I've told you. Anton has devices under Primus castle which were designed by our ancestors to fight the Family and the People.'

Jerome shrugged. 'You spoke of metal carriages and silver cages.'

'Tanks,' Fianna corrected. 'And the cage once held the herd. Anton plans to ensure that all the magic goes from the Land, and that would affect dragons and unicorns. We do better to let him bring battle to us, to a place of our choosing.'

The door suddenly slammed open, oak hitting rock with a clang that made all the occupants of the room start, hands reaching for swords. None of them relaxed as Lady Sallah glared at the meeting. 'What matter are dragons and unicorns?' she demanded, thumping the end of her cane against the floor in emphasis. 'Why not ally ourselves to the Third Kingdom against the beasts, even as King Anton invited?'

Fianna ignored the various gasps and grimaces at her aunt's blasphemy. The green eyes, a shade darker than her own, narrowed slightly. Fianna felt herself slip back into memory, of other times when that same hard gaze had halted her in mid-argument. 'We will not,' she said slowly, fighting against the usual knot of fear in her stomach whenever she dared to go against Sallah, 'betray those to whom we are linked by blood and by oath.'

'Even if it means war?' Sallah demanded, lowering herself into a chair beside Jerome.

'Yes,' Fianna said, fuming inwardly that more words would not come.

'The Queen has spoken, my lady,' Pealla said firmly. 'We must turn our thoughts on how to convince the Family and the People to join our cause.'

'If these unicorns have any sense of honour,' Jerome growled, 'they will leave their ties to the Third Kingdom and ally themselves to us.'

'And their heir is your Champion,' Arwan added.

Fianna unwillingly returned to the table. 'The unicorns are still allied to the Third Kingdom.'

'Did the Prancer not renounce that tie when King Anton betrayed guest law?' Pealla asked.

'Many things were said.'

'Enough to bind the unicorns to us?'

'The Prancer is the son of the Herd Stallion, the Dancer,' Fianna admitted. 'But there are matters to be resolved between them both, if and when he finally returns to the herd. He blames his sire for the death of his mother, who was twin to the Dancer.'

Pealla shrugged. 'There is no shame to the breeding of brother and sister. It is rare, but I have known breeders to do so with horses.'

'He's not a horse. And his dam was most likely unwilling.' Fianna smiled bitterly. 'I know what it's like, to feel betrayed by one's own sire.'

'Perhaps Anton will send his strength after the unicorns,' Arwan suggested quietly into the awkward silence. 'Why should he invade the Third Kingdom?'

'For this.' Fianna swept a hand at the map. 'He told me that there are mineral

deposits,' she stumbled over the unfamiliar expression, 'which he requires for his magics. And, if necessary, he will take them by force.'

'He must pass through two thirds of the kingdom to reach the Dark Hills,' Jerome mused.

'A long way to bring workers of his own,' Fianna pointed out. 'He would need our subjects for his work.'

Pealla touched the brown marks on the map. 'He would not agree to a fair price for these mineral deposits?'

Her suggestion caused uproar. Fianna pounded the table with her fist, which made a satisfying, if painful, noise. 'You haven't met the man. I have. He cannot be reasoned with. He means to take what he wants from our kingdom, and to destroy the older kingdoms. We must be ready to defend ourselves.'

'And yet we cannot expect either dragons nor unicorns to lend support to our army,' Pealla said, smoothly changing subject. 'I will discuss our options with the General.'

Fianna glanced at the knight. 'Are you dismissing this meeting, Colonel?'

Pealla nodded. 'That is my duty, Your Majesty. May I suggest we open the discussion to the council at tomorrow's meeting?'

'Good idea.' Jerome rose, bowed to Fianna, ignored Sallah. Her aunt's glare was transferred from his back to Arwan. The lieutenant was careful to give both royals a nod before he followed his General.

'And why,' Sallah demanded icily, 'was I not invited to this conference?'

'We were discussing our plans for war,' Fianna said, keeping her voice calm. 'You won't be on the front line--'

'No, I shall be here, in Secundus.' Sunlight glittered on the short grey hair as her aunt lifted her chin. 'So I will need to know what my General and Colonel are doing on the front line.'

Pealla leaned forward, corrected quietly, 'Queen Fianna's General and Colonel.'

The two women locked gazes for a long moment. Then Sallah rose to her feet. 'I don't like your tone, Duchess.'

'I'm well aware of that, Princess.'

Sallah looked over Pealla's head at Fianna. 'I will be present at the next meeting.' Her cane thumped angrily against the floor as she left the room.

Fianna took a deep breath. Pealla glanced away, but not quickly enough to hide a quick grimace. 'I thought you always spoke your mind to me.'

'Not when my own interests might coincide with my advice,' Pealla said. 'If war is to come upon us, you must consider providing the kingdom with an heir.'

'There is my aunt,' Fianna replied unwillingly.

'Would any knight lay down her life for Queen Sallah?' Pealla snorted. 'Forgive my bluntness, Your Majesty, but I find it hard to believe that the same lineage which produced your wise and patient father also brought forth the Lady Sallah.'

'She never had her chance to prove herself.' Fianna heard the sharp tone in her voice, wondered why she always felt such a need to defend her aunt. She did take me in, she reminded herself, when I left Secundus. I owe her for that. 'If the laws of the kingdom would have allowed her to ascend the throne instead of her younger brother...'

'But she did not, and you have come to the throne. At any rate, she is too old for child-bearing, and leaving an heir in her turn.' The Colonel's eyes strayed to the window. 'Some would have me believe that you might form an attachment to my son.'

Fianna was pleased that she could hold back her temper. 'What do you believe?'
'I believe that you await Deian's return.'

Now her cheeks flushed in anger. 'He left when I refused to pardon Latham. If he truly loved me, he would have returned by now. That pig herder is nothing to me.'

'Really? I know that you spent many a day with him during your self-chosen exile to Lundern, choosing his company over that of your aunt.'

'I played Strategy with his hound.' Fianna waved it away. 'I have little wish to fall pregnant now. It'd make riding into war very difficult.'

Pealla looked troubled. 'There are times when it's a Queen's duty to remain protected.'

'That's enough,' Fianna snapped. She ran a hand through her red hair, noting absently that it almost touched her shoulders. 'I've had enough of hearing about a Queen's duties for one afternoon.'

Pealla's voice was suddenly gentle. 'They are many, and you've had little training for them.'

Fianna stared down at the table, the map blurring before her gaze. 'If my father--' A stab of anger stopped her, and she took a deep breath before continuing. 'If my father had not remarried, I would have stayed in Secundus. I would have served as his page and, several years ago, as his squire. I no longer have that option.'

'No, but it's important that you do become a squire. Time, and past time for you to have tuition from a knight.'

'So have I thought,' Fianna admitted.

'Have you a particular knight in mind?'

'I know it's the place of a knight to choose the squire.' Fianna finally looked up again, meeting Pealla's blue eyes. 'But I would ask you, Colonel, if you would consider accepting my service.'

There, she had said it. Pealla rose from her seat, and Fianna wondered if she would have to await her answer. But the Colonel opened the door, shouted down the hall. A moment later, Jerome followed her back in, heavy brows pulled low in concern. 'Yes, Your Majesty?'

'I was the one who called for you,' Pealla answered. 'Fianna, sometime page in the royal stables, is seventeen years of age and past ready to assume the duties of a squire. Since Maribeth has recently left my service to take oath as a knight, I have asked this page to bind herself to me. Will you witness the oaths?'

The General's face gave nothing away. 'Page Fianna, are you ready to pledge yourself to the service of Sir Pealla, giving her your strength and will in return for her training and protection?'

Fianna stood and made her way around the table. She would have preferred someone other than Jerome as witness. His refusal to support her claim to act as Regent to her half-brother still irritated her. But in this she was outranked by both of them, knights and officers in the royal army. 'I am ready,' she said, slipping her dagger from her sheath and holding it out to Jerome.

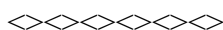
'I will witness,' he affirmed, sliding the knife into his own belt.

She turned to face Pealla, Jerome arranging himself at Fianna's left. Pealla drew her sword and placed it across Jerome's outstretched palms. Fianna laid her right hand on the hilt. 'I, Fianna, by birth daughter to King Stannard, by vocation page in the royal stables, swear that I will be a good and faithful squire to Pealla, by birth Duchess of Kaliburn, by excellence in arms and service to the kingdom also Colonel of the royal armies. My strength will be added to her strength, and I will obey her commands without question, save in the performance of my royal duties.'

Pealla placed her right hand over Fianna's. 'I hereby accept the pledge of Fianna, and swear that I will be a patient teacher and a reasonable commander as she learns the duties and privileges of a knight. I declare her to be a squire, with the responsibilities and rights of that station.'

'So witnessed.' Jerome spat onto the sword. The women released their hold, and he returned the blade to Pealla, along with Fianna's dagger.

Pealla smiled as she handed the knife back to Fianna. 'We'll begin your lessons in sword play tomorrow, after the meeting.'



Pealla watched Jerome's face. Not the arm, though the blade of his sword captured the faint sunlight and flashed light into his dark eyes. The face of a warrior, she rehearsed to herself, shows more of his intent than the muscles of his arms. Whether he intends to kill or only to harm, whether anger has taken the place of the steady calm to which a knight should aspire, even in the midst of battle. The face mirrors the mind, and it is in the mind that a fight is won or lost. Pealla made a mental note to pass that wisdom on to Fianna.

A cheek muscle twitched. Pealla sidestepped, her sword arcing to screech along the edge of Jerome's blade. The attack repulsed, she returned to her ready position. The General had asked her to allow him to attack, and to withhold from any return strokes.

'Were you surprised at the Queen's request?' he asked, studying her own face.

'Not entirely.' Pealla shrugged. 'Who else is there for her? It should have been her father's task, but she threw away the time she might have had with him.'

Jerome lunged, grunted as Pealla again predicted his move and parried. 'You still haven't forgiven her leaving Secondus?'

'Have you?' Pealla matched his steps as he moved across the enclosure, his eyes searching for a weakness in her stance. 'You were here when she came near to challenging the King, merely because he decided to marry Marissa. If she hadn't left Secondus, she would have been his squire, even as he was squire to his sire before him.'

'Remember that she was young, barely into her twelfth year. She would have returned, had it not been for the person she chose to run to.'

'Lady Sallah.' Pealla wished Jerome would try another attack. Standing still was letting the sweat chill on her forehead. Winter was not the time to be holding a discussion in the outside practice yard.

'I was not only the King's Champion, but also Stannard's blood brother.' This bit of information, which Pealla had never heard before, shook her concentration. But not long enough for Jerome to succeed in his thrust. 'So I was in a prime position to watch his heir mature,' he continued, dropping back again. 'She always had a quick temper, for which the King berated her time and again. And yet, she also was willing to take on the dirtiest tasks in the stables and kennels, when she could have chosen lighter duties in the castle itself.' The sword lowered to the earth, the tip touching the ground. Jerome's lips crooked in a strange smile. 'She reminded me of Stan, when he was young and we were both pages.'

Pealla lowered her own sword, reflecting on how little she knew about her commanding officer. 'I came to Secondus when he was already squire to his father.'

'Stan learned to calm his temper with patience. But Sallah kept her full measure of anger. His older sister, passed over for the Throne...'

'Fianna said something similar to me.' Without warning, Pealla lunged, sweeping

her sword at Jerome's chest. With quick reactions trained into a knight after a lifetime of fighting, he parried the thrust, the tip just inches from his leather armour. Pealla gave him an approving nod. 'A woman can be knight or merchant or farmer, but she cannot sit on the Dragon Throne, not so long as a male heir is available.'

'Such as Laran.'

Pealla winced. She had lost a child herself, when the babe had been barely a few weeks old. Through sickness, true, not deliberate murder, but she still sympathised with Marissa. It must be a terrible thing, to find one's young son suffocated in his cot. And then, afterwards, Latham's attempt on Fianna's life had meant that a father had also been taken from Marissa. 'Do you think that Fianna arranged for the death of her half-brother?'

'No,' Jerome answered steadily. 'Do you?'

'She says she did not.' Pealla nodded. 'Yes, I believe her. I wish we could risk an investigation to find the culprit, and so to clear her name.'

Jerome shook his head at the old argument. 'This is not the time, not with war coming to us. Knights need to be focussed on battle, not accusations and counter-accusations.' Then he lifted his sword, slid it into the sheath. 'Colonel, does the Queen trust you?'

Pealla stared at him for a moment, startled by the question. 'Yes. Yes, I think she does.'

'Enough, do you think?'

Pealla slung her own sword away. 'Come now, Jerome, stop speaking in riddles. Enough for what?'

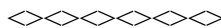
'For you to wean her away from Sallah's influence.' The General stepped close, his voice low. 'You can see the woman's intentions. She plans to rule through Fianna.'

'Sallah will fight any attempts to reduce her power.'

'Ah, but you wouldn't be alone in your attempts.'

Pealla frowned. 'The Queen doesn't trust you. Who else is there?'

'Herself, of course.' Jerome straightened. 'We must have faith that she is her father's daughter. We have little choice, after all. She is the only heir of Stan's still left to us.'



Jeremy muttered as his rag refused to remove a stubborn mark from the sword stretched out across his knees. Dipping the end into the cleaning oil, he bent over his task with renewed vigour.

'Careful, squire,' Fianna warned, glancing up from her own polishing. 'That sword was only finished for me last week. What would the swordsmith say if I returned it to him so quickly?'

'That you shouldn't get it stained.'

'At least it doesn't have all the nicks this one has.' Fianna leaned back, her shoulders aching from the drudgery. Kahless, her young puppy, looked up hopefully from his sleeping place near the fire. When she didn't move, he lowered his golden head again. 'I don't know what your mother does to it.'

'I saw her practising with General Jerome this afternoon.' Jeremy looked suddenly wistful. 'I wish I were as quick as she is. Fals gave me a good whack yesterday when I didn't parry quick enough.'

'You're young, you'll learn,' Fianna said, repeating the old litany without thinking.

Then she grimaced. ‘That’s what they always say, at any rate. This is all wrong, you know that, don’t you?’

Jeremy’s hands stilled. ‘Have I offended the Queen?’

‘You? Never.’ Fianna waved the thought away as she looked around her chamber. A large fire blazed in the hearth before them, rain cloaks were hung away, boots were so highly polished that the light from the oil lamps flickered reflections across the leather. All Jeremy’s doing. ‘You should be squire to a knight, not a Queen who is herself only a squire. You should be polishing Pealla’s sword.’

He said, quietly, seriously, ‘I am honoured to be squire to the Queen.’

‘But I can’t teach you about being a knight.’

‘Oh, that.’ His face cleared to his usual good spirits. ‘The General’s seeing to that.’

‘If he doesn’t--’ She clenched her lips shut, and bent back over the sword.

‘You don’t like him very much, do you, Fia?’

‘Not really.’ Then she lifted her head. ‘What did you call me?’

Jeremy met her gaze. ‘Fia.’

For a moment she thought she would be angry. But then she found herself laughing aloud. ‘Do you remember,’ she said, still chuckling, ‘when we were both pages in the stables? Everyone had a pet name, even the knights. Everyone except me.’

‘Because you wouldn’t allow it,’ Jeremy agreed, grinning. ‘You wouldn’t let us call you lady or princess, but you wouldn’t be anything but Fianna either.’

‘I liked being in the stables,’ Fianna said after a short silence. ‘I liked being a page, before--before Marissa came.’

Jeremy snorted, sounding, for a moment, very much like his mother. ‘Useless woman. She doesn’t even know how to handle a dagger.’

‘Her father saw no reason to teach her.’ But Jeremy’s equally low opinion of her step-mother made Fianna smile. ‘At any rate, you’ll be a knight soon, and I’ll have to find a new squire.’

‘Really, Fia, you forget that I’m only two months older than you are.’ Jeremy lifted the sword off his lap, inspecting it by firelight. ‘No one can be made a knight until they’ve reached eighteen years. I’ve got a year to go, just like you. I’ll be your squire as long as you’ll have me. Except...’

‘Except?’ Fianna repeated sharply.

Jeremy ducked his head. His dark hair was tinged red by firelight, but the colour on his cheeks came from embarrassment. ‘The Wintertide Ball will be soon upon us. I ask to be excused from duties as your squire for that night.’

Fianna glared at him. ‘You know how I feel about ladies-in-waiting.’ She blinked, added, ‘Are you waiting for a lady to ask you to accompany her?’

His answer came after a moment. ‘Yes.’ Then he began to polish her sword furiously. A finger caught against the sharp edge, and he yelped. A sliver of blood dripped down his skin. He raised it to his mouth, grimacing at the pain and at Kahless, who had rushed up, barking loudly at the noise. ‘Quiet, pup.’

Fianna put Pealla’s sword to one side and rose in one swift movement. ‘I’ll get a bandage.’

Jeremy spoke around his finger. ‘I can take care of it myself.’

“‘Never treat your own injury when another is there to treat it for you’,” Fianna quoted at him. “‘Two hands are better for healing than one.’” She retrieved her travel case from a closet and returned with antiseptic and cotton cloth. ‘Okay, give.’

Reluctantly, Jeremy lowered his hand, letting her study the cut. ‘It’s not very deep,’ he said, as she spread lotion along the cut and wrapped the forefinger.

‘No, but there won’t be any sword practice for a week.’ She gave him a grim look.

‘And you’ll have to explain why to Jerome.’

‘Right,’ he muttered.

Fianna tied the ends of the wrapping. ‘So, who’re you hoping will ask you to the Wintertide Ball?’

His hand shook slightly under her fingers. Suddenly she knew, and now it was her turn for cheeks to redden. Withdrawing his hand, he said gravely, ‘It is for the lady to ask.’

Fianna busied herself with her travel case. Deian came to her mind, standing in his rough clothes near her aunt’s woods, pig muck and mud mingled on his boots. He had been her only reason to smile for two long years. But he had left her when she most needed his support. How could Pealla think that she awaited his return?

I’ll show them, she thought. Meeting Jeremy’s eyes, she asked simply, ‘Jeremy, will you be my escort for the Wintertide Ball?’

His tried to keep face solemn, but delight tugged at his lips. ‘My lady, I will be honoured to have you on my arm.’

An hour later, after he had finished his duties and left, Fianna remained seated on the floor, Kahless curled beside her as she stared into the dying fire. Pealla’s sword lay forgotten across her outstretched legs. Deian left me, she thought angrily. Couldn’t he see that I had no choice? Latham tried to kill me while I was lying in my own bed. He had to be executed. If only Latham had believed the truth, that I had nothing to do with the murder of his grandson, my brother.

The gold bracelet Deian had given her weighed heavily in the pouch resting under her shirt. A hope-promise only, Fianna reminded herself. Given in hope of a promise to come. I can return it to him at any time, without dishonour or reason.

Her door was pushed open, allowing a blast of colder air through the room. Fianna scrambled to her feet, the sword and Kahless hampering her. Sallah stood in the doorway, her gaze stern. ‘What,’ she rasped, pointing at the sword, ‘is that?’

‘Colonel Pealla’s sword,’ Fianna answered, forcing her voice to remain calm. ‘I am now her squire.’

‘You are the Queen.’ Without waiting for permission, Sallah entered the room. ‘A Queen waits on no one.’

Yes, I am the Queen, Fianna reminded herself, trying to draw strength from the title. ‘And one day, I must be a knight, if I’m to be respected by the knights I lead into battle. I must serve my apprenticeship, Aunt Sallah.’

‘Which badge will you wear, the monarch’s or that of the House of Kaliburn?’ This was not a question Fianna had considered, and as she struggled for an answer, Sallah continued, ‘No matter, this is easily solved. I will make you my squire.’

The idea made Fianna’s stomach tighten. ‘You can’t. You aren’t a knight yourself.’

Sallah shrugged. ‘I can arrange to be knighted.’

Fianna looked down at the sword in her hands. ‘I made a vow on this blade today,’ she said quietly. Straightening her shoulders, she met her aunt’s eyes. ‘I cannot be known as a Queen who breaks her oath. I would lose the trust of the court.’

She saw that Sallah had to accept the logic in that. ‘Then watch your step with this Pealla. I do not trust her.’

Fianna nodded and made dutiful murmurs as she escorted her aunt to the door. No doubt Pealla returns the feeling in full, she found herself thinking when she was alone once more. But I need them both.

CHAPTER TWO

With a clumsiness which came from inexperience, Deian tugged at the saddle straps of his stallion. One caught at the black skin, folding it unnaturally. He sent the horse a quick mental apology, and the stallion exhaled grass-scented forgiveness across his face. Once the heavy saddle was off his back, the horse wandered away to graze, free from either tether or hobble. Deian rested the saddle across a tree branch, knowing that his mount was as unlikely to leave him as Alastair.

As if hearing the thought, the hound appeared. A few flecks of blood around his muzzle were the only sign that he'd caught and eaten his dinner. Deian disliked seeing anything killed for food, so Alastair was always careful to finish his meal out of sight. He lapped gratefully at the bowl of water Deian offered him, then curled up on a patch of ground bare from snow.

'He does well,' Deian said to Alastair, watching as the horse scraped snow away with a hoof to expose dry grass. Alastair's tail pounded against the earth, his jaws open in his soundless laugh. 'Yes, and he was your choice.'

Several months ago, when Deian had taken his abrupt leave of Fianna and Secundus castle, he had soon realised that he would need a mount. Winter was marching across the Land, and this was no time to be crossing the Fourth Kingdom on foot. The last of his stock of gold in hand, he had approached the horse seller at the outskirts of the city. The woman had willingly taken him to stable after stable. None of the horses had appealed to him. All had been broken young, and with heavy hands, so that their character had been quenched along with their independence. 'Have you nothing else?' he had asked at last.

A quick thought from Alastair had drawn him to one last stable, separated from the others. 'Careful,' the horse trader warned. The sharp crack of hooves striking wood underlined her words, and the stable wall shuddered. 'He be a stallion, and come spring methinks to sell him to stud.'

Deian felt the strong, restless mind. 'This one did not know saddle nor bridle until four years of age.'

The woman gave him a curious look. 'How would ye know that?' Then she shrugged the answer away. 'He be trained by Sir Galadriel. Only that knight would have the courage, or the foolishness, to ride a stallion into battle. This one has never known another's hand, and will not accept a new master.'

'Why does he need a new one?'

'Sir Galadriel was killed in Primus. His stallion returned to Secundus bearing his body.'

Deian closed his eyes briefly. The pain of that loss still tightened the strong muscles of the horse shuddering inside. Without his master, the stallion had no purpose. His hooves once again drummed against the side of his cage. Alastair pointed his long muzzle at the stable door. Without hesitation Deian pulled it open and stepped inside.

The stallion drew back in surprise. The horse trader gasped behind him. Deian reached into the horse's mind, but also spoke aloud to reassure the woman. 'I could never replace your master, so I won't try. But I would be your friend.'

Dark eyes in a black face studied him. Even Deian, who knew very little about horses, could see the fine breeding in the narrow head. 'It would be a shame,' Deian

continued, 'for you to spend the rest of your life servicing mares.'

The stallion snorted. The idea had some appeal, admittedly, but he would first like a life of action. The mares could come later. He lowered his head to study Deian. What could this little man offer him? Battles and glory?

'I travel.' Deian pictured the journey ahead of him, long canters across hard ground, the clouds and stars overhead at night.

The stallion nibbled at his hay, considering. Deian waited, patient. Perhaps the battles could also wait, the horse finally decided. To be free of this stable, once again crossing the Land... He would be a mount for this little man.

Deian put a hand on the glossy neck, then turned to the horse trader. 'How much gold for him?'

The woman's mouth opened and shut soundlessly several times. Then she swallowed. 'I could demand a high price for him as stud in spring, but only after paying for his keep through winter. Five new coins, and he be thine.'

Deian carefully removed the gold from his hip pouch. He tried not to look at the head embossed on the coins. Fianna's face, her forehead covered by the crown which she said came between them. The horse trader dropped them into her own pouch. 'There be his tack, to which ye be welcome.'

She helped him lift the heavy saddle onto the wide back, the stallion holding still as she showed Deian how to fasten and unfasten the girth strap. She turned to pick up a bridle, but he stopped her with a shake of his head. 'Saddle is enough.'

'How will ye direct him?'

'I will tell him.' Deian walked out onto the deserted street, Alastair and the stallion following him. He mounted, awkwardly, and then grabbed at the saddle as the horse took him out of the city at a swift trot.

Now, autumn behind them, he had no regrets. The stallion was a willing companion, even if he would never again give his heart to a human. He had loved and lost one master, and that had been enough.

'So you have no need to be jealous,' Deian said to Alastair.

The hound laughed a second time. He was jealous of no one, not even Fianna. Especially Fianna.

'I know well how you feel about her.' Deian felt his voice tremble slightly. In that, they were in total agreement. And yet both of them had left her. 'Will we ever return to Secundus?'

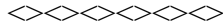
Alastair lowered his head across his forelegs. He knew how to herd pigs and navigate by the stars, but he was no future teller. Deian would have to look elsewhere for such answers.

Deian sighed. The night was chilly, but like the animals he knew how to regulate his body temperature. The snow around him was already beginning to melt. He removed his boots and curled up into a thin blanket, using Alastair's side as a pillow.

That, he recalled as he drifted off to sleep, was how his father had come to choose Alastair as the next family hound. He had not been the most promising of the five puppies born to the old herd dog, his rangy body a strange contrast to the others, who took after their squat mother. But late one night, unable to sleep in his pallet, Deian had crept to the hearth and snuggled up alongside the puppies. In the morning, not realising where his son lay, his father had built up the fire and left the house. When he returned, he found one puppy lying uncomfortably close to the flames, his body protecting the head of the still sleeping boy from the heat of the fire. 'This is the one we will keep,' his father had pronounced. 'He will be a brother to you.'

Deian felt Alastair stir at the happy memory. The long head bent around, and his

tongue quickly touched Deian's face. Then they settled into sleep.



The winter was growing harsher, snow falls more frequent and heavier. Several times Deian had to lift Alastair onto the stallion's back, lest the hound disappear into a snow drift. Finally the horse announced that they must seek shelter for the duration of the cold weather. He could not be expected to carry two heavy passengers through such treacherous conditions.

Deian also knew something the stallion would not admit. The horse's winter coat had been trimmed away to keep his coat glossy and battle ready, so he felt the cold more than hound or human. Nor was he finding much sustenance as the snows grew deeper. Reluctantly, Deian searched out the nearest town.

Most of the denizens were inside their thatched homes, keeping warm by fireplaces. Those who were outside stopped their work and watched in amazement as Deian rode by. He had to admit that they must make an interesting sight. A man dressed in common wool and leathers riding a well-bred horse who wore a saddle but no bridle.

A small group gathered in the road, their faces curious but friendly. 'Hail, good fellow,' said one woman, her breath misting on the air. 'Why come you to Litdown?'

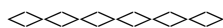
The stallion halted. 'I seek shelter for myself and my companions,' Deian answered. 'Is there a place for us here?'

'We have an inn, little used this deep into winter.' A dark haired man pressed through the crowd, his overcoat unbuttoned and obviously thrown hastily over his broad shoulders. 'But we would first know who comes to us, riding a stallion he could so ill afford.'

Deian raised an eyebrow at the implied accusation. The man stepped up to the stallion, and the horse reacted before Deian could. Ears and tail sweeping back, the stallion rose onto his hind legs, his steel-shod hooves dangling inches from the man's face. Deian grabbed at the saddle as the horse held his position. The stallion told him crisply that he was doing a perfect levade, protecting his rider, and could Deian please stop disrupting his careful balance?

The man stepped back slowly, then made a low bow. 'The stallion is indeed yours, my lord, and trained to your hand alone. Will you accept lodging in my own house in apology for my hasty accusations? I have a fire in the hearth.'

The stallion dropped back to the ground, and Deian could breathe easily again. He met the man's eyes as he straightened, and felt a flash of common understanding. This man knew horses and hounds, and through them, something of the Land. He gave the traditional acceptance. 'May the fire light the hearts as well as the bodies of those who dwell therein.'



Deian soon realised that his host was someone of importance in Litdown. His house was situated ten minute's ride outside the town, up a slight hill. The fences of multiple horse paddocks humped snow into straight lines which ran up to the large mansion. The building spoke of slow, gradual social climbing, newer extensions more solid and decorative than the original humble dwelling. Two large blocks of stables stood on either side of the house, as if emphasising the source of the man's wealth.

The man finally exchanged names with Deian as he led him into one stable block.

Harker, horse breeder and trainer. Since his grandmother's time the family had been building their reputation, and now were surpassed only by the Kaliburn stables. 'Your stallion is one of theirs,' Harker said, standing well to one side as Deian dismounted. 'He has the fine face, the sturdy hocks. A knight's mount, though you act little like a knight.'

'I'm not a knight.' Deian easily located curry comb and brushes. The entire stable was well organised and clean. He felt himself relax in the comforting smells of fresh hay and the sounds of contented horses murmuring in their sleep. 'I was a pig herder.'

'And that is your hound?'

'Alastair accompanies me, yes.' Deian tried to remember how he had seen pages groom a horse. The stallion stood patiently under his awkward strokes. 'He is his own.'

'And the horse might obey you, but you have little knowledge about his care.' Harker's smile softened his words. 'Would he tolerate the touch of a groom?'

A young woman emerged from the shadows, her dark hair short in the style of one who had only recently reached maturity. Deian shared a thought with the stallion, and the horse snorted his consent. Handing her the various implements, he said, 'I hope you will teach me how to care for him.'

She laughed, a bright, happy sound. 'Gladly, when you have been cleaned and fed yourself. Go with my father, your mount will be well cared for.'

Deian smiled slowly in return. 'You must excuse my heir,' Harker said as he led him towards the house. 'She is very forthright. A trait she learned from me.'

Deian nodded. He preferred those who said as they thought. Humans lied so easily, contradicting their thoughts with their tongues, which was why he rarely reached out to touch human minds.

To his surprise, he was taken in through the main entrance, a courtesy not often given to pig herders. Harker removed his boots and coat, so Deian followed suit. As he lined his shoes up with the others standing across the tiles, he heard his host speaking quietly to Alastair. 'When you need relieve yourself, there is a side door through the kitchen. A servant is always on duty nearby, and will hear your scratches. Need I show you?'

Alastair's tail thumped against Deian's legs. 'He understands,' Deian said.

Harker harrumphed. 'If he does not, my hounds will instruct him. Come, we keep soup over the stove at all hours during the winter.'

Four bowls were filled and passed out. The three humans, including one of the servants, sat at the old table which filled one end of the kitchen. The fourth bowl was placed on the floor for Alastair, who sat and waited for it to cool first. Deian enjoyed the white bread, a delicacy he had rarely tasted. It was warm and light, and it seemed a waste to dip it into the soup as the others did.

Harker's daughter came in through the side door, bringing in a blast of chilly air. 'Hannan,' she introduced herself, quickly pulling off outer clothes. 'Your stallion, he's of Kaliburn stock, isn't he?'

'So your father said.' Deian reached out for more bread. 'I know little of horses.'

'But he listens closely to you. I could tell.' She obtained some soup for herself and took a seat next to him. 'Did you train him yourself?'

'No. A knight did. He was killed. The horse will never give his heart to another.'

'That's sad.' Hannan made a face. 'If it's true. How can you know that about a horse?'

'I have told you before, daughter.' Harker waved his spoon at her in emphasis. 'Animals are not stupid beasts. They understand much of what we say, and can tell us

much in return, if we but listen.'

'Those who know the Land,' Deian said quietly, 'know that animals were long ago adopted as her children. We humans come less readily into her care.'

'What are you saying?' Hannan leaned forward. 'Are you a mage? Can you talk to animals?'

'Not a mage. But they understand my thoughts.'

'Like your hound?'

Alastair looked up for a moment, then returned to his soup.

'Especially Alastair.'

'Tell you what.' She pulled a sheaf of paper and a writing stick from a pocket. 'I'll write down something for you to tell him, only in your mind, and we'll see if he does it. That's a fair test, isn't it?'

'No.' Deian glanced away, ashamed. 'I can't read.'

Silence fell over the table. 'Surely, your elders...' Harker began weakly.

'My mother started to teach me letters. Then she died.'

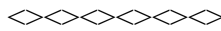
'But that's okay.' Hannan was grinning. 'That'll give us something to do all winter. I'll teach you how to read and write!'

'All winter?' Deian repeated. He glanced at Harker.

'She is my heir, and therefore has the power to make promises on behalf of this house.' Then Harker smiled. 'It be too long into the season for much travelling.'

Deian studied the rough wood under his fingers. These were good people, and this was a good place. He had planned to spend some time wandering through the Fourth Kingdom before returning to Secundus. But could he really stay away from Fianna that long?

'Decide in the morning,' Harker suggested. 'When you and your beasts have rested.'



The morning decided the matter. Overnight the grey clouds released their heavy weight, and steady snowfall obliterated roads and landmarks. Deian joined the family for morning meal, an informal gathering in the kitchen which included servants and house dogs. Snow glistened white in Harker's hair. He had been outside already, working alongside his servants to clear the paths to the stables and kennels. Now he gulped hot tea between orders to his kennelmaster and stablemistress, organising the feeding and exercise of the animals for the duration of the storm.

Hannan sat attentively at his elbow, occasionally questioning one of his decisions, and nodding as several were amended at her suggestions. She gave Deian a brief smile as he slid into a free seat. Those eating were using knives and forks. Deian watched closely, studying the uses of these utensils. In his own hut he had used either a spoon or his dagger.

At Hannan's left an older woman was instructing the indoor servants. She had the same rounded face and brown eyes as Hannan, and Deian knew immediately that this was her mother. A boy several years younger than Hannan took more after Harker. He was obviously the second child in the family.

Noting his gaze, the boy left his seat and came shyly up to Deian. 'Kernar,' he introduced himself. 'I like your horse. Can I exercise him? I'm a good rider.'

Hannan reached over and ruffled the boy's hair. 'He's a knight's steed, Ker. He doesn't let other people ride him.'

'Oh.' Kernar was only momentarily disappointed. 'Will he run on a lounge line,

then? The exercise barn's big enough.'

Deian reached out to the stallion's mind. The horse was enjoying a portion of oats after a good night's sleep on warm hay. Yes, he would allow the boy to take him out and exercise him on a line. After he had finished his oats. 'Yes, he will.'

'Leave him until last,' Harker told his son. 'And don't overdo it. That horse has come a long way in the last tenday. Let us know if you see any lameness.'

'Of course I would,' Kernar said with affronted dignity. He bolted the last of a hard-boiled egg, then grabbed his coat and boots. Hannan gave him a list of his horses for the day, and the boy left.

'Good thing I got up early to clear the paths,' Harker grumbled good-naturedly. 'I think he would have forced his way through to the stables.'

'He's young,' Hannan said smugly.

'Only two years younger than you, my daughter.'

'I've cut my hair.' She raised her chin. 'He's not cut a beard, yet.'

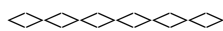
Deian rubbed his now smooth face, remembering his first shave, only this summer past. He had buried the first hairs near his father's grave.

'Will you be staying?' Harker asked.

'Yes.' He added, 'I will earn my keep.'

'I could use another hand in the kennels,' the kennelmaster spoke up. 'Several bitches will be whelping soon.'

At Deian's nod, Harker smiled, satisfied. There was another thought lurking behind the dark eyes, just below easy reach. Deian shrugged it away. No doubt the man would share it with him in due course.



The days settled into a comfortable pattern. Mornings Deian spent in the kennels, amazing the master with his easy confidence among the massive hunting hounds Harker's family bred. Even the most temperamental bitch allowed him to touch her nursing pups, accustoming them to human hands as well as taking measure of their steady growth.

Afternoons he went to the stables, where the stablemistress instructed him on the care and training of horses. Yearlings born the summer before were getting their first taste of bits and saddles. Deian was glad to see that gentle methods were used to tame the horses, each correct step rewarded with praise and slices of apple, alongside endless patience for the more stubborn ones. He could see the results of this approach in the stables. The adult horses willingly served their masters, their character intact.

In the evening, by the light of the family room fire and gas lanterns, Hannan taught him to read and write. They sat on the floor, papers spread out on the woollen hearth rugs. At first, Alastair watched over Deian's shoulder. But soon the hound was retiring to a well lit corner with a book of his own, his reading comprehension overtaking Deian's. Because he wasn't trying to learn how to write as well, Deian decided one night as he massaged his aching wrist.

The rest of the family were intent on their own tasks. Kennan was teaching her son how to manage the affairs of a large house. Hannan, as elder child, was the heir, so it was the general consensus of the family that Kernar would probably marry another heir. Therefore the organisation of indoor servants and the maintenance of ledgers would fall to him. Harker sat at a desk by one wall, chewing his writing instrument as he determined which mare would be taken to which stallion once the season began again. Hannan had left Deian to add her own opinions.

Alastair rose, stretched. Then he trotted over to Deian, carrying a closed book carefully between his jaws. He had finished it, and wanted a new one.

‘Look at that hound,’ Hannan said, laughing. ‘He acts as if he can actually read.’

Deian accepted the leather bound volume. ‘He can.’

Hannan shook her head. ‘Dogs can’t read.’

‘Your grandmother had a tale to tell,’ Kennan said, her quiet voice forestalling argument. ‘She said that, originally, animals were far less intelligent. But when they were brought to the Land, the Land affected their minds. Horses and hounds in particular grew in understanding, which was why she had decided to breed them.’

‘Brought to the Land?’ Hannan repeated. ‘Brought from where?’

‘Wherever we came from.’ Kennan shrugged. ‘She said her grandsire had once told her that we are all new to the Land. We came from another place, where there was only one moon in the sky and the years were only twelve months long, not fourteen.’ She smiled. ‘So, if Deian tells me that Alastair can read, I am not surprised. I also know that Deian never tells an untruth.’

Hannan blushed at the soft rebuke. She rose to her feet, picking up one of the oil lanterns. ‘What would Alastair like next? Perhaps you will come with me to get it for him.’

Deian followed her to the library. ‘My apologies,’ she said to him as she held the flickering light up to the shelves of books. ‘I didn’t intend to call you a liar.’

‘You say what you think.’ A trait which Fianna shared, he found himself recalling, and which had first attracted him to her, two years ago when he had thought her to be nothing more than a servant in Lady Sallah’s kennels.

‘My mom says I’m like my dad, in that respect.’ She moved the steps across the room, and climbed up several rungs. At her gesture, Deian handed her the book, which she slid away in its place. ‘Alastair seems to like philosophy. What would he like next?’

Deian communicated briefly with the hound. ‘The next one along.’

‘There’s no way he can read the title from down there.’

‘He isn’t.’ Deian smiled. ‘He says he is merely working his way down the shelf.’

Hannan laughed. She retrieved the thick tome and handed it to Deian. ‘Here. You’d better carry it back for him. It’s heavy.’ He accepted the book, waited. She made no move to come back down. ‘Dei, do you like it here?’

Both the sudden shortening of his name and the question caught him by surprise. ‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ She nodded, as if the answer had satisfied more than one query. Then she returned to the ground to lead the way back to the family room.

As they came through the door, Deian caught the quick, curious glances of the others. Harker looked pleased, Kennan thoughtful, Kernar annoyed. The mix of emotions confused him. Deian quickly gave Alastair the book and returned to his place by the fire. For some reason he found himself thinking about Fianna. He had never found it easy to touch her mind, and inside a house he was too separated from the trees and earth of the Land to make the more sustained effort required to reach her. How was her winter faring?

CHAPTER THREE

Sunlight trickled warmth across her forehead, her cheeks, her lips. Fianna woke slowly, smiling at the unexpected light, so deep into winter.

Kahless noted her movement. A moment later a rough tongue was washing her chin as the puppy barked happily. He climbed onto her chest, his light weight resting between her breasts. Fianna opened her eyes and grinned at him. 'You mighty warrior. I should make you a page. You're better at getting me up in time than either Lilibet or Sorin.'

Carefully moving Kahless to one side, she swung out of bed. Her left toes landed in something soft and sticky. The smile dropped from her face, and she cursed loudly. Kahless barked at her, unconcerned by his latest accident. 'As Queen,' she grumbled at him, 'I can command armies and knights, throw dukes off their lands and summon the dragons. So why can't I houstrain a pup?'

As if on cue, the door to her bedchamber swung open. Fianna met Lilibet's gaze, the smell in the room informing her page of the task which awaited her. 'Remind me to have another word with Ellenor,' she said grimly as her page quickly brought over a bowl of water. 'The kennelmistress might know why Kah still soils inside the castle.'

'He's only young, Your Majesty,' Lilibet pointed out as she dried Fianna's foot. 'Not many pups are trained by three months of age.'

'I bet Alastair was.'

'Was that the large hound which came with you to Secundus?'

'Yes.'

'Where is he now, Your Majesty?'

'He left me. After I had tried to chain him in the royal kennels.' Fianna shrugged. 'It's not important.'

Lilibet laid out the informal court clothes, woollen for winter. Fianna changed quickly from night dress to the warmer garments as the girl cleaned up after Kahless. Fianna watched the small hands scrub at the carpet, wondering if she had ever been so young. Kahless dropped over the side of the bed and did his best to trip Lilibet up as she carried the bowl away.

'Ugh.' Jeremy's nose was wrinkling as he paused by the door. 'Don't tell me. Kah's embarrassed himself again.'

'He doesn't seem embarrassed in the slightest. That's the problem.' Jeremy stepped back as she strode into her main room, leaving her page to sort out the bedchamber. Kahless followed, his ears flopping. No, he's nothing like Alastair, Fianna found herself thinking. Kahless was the golden and white snub nosed runt from a litter of hunting hounds. He had none of Alastair's grace and intelligence. Or his independence.

'What's this?' Jeremy lifted the sword from the worktable. 'My mother's sword?'

Fianna winced. 'I forgot to take it back last night.'

Jeremy whistled under his breath. 'You're in trouble.'

'I'm the Queen,' Fianna retorted.

'You're also her squire now.' He handed her the blade. 'You'd better take it back right now.'

'All right, all right.' The Prancer was pushing open the door joining their chambers

as she left. She gave him a distracted nod as she hurried into the hallway.

The Colonel's rank entitled her to chambers inside the castle itself. Fianna ducked through several corridors, her knowledge of Secundus castle nearly instinctual. Outside Pealla's rooms, she checked her clothes. Since birth she had been raised with the knowledge that others were watching her, daughter of the King, and ensuring that tunic was smooth over trousers, her hair slicked back into place, was automatic. She raised her hand and knocked on the door.

A young boy swung it open. He bowed to her, then stepped to one side. Carrying the sheathed sword, Fianna stepped into Pealla's quarters, and found herself admiring the personal touches to the entrance room. Paintings of horses bred by the Colonel were interspersed with those of her husband, herself and her two sons. Almost irreverently, Fianna noted a likeness between the long noses of the family and those of the horses they had raised.

'Yes, my sword.' The Colonel's voice was icy as she came in from her bedchamber. She nodded to her page, who ducked out of the room, shutting the door behind him. 'You bring it back to me at last.'

'My lady?' Fianna asked, wondering at her tone.

'Your knight and colonel,' Pealla reminded her sharply. 'What is the rule of a knight and her sword?'

'“The blade should always be at hand, even at play or in rest”,’ Fianna quoted, “for she never knows when it might be needed.”’

Pealla nodded. 'And how long have I had to wait for my sword?'

Fianna felt her face flush. A dozen excuses crowded in her mind, along with hot anger that a mere duchess dared to challenge her so. In this, she is your superior, she reminded herself. Biting down on her temper, she managed to answer smoothly, 'All night, Colonel. I apologise for my tardiness and oversight. It won't happen again.'

'See that it does not.' Pealla took the sword, and drew it from its scabbard to check the polish. 'I hope the delay has been to the betterment of the sword. Or else I will give you three slaps of the blade against your buttocks.'

'My lady,' Fianna ground out between clenched teeth, 'do you try my patience on purpose?'

'Yes.' Pealla suddenly smiled. 'And you did quite well to maintain it.'

Fianna took a deep breath, then released it along with her anger. 'It's time for the council meeting. Shall we go, Colonel?'

'A moment, please.' Pealla glanced at the bedchamber, checking that the door was still shut. 'Will your Champion be at the meeting this morn?'

'I've invited him,' Fianna replied evenly. 'Do you disapprove?'

'No, he is Queen's Champion, he has a duty to be there.' Pealla, Fianna had noticed before, had a habit of running a hand through her blond hair when she was distracted. She ruffled the short locks several times as she moved to the window.

'Your Majesty, I must speak plainly.'

'You don't usually wait for my permission first.'

'What I speak of is a private matter, between you and Lord the Prancer.'

Fianna felt her face freeze. 'The horn.'

'Aye, the horn.' Pealla fastened the sword belt around her waist. 'When will you confess to him that you have it?'

Fianna drew the pouch from underneath her tunic. Inside mage's cloth, protected from detection, was a short length of unicorn horn. 'A dragon gave it to me. You once thought that it was a sign that I was to be Queen.'

'That was before I heard from the Prancer that he searches for this very horn.'

Pealla's face was grim. 'It was to find this piece that he left his own people.'

'Deian removed it from the dragon's eye,' Fianna said stubbornly, 'and then it was entrusted to me. I carried it long before I met the unicorn and discovered it came from his milk-brother. If I now give it back to the Prancer, he'll leave me.' Just like everyone else does, she thought bitterly. My mother, my father, Alastair, Deian. They die or remarry or decide they just can't stay.

'He might. I believe he would also return to you.'

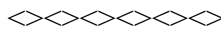
Fianna barked a laugh. The horn tip gleamed even in the faint winter sunlight, silver against the golden links of Deian's hope-promise. She dropped both back into the pouch. 'Perhaps, if I had told him from the first. What will he think of me now? I've hidden it from him for several months.'

Pealla said softly, 'True friends forgive each other.'

'Maybe.' She felt more comfortable once the pouch was again resting against her chest, tucked out of sight. 'Do you speak as Queen's councillor, or as the knight the Prancer healed?'

Now Pealla had to look away. 'King Anton's treachery would have killed me, had the unicorn not drawn his healing runes,' she acknowledged in a low voice. 'But I swore my loyalty to you, my Queen. I will keep your secret.'

'Good.' Fianna smiled, relieved. 'Shall we attend the council meeting?'



It was Fianna's right, as Queen, to choose the members of her council. However, as she was quickly coming to learn, she often had little real choice in such matters. She might have been crowned, nobles might have sworn fealty to her, but the reality was that the Kingdom required the support of dukes, earls, and knights. Her father had never taught her the unwritten rules of the game of politics. Lady Sallah had taught her little else.

As the councillors asked questions of Pealla, demanded explanations of Jerome, Fianna leaned back in her chair and studied their faces. Her aunt had to be there as the only other member of the immediate royal family still alive. Jerome and Pealla as General and Colonel of the Kingdom's army also deserved automatic seats. Bernard the Court Recorder, and Capella as Castellan, had to be given the respect due their positions. The Prancer attended as her Champion, the golden dragon ring of his status hanging from a long cord to gleam against his coat.

She was happy enough to reward Arwan by appointing him to the council. Although he was only a lieutenant, he had ridden to Lundern to tell her of her father's death, and brought her back in secret to Secundus. Jeremy was her squire, and he also represented his brother, who had taken on the duties of the Duchy of Kaliburn so that their mother could devote herself to her responsibilities as Colonel. Leonard was the third in command of the army, and he was useful in that he was always willing to sit next to the unpopular Lord Mage, who also had a seat by right.

But the last member... Fianna carefully did not look at the woman. She had not wanted Marissa on the council. Politics again. Just before his execution, Marissa's father had asked Fianna to allow his daughter to remain in Secundus. The Duke's death had raised his older daughter, Carola, to Duchess of Cassern. And Marissa, next in line, was Cassern's representative.

With reluctance Fianna brought her attention back to the squabble. The idea of war affected each council member differently, with an almost predictable split between knights and the non military. Although eager not to appear cowardly, the knights were

hopeful that war might not come. The non combatants were more willing to argue for preemptive strikes, vengeance, protection of the Land. Their lives were not the ones at risk.

The Prancer, she noticed, seemed distracted. Usually he could be counted on to add flavour to any debate, his good spirits injecting humour when it was most needed. But today he was silent. The meeting needed him. Marissa was starting to argue in earnest with Leonard, and the Lord Mage's comments to Jerome were becoming more and more barbed.

'Thank you, our lords and ladies,' Fianna said at last. Voices stilled as she spoke. 'Your views are noted and valued, as always. Recorder, give the date of our next meeting with our esteemed councillors.'

Bernard hunched dutifully over his diary. 'A week from now, Your Majesty.'

Fianna rose, smiled slightly as the others quickly followed. All except her aunt, who remained sitting, her lips tight. 'We will meet with you again, my lords and ladies.'

They filed from the room. Once in the corridor beyond, discussions resumed. Fianna sank back into her chair and closed her eyes.

'We need either unicorns and dragons to stand against the Third Kingdom,' rasped Sallah's voice, 'or the Third Kingdom's strength to stand against them. Why should humans die for creatures who have no interest in us?'

'Others may act dishonourably,' Fianna said, 'but that's no reason for us to dishonour ourselves in turn.'

'You sound like Stannard.'

'He was my father.' Fianna opened her eyes again, shifted in her seat. Holding up her left hand, she added quickly, 'I also have this.'

Sallah's gaze focussed on the gold and red ring sparkling on one finger. 'You believe the Summoning Ring will help you?'

'I have two parts.' Fianna lowered her arm to study the heart shaped ruby which rested on one gold band. A small hand completed the second band. 'Once I have the other hand, the Ring will enable me to summon the Family to do my bidding. I will call upon them to fight for us.'

'You can only control the dragons if you can find the third part. Every ruler has tried, and failed.'

'What else would you have me do?'

'You know what I would choose. King Anton offered you marriage. Both kingdoms to rule, if you would join him against the other two kingdoms.' Sallah sniffed. 'A much better match than that pig herder you insist on pining for.'

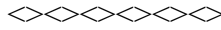
'I'm not pining for him,' Fianna retorted. 'In fact, I've asked Jeremy to be my escort for the Wintertide Ball.'

She had the rare pleasure of receiving a nod of approval from her aunt. 'Yes, Jeremy, son of Duchess Pealla, second in line to the third most powerful family in the kingdom. You would have my permission to marry him.'

Seventeen years old and Queen, Fianna needed no one's permission to marry. But she kept the thought to herself. 'The kingdom will have to wait awhile longer for any royal weddings, my lady. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go to my sword fighting lesson.'

'You are excused,' Sallah said, rising first to her feet.

Remember how much you owe her, Fianna reminded herself. She gave her aunt a bow, then left the room.



‘And you must always have your goal firmly in mind,’ Pealla continued.

Fianna nodded. The wooden practice sword had seemed heavier with each lunge, and she was happy to let it rest on the exercise floor. Her breaths puffed into sight before her. The smaller practice yard might be under cover, but it was little warmer than the cold day outside. ‘You mean, whether to go for a leg or the chest.’

‘No, even before that. Is your aim to kill, to wound, or to merely draw first blood?’ Pealla still spoke easily, the exercise not even winding her. ‘In war, a knight may have no option but to settle for the first. It is always preferable to only wound, so that a family might not be left without a provider. In a fight for honour, the battle is over when first blood is drawn, and the wound should be as slight as possible.’

‘Like Latham’s challenge at my coronation.’

‘Which he fought naked, as I did.’ The Prancer entered the chamber. As usual, light seemed to come in with him, a glow which clung to his white mane and bright hooves. ‘Still an uneven contest, since only silver can harm one of the People.’

Fianna glanced away, reminded by the items around his neck of the secret she held. Bright against his greying skin rested the silver claw of the dragon which had killed his milk-brother. Another cord twisted around the whorl of root from his birth tree, and a third was strung through the golden ring of the Queen’s Champion. ‘The Colonel is attempting to teach me philosophy, whereas I had hoped for fighting techniques.’

‘The first leads quite naturally to the second,’ Pealla replied evenly.

‘And which is sharper, the blade or the wit?’

Fianna grinned at the unicorn. No matter what her mood, the Prancer always brought her back to a smile. ‘A pointed question, Lord Unicorn.’

He snorted. ‘I prefer to horn in on the answers.’

‘Lord the Prancer,’ Pealla said with mock severity, ‘you have interrupted my lessons with my squire.’

‘Indeed.’ Without warning he was in the ring, his horn sweeping towards Fianna. She swung the practice sword wildly, blocking the first, then the second of his attacks. The third sent the sword flying, and the sharp silver tip hovered inches from her shoulder. Fianna froze.

‘You might do best to keep to philosophy,’ he told her, stepping back.

Fianna felt her face redden, her fists clench at her side. Deep breaths, she told herself. Don’t give in to it. ‘Still an uneven contest, since only silver can harm a unicorn.’

The Prancer bobbed his head. With a flick of his tail, he suddenly became serious. ‘When you are finished, Lady Pealla, I would speak with you and your squire.’

A hind hoof dug at the ground, a sign of agitation. Fianna saw Pealla take note of his action. She raised her sword to her head, and Fianna, retrieving her own, repeated the salute. ‘We’re done for the day, Lord the Prancer. Shall I leave you to speak alone with the Queen?’

‘No. What must be done requires three. See to your comfort first.’ The unicorn bent his head, unnecessarily polishing his horn on his coat while he waited for them to hang the swords away. Then he followed them to the sunken baths, backing away as they stripped and splashed into the steaming water.

Fianna glanced at him as she surfaced. Was he going to tell her that he planned to return to his own kind? But he can’t, not while I have the horn, she thought. She scrubbed her scalp furiously, cleaning the tangled red hair.

Pealla, who kept her own hair short, was already finished and relaxing to one side. Fianna quickly finished her wash, then floated to the edge. 'All right, Prancer. We're ready.'

Steam curled around his nostrils, and he sneezed. When he spoke, it was so quietly that Fianna had to lean forward to catch the words. 'My milk-brother was entrusted to the Land three full moons ago. The seasons have turned, the ground has chilled, and once again both moons are full and rising into the sky. I must renew the binding at the fourth fullness of the moons, or Storm's spirit will rise with them and rejoin the Wheel.'

Fianna glanced at Pealla. The older woman shrugged. She didn't understand either. 'We're not unicorns, Prancer. You'll need to explain it to us.'

He sighed. 'I--I'm unsure how.'

'We know it's difficult for you, so long and far away from your own kind,' Pealla said. 'Tell us of the People of the Trees. Perhaps then we can understand what you ask of us.'

'Yes.' He straightened, arched his neck. 'You will have your spirits improved by the telling. Very well. When a mare runs with a stallion, she opens herself to the spirit world. Those who are on the Wheel, between physical lives, can choose to make her their mother, and so return to the Land. Surely your mages tell you this much?'

Fianna glanced at Pealla, then answered for both of them, 'No, they don't. Probably because not all humans believe as you do.'

'Believe?' the Prancer repeated, sounding puzzled. 'What's there to believe? What I speak of is true for all those who live on the Land.'

'Then educate us further,' Fianna suggested.

His hind hoof struck the ground. 'In each life we must strive to become more than we were before, placing our hooves firmly on the steep hill towards perfection. Those who die young, before even outgrowing their birth names, gain nothing from their birth, and must return again at the same level. Storm had come to realise his second name, but before the Dancer could speak it over him, he was killed by the dragon. Nor could my sire name him after his death, for he had lost part of his horn and was not whole.'

Fianna forced herself not to glance at her bundle of clothes, lying on a bench nearby. The pouch hiding the horn was buried under shirt and trousers. 'You told me that you left the herd to find the horn.'

The Prancer dipped his head in a nod. 'If I can return it to Storm's burial place, he will be whole. Then my sire can give him his name and he'll go to his next life carrying what he had learned in this one. I need time to find the dragon who killed him, so I can challenge him for the horn. But a spirit only remains bound to earth and tree for three full moons. The binding requires renewal now, to keep him bound for another three moons. Or else he will free himself, and follow the path created by their combined strength to the spirit realm.'

'Maybe that's for the best,' Fianna said sharply. 'Is it right to hold him back?'

'I'm not sure.' The Prancer lowered his head. 'I hold him back because I wronged him, and I want to redeem that wrong.'

'What wrong did you do him?' Pealla asked.

'He forgot to keep himself invisible when the dragon came to the herd,' Fianna replied irritably. She had heard the tale before. 'Storm drew the dragon away from the Prancer and saved his life.'

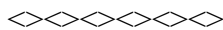
'There is more.' The Prancer looked away from them. 'Storm had entrusted me with the keeping of his name to be, and he begged me to speak it over him before he

died. But I could not. I'm not a Dancer, to summon the lines and awaken the spirit.'

'I must ask that you explain further,' Pealla said gently. 'I thought your sire was the Dancer.'

The Prancer sighed. 'The herd is without the sacred twins, the Painter, who Heals, and the Dancer, who Judges. I was born alone, the offspring of my sire's black deed, and I carry the signs of both.' His horn touched the five black dots spread across the top of his right hind leg, and his lips nibbled the jagged sign of lightning on his left shoulder. 'My coat is darkening, but whether this will be to the grey of a Painter, or the black of a Dancer, I cannot say.'

Fianna stared down at her hands, unable to meet Pealla's eyes. So she left it to the Colonel to say, 'You are the Queen's Champion, a trusted councillor, and our comrade in arms. Tell us what you would have us do.'



She didn't even bother to ask me if I wanted to assist, Fianna thought resentfully several nights later. Her thick cloak of fur-trimmed wool did little to hold out the mid-winter chill. Both moons were high in the sky, tingeing the snow with blue and green.

After some searching, Pealla had found a grove acceptable to the Prancer. The oak, the birth-tree of Storm, was older than the unicorn would have liked, but the rowan, his own birth-tree, was the right age. The Prancer now stood between the two trunks, his eyes gleaming almost as bright as his horn.

'We are gathered,' the Prancer said softly. 'We are here, we three to speak to one. Let us prepare the binding, for the one who struggles to be free.'

Fianna took her place opposite the rowan tree, Pealla across from the oak. The Prancer began to walk around one trunk, then the other, crossing over his path mid-way in a large number eight. Fianna had expected to see him lower his horn and draw lines in the dirt, surrounding the trees with swirling colours, as he had done around Pealla before healing her. He said this binding wasn't something only a Dancer or Painter could do, she reminded herself, but a ceremony any unicorn could carry out.

Twelve times the Prancer circled around the trees. With each completed circuit, his steps became slower and slower, as if he were pushing against some increasing force. Fianna blinked. For a moment, she thought she'd seen something flowing around the trunks. But there was nothing there, only shadows cast by the two moons.

The Prancer returned to his place between the trees. Now he spoke in Unicorn, more physical than verbal. He had told the two women what he would be saying, and Fianna recalled it as the unicorn snorted and pranced. 'I call oak to reach to oak, rowan to rowan. To the trees which accepted the sacrifice of our birth companions, those who nourished us while we were yet unborn, brought us into the world, and then died so that we might live.'

The afterbirth, Fianna suddenly realised. He's talking about the afterbirth. Is that what the herd does with it, bury it under a tree? Is that why they call themselves the People of the Trees?

A hot tingle of power flashed underneath her boots. Although the Prancer had warned her about it, Fianna had to grit her teeth to keep herself from moving away. Only now did she admit that she hadn't really believed him. How could trees communicate with each other across miles and kingdoms?

'I speak through rowan, to oak,' the Prancer continued. 'As Prancer, I speak to Storm, companion to companion, spirit to spirit. I ask you, do not step upon the moons' path, forming over our heads. Do not seek to rejoin the Wheel. Trust me, your

milk-brother, your friend. I will find the part of your horn which the dragon carried away. I will return it to your body, your birth-tree. And then can your second name be spoken, and you will take back to the Wheel that which you have gained in this life.'

He turned his head to Pealla, then Fianna. Switching to Human, he said, 'I have two new companions, who have stood by me, who will support me. We bind you for three further moons, Storm, asking the Land for her permission as we do so.'

With a flick of his tail, the Prancer circled the trees once more, striking them with his horn as he passed.

Fianna jumped back. Glowing blue lines had suddenly appeared around the trunks, humming at a low frequency which made her ears ache. She glanced at Pealla. A thin smile from the older woman told her that Pealla had seen the lines long before her, and Fianna bit down a surge of anger.

The Prancer straightened, arched his neck. 'Does the Land agree to my binding?'

The buzzing in her ears stopped. The air was suddenly warmer, touched by the scent of flowers and fresh earth. A presence filled the forest, hovered between the trees. Out of the corner of her eye, Fianna saw Pealla sink down onto one knee, and she had to fight against doing the same. All her life she had paid lip service to the teachings of the mages, never really believing that the Land was an entity in her own right. Now she knew it to be true.

From the wind rustling the branches, from the sounds of night animals, came words which Fianna instantly understood. 'A friend helps a friend.'

'That is what I attempt here tonight,' the Prancer answered, sounding confused.

But Fianna knew to whom the Land spoke. She felt the horn suddenly warm against her chest, the heat spreading through the mage's cloth. All she had to do was tell the Prancer. Give him the horn so he could return to the herd and release Storm. *No*, Fianna thought back at the presence, *it's mine. The dragon gave it to me.*

'A friend helps a friend,' the voice said a second time, sadly. The lines of energy surrounding the two trees flickered, then died. 'He is bound.'

The presence disappeared. Fianna shivered, the wind chilling the sweat on her forehead. The Prancer lowered his head, his own body shaking. In a voice so low that Fianna just caught it, he said, 'It has been done. Storm is bound.'

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