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Hunter's Moon

by
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– Mother Love –

The angry scolding of a squirrel told the man in brown that something was wrong. He looked up and found the little animal, high on the limb of an oak, conspicuous by its drab coloring among the blazing yellow and gold splendor of mid-autumn foliage. It stood out in silhouette in a break in the leaves, against the clear blue beyond, and a thin sliver of new moon hung faintly visible in the same small patch of daylight sky.

The squirrel peered indignantly away from the path, toward the right, chattering at the top of its lungs, switching its bushy tail back and forth in warning and agitation. His eyes followed its gaze, but he could neither hear nor see any trace of whatever had excited it. There was no suggestion of hazard, nothing out of the ordinary, except perhaps a half-heard hint of the murmur of flowing water, somewhere not far away.

He drew a breath and considered. There were occasional dangerous things in these woods, for the most part natural, but now and then not. He glanced at a talisman at his chest, a simple bit of reliable wizardry that warmed and glowed softly when other magic came near. Now it lay inert, a mere icon of

decorative silver hanging from a plain rough cord about his neck. Even so, something did not feel right. He kept still and listened silently for several long, slow breaths, moving only his eyes, carefully sensitive to the rhythm and pattern of the forest. He tried to pay attention to everything in general and nothing in particular, seeking whatever it was that made him so inexplicably uneasy. He could detect no cause for alarm, neither by reason or by intuition. Yet he felt no relief at his failure.

He drew another breath, and ran a hand pensively through the unruly mass of dark, gray-tinged curls at his temples. It would be easier to pass on, but it might be wiser to find out. Curiosity did kill, but not as quickly as ignorance. At least, not usually.

He stepped off the path, moving cautiously and quietly through the brush, treading carefully to avoid making foot noises in the rich bed of new-fallen leaves. After a few dozen paces he halted abruptly, all but falling over the edge of a deep, narrow ravine that curved out of sight in both directions. It had been blocked from view by dense undergrowth, and by the slight slope of the ground, upward and away from the path. Along its bottom ran a small woodland stream, softly muttering and prattling to itself as it trickled along the pebbly bed, and close by the water's edge loomed the source of the squirrel's displeasure.

As bears went, it was big enough. It was possibly the biggest bear he had ever seen. In fact, it was the only bear he had seen for a long time at any distance less than full bowshot, which

had always been more than close enough to get to a bear, especially a big bear. A very big bear.

It stood less than thirty yards away, down slope, on the same side of the gully. It faced into a cut in the side of the ravine, or perhaps the mouth of a cave, and it had something trapped inside. Thick blood ran on the bear's shoulder, trickling from a fresh wound. The broken shaft of an arrow lay on the ground nearby. Blood smeared the animal's claws as well, but it was grumbling and fussing, part way into the niche, so whoever had wounded it still lived, and could still put up a fight – but probably not for long. There weren't many reasons why a bear would press home an attack on someone with weapons, but any of those reasons made for a very determined and a very lethal bear.

The man in brown was neither so young nor so stupid as to be a deliberate hero, but he would not intentionally leave someone to be savaged by an angry beast. The bear had not seen him, and that was excellent. What little wind there was, blew directly into his face. Good. His own small bow was for traveler's fare like rabbits and birds, not war or big game. Bad. Even worse, there was no time for anything complicated, and a direct, frontal assault would be utterly hopeless.

He looked hurriedly for an alternative. A fractured outcrop of weathered gray stone overhung the rim of the gully. Some of the rocks looked loose. He left the concealing trees and moved quickly along the edge of the drop off. Sure enough, here was a small boulder, half the size of his torso, extending out over

the top of the bank. Perhaps he could manage a distraction. The bear still had not noticed him, or maybe it just didn't care. Its rich coat shone with the color of cinnamon and dried pine needles, highlighted here and there with glints of sunlight, reflections that shifted and danced with every ripple and contraction of the powerful muscles that bulged and flexed beneath the animal's skin.

He dug his fingers into the soil around the boulder, pulling and prying valiantly. It gave a little. He picked up a branch, a deadfall from the forest floor, and tried it as a lever against the half-buried mass of stone. The branch broke. It was rotten. He sat with his back braced hard against a tree, dug his heels into the earth at the side of the rock as far as they would go, and pushed with all his might. The boulder leaned a finger's width, hesitated, then broke completely free of the earth holding it in place and tumbled downward. Deprived of underpinning, the ground beneath him crumbled and collapsed, sending him sliding after, grabbing wildly at anything for support, and failing. A small landslide composed of a few boulders, a bushel or two of loose rock and soil, and one terrified adult human male, cascaded down the side of the gully and missed the bear completely.

His left foot turned under him as he tried to land upright, and he collapsed back against the bank in a wash of agony. His pack had come half open during the fall. Books and everything else tumbled out erratically, pages fluttering against cobbles and dirt as they fell. And the bear had noticed him. It backed

off from its cornered prey and glared furiously at the newest challenger to its sovereignty, scowling and snorting, almost close enough to touch, far too close. A wave of foul breath came to him, a hot, rancid stink, a stench testifying that a bear does not eat only grubs and berries. He scabbled away sideways, along the foot of the bank, half hopping and half sliding, back pressed against the slope, pushing himself with his good leg. The pain was too great for him to think.

The bear lifted its broad head, stared down the curve of its blunt, massive snout, and considered what to do next. It had trouble deciding. He tried to tell himself that it only looked twice as long as he was tall, that it was only the thick, shaggy coat that gave the illusion of so much muscle and sinew. Yet try as he might, he could not muster the slightest conviction that the powerful claws and formidable teeth that menaced him were anything but real or anything but sharp. The huge creature muttered fury deep in its throat. Thick, irregular ropes of saliva dribbled from the corners of its terrible jaws as it growled and glowered.

An arrow flashed from the cleft and grazed the great mound of muscle that topped the animal's shoulder blades. Something was wrong, though, for the shaft lacked force and speed. The bear hunkered down again, and turned once more to the opening. He still could not see what was inside.

If it kills whoever is in there, it will come for me next, the man in brown thought. He picked up a rock and heaved it at the bear. It hit weakly, a glancing blow near the animal's

ear. The enormous beast hastily backed up and turned toward him. Its colossal paws were the size of his face.

He hoped for more arrows from the cleft, but none came. He pushed himself gamely erect, sliding his back up the bank of the ravine, and stood wobbling on his one good foot. There was a knife in his belt, and it might possibly kill, but it would take great luck and skill for so short a blade to be more than a nuisance to the huge animal before him. *Feet first and kicking*, he thought, grimly. He seized an edge of his cloak in each hand, and spread out his arms.

"YAAAAHHHHH!!" he shouted, and hopped toward the bear as fast as he could, flapping his cloak furiously. "YAAAAHHHHH!!"

The bear halted again, staring in brooding ursine bewilderment at the flailing apparition advancing upon it in erratic jumps. "YAAAAHHHHH!!" Five more hops and he would be within reach of the mammoth paws. He had no idea what he would do then.

Motion in the cleft caught his eye — he could see now that it opened into a wide, shallow cave. Then came frightened animal squalls, and finally two half-grown indignant bearlets dashed pell-mell from the niche, galloped behind their mother, and scrabbled away down the wash. Momentarily distracted, the she-bear turned and looked after her offspring. The man in brown hastily reversed his charge, or tried to, but hopping backward on rough ground was too much for him. He tripped and sat down hard, twisting his injured foot again in the process, calling up a fresh wave of sickening pain. The bear was coming for him,

there was no time to get up. He tried to push himself further away from the creature, but his hands and usable foot could not find effective purchase in the loose, smooth gravel and half-decomposed debris that formed the bed of the gully. He averted his face and held desperately still.

The huge animal towered over him. She glared down for one terrifying moment, and glanced briefly aside. She looked away for a longer interval, then finally bent her neck so that she no longer faced him. At last the she-bear swiveled and peered into the cave, then turned still further, snorted softly, and rumbled ponderously off, following her cubs.

"Mother love," said the man in brown to no one in particular, as he stared after the departed bruin. His gorge rose abruptly, and he choked back a mouthful of bitter, acid fluid. His head spun from the pain in his ankle, and his vision had gone half-dark at the edges. Then a sound from the cleft caught his attention. He twisted carefully, to see where it had come from, but when he saw what he had rescued, his profoundest wish was that the bear would come back.

It was a demon. No, worse: It was two of them. And he fainted dead away.

– Manners –

Tlick. A percussive noise echoed somewhere in the darkness, and it was dreadfully important to remember what it meant. *Click tlick click.* It came and went, it stopped and started. The individual sounds were not precise and separate, but blurred, composed of many single strokes too close together to be distinguished, like the telltale rattle of a sentinel drum. *Tlick click.* Like the nervous beat of fingertips on polished hardwood. *Tlick.* Like the roll of a fortune-teller's bones. *Tlick click tlick.*

Like claws on rock. The man in brown opened his eyes abruptly, then half closed them in caution, remembering. His foot throbbed. He lay on smooth bare stone, looking up at a steeply sloping rock ceiling, but the glare of full daylight shone at the edges of his pain-blurred vision. He rolled his eyes to the side, and found himself just barely inside the broad entrance of the cave that he had seen earlier. The shadows in its mouth had not visibly changed – he must not have been unconscious for more than a few minutes. As more memories slowly returned, he realized with a chill that some one, or some thing,

had moved him to his present position. *Tlick click*. The noise came from outside. He turned his head, slowly and gingerly, and found his neck pillowed by a great wad of something soft and scratchy – his woolen cloak – and his injured foot propped carefully atop his pack. Who had cared for him? What had done this? Why? *Tlick*. He turned his head a little more, wincing at the hot pain of his injury, and tried to bring his eyes to focus.

The creature barely twenty feet away looked like a bizarre, impossible cross between some great hunting cat, almost as large as he himself, and a powerful, wingless bird. Catlike ears faced alertly forward, and a lustrous, glorious coat dazzled in the sun, a coat worthy of the most magnificent feline predator. The animal's pelt was rich and soft, lush and shimmering, pale cream beneath with upper parts mottled in shades of warm brown and yellow. The colors ranged from light beiges and near-lemony tints, scarcely darker than white, to hues so densely pigmented as to be almost black.

Emerald eyes stared at him, eyes very like a cat's. Their large, startling green irises surrounded vertically elongate pupils, that narrowed to sharp points at top and bottom. Yet the head shape was not at all feline. The long, tapering muzzle resembled a wolf's, but was thicker, with nostrils set at the side of the snout, not in front, and not in a pad of leather. No whiskers adorned either nose or brow, and the teeth all looked alike, set in slightly irregular, backward-pointing rows, with razor-like rear edges as well as sharp points. The long and

gracefully curved neck adjoined the rounded skull at the back rather than the edge of the base.

The ends of the oddly delicate forearms suggested the feet of birds, with three slender digits that terminated in claws. The paws were perhaps the size of his own hands, and looked as much suited to manipulation as to destruction – though the thumbs were proportionately longer than his own, and were set unusually far back, toward the sides of the slender palms. Some of the fingers bore jewelry – narrow, zigzag bands of warmly-colored metals that must be copper and gold. The greater proportion of the being's body mass lay over its hindquarters. It walked half upright on powerful hind legs. No, that wasn't quite right – the torso itself was entirely horizontal, with the spine parallel to the ground. The rising s-curve of the neck, almost like that of a heron or an egret, gave the posture its character. The long, stiff tail was thick from top to bottom where it merged into the body, but tapered gradually to a narrow tip at the end. It might be as much for balance as for anything else. The creature wore a belt where a human might, with several pouches attached, but had no other clothing.

It lifted one leg and stood poised for a moment, and the blood in his veins ran suddenly icy. Only a natural killer would have such huge, bare talons on the hind legs. An eagle large enough to lift a man with nonchalance might possess claws of such magnitude. They looked efficient and powerful. They looked absolutely deadly.

It stood over the body of another of its kind, similarly

marked but somewhat differently colored, lying half on its back on ground soaked with blood. He remembered that the second one had been in the same position when he had first seen them — undoubtedly it had been wounded by the bear. It lay unnaturally still. He looked more closely, and yes, there on the chest gaped great torn gashes left by the blow of the she-bear's powerful forepaw. The creature on the ground was dead.

Now as he watched in horror, the clawed foot of the first being descended and slit the belly of its companion wide open from mid-chest to groin. It did not pause after the first slash, but continued with fierce intensity, now bending and using forepaws as well to open the body cavity, pulling out entrails and tearing within. Blood splashed and spattered. Masses of warm, wet tissue steamed in the chill autumn air. Gobbets of fat and gristle flew in all directions. The thing stopped and stared at him, then resumed its frantic excavations, holding its face close to the yawning wound and peering into it. The man in brown knew all too much of blood and body parts, but even so, his stomach turned, and yet he dared not look away. He had never before felt so utterly helpless. He could scarcely move because of his injury, and the pain in his leg made it all but impossible to think. Yet that very helplessness had created in him a detachment, an awareness that for the moment his fate lay beyond his own control. So in that state he watched, as the terrible creature swiftly and messily dissected a fallen member of its own species.

All at once the being ceased its activity, lifted its head,

and emitted a long, sibilant, resonating hoot, a sound reminiscent of an owl, but deeper, or of a recorder, but more varying in pitch. It put back its head, ears flattened a little toward the side, and vocalized again, longer and more eerily. The forest fell silent at that mournful cry, and the man in brown felt an emotion half loss and half foreboding. As its call ended, the creature turned toward him.

Yet as it approached, he realized suddenly that he had made at least one error in reasoning. Whatever this being might be, no matter how horrible and sickening its actions, it was not a demon. For the talisman at his chest emitted not so much as a hint of light. It had given, and continued to give, no warning whatsoever of even the slightest trace of magic.

In any case, the thing ignored him. It met his eyes briefly for a moment – he had no way to read its expression – then busied itself with belongings of its own in the cave. It set aside a lightweight, short bow and a quiver of arrows, both quite conventional, except the arrowheads were not iron, like his own, or even bronze, but flint. Then it turned to two packs that lay by the wall. They looked generally similar to his, but differed greatly in detailing. Their surfaces bore elegantly tooled figures, that he could not quite distinguish clearly across the width of the cave. Their edges and seams carried decorative patterns of twisting colored lines, crisscrossing one another like fancy rope or knotwork. The creature lifted its hands to its face long enough to lick the gore carefully from its claws, then opened one of the packs and pawed about within.

The three-fingered hands manipulated the fastenings and sorted quickly through the contents with deft precision.

In spite of his fear and the pain in his foot, in some far-off objective corner of his mind, he was fascinated. He could not imagine what such an alien entity as this would carry in place of tools, money and traveling gear, and could not quite see. It took out several items, one at a time, apparently more jewelry or bric-a-brac, and put them into a pouch at its waist. Then it stopped rummaging, closed the pack, and returned to the butchered corpse of its companion. Hooting again, now more softly, it picked up the mutilated body, oblivious to the spilling blood and entrails, and carried it out of his field of view.

The man in brown tried with no luck to draw his faculties together and think. He couldn't get far with a foot injury, and surely a creature that was so obviously an efficient predator could easily track him down if it wished to. Furthermore, it probably had not gone very far away, not with so heavy a burden. His knife was still at his belt, but it would not amount to much in a fight against those enormous claws, even if he had been uninjured. His bow had fallen outside, and with it most of his arrows. He could not move well enough to retrieve them. Other things in his gear would do for weapons, but they took more concentration and coordination than he could muster in his present, pained condition.

Anyway, the being had had plenty of time to do him any harm it might have wished, but had done nothing malicious. In fact,

it had administered first aid. On the other hand, it might have some unpleasant purpose in mind for the future. Were it not for his foot, he would probably have made haste to get away, but he was almost pleased that he could not do so. He grinned ruefully, thinking about curiosity and cats. Nevertheless, he decided it was not worth risking the creature's wrath to crawl across the cave and look into its gear. And in any case, there remained his injury to deal with.

He spent most of the next hour slowly working himself into a sitting position, then painfully sliding his boot off the thick swelling that had grown atop the arch of his foot. Removing it was agony. He was perspiring heavily and once again felt faint and nauseated when he finally got it clear. Severe black and blue swellings crisscrossed his skin, but cautious probing and massage found no broken bones, only painful muscles and tendons. The damaged tissue felt better with pressure on it, so he improvised a bandage from spare clothing in his gear, and once more propped the foot high on his pack. He was wishing for hot water to soak it in, when the click of claws on rock announced that the strange being had returned.

He breathed shallowly and held very still, not looking directly at the creature, but it continued to pay him no attention. It had groomed itself, and perhaps bathed – its glorious coat bore no remaining traces of blood, and looked damp in places. It carried an armload of books, bow and arrows, and the other gear he had spilled outside. Glancing at him from time to time, it put them down near the other packs. It made a neat,

orderly pile of the books, with the bindings aligned and all the titles facing the same way.

Which was thought-provoking, for the block letters and differing scripts on the volumes would not suggest so regular an arrangement to an eye unfamiliar with bindings and alphabets. Could it possibly know how to read a human language?

And if that were true... Feeling a little silly and more than a bit frightened, he cleared his throat.

"Do you understand spoken words, or just written ones?"

The creature's ears flicked. It glanced in his direction, then turned and faced him, cocking its head and holding still, in an oddly birdlike gesture. It met his gaze for a long moment, then turned its eyes to the books, all without moving its head. Finally, it looked back at him. A strange ripple traveled up and down its coat, from the base of the skull down to the nape of the long, flexible neck. Suddenly it moved, striding abruptly to the side of the cave. It opened one pack again, spent a brief moment rearranging the contents, then quickly pulled out a rectangular piece of light-colored slate, bordered with polished wood, and a thin stick of hard charcoal.

It made marks rapidly, with small, crisp strokes of the stylus, then turned the surface so he could see. In precise and elegant penmanship, it had inscribed letters and words that were slightly, quaintly archaic, as if the creature's knowledge of writing and language had been garnered more from musty library tomes than from correspondence or personal instruction.

Please excuse my bad manners, it had written. Until I noticed

*the books, I had not considered that you might know how to read.
My name is Moon Hunter.*

He laughed silently, wryly at himself. "I am called Elwyan," he replied formally, half smiling, nodding his head in a bow of introduction. "And I fear that I myself have been guilty of much the same oversight."

– Moon Hunter –

They called themselves the Swift. A great magician had rescued a handful of them from some vast catastrophe in their native land, bringing them here by magical means. Moon Hunter had not known the place they came from – indeed, had not yet been born.

I was still in the egg. The precise script flowed forth quickly, with small, deft motions of the charcoal. That clutch was not quite ready to lay, my mother told me.

Elwyan wanted to know more about the catastrophe. *My father said the sky was on fire, and the earth shook so hard the trees came loose. He still bore scars when he died.* The wooden border of the slate carried delicately carved letters of the alphabet, as well as some of the most common words and modifiers. Moon Hunter communicated by a strange, rhythmic combination of writing and pointing.

Elwyan glanced at the Swift out of the corner of his eye, but the creature's face bore no trace of expression. A description of so much violence might be an exaggeration, but there was no

way to tell. That would have to wait.

"How many of you are there?" The Swift had built a fire. Elwyan sloshed his foot in his cooking pot, now filled with steaming hot water. It felt better, just a little.

Moon Hunter stared at the bloody ground by the cave mouth. *Two of us yet lived until today, but now there is only me. A pause. We were clutch sisters.*

That stopped Elwyan for a long moment. Sisters? He hadn't consciously thought of what sex the creature might be – there were no external signs that might have hinted one way or another, at least, none he could recognize. The term "clutch sisters"... must mean much the same as "fraternal twins". But then... why the carnage he had just witnessed, on the body of a sibling? Notwithstanding the warmth of water and fire, he shivered slightly. He was fearful even of asking.

"How did you get trapped in the cave?" he said, trying to change the subject.

We were extremely unlucky. We got between the bear and her young. She was very determined. She wounded my sister early, and since I was trying to stop the blood I could not defend us properly. I had to throw arrows one-handed, without my bow. When you distracted her I moved us both to the side, to let the cubs escape.

"What would you have done if there had been no distraction?"

Again a long pause. *My sister would have died soon, and then it would have been easy to let the young get by. She was beyond saving.* The Swift stared at the entrance to the cave. *Now she*

sleeps in the mouth of forever.

That sounded like a blessing, but Elwyan was not certain what it meant. "The bear might have pressed home its attack even so."

I could outrun it easily. Or I could probably have killed it, but I would not have wished to do so, for it has young, and is more than I could eat before the meat spoiled.

"Kill it with arrows?" Elwyan was skeptical – her weapons were small and light. *Arrows are for birds and tree game,* Moon Hunter replied. *I would use these.* She glanced downward and flexed the great curved claws on her feet. Elwyan swallowed nervously, and exhaled. Close combat with a bear... Was she kidding?

"Then you were not in very great danger after all?"

One should never speak lightly of danger. The bear is by no means a sure kill for me, nor would I have been certain of getting clear if I had chosen to try to escape. She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. *I must thank you for coming to our... she erased – to my rescue, at such great risk to yourself. You were both brave and resourceful.* Elwyan smiled, less in appreciation of flattery than in acknowledgement of tact. *And had her wound been only a little less, your action might have allowed my sister to live.*

"And where are you going now?"

I do not quite know. We... she erased again – I seek the service of another magician, who lives somewhere not far to the north, here in the foothills. His name is Windfarer. But I do not know precisely where to find him. Do you?

She was disturbingly direct. "Well..." Elwyan considered for a moment before replying further. "I have heard people speak of him. They say he is like any wizard, but surlier than most." He chuckled. "They say he is bad-tempered, self-centered, solitary, impatient, and altogether difficult to deal with. And to tell the truth, I don't really think he's all that much of a wizard. Why do you want anything to do with him?"

There is a problem he might help me with. The Swift stopped writing for a moment, tilted her head to the side, and stared hard at Elwyan. Her eyes glowed with green fire, the points of their cat-like ebony pupils almost as sharp as her teeth. He shivered at the intensity of her unblinking gaze. *But if you do not mind, I would rather not discuss it. Do you know him?*

"I know where he lives, but I don't think anyone truly knows the man himself, at least not well. I surely do not. But how do you propose to obtain his assistance? They say the price of magic is even higher than its cost."

I dare say I would like to meet the "they" you keep talking about, since they seem to be so knowledgeable. But to answer your question, I have some books and notebooks that belonged to Wizard Darleialys. I hope they contain enough of interest to trade for his assistance. Though if he knows "them," perhaps he will not find the information to be noteworthy.

"A whole pack full of magician's books? I should think that would be quite a prize for any wizard."

Not the entire pack. I have traveling gear and tools, too. I even have a little money, though I am not sure how I would get

close enough to a human to be able to spend it.

She looked up suddenly. Elwyan stopped laughing and shook his head. Tools, money and traveling gear, indeed! "How did you come by the books and notebooks?"

Wizard Darleialys was old. She died. There were magical inhibitions – I think they are called wards – on us that broke at that time, and we were free to leave the island where she lived.

"Darleialys Stormbender," Elwyan mused, naming the magician she had mentioned. "One of the best, or so they say. The world will be the less for her passing. And your relationship was such that she found it necessary to ward you?"

At first it surely was. All the elders told how frightened we all were, and how some were badly hurt. And of course, we could not communicate with humans to begin with – they said it took a long time for her to teach us to understand your language, and she could never manage to learn ours. I do not think humans can even hear many of the sounds we use. And she was only one scholarly person, with a small staff. Possibly she worried that we might pose a threat.

Later, I believe she merely kept the wards out of habit, or perhaps thought they were somehow for our own good. But she did not fear us at the end.

"How did you get off the island itself?"

There was a little boat, with a sail. We waited till the tide was flooding and rode it most of the distance to the mainland, then sailed and paddled the rest of the way in. The water was

much too cold to swim for very long.

Elwyan was silent for a moment, and then shrugged. "Well, it is difficult to travel through these hills without coming close to Windfarer's home... though few people know exactly how to find it. The road I wish to walk leads past his very threshold. If you like, I will show you the way there, as soon as I can get anywhere at all on this foot."

That would be kind of you. A pause. Perhaps I can assist with your injury. May I look?

Elwyan gestured. Moon Hunter carefully lifted his foot out of the basin of hot water, and set it on her pack. She squatted by his lower legs, and gracefully bent her long neck to examine the injury. Her skull was broad, with the ears set noticeably lower than a wolf's or a cat's. There was something odd and different about the texture of the fur that covered them, but he couldn't quite tell what. The claws on her fingertips were hard, but the flesh of her fingers and palms was gentle and soft, and noticeably warmer than human body temperature. Even the claws themselves felt warm, when they brushed his skin.

She squeezed the swollen tissues thoughtfully. Elwyan winced. She squeezed again, more gently and in a different location, then with greater confidence began to probe the damaged area. Except for her hands, the bare parts of her skin were rougher than his own, and textured so as to be almost scaly. The gold and brown of her coat covered the backs of her hands and fingers, and rippled and shone as she cautiously manipulated his injury. The narrow, three-fingered hands and the odd location of

the thumbs were strange and unfamiliar, but all in all, it felt wonderful – she knew just where the tendons went, precisely how the muscles lay, and exactly what was damaged and what was not. Elwyan had some medical talent, but doubted he could have done any better, in his present injured state, without a great deal of paraphernalia. He wondered where she had learned so much anatomy, but looked again at her teeth and claws, and decided that perhaps his tranquility and peace of mind were more valuable than a detailed answer. Nevertheless, the afternoon sun shone warmly into the wide mouth of the cave, and he could already feel his tormented muscles and tendons starting to ease under the Swift's firm manipulations. So instead of worrying, he allowed himself – forced himself – to begin to relax.

* * * * *

By the time the sun went below the high tree line, Elwyan's foot merely throbbed stiffly. The agony was gone. *I am hungry,* wrote Moon Hunter. *I would like to hunt. Will you be all right for a while?*

Elwyan considered. "I believe so. Let's damp the fire a bit. A small one will keep away animals, or I can build it up if need be. A large one might attract other people, and in these woods, some of them might wish to be unscrupulous about an injured man."

Moon Hunter departed silently, taking no weapons, leaving Elwyan wondering what to do next. His foot felt much better than

a few hours ago, but he certainly wasn't going to travel very fast on it, and not long remained till sunset. Still, he could cut a branch for a crutch or cane, and hobble along. There were settlements and homesteads not too far off, where he might take shelter. His pack and gear were at hand. Should he just depart?

The Swift's own packs also lay nearby. Hmn. The creature was either very trusting, or very confident of her ability to track him down. Or perhaps she had passed judgment on his character, and found it acceptable. He snorted back a chuckle. Wincing with every movement, he slid closer to Moon Hunter's gear.

The packs were magnificent, with the look of old leather, noticeably used but well cared for. They were elegantly fabricated from some kind of fine-grain dark hide, that he did not recognize. The back of one showed a landscape covered with plants and animals, wrought in intricacy and beauty, shapes filled in and highlighted with rich, carefully worked texture, shading, and detail. Elwyan looked more closely, admiring the craftsmanship. Some of the trees were familiar, but the rest – and all of the animals – were nothing he had seen before. A few looked something like Moon Hunter, but the others were, were... bizarre. His mind had trouble comprehending their shapes, they were so strange. Well, not quite all, for here on an elaborately tooled tree branch was something that looked a lot like a squirrel – a squirrel with an exceptionally pointy nose, and strange, tiny ears that could almost be human. Encouraged by the sight of something familiar, he looked more closely at the rest of the figures. They made a certain sense. The patterns of

texture resembled the kinds of camouflage possessed by creatures he knew. The proportions and postures looked right, as if the beasts were real and the artist had known them well.

And it might be so, considering the packs' evident age and Moon Hunter's history. A place that held things like her would surely contain other wonders. Where could she possibly be from? What in the world had Darleialys Stormbender been doing to dredge her up? Magicians were a secretive lot, and Stormbender had had that reputation more than most. He fished his magic-detecting amulet out of his shirt again, and passed it closely over the Swifts' packs and gear. Not a trace of activity. Nothing. How odd, how truly bizarre.

Elwyan smiled once more, laughing at himself. His fondest passion was chasing mysteries, and there was no great chance that he was going to run away when a real one all but landed in his lap. Though actually, he recalled, thinking ruefully of the slide down the embankment, it was he who had very nearly landed in her lap. Well, at least in the bear's lap.

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He was careful not to touch or disturb his companion's belongings, but he was still admiring the toolwork when Moon Hunter returned. She was carrying a young wild boar, almost half as long as she was. Its throat was cleanly slit. Not a hair of the Swift's coat was stained or even out of place.

I believe humans like these. I thought you might like to

carve some off before I start to eat. She wasn't even breathing hard. Take all you like. I took the smallest one in the herd, but even so, I will have to eat hard not to waste any.

"Ah... thank you." Elwyan did indeed like boar, but his appetite was having trouble with the fact that the creature before him had evidently walked up to a group of them, and nonchalantly taken the one she wanted for dinner, much as he might pluck an apple from the tree. Wild boar generally left humans alone, but they were a poor choice of game. Their size, agility, and intelligence made them among the most feared and dangerous animals in the woods, especially when wounded, or when acting in self-defense. He glanced again at the incredible claws on her feet, then at the slashes on the boar's throat. Sure enough. One deep gash showed where the big one had gone in, and two shallower gouges, off to the side, were the work of the other claws. Hmn. She wrote with her left hand. From the appearance of the kill, she might be left-footed, too. She must have been awfully fast – that boar certainly hadn't been standing still to be slaughtered.

It looked as if she had meant it about the bear, after all.

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Elwyan carved a few steaks, spitted them, and started them cooking over the fire. Moon Hunter systematically ate huge portions of the animal, raw. She started by lifting the entire kill in her front paws, then raised a foot high and ripped

downward with its talons, tearing the body apart. Next she held each piece in place on the ground and bent over it, tearing off chunks of flesh, gristle and bone with powerful neck and jaw muscles, occasionally using her forepaws to manipulate the tissues, or to slice or pry. She scarcely chewed – her teeth looked better suited to slashing – she just tossed her head once or twice to position the meat, and swallowed. She did not eat the intestines, but eagerly devoured the other visceral organs. With the boar a third gone and her entire abdomen noticeably fuller, she stopped eating and picked up slate and stylus again.

I prefer cooked meat, but I was very hungry.

"Um." Elwyan swallowed nervously. "Evidently." He was concentrating carefully on turning the spit with his steaks, and perspiring from more than just the fire. He wondered if he looked as pale as he felt. He was no more than intellectually curious about whether his appetite would recover by the time the meat was done. He offered her his knife, quite sure she did not need it, but hoping she would use it anyway, and gestured. "There's room for more over the fire. Do you ever eat anything but meat?" She didn't take the knife.

Not usually. When she was not using the slate, Moon Hunter had begun to groom herself with her tongue and the furry backs of her paws. The motions were not quite feline. Occasionally she would run the slender claws of her forelimbs through her coat, using them like a comb. *I can eat human foods, but most of them do not seem very filling. Some things are good for flavor, though.* She listed several varieties of spices and fruits. *And*

there is tea. I like tea.

"Tea." Pale or not, Elwyan was suddenly entirely bemused. Tea came from far away, on the other side of the world. It was scarce and expensive, and was usually drunk in small quantities, occasionally with elegant ceremony. "I have a little with me. Would you like some?" Moon Hunter tapped the words for "yes" and "please" at the border of her slate. He noticed that she was looking at his spread-out gear, directly at the small bag that held his tea canister. She must have smelled it, but had not asked, only hinted.

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The Swift handled Elwyan's extra cup with curious charm. Her three-fingered hand manipulated the container with surprising nimbleness. She gripped the outer extremity of the handle between clawed thumb and middle finger, then doubled her third finger underneath, to keep it upright. Her gold rings contrasted handsomely with the vessel's roughly worked combination of red and yellow brass. She drank with small sips at the very tip of her mouth, tilting her head back a little, to allow the liquid to flow slowly to her throat before swallowing. Her lips were not nearly as flexible as human ones. Elwyan decided that she probably could not take larger swallows without dribbling. She kept the cup close to her nostrils, and now and then inhaled deeply.

He offered a trifle from his rations, a small cake made with

honey and blackberries. She nibbled at it curiously, between swallows of liquid.

Thank you. This was another word carved prominently into the slate's rim. *The sweet is good.* As Elwyan reached to take her cup he noticed something white gleaming in the sand. "Did you lose a tooth?" he inquired.

They grow back. She looked thoughtfully at the boar. *And if you will excuse me, I will cook some meat, too.* She took a knife from her own gear and busied herself with the remaining pieces of the carcass, but sampled as often as she carved. The handle of the knife was curiously shaped. Elwyan stared at it for a puzzled moment before he realized that it had been made to fit her unusual hand. He kept glancing at her, still a little uneasy. Once she caught his eye for a moment, and again there was that strange ripple of her coat, up and down her neck. He would swear that she was laughing at him.

Elwyan's steaks were almost ready. The hot beverage had settled his stomach. He sloshed the container where more of the leaves sat brewing, and addressed his new companion. "There's still some tea left, for when you're done."

Perhaps he was going to be hungry, after all.

- Hunted -

Elwyan dozed fitfully. Every time he was about to fall truly asleep, he would shift his foot so that it pained him, or knock it against something with similar effect. When he did drift off, it was immediately to dream of rivers of flowing blood, and of the precise, powerful strokes of great curved talons into the belly of an unhuman corpse. He awoke in a fright, sweating and disoriented, only to find the Swift slumbering peacefully, a body length away. They had moved back into the cave, for stored warmth and a bit of extra shelter from the cold, dark sky, a sky that promised winter in the way it sucked heat quickly from exposed surfaces, even on this calmest of evenings.

As he tossed and turned restlessly, Elwyan could not help but envy his companion's composure. She had settled herself onto front and rear paws, half on her side, like a dog or cat, and had turned her long neck almost completely around, nestling her head against the crook of one forearm. Watching her ribs slowly rise and fall, and occasionally hearing the faint sigh of her breathing, Elwyan was not sure whether she reminded him more of a resting bird or a snoozing kitten. What a strange creature she

was, with such manifest capacity for violence, and yet seeming so gentle.

One ear stuck ridiculously out from the side of her head. There was certainly something odd about it – the grain of the fur ran in two directions at once – but in the dim, flickering glow from the dying fire outside, he could not see any more detail.

For all the peacefulness of her rest, Moon Hunter was not a heavy sleeper. The first few times he coughed or cleared his throat, or shifted his weight and moved more than a little, she came instantly awake, not moving but breathing in a more measured way, eyes wide open and turned to stare directly at him. Yet she had grown quickly used to the habitual sounds he made, for now she slept steadily.

At least twice during the night the Swift arose and went outside for a considerable period. Elwyan wondered at her absence, but in the morning the reason was clear – the boar had been eaten entirely, all but for a considerable piece of hairy skin, a pile of intestines, and a few of the biggest bones. Moon Hunter's body was noticeably distended, and her larger movements were much slower than the day before, almost torpid. Yet her fingers were no less nimble as they conversed.

Do you feel up to traveling? Would a day of rest help? She yawned at the thought, showing an appalling array of teeth.

"I think I will be able to tell if walking is making my foot any worse. We can stop if it is." Elwyan had found a fallen branch – this time, one that was not rotten – and had set to

work carving it into a walking stick. He paused for a moment. Perhaps she was hinting. "Would you like to rest a while, yourself?"

Yes, but I think I should not.

"Windfarer lives north of here by about a day's walk for a pers— ... ah, for a human who does not have an injured foot. The trail I was traveling passes not far from the place, so it will be easy to take you there." He paused again. "You do know about the trail? About three dozen paces that way?" He pointed.

Yes. We — her clawed finger lingered for a moment as it touched the word — had been paralleling the trail but not walking upon it.

"Because of your tracks." Elwyan understood at once. Clawprints like Moon Hunter's on a thoroughfare would panic everyone for leagues around. "How about domestic animals? Did any catch your scent?"

A dog once, and two or three times we startled horses or cattle. The wind has been steady, and habitation seems to keep close to the roads and trails. It has been no problem to stay downwind.

"Good."

Elwyan. She had left his name written out in one corner of the slate, and touched it from time to time as the course of conversation required. He looked at her and raised one eyebrow. Her continued silence made it clear that she did not understand the gesture, so he spoke. "Yes?"

There were three of us when we left the keep of Wizard

Darleialys. There was trouble along the way. The third was killed. I believe that humans may have been killed, also.

Elwyan took a deep breath and leaned back against his pack. His foot hurt. His head hurt. "What happened?"

We were seen and attacked, twice. There was no warning, they ambushed us. Soldiers.

"Whose?"

The first group was wearing the ... special clothing, the ...

"Livery?" Elwyan supplied the word.

... the livery of a ... someone important, I do not know the title. His people visited the keep occasionally, but we did not meet them – Wizard Darleialys kept our existence a secret. The other times there were more soldiers, and some in a livery that I did not recognize.

"Describe it."

She tried, but the conversation grew rapidly confused. Her descriptions and comparisons of color made no sense. He wondered if she saw colors the same way he did. That made one more thing that would have to wait.

"Back up. Did you see any badges or emblems?"

The second group had more soldiers than the first. About a dozen dozen. Some had emblems on their shields that looked like a circle with stubby arrowheads attached.

"How do you mean?"

An empty circle, seen obliquely from the side and below, with all the arrowheads pointing the same way, up. They were not quite arrowheads, but something very close in shape.

Elwyan's head hurt much worse. "That sounds like what we call a 'crown'. If so, those were King's soldiers."

Moon Hunter thought for a minute, then wrote again.

Yes, a crown. I know what a king is, and what a crown is, too. I did not recognize it in the form of an emblem, but that is what it was. A crown. I am sure of it.

"What makes you so certain?"

Their leader was wearing one.

"Oh."

We may have killed him.

A tiny, greenish bird hovered in the shrubs on the far side of the stream, wings buzzing audibly, beating so fast as to be invisible. As it moved, the sun caught its iridescent head feathers just so, and they blazed incandescent red, like a coal before the puff of a blacksmith bellows, like the spark that marked the start of a conflagration. Elwyan put one hand's fingers to his forehead, and exhaled slowly.

We were trying our best to kill him, and though I am not absolutely certain, I think we may have succeeded, said Moon Hunter.

* * * * *

It took a little searching to find a place where the bank of the ravine permitted Elwyan to climb out without further abusing his injury. Eventually they regained the main trail, and turned north.

They moved slowly and carefully. Elwyan gimped along on his lame foot, which was slowly improving, a bit at a time. Moon Hunter, still fearing to leave tracks in the soft earth, padded noiselessly through the brush off to the side of the trail, ears and nose alert for hazards and for other travelers. There was something odd about the way she walked, but Elwyan could not quite put his finger on it. He wondered if there were a fundamental difference in how the bones of her hips were arranged, that reflected itself in her gait. It was somehow birdlike, yet her motions were more graceful than the staccato, head-bobbing jerkiness of a bird on the ground. Or on the other hand, perhaps it had to do with her long tail, which stood out nearly horizontally, a direct extension of the line of her spine, as she strode along. It was not proportioned like a cat's or a dog's, instead it tapered smoothly, like a lizard's, from rather wide and very deep at her hindquarters, to fine and narrowly pointed at the tip. Yet it did not bend like a lizard's — she carried it with no sign of effort expended to keep it stiff, as if it were a young sapling strapped to her back. Its rhythmic flexing lent balance and stability to her motion. It gave her the poise of a dancer. He had the feeling that if the world turned upside down, she would land on her feet with scarcely a break in stride.

Elwyan, she scribbled when they stopped for a break, if my being in trouble with the King and his people is a problem you do not wish to deal with, I can go on alone, and try to find Windfarer by myself.

He sighed. "Thank you for offering, but we are going the same way in any case, and I may still need some help with this foot. That is, if you are willing to let me slow you down." He wiggled the offending member demonstratively, then grimaced at a recurrent flash of pain. "I am not necessarily fond of the king and the royal family. Tell me about the fighting."

She hesitated. Forgive me. There has been so much needless violence. The first time there was no combat. About two dozen soldiers came upon us in the forest. They seemed surprised. I think they did not believe we were real. They shot some arrows, then ran off. We dodged the arrows and ran in the opposite direction. Nobody was hurt.

The second time, it was we who were surprised. They approached from cover, from downwind and crosswind as we passed a steep hillside. There were more of them, about a dozen dozen, on horseback. The country was otherwise open, and there was no place to hide or make a stand.

Some of them had – she drew a picture – "crossbows," said Elwyan. They had crossbows, and they were very effective. The arrows they shot flew so fast that it was hard for us to get out of their way. My mate... she erased the word, thought, and wrote another ... my husband fell then.

"I'm sorry," said Elwyan quietly, but Moon Hunter continued without any noticeable pause or acknowledgement.

There was one soldier who was obviously the leader, the one with the crown. He came within bowshot, so I shot him. The rest became quite disorganized when he fell. Some of them charged us

full tilt, so we were able to dodge the horses, break through their lines, and outrun them. The horses were frightened of us, which added to the confusion. But my sister was wounded. That was why she could not defend herself from the bear.

Elwyan thought rapidly. Dodging arrows in flight? Outrunning horses? That would make them "Swift" indeed. "Had you had any contact with humans before the first soldiers? Anything that might have given them cause to fear you? Could you have taken a domestic animal for food?"

There was plenty of game. And no contact that I know of. I suppose someone saw us. Wizard Darleialys said that many would fear us on sight. She looked at him. But you do not. Why is that?

Once more, she was very direct. "People are sometimes... impetuous... about things they do not understand. Perhaps I am not wise enough to be fearful of strange things. Anyway, it sounds as if you did nothing to provoke an attack. Yet whether you provoked it or not, if you have killed or wounded royalty, there will be a great deal of trouble."

There was much traffic on horseback afterward. My sister and I could see it on the road from time to time. They were looking for us. Several times more they got close, and we had to move hastily. But we had seen none since we turned north on this side trail.

"Could you have been tracked?"

I hope not. We waded in streams wherever possible, so as not to leave scent or trail. And I do not think they realized how

fast we could move.

Elwyan was only beginning to realize that himself. "Do you suppose you might have been tracked magically?"

She had not thought of that. *I do not know.*

"Do Swifts have magic?"

She hesitated, and cocked her head for a minute. *I do not think so. I never actually thought to ask - Wizard Darleialys seemed so unique that it did not occur to me that her powers might be widespread. Anyway, no one among us ever spoke of any magical Swifts, and I think someone would have said so if any were known. Certainly there were none with such powers in the group that Wizard Darleialys rescued. Many died before I was old enough to know them, but I am sure I would have heard of that.*

Elwyan shook his head grimly and muttered, half to himself. "Royalty. May people in high places take notice of you." Moon Hunter stared motionlessly at him for a long time, then put her slate away without writing another word.

– Windfarer –

The forests and grasslands abounded with animal life, life that manifested itself everywhere by calls and songs, by the scurry of small creatures in the underbrush, and by the subtle signs of trails and tracks, of bits of fur and occasional loose feathers, and of scattered droppings and telltale remnants of eating. Now and then, patches of yellow flitted like dancing sunbeams, low in the shaded cover of scrubby chaparral and young trees. They proved to be swatches of color on the throats, caps, and hindquarters of energetic birds with needle-like bills, probing leaf and bark for insects to eat. Here a porcupine had nibbled on tree bark, there a browsing deer had stripped a particularly succulent shrub head-high of its leaves. They saw squirrels, raccoons, and an occasional elk. For part of one morning, a family of eight or nine wolves followed them curiously, intermittently visible as one or another of its members crossed the trail behind them, but they encountered no dangerous animals.

They talked little. Moon Hunter kept for the most part well off the trail, now and then visible through breaks in the

foliage. They camped late and rose early. Elwyan became ever more tired. His leg still hurt, and continued to keep him from sleeping soundly. Every night he had nightmares about blood, gore and dissection. He had not found a way to ask his companion about her motive for the actions that troubled his dreams, and found the prospect of inquiring more than a little frightening.

As if the things she had already told him were not disturbing enough. Elwyan bore no special love for king and court, yet felt no eagerness to excite their wrath. He wondered what member of royalty had been present, wearing the crown, when the Swifts were ambushed. Probably not the king, at least, as long as he were not in one of his infamous moods. He would probably have more sense than to mount an attack on something just because it was different. Probably. Prince Br'wen? Not likely, but Elwyan wasn't sure. Prince Eritvorrán? Perhaps. Perhaps. The elder prince already had a reputation for cocksure rashness, for too much pride and too little wisdom. He was much too much like his father; he showed every promise of making a terrible king. It was too bad he was first in line for the crown, and obviously looked forward to occupying the throne. Someone would probably decide to kill him before he had a chance to claim it.

Yet King Lyoran and most of his family loved to hunt. A pack of something that passed for demons might have proved tempting.

* * * * *

The second day provided a chance to acquire more information.

An hour before noon, Moon Hunter appeared suddenly in his line of sight at the edge of the path, with a single word written large upon her slate.

Horses. She pointed back along the trail, toward the way they had come.

"How many?"

She cocked her head for a moment, and held up one hand, showing both fingers and the thumb. Then she listened some more, erased the slate, and wrote another, more ominous word.

Soldiers. With that, the Swift disappeared back into the forest, downwind.

Elwyan stepped off the trail himself, into hiding. Not all soldiers were friendly. Her hearing was excellent – it was a hundred heartbeats before he could detect the dull tread of hooves and the faint, sharp, metal-to-metal chink that meant weapons and armor. The men at arms indeed bore the crown on their shields, and the commander was a man he recognized from somewhere, sometime, some occasion he could not quite recall. So he showed himself – not abruptly – as they approached. Two soldiers rode small mounts, suitable only for light cavalry, but their leader sat astride an immense, powerful war horse. The animal that bore him was a great chestnut stallion, thick of shoulder and long of neck, with three white feet.

"Elwyan." The leader spoke as he reined in. "Well met."

"Good morning, Captain." The word was both a rank and an honorific for the leader of a troop. Elwyan used it in the latter sense, and intended flattery, for the soldier's actual

grade was much lower, and three was rather a small contingent. Besides, Elwyan did not remember the man's name. "How do you do?"

"Well enough, but hastily. And yourself?"

"Much the same, though rather less in haste. Autumn is such a lovely season for a walk." Elwyan stood quietly, leaning against his staff, casually at rest. He did not wish to reveal his injury. It might give rise to questions.

"We can't stop for long, but I should take time to tell you. There are dangerous creatures in the land. We ride north, to give warning."

"What kind of creatures? Are you sure?"

"They are twice as large as men. I have not seen any myself, but they are said to look like... wingless griffins..." – they both knew that griffins were most likely mythical – "...with powerful claws. They walk upright and use their front paws like hands. They carry bows and arrows, and shoot well. Some thought they were demons, but they bleed, and can be killed."

Elwyan contrived to look concerned. "Demons would be serious indeed. It is fortunate if these creatures you speak of are something else. But what has happened? How many are there? Where did they come from?" He forced a laugh, and hoped it sounded convincing. "To be honest, the only such creatures that anyone has ever told me about before, live in wine bottles and beer kegs. Are you trusting enough of your sources to be sure these didn't come from there, too?" One of the smaller horses, a handsome gray with a white face, was beginning to be uneasy.

Elwyan wondered if the wind was shifting.

The captain smiled briefly, chuckling, then resumed his grave expression. "I know a lot of troops who are always eager to learn more about the contents of bottles and kegs, but these creatures are real. No one knows where they came from, or what they are doing here. The largest group that has been seen is six or seven, but there seem to be several bands, all heading eastward on the main road to the south of here. The leading band couldn't have been far behind us." One of the other soldiers looked nervously back down the trail. The leader continued. "I know of at least two actions against them. Prince Eritvorran was seriously wounded by arrows in the second, and ten or more of his men were injured. We killed at least three of the creatures, or at least, that's the report."

Damn, thought Elwyan. "Will Eritvorran recover?"

"Last I heard, he was doing well, but it was too soon to tell."

"I am truly glad to hear that." Elwyan carefully did not specify what aspect of the remark had pleased him. "Were the others also wounded by arrows?" The telltale gray had quieted. Perhaps Moon Hunter had changed position.

The commander paused, and looked a little embarrassed. "Not according to what I heard. The things were surrounded. They picked off the prince with arrows, and in the confusion when he fell they spooked our horses. It worked. There were some thrown, and a few people stepped on. We killed a few of them, though."

"How did the fighting start?" The commander's enormous mount

swung its long neck around and nosed curiously at Elwyan's pack, scenting trail rations. As its rider reined it back, Elwyan absentmindedly ran a hand along its muzzle, thumping the animal affectionately. "He's handsome."

The rider chuckled. "And he knows it, too! Lord Riyevan said that a party of his men ran across some of the things, and were attacked. Eritvorran was in the area on some Crown matter, with a company for escort, and of course rode to help."

Elwyan shifted his body, facing the horse more squarely, keeping the flaps and ties of his pack out of reach of its questing, manipulative lips. He glowered ineffectively at the animal. The corners of the rider's mouth half lifted in brief amusement, but his expression became sterner as he continued to speak. "Elwyan, these creatures are fierce and intelligent. It was a good tactic in the battle, to spook the horses. We couldn't beat them, even at twenty to one. And a couple of times we found the remains of game they had killed - large game, like wild cattle or boar, almost as cleanly killed as if it had been tied up in a slaughtering pen. I saw one myself. It looked like they had just walked up to it and slit its throat. It looked like it was claws that killed it. I never heard of anything that could do that. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. They are very dangerous. The king has demanded that they be hunted down and killed. There's a royal bounty for remains."

Elwyan frowned thoughtfully. "That doesn't quite sound like Lyoran..."

"The king is..." The commander began to say something, but hesitated and started over again, his face a mask. "So wishes the king, so commands the king, the king's will be done. Hear and obey!" He uttered the formal words that closed each public proclamation of a royal decree, but in a tone that was carefully noncommittal. Elwyan frowned again, more deeply, but before he could reply, the rider picked up his reins, squared himself in the saddle, and spoke again, more casually.

"We must go quickly to give warning, but I am concerned about leaving you alone here. Can we offer transport? My horse could easily carry your weight as well as mine. I left our full armor behind in order to make more haste." Indeed, the captain's horse was more than twice as massive as the lesser mounts. Its shoulder stood taller than Elwyan's head. It was still eyeing the pack, staring contemplatively from intelligent brown eyes. Elwyan unfastened a pouch at his waist and fumbled within it.

"Thank you, but no. I am not far from my home, and for some reason I feel safe from these creatures here." He brought his hand back into view, bearing a fragment of blackberry cake, then glanced at the horse and raised one interrogative eyebrow at its rider.

"Go ahead," the latter nodded, then continued the other part of the conversation. "Elwyan, don't be a fool."

Elwyan positively beamed. "I congratulate you on the excellent quality of your advice! I shall do my best to follow it, though I fear that it may not always be within my capacity to do so." The great horse took the morsel from Elwyan's

outstretched fingers with surprising grace and delicacy.

The soldier chuckled, then sighed, and made ready to ride on. Yet he turned to Elwyan once again.

"Sir, you are well respected as a scholar. Do you know, do you have any idea what these things could be?"

Elwyan considered his response most carefully. "Never in my reading have I encountered any reference to any being – magical or not – which sounds even remotely like the ones you have described, and no scholar has ever said anything to me about such a creature. I am certain beyond all doubt that meeting even one of them would scare me silly. I have no idea what they are, where they came from, or what to do about them." He shrugged. "Truly, I wish I did."

"I was afraid of that. Well, I wish you good luck and safe journey." He looked a little dubious about the matter of safety. "By your leave?" As the officer lifted his reins, his powerful mount pawed at the earth with one broad, long-haired foot.

Elwyan nodded. "Thank you, and the same to you." As the group departed, the gray whinnied and tossed its head, but its rider controlled it expertly, and in a few moments they had all trotted out of sight.

After several minutes Moon Hunter came into view suddenly, at the edge of the trail, surprising Elwyan with the abruptness of her reappearance. Her mottled pelt provided superb camouflage amid the dappled pattern of light and shade. She had something written out on her slate.

I am deeply mortified that you do not consider me a scholar,

but I shall try to do better in the future. Life is so dull in my beer keg, there is plenty of time for study.

Elwyan chuckled merrily. She had been listening. Beer keg, indeed! Moon Hunter's head was bowed gracefully, low over the slate, as if in shame or submission, but she peered up steadily at him from emerald eyes slit like a cat's. The back of her neck rippled slightly, in the strange way that he had noticed before. It was laughter. It had to be laughter. And as she tilted her head toward him, a chance ray of sun falling upon the golden and cream tones of her coat revealed yet another wonder. It backlit her pointed ears and sharply defined their half-translucent structure and texture, showing beyond all doubt that the wide, tapering shapes were not composed of skin at all. They were made of feathers.

* * * * *

Because of Elwyan's injury, they took several days to cover a distance that normally would have taken one. Elwyan found ample berries and nuts to supplement the traveler's fare in his pack. Moon Hunter was satisfied by the huge meal of boar she had taken on the day they met. She ate only once during the whole time, when a loud buzz sounded suddenly from a bush at the side of the trail. Elwyan was preparing to circumnavigate the hazard, when the Swift leaped abruptly into the chaparral and slammed one great talon against the ground with dazzling speed. She had caught the rattlesnake behind the head in mid-strike, and broken

its neck. The Swift chewed on the reptile slowly, as they walked, peeling its scaly skin back from the head a little at a time, as if it were an elongated, flexible fruit. She nibbled delicately at the raw flesh within, cleaning the animal as she went, fastidiously picking out ribs and vertebrae and tossing them far from the path.

That was delicious, she wrote when she had finished, in between precise grooming licks of fingers and claws. *They taste rather like chicken. Have you ever tried one?*

Elwyan swallowed nervously. "No," was all that he could muster in reply. Yet he could not escape the impression that Moon Hunter was vastly amused by his discomfort.

The rest of the journey was uneventful. Once they both started as an entire bush awakened and shook itself as if it were about to get up and walk away, but its animation proved no more than a flock of brownish birds, fluttering about as they munched on its berries and the seeds within them. The broad, pale streaks atop their heads looked like striped white caps as they capered from twig to twig.

* * * * *

Late in the afternoon of the third day, Elwyan called to Moon Hunter and stepped aside from the main trail. "Windfarer's home is this way." The Swift turned sharply and stared in surprise. She had not noticed the opening, and blinked once or twice as they passed through a half-hidden clear space between bushes.

"Most people wouldn't find this if they didn't know how to look for it," he continued. "Wizards like it that way."

The gap opened onto another trail, narrower than the one they had left, and obviously less well-traveled. The light had a different quality, gentler and more diffuse, and there was not nearly so much underbrush. The forest felt noticeably cooler, too – the countless shades of green were all darker and more moist. After perhaps a thousand paces, the pathway opened out into a beautiful small glade. Shafts of sunlight fell through the branches of enormous trees, and set patches of dense moss on the ground ablaze with emerald fire. An eagle crossed the stretch of blue sky that spanned the topmost branches. Its white head gleamed like a planet as it circled broadly, soaring in the blaze of afternoon sun, high above the forest canopy. Near one side of the clearing stood a tiny, dilapidated stone house, run down and in need of paint and maintenance, with several ramshackle wooden outbuildings behind it. It looked entirely unprepossessing, and might have escaped notice completely at a casual glance.

Yet as they approached, the character of the holding slowly began to change. It no longer seemed quite so little, or in quite such disrepair. It was hard to say how its attributes had metamorphosed, for there was no precisely identifiable alteration in its appearance. It changed as might the connotation of a word casually overheard, as the listener carefully considered the context in which it was uttered, the intonation and emphasis of the speaker, and the likely special

concerns and hidden desires of the audience. It meant something entirely different than it had appeared to mean at first.

Moon Hunter halted and stared uneasily, not knowing what to make of the transformation.

"It's all right," Elwyan reassured her, "It's just a bit of simple magic. I've been here before. Come on, it's almost dinner time." He stepped forward cheerfully. The eagle descended and landed on a branch nearby, eying them with curiosity and detachment. It was enormous. Its wingspread was more than two handspans wider than Elwyan's height.

The thick, dark, and forbidding front door had no visible handle, latch, or knocker. The first-story windows were a surprisingly long way up, and those of the upper floors were far out of reach. There was no sign of any other way to enter. Moon Hunter set down some of her gear, produced her slate, and began to write.

It looks empty. How do I announce myself? Do you think Windfarer will help? Do you suppose anyone is at home? I do not know how to behave. I should have thought to ask sooner. Do you know?

The eagle stared at them balefully. Elwyan waved at it. The bird slowly cocked its head and blinked, ruffling its feathers nervously.

"I suspect he will help. I think he has just returned. And I believe he has brought a friend." He pushed one side of the door lightly, with a fingertip, and it swung open. "Do come in." With those words, Elwyan Windfarer stepped past his threshold and

entered his home.

Moon Hunter stared in astonishment, her head tilted half to the side. Her pelt rippled with nervous agitation. And although Elwyan was far too polite to do so, this time it was his turn to laugh.

– Of Magic and Muffins –

Any plans for an immediate meal ended at once in a shriek and a clattering crash, that left Elwyan's young housekeeper staring in shock at three yards of lean, unfamiliar carnivore looming up in the open front door. The wizard stooped unceremoniously to pick up the shattered remains of the crockery bowl that the woman had dropped in surprise.

"Elwyan!" she exclaimed in a hasty, hoarse whisper, eyes all agog at the Swift. "What in the world is that? Is it safe?" Elwyan saw her glance momentarily at a small rack of weapons near the door. Fortunately – though perhaps not from the woman's viewpoint – these were just as close to Moon Hunter, who stood halfway across the threshold, head tilted slightly to the side, peering curiously at the startled, slender human. The Swift had not flexed a muscle since the bowl had fallen. Only her eyes moved, following the wizard as he gathered bits of ceramic, and now and then quickly glancing at the other person.

"What in the world ...?" the woman exclaimed again, softly, still staring.

"It's all right, Jennalys. There's nothing to worry about."

Elwyan began to straighten up, carrying broken pieces of pottery stacked vertically between his hands. "Everything is under control." He had one shard too many. A slippery fragment dislodged itself from the middle of the stack and spun half way across the room. The entire collection tumbled to the floor again, clattering and bouncing erratically. A bit of something wet and uncooked splattered against the side of his nose and dribbled down into his mouth. It tasted of flour and raw egg.

Returned from the strange to the familiar by small domestic catastrophe, Jennalys reclaimed her confidence and spoke more loudly. "Wait, Elwyan. No. Please. Stop! Don't do it again! I'll get a broom and a mop. Thank you. Thank you very much." As the wizard arose from his second attempt at organization, Jennalys shook her head and looked at the Swift once more. "What on earth is going on this time? Where did you get this... this...?"

Elwyan watched her eyes as they found the pouches and gear on the belt at Moon Hunter's waist, thoughtfully appraised the short bow and quiver, lingered appreciatively on the rings at her fingers, and finally fixed on the Swift's attentive ears. The woman started to say something, then stared again at Moon Hunter's lean muzzle, where the half-exposed points of many sharp teeth gleamed palely, even with the Swift's long mouth completely closed. Jennalys lifted a brown hand to brush her hair back from her forehead, took a slow, deep breath, and let it out again.

"Does it... Can it understand us?" she asked hesitantly, glancing rapidly from Elwyan to Moon Hunter and back again.

"She," said Elwyan. "Yes. You figured it out a lot faster than I did." He proceeded with formal introductions. Moon Hunter dipped her head gracefully, and Jennalys – not usually one for manners – held her skirts wide and clear of the ground as she bent a knee straight-backed, in a perfectly respectable if rather out-of-practice curtsy. She paled and gasped involuntarily as Moon Hunter stepped up and over the sill, bringing her great talons into view for the first time. They clacked sharply on stone as she crossed the slate flags just inside the door. Yet as the Swift advanced further, she carefully curled her toes upward, taking obvious care not to scratch the polish on the parquetry laid in the rest of the entry hall. The woman's expression slowly eased, and she began to relax.

"What lovely rings," Jennalys admired softly, as Moon Hunter extended first one clawed hand and then the other for inspection. Elwyan watched with amusement as the dark-haired woman reacted with ill-concealed surprise to the warmth of the other's skin.

"I believe we will be having company for a while," Elwyan continued. Jennalys's eyebrows rose a small notch, and she half opened her mouth, as if to say something, but closed it again and remained silent, watching the wizard.

Elwyan paused briefly and began to speak once more. "Is there a spare..." Then he stopped, looked thoughtful for a moment, and turned to his guest. "Moon Hunter, I hadn't thought to ask how you would like to be quartered. Is a human bedroom suitable for

you?"

The woman stared in fascination, not quite smiling, as the Swift produced slate and stylus and wrote a polite reply in her small, precise hand. *I thank you for your courtesy. I should be very grateful for soft bedding for a change. If you please, is there perhaps one a bit wider than is usual for a human? I sleep on my side.*

Fortunately for protocol, Jennalys could read. Her wondering gaze traveled the length of the long alien body. "If a bed wide enough for two of us would do for one of you, we have several."

"She means several beds, not several of you," Elwyan interjected cheerfully. Jennalys glared sideways at the wizard for a heartbeat, then sighed in exasperation and continued as if he had not interrupted.

"When my husband comes in from the garden he can move one into whichever room you choose." She glanced at the scattered pottery shards on the floor, flicked her eyes briefly toward Elwyan, and returned her full attention to the Swift. She smiled innocently. "It's nice to have a man around who is good at simple domestic tasks."

Moon Hunter stepped outside again, to retrieve the gear and equipment she had set down. Jennalys watched intently, till the Swift's long, horizontal tail cleared the door frame and vanished from sight. Then she lifted a tanned arm and ran strong, slender fingers through her hair, half to straighten it and half to scratch her head. She looked at Elwyan for a long moment, then back at the door, shaking her head and beaming.

"Where ever did you find her? She's beautiful!" When the wizard merely shrugged in response, she raised an eyebrow and looked at him sidelong, a little archly. "I must beg forgiveness, my lord - " One corner of her mouth turned up even more. "As you well know and have often heard, I have never thought much of your taste in ladies before, but this one is truly exceptional. You have my congratulations." The wizard made a face at her. "And you have batter on your nose. My lord."

'My lord' wiped his face and flicked a drop of the offending substance at his tormenter, who was valiantly failing to keep from laughing outright. And missed completely.

* * * * *

"Windfarer is a title, not a name," Elwyan explained to Moon Hunter, over tea in his study. He sat in a favorite chair, injured foot propped high on a stool. Moon Hunter's tail made the use of most chairs impossible, and her anatomy was in any case better adapted to sitting on the floor with her body half way horizontal, well and comfortably braced by her hind feet and stiff tail. She had accepted Elwyan's offered cushion, and sat on it facing him, with the slate between them. The wizard was beginning to acquire a considerable facility at reading upside-down.

Then what is your real name?

"You're not supposed to ask that of magicians." He stretched his legs and wiggled his feet happily. How wonderful not to have

to walk!

I apologize. She did not continue. She sat expectantly, waiting for something.

"Accepted." said Elwyan. Even in a few days' acquaintance, he had noticed again and again that the Swift always concerned herself with the details of manners and behavior, so he elaborated. "I don't mind your asking questions, if you won't mind if I should occasionally find reason not to answer one. Is that fair enough?" Moon Hunter nodded her head up and down in affirmation. The motion did not look natural. Elwyan suddenly realized that of course, she had had to learn all of human gesture as well as human language.

Why am I not supposed to ask your name?

Elwyan looked embarrassed for a moment, then laughed a little. "Actually, it really is 'Elwyan'. There's a legend that you can command any magician whose name you know. That's not true, but it's a convenient fiction. It encourages some of those who would trouble magicians to waste their time chasing after nonsense. And occasionally it surprises someone who has learned a magician's true name and used it to summon him."

Can a name be used to summon someone?

A face appeared briefly at the door, which hung ajar. One of Jennalys's children peered curiously in, then saw that Elwyan had noticed her, grinned shyly, and scampered off. The youngsters of the household had not figured out what to make of the strange, new guest.

"Again, no, but if someone uses your name – my name – I mean,

a wizard's name, in certain kinds of spells, I'll know it is happening, and where, and perhaps who is doing it."

The effect of the spell is devious. May I have another tea cake, if you please?

"Certainly. Help yourself. I've had all I want." The cakes were more sugary blackberry confections, like the ones he had carried in his pack. Moon Hunter had become quite fond of them. "And by the way, please don't start calling me 'Wizard Elwyan', the way you talk about 'Wizard Darleialys'. It sounds much more pompous than I deserve – I'm not really that much of a wizard."

Very well, I will try to remember, wrote the Swift. I hope you will forgive me if I forget. But it always seemed so natural to be formal with her. She had grace and dignity.

Elwyan nodded. "That she did. But no one has ever called me 'dignified', much less 'graceful'. So 'Elwyan' will do just fine." Then he replied to Moon Hunter's previous remark.

"Actually, it is spell books that are devious. They are usually written by people well familiar with magic. It is hard to describe something you know thoroughly, clearly enough not to confuse a beginner. But even if that were not so, magic often has unanticipated side effects."

Thank you. She nibbled at the pastry. And why do they call you Windfarer? Does it have something to do with the eagle? They had left the bird a small snack before settling in to relax.

Elwyan was embarrassed again. "Most people say it has to do with my hair." He ran his hands through wayward curly locks. "It goes all over the place. It looks as if the wind has been

blowing it around, even when it hasn't."

Moon Hunter thought for a while before responding. *I am beginning to think that what most people say about wizards has nothing to do with the truth.* She cocked her head and stared at him motionlessly.

"Most people say that, too," Elwyan chuckled, but the effect of the paradox was lost, as her expressionless face gave no hint of whether she appreciated it. "And, well, maybe it does have something to do with raising birds."

Am I allowed to know the name of the eagle? Can you use it to summon him?

"'Evening Star'." Elwyan chuckled for a moment. "I can summon him by that name, or by any other, but he won't come unless that's the way he was already planning on going." He laughed more loudly. "That's the way it is with most summoning, magical or not."

She cocked her head and wrote out the words. *Evening Star. A fine name. There were a lot of that kind of eagle in the islands near the keep of Wizard Darleialys. I remember sometimes looking up from shade and seeing one in the sun, and thinking for a moment that it was a star that had somehow taken wing. The feathers on the head and tail are so intensely white, they almost dazzle. A fine name.*

Elwyan nodded, and then chuckled again. "Actually, when he was a chick, he looked more like a piece of fluff than a star. All fuzz and pin feathers, like a thistle at seed. I couldn't even feed him without laughing." He thought for a moment, then

continued the conceit. "And now he rides so easily on the wind, like a bit of thistledown. He's awfully prickly, too, as you will find out if you get too close to him. At any rate, a human would find that out."

She stared at him for a moment, rippling her coat in a way he had not seen before. *You raised him? Was that difficult? Is it something you do often?*

"From a warm egg. Difficult? Well, not really." He frowned. "Well, actually, yes, at times it was demanding. But it had its rewards – not many people get to know an eagle. The problem is, I spent so much time around him, bringing him up, that he long since figured out he has no reason to be wary of me. That makes him rather dangerous, and puts him at risk if he should come too close to a human who is not so fond of wild creatures. But I like animals."

He lifted his teacup, but as he tilted it toward his mouth, he caught sight of a flash of color and motion in a dark corner of the room.

"For instance..."

He gestured with the cup. A bewhiskered black nose, flanked by two luminous yellow eyes and a pair of small pointed ears, peeped out from under the base of a bookcase. The eyes stared intently at the occasional casual motions of the tip of Moon Hunter's powerful tail. Below the nose, a tiny pink mouth opened, and rows of needle-like teeth within clicked together in anticipation. The very picture and embodiment of a predatory carnivore, a black kitten emerged from hiding, one paw at a

time, and crept stealthily toward its intended prey.

Moon Hunter sat facing away from the small approaching disaster, but Elwyan noticed a slight tilt to her ears and knew that she had caught the little cat in her peripheral vision. "You understand about pets?" he inquired nervously. She nodded slightly, and once again he saw the flicker of motion of her coat, up and down her neck, that he had come to understand meant laughter. Now the tempting tail-tip twitched a little more invitingly. Moon Hunter probably had an excellent sense of smell. She must have known for a long time that the kitten was there.

The little cat crept closer. Its hindquarters had completely forgotten the essence of stealth. They were thrust aloft, bearing the short, pointy tail vertically, where it flicked back and forth like a battle standard waving in the wind. Moon Hunter swept her own tail slowly through an irregular horizontal arc, luring the tiny creature ever further from its retreat.

The kitten's hindquarters gave one decisive final twitch, and it sprang, dashing pell-mell across the slick floor, but Moon Hunter's tail was no longer there. She had lifted it quickly over the top of its adversary's head, and settled it back down on the opposite side of her body. The frustrated animal wheeled in pursuit, but the floor was too slippery for it, and for a moment it slid in its original direction even though its feet were galloping madly in opposition. Scrambling furiously, it gathered way and again bore down on its target, and once more the Swift lifted her tail at the last moment. A few more cycles,

and the kitten stumbled and tripped, but before it had come to rest Moon Hunter reached down and grabbed it carefully by the folds of skin at its shoulders. She lifted the wriggling fur ball to eye level, and gazed at it for a moment. Then she lowered the little cat into the curve of her opposite arm, and thoughtfully began to scratch the back of its head with claws fully half as long as the small animal's body.

The kitten resisted a few seconds, then feline pragmatism prevailed. Never in six long weeks of catly existence had it encountered fingernails like these. Thoroughly seduced, it settled into the crook of her elbow, closed its eyes, and started to purr. Moon Hunter set the slate on the floor and resumed their conversation, leaning sideways slightly to write with her free hand.

Could you not have used magic somehow to deal with the bear? She absentmindedly resumed scratching the little creature while she waited for a reply.

"Magic has limits, and one of them is that it takes time to set it going. I wasn't sure I had any time at all, so I tried to create a distraction – that was quicker. Then after I fell off the cliff, I was too much in pain to concentrate. I couldn't start a spell. What's more, the shock broke most of the wards of protection I had set on myself. It was a tight spot. Actually, it was the tightest spot I have been in for a long time. I thought I was going to die, but I was determined to go feet first and kicking."

She stopped fondling the kitten for a moment, and cocked her

head before she wrote. *"Feet first and kicking." Odd that that should be a human phrase. Elwyan had no idea what she was talking about. But, why did not your wards protect you from falling off the cliff?*

"I had warded myself to warn me of certain kinds of hazards. If it had been dark, or if I hadn't seen the cliff for some reason, I would have known it was there. Or, I could have warded that particular spot on the cliff so that I wouldn't fall off, or even so that nothing would fall off, just as if I had built a fence— actually, it might be simpler to build a fence for real. Or, if it had been a very long drop, I might have had time to get something working to save me before I hit the bottom. Sometimes great fear or great emotion helps the magic happen faster, but that is not a thing you can count on — most often you just get confused. Usually you have to have time to work a spell, or else set things up in advance, like what I was talking about with wards. Yet there is no way to ward all the possible hazards in the world to protect me from all the possible ways that I could do something stupid."

He smiled and joked. "The trouble is, we stupid people are sometimes much too clever."

So I see.

Elwyan hastily changed the subject. "Are you ready yet to tell me what service it is that you require of a wizard?"

Moon Hunter hesitated visibly. She put stylus to slate, started to write, then erased and began again.

I had not planned for so informal an encounter.

"Neither had I, but angry mother bears do tend to bring about a degradation of protocol." Elwyan was puzzled. The Swift's insistence on forms and manners was almost vexing. Then he remembered how much loss she had seen recently, and continued more gently. "However, if you would feel more comfortable with a formal approach to the matter of your request, it is entirely acceptable for solicitants to ask me for assistance. I have received no small number of such petitions in this very room. If you wish to pretend that you have just been ushered into my presence for an, er... audience, please proceed."

– I Have To Go Back –

Very well. You know most of it. I have the notebooks to bargain with. We... my people were brought here from a far place. Wizard Darleialys told us once that Elwyan Windfarer practiced a kind of magic that could send us back. I have to go back, just for a little while.

"Just for a while? Not for good? Why?"

I... would rather not explain.

Elwyan had no way to read her expression. Moon Hunter didn't have expressions – the skin and muscles of her face lacked nearly all the requisite capability for flexure and movement. He had begun to realize how much the nuances of human communication depended on those missing subtleties of appearance. He frowned for a moment, then approached the subject differently.

"What did Darleialys Stormbender tell you of her own magical abilities?"

Not much. I do not know humans well, but even allowing for that, Wizard Darleialys still seemed strange and reticent.

Elwyan nodded. "I knew her as well as anyone could, I

suppose. I was apprenticed to her when I was only six years old, for the first part of my training as a magician..." He stared into space for a moment, then spoke softly. "I hadn't seen her in almost twenty-five years..."

"Anyway, she was particularly skilled at a kind of magic that can be used to summon spirits of the dead for consultation or for information."

Then why is she called "Stormbender"?

"Her greatest achievement – or so I used to think, until I encountered you – was to draw a tremendous oceanic storm out of its track, and bring it to land at a different place than where it had originally been headed. It was a closely related sort of magic."

That must have been very destructive.

"No. It was to end a drought, and it worked. You haven't heard the story?"

She never told us how she got her title. It was so much a part of her name that I did not think to ask.

"She wouldn't have told you. She was very proud of it, so she wouldn't have mentioned it. She held her own emotions closely."

Moon Hunter picked up the earlier thread of conversation.

You said that Wizard Darleialys had power to summon spirits of the dead. Are you hinting that she used that kind of magic to summon us? I do not yet sleep in the mouth of forever. The kitten had begun to squirm in the Swift's forearm.

"True enough. But not always. That is, it's not really used to summon the dead." He sighed. "When something important

happens it creates a kind of – eddy – in the, the... well, I can't quite explain what it is, but think of a disturbance that can be detected a long way off. Like the ripples when you throw a stone into water, they go on for a long distance. It only works when the event is important in some way – that's what it takes to make big ripples."

"The right kind of magic can detect those disturbances, and can reach back to the time they happened. It is almost impossible to influence things in the past, but you can sometimes bring forward someone, or something, associated with that event. Usually you do it in pursuit of knowledge – someone knows something you need to find out. And I do think that was the kind of magic used to bring you and your people here."

What were we Swifts doing that was so important?

"Probably nothing – almost certainly it was the disaster that did it. It provided the disturbance, the ripples, that gave Darleialys the chance to bring you through time to here and now."

The kitten clambered up Moon Hunter's forearm. Now it perched on her shoulder, staring curiously up at her. She twisted her neck until their noses all but touched.

What name has the kitten?

"I think that one is 'Muffin', at least this week."

When you said "summon spirits of the dead," you did not mean talking to ghosts, you meant calling forth living people from the past, to a time after they had died.

"That's right," Elwyan smiled at her perspicacity. "I helped

to do one, once. We brought forth a high king from a great battle, that happened over a thousand years ago. We wanted to find out what had become of his sword, which had enormous magical power."

Did you?

"Yes."

You were trying to retrieve the sword?

"We wanted to, but one of his companions had taken it back to where it had come from, and we couldn't get to it there. All things considered, I thought that was probably just as well. Though not everyone agreed with me."

How did you know about it in the first place?

"It figures in an old myth. There is often a lot of truth in myths, if only you can unravel what it is, but that last part is hard to do."

Was not the high king missed upon the battlefield?

"The summoning is usually very brief, and often seems to last for no time at all at the place from which the being who is summoned comes. Besides, he was dying."

I am confused. What does summoning spirits of the dead have to do with bringing storms across the ocean? I would think those things would involve very different kinds of magic.

Elwyan grinned – another perceptive comment. "So would I, except they don't. The spells to move things across space are almost identical to those that move things across time. I don't understand why – space and time certainly must be very different. I can't tell you it makes sense, that's just the way

it works."

And the summoning was not brief in our case. I have... we had been here for nearly twenty years.

"I know," he continued. "I have been thinking about that very point, and I don't know for sure what to make of it. There is no case I am aware of when a being brought here that way has been able to remain in the present without the continued application of considerable magical effort. It ought to take a whole lot of work. You are an unexpected exception, which I think is without precedent." He stroked his chin for a moment. "There is a theoretical explanation, though."

Muffin had clambered up Moon Hunter's long neck. The Swift ignored the tiny claws, or perhaps they had merely tangled in her pelt rather than pierced her skin. With appalling confidence, the little creature sniffed curiously at her mouth. The Swift opened her jaws a fraction, and let the kitten nose directly at her teeth and gums.

"If the nature of the important event brought about a sufficiently major change in things, you might lose – call it affinity – for the place you came from. No, I mean that if the world changed enough, it might no longer have an affinity for you. If that had happened, possibly you might stay here unassisted."

How big a change would that take?

"Again, I do not know. But the disaster your father spoke of might do the job."

Surely it was not the end of the world.

"I doubt it, for the world does not sleep in the mouth of forever." He paused, wondering if he was using the idiom correctly. His companion made no response, so he took a long breath, and continued.

"But the Swift do."

Moon Hunter blinked, and her whole coat lifted for a moment, then settled back down. Elwyan took another deep breath and spoke firmly. "I told the truth when I spoke to the soldiers the other day. I have never heard of anything remotely resembling you or your people, not anywhere within the twelve corners of the world. I don't think that anything like you existed anywhere in our world today, before Stormbender brought you here."

"Nor have I ever seen any record that so much as hints of the disaster that befell you. It must have happened – I have no way to tell when – sometime before the start of our written history. Perhaps thousands of years ago. I do not know for certain that you all perished then, but I fear it may be so. In which case, if you were sent back, it might merely be to die almost at once, from the same cause, whatever it may have been. But such a change could explain your being here. If it was fate for the Swifts all to have perished, then the world that resulted, without them, might no longer have an affinity for those of you who escaped. The thread that would have bound you to your own time is no longer attached to anything."

"Didn't Darleialys tell you about any of this?"

Moon Hunter blinked again, and replied. *She also believed that no Swift now live. She told us that she could not send us*

back where we had come from. She said that even if she could, it might kill us. She did not explain why, but she did say it might happen.

"She spoke truthfully on both counts. The kind of magic it takes to send something away is quite different from the kind it takes to summon it in the first place, and sending to a specific place is particularly difficult. But she was right, it is in fact a kind of magic I am versed in. It is rather a specialty of mine, just as summoning through space and time was a specialty of hers."

Could you send me back? Can you send across time, as well? Is that a kind of magic you can do?

"Well, I'm not that much of a magician, but... if you were sure you wanted to go, then perhaps... perhaps I could." Elwyan thought rapidly. "I do not think that any such thing has ever been tried before. As I said, in cases of magical summoning, there is usually no need for it, rather the contrary. But a summoned being would certainly have a particularly strong affinity..." His voice trailed off, and he stared distantly into space for a few moments.

"Well, maybe." Elwyan shook his head and looked at the Swift again. "I will have to review some books and think for a while, but maybe it can be done. The possibility is fascinating..." His gaze grew distant once more.

How would that magic work? Can you explain any of what you are talking about?

"I can work a number of kinds of magic, but the one I do

particularly well involves moving things from place to place. The power has its limits, but it is easiest when the thing to be moved has an affinity for the place it is going – as you have for your home, that is, for your home before the disaster. It's particularly strong in your case, or it ought to be, because as I said before, summoned beings usually go back of their own accord. So between that affinity and my own abilities, it is possible that I might be able to get you back there."

"But, are you really sure you want to go? Moon Hunter, if there is something you need from your homeland, perhaps a substitute for it could be had here, at less risk."

No. The time before the disaster is not my home, for I have never been there. But I have to go back. There is no alternative. The Swift hesitated for a long time. Elwyan groaned as he lifted himself to pour another cup of tea – his foot still hurt, and an hour's inactivity had made him all too aware of tired muscles and stiffening joints. The kitten fell from its perch and tumbled into Moon Hunter's lap. She picked it up and held it at eye level, staring at it with her head tilted slightly to one side. It was so close to her face that her eyes crossed a little, looking at it.

I will not hurt Muffin, she wrote with her free hand, then opened her mouth wider, and sat the small black fur ball directly on her tongue. She closed her jaws a little, so gently confining the tiny animal between rows of sharp teeth. Elwyan stared in stupefied horror, but the cat was not the least perturbed by its constraint; indeed, it looked happy, turning

and wriggling. Presently it started licking the inside of one of Moon Hunter's pointed teeth with considerable industry.

Elwyan realized with an abrupt start that she had continued to write. He swallowed and scanned rapidly, catching up.

I suppose there is no reason not to tell you. As I said, we have been here for nearly twenty years. There were more than two dozen of us to begin with, and six more hatched from the clutch my mother laid not long after we arrived. She was the only woman among us who was laying - my father was head of our clan. I was one of her last clutch. Since then, there have been no more young, not from her, and not even when some of the others tried to breed.

"What happened to the others? The adults, I mean."

They died.

"From sickness? What kind of disease?"

Many diseases. The elders all insisted we died before our times. They said it was not normal for so many to die so young. Wizard Darleialys could never find anything wrong with us, to make us more susceptible to illness.

"Are you well yourself?"

Yes. The young always had more resistance.

"How come only one female was breeding?"

That is how it normally works with us. There is one big clutch of eggs every now and then, when things are just right, and everybody works hard to take care of the small ones. Or so I was told. I have never seen it happen, of course, and I do not remember when I was part of it, I was too little. I know it is

different with humans. I have often wondered how you do not get entirely overwhelmed, with all of you having children all the time.

"Anyway, go on."

In this land, our eggs do not hatch. We lay them, but there is something wrong with them. Nothing grows within them, not even when they are laid. They are dead. They are all dead. Dead. She tapped the word again and again. Elwyan questioned her gently.

"Do you have any idea what the problem is?"

No. I suppose it could be some kind of curse, but for all I know it is something commonplace. Perhaps it will help if you look at this. She fumbled in a pouch at her waist, and passed something dark and rounded over to him. He took it gingerly. It had several times the bulk of a large hen's egg, but was proportionately longer and not so smoothly oval. It scarcely weighed a thing, and felt dry but not quite stiff, like dessicated, rotten leather.

"This is a Swift egg?" It seemed oddly small for a creature Moon Hunter's size.

One of mine. It never lived. It never had any trace of life within it. None of them ever have, none of any of us.

"I see," he replied clumsily. He didn't, but he couldn't think of anything better to say.

It makes me wonder if what you say about fate might be true.

Elwyan lifted the egg to eye level, turning it this way and that. Hairline cracks all but covered it, and here and there

crumbling bits of surface had flaked off, leaving irregular powdery places behind them. Something light and dry rattled inside. The shell smelled faintly of decay, and though age and corruption had colored it almost black, it still bore traces of a mottled pattern. He brought the egg close to his chest, where his magic-detecting amulet dangled, and stared thoughtfully.

"There is no sign of the effects of magic. But there wouldn't necessarily be..." His voice trailed off as he contemplated the egg and its mysteries.

We discussed the matter with Wizard Darleialys, and at first she had no idea of how to help us. I am not sure she even wanted to help. Much later - about a year ago - she learned something. I am not sure whether she consulted some magical being or did some kind of divination, of scrying - is that the word? Anyway, she told us that in order to have children, we would have to breath the air and drink the water of our native land. And she said that the only wizard in the world who might have a chance of getting us there was you.

Her mouthful of cat had settled down and begun to purr. Perhaps it was warm in there. Elwyan wondered whether it tickled. He wondered what would happen if she sneezed - did Swift sneeze?

I think she was trying to make up her mind about whether or not to seek your aid herself, in the months before she died. I do not know whether or not she would have done so. Anyhow, when we were free of the - wards - we decided to come ourselves.

"I see," said Elwyan, who still didn't. "But - excuse me -

don't there have to be two of you, to have children?"

No. Yes. Not really. Moon Hunter touched words and wrote in rapid succession. *We are able to lay eggs that will hatch, for many months after we have mated. It is not like with humans, where a pregnancy – is that the word? – starts soon or does not happen at all. For at least another half year I will be able to lay eggs that will hatch into the children of my husband... she erased and rewrote – partner and me. At least, I could do so if my eggs would hatch at all.*

Elwyan had never heard of anything remotely like that.

"You're certain?" he asked.

Yes. I can tell – I know. She tapped the word for emphasis. *My body knows, and it tells me. I have not seen a Swift child since I myself was one, and I want to. Besides, if I do not, there will be no more Swifts, not ever again.*

"I might be able to help you, but..." Elwyan frowned. "I will have to think some first. May I keep the egg for a little? Perhaps there is something I can learn from it. No, don't give me the notebooks until we know whether I can do anything." Elwyan pursed his lips. He didn't know what to make of the possibility of a world peopled with creatures like Swifts. It was hard to imagine. It would be very different, frighteningly different. Darleialys must have had the same thoughts; her reluctance made perfect sense. He shook his head. He would have to think about that some more, a lot more, later.

The black kitten had gone completely to sleep, gripped surely and gently, two paws and a tail dangling ridiculously out of

Moon Hunter's mouth. Elwyan shuddered as he looked at the tiny creature, confined between powerful jaws and strong teeth, yet he thought suddenly, incongruously, of the sheltering sides and ribs of a cradle.

"Moon Hunter..." he spoke with hesitation.

Yes? She tapped the word at the border of her slate.

"Tomlys might be frightened if she peeked in again and saw you with her kitten in your mouth."

Moon Hunter carefully extracted the sleepy little cat, groomed it briefly with deft strokes of her long, flexible tongue, and settled it into the crook of her arm again.

I prefer tea cakes to Muffins. If you please, may I have another?

As Elwyan reached for the plate, the door to his study was forced open by insistent scratching, and two more kittens – another black, and a pale gray tabby with white feet and belly – bounced eagerly into the room in search of their litter mate.

I meant, another tea cake, wrote Moon Hunter, but Elwyan was staring vacantly into the distance, lost in uneasy, unsettling thought.

– The Egg of Destiny –

"Are you still finding plenty to eat?" said Elwyan over dinner, almost two weeks later. He regularly dined by himself when there was no company in the house, so it was not unusual that his only companion at recent meals had been his improbable guest. Moon Hunter sipped tea and nibbled politely at a portion of the human food, but out of respect for the difficulty of handling large kills and raw meat in the dining room, she did most of her eating in the woods, or on the grounds adjacent to the outbuildings. Elwyan sometimes joined her there.

Yes, there is plenty of game. The rats and mice are all fat and well fed – you really should fix those grain bins, Elwyan. And the deer are generally in excellent condition, but I have been managing to find old and weak ones to take.

She had already provided two deer for the dinner table, but Jennalys had declined a considerable bag of plump rodents, notwithstanding the Swift's insistence that nothing was more savory than an oat-fed rat. Elwyan could tell from Moon Hunter's description of the incident that his housekeeper had been unflappably polite and courteous in her refusal, yet he could

not keep from wishing that he had been there to witness her expression, which would surely have been memorable.

And Evening Star has been most helpful.

"Evening Star? You haven't mentioned him before. What does he do?"

Elwyan was not truly surprised at this development, for Moon Hunter had already begun to cooperate with a different local resident who hunted for food. After Jennalys's rejection of the sack of edibles, the Swift had begun swapping tasty mice and rats with the stable cat, an old gray grouch of a feline who had one canine tooth missing and the other three well worn. It pleased both predators at last to have found another creature properly appreciative of inert, furry presents.

He scouts. He picked it up right away. He can find game more easily than I can, and he leads me to it. When I make the kill I always leave plenty for him. What we each do well is different, but we complement each other. It is good teamwork.

"He has stayed about as friendly as a bird ever gets since I set him free, but I never thought to try hunting with him. Does he let you get close?"

No, he is quite circumspect. But I would not hunt his kind.

"Why not?"

In flight they are much faster than I am, and their claws are very powerful. It would be risky.

The eagle's talons spanned less than a third the length and width of those on Moon Hunter's hind limbs, and the largest of the Swift's teeth were almost as long as the bird's entire bill.

Elwyan raised an eyebrow skeptically, but after a moment realized that she did not know what the gesture meant. "Surely, you would win, if it came to a fight with an eagle?"

Oh, I expect so, but it would be risky, and even a small risk is too much.

"I don't understand."

We have to hunt two or three times a week, and if we went after dangerous prey regularly, even in groups, before long something would kill one of us, or cause a serious injury. Remember, Elwyan, if you want to live to a ripe old age: Creatures that are small and weak, or old and sick, make the best prey. And better still if they have no warning you are coming.

Elwyan was suddenly much less hungry, thinking about a group of Swift planning an ambush and carrying it out. "I think I see what you mean. But are boar small, weak creatures? The one you took the day we met didn't look old or sick, either."

Well, no. But they were slower than I was, and upwind, and he was at the edge of the herd, and got too close to where I was hiding, and was not looking. So I kicked open the veins in his throat with my claws, then waited till he bled to death. And I do like boar.

* * * * *

Presently Elwyan summoned the rest of the household to join them for dessert – pudding with the last of the year's fresh

berries, a special treat. Moon Hunter's eyes lingered particularly on the two children, who stared boldly back at her from the other side of the table. The Swift had fascinated them, the more so when they found she could give piggy-back rides with brief bursts of enormous speed. Elwyan and the other two adults had tried to keep them on some semblance of good behavior, but Moon Hunter insisted again and again that she liked children, and appeared genuinely to enjoy their company. Elwyan did not entirely fathom their interaction, for the Swift of course could not speak human words, and only the girl, Tomlys, had advanced enough in her studies to read from Moon Hunter's slate. Elwyan had to interpret their present conversation, reading aloud what Moon Hunter had written.

In any case, Brennan remained cheerful, and much neater than usual – he had only smeared a small amount of the creamy purple confection on his face and shirt. Tomlys sat straight and quiet, watching the Swift's clawed hands attentively as they deftly moved the stick of charcoal. Elwyan suspected the girl had by now become as adept as he was at reading upside down.

"Moon Hunter has a story for us." He gestured at a few sheets of paper she had at her side. The Swift had begun writing before he started to speak. She lifted her slate and turned it around.

This is a tale my father used to tell when we were little, so many times that I learned it by heart. It is a favorite. I thought some of you might like to hear it. I set it all down in advance because I cannot write as fast as you can listen. If you please, Elwyan, would you be willing to read it?

Elwyan nodded, but was privately puzzled. They had already agreed that he would do the reading tonight. Why did Moon Hunter feel the need to be so strictly formal as to ask permission again? She was always like that. Yet he was as eager as any child to hear what kind of stories the Swift told among themselves, and even if he were not, there would surely be something to learn from them. So he accepted her invitation courteously, picked up the sheaf of pages, and began to read.

In the beginning, the Mother of the World laid the eggs that hatched into everything. She laid the eggs that hatched into the tall trees. She laid the eggs that hatched into the Swift and their prey. And she laid the egg that hatched into Little Scolder, whose people are so small they cannot have eggs of their own. But the last egg she laid was the one that contained her own destiny, and that egg frightened her.

Now Little Scolder was the smallest of all the creatures of the world, and since he was small he had to be very clever, just to keep from being caught and eaten. The Mother of the World thought he might be clever enough to know what to do about her last egg. So she went to him and said, "I wish you would give me some advice."

"All good children should do what their mother wishes," said Little Scolder. "I advise you to go away and let me finish dinner."

"Just a few questions," said the Mother of the World.

"Later."

"Please?"

"No!"

The Mother of the World leaned down, and delicately nipped the scruff of Little Scolder's neck between the points of the great claws on one of her hands. She picked him up, still carrying the beetle he had been eating. He dangled high above the treetops as she bent her thick neck and glowered down at him.

"If you don't mind..." she said.

"Oh, very well." And she explained about the egg that contained her destiny.

"Mother, what is the matter with you," said Little Scolder. "You have made your own destiny, and everybody wants to do that. So why do you come here and bother me?"

"I am upset because I don't know what my destiny is," said the Mother of the World. "Even though I laid the egg, I do not know what is inside it." She lashed her powerful tail in vexation.

"So why don't you hatch it and find out?"

"I don't want my destiny to happen right away," said the Mother of the World, "and besides, suppose it is something I do not like."

"Well," said Little Scolder, "take me to the egg, and let me look at it, and maybe I can tell you what is inside without hatching it."

The Mother of the World's last egg was pale creamy white,

mottled with brownish black, like the moon. Little Scolder knew what these colors meant.

"These are the colors of destiny," he said. "White is the color of day, and day is the time when you can see the shapes of things clearly. White is the color of certainty. It means that this egg really does contain your destiny, and there's no avoiding it."

"I knew that already," said the Mother of the World, starting to glower again.

"But black is the color of night, and night is the time when the shapes of things are not so clear. The black color means that your destiny is not yet determined. Black is the color of possibility. You can't tell what your destiny is going to be, even if you look inside the egg."

"What do you mean, I can't tell! If this egg contains my destiny, then my destiny will come out of it when it hatches, and all I need to do to know my destiny is to open it!"

"Foolish mother!" said Little Scolder. "What is inside that egg is your destiny, but your destiny is not complete until you face it. Destiny is powerful, even more powerful than you are, but it is blind and stupid. You have wits and can make choices. It is by how you use your wits and by what you choose to do, that you may change your destiny."

The Mother of the World considered Little Scolder's words for a while. "Do you really believe that wits and cleverness can change destiny?" she said, leaning

thoughtfully toward him.

"Yes."

"Are you quite sure?" She leaned closer still.

"Positive," said Little Scolder, suddenly beginning to look very suspicious.

"Well, perhaps your destiny is for me to eat you, and perhaps now I will do it!" and she lunged. Her mouth was as big as the sky, and there was no way for Little Scolder to escape, so he jumped in and ducked under her tongue, where she could not swallow him.

"So tell me how is it that one may use wit and choice to overcome destiny?" she asked, carefully keeping her teeth clenched.

"I did not say you could overcome it. I said you could change it." Little Scolder's voice was muffled somewhat.

"Wouldn't it be better just to face it bravely?"

"You will have to be brave in any case, but when the time comes, you had better have something extra in the bottom of your mind. Just because you are big and strong and courageous, it doesn't mean you always have to be stupid. And if you are smart, you will be ready to do something unexpected, you will be prepared to cheat."

Little Scolder took the carapace of the beetle he had been eating and pushed it up against the Mother of the World's teeth from inside.

"I sometimes think that I am not as clever as you," said the Mother of the World. "Will you help me deal with my

destiny when it is time for me to face it?"

The Mother of the World thought that the beetle was Little Scolder, so she opened her jaws to feel it more closely with her teeth. Little Scolder wriggled out of her mouth and climbed up behind her ear, where her claws could not reach him.

"I have already helped you today," he said, "and tomorrow is too far off for me to make promises about. You will have to ask my children, or my children's children. I am sure they will be as cooperative as I am."

The Mother of the World knew Little Scolder well. "I have no doubt of it," she sighed, "so that will have to be fair enough. And I see you meant what you said about using your wits."

Little Scolder glared down at her. "I will give you some more advice," he chattered as he shook off his fur. "If you don't want that egg to open before its time, you had better put it some place safe. If you just leave it on the ground like that, someone might step on it."

"I will bury it."

"I might dig it up and eat it."

"You are not allowed to harm any of my eggs! If you ever so much as touch one of my eggs, I will know it immediately!"

"All children should do as they are told. It looks delicious, I can hardly wait."

"I will put it in the sky instead. You are not to touch

my eggs! I will know at once if you harm any of them!" As she bent to pick up the egg, Little Scolder quickly hopped off into a tree and hid in the branches.

"Oh, mother," he yelled up at her, "you have an egg for your own destiny, but how about mine?"

"Just come here and come into my mouth, and you won't have to worry about your fate. Do it now."

"I obey, as all children do," said Little Scolder, as he retreated still further into his tree. "And what if it's me who doesn't like his destiny? Do I get to use my wits to make a choice, too? Do I get to cheat?"

The Mother of the World pondered for some time before she answered. She thought long and carefully about Little Scolder's character. "No," she said finally, with a hint of laughter in her voice. "You have no such permission from me. In fact," she thundered, "Let there be no doubt! I absolutely, positively forbid it!" And she laughed till the mountains shook.

Little Scolder looked at her for a long, long time. For once, he had nothing to say.

The children sat quiet and solemn for a bit, then Brennan had a question. "Is the moon the destiny egg?"

Moon Hunter tilted her head and stared into the distance for a while before making her reply. Elwyan read aloud what she had written. *We say that when the moon hatches, the destiny of the world will be upon us. Yet the story does not say that the moon*

is the egg of destiny, only that the Mother of the World put the egg in the sky.

"That was a good story!" Tomlys clapped her hands with enthusiasm. "Do you know any more?"

Oh, there are lots more. Some day I will tell how Little Scolder lost his ears and got his claws flattened out. It was a trick the Mother of the World played on him. She is particularly fond of playing tricks on people, but she doesn't like it when anyone plays one on her.

Elwyan shook his head. There was so much to learn from this creature. He scarcely knew where to begin.

– The Price of Scholarship –

The children had been dismissed, all round-eyed and excited but beguiled into behaving by the promise of more stories some other time, and Jennalys and her husband had retired to their own quarters. Elwyan poured more tea, then settled into his chair and remarked, "I have a plan for your quest." The Swift drew herself upright and cocked her head expectantly.

"I won't know till I try, but I believe it is possible to send you to the place you came from, and then get you back here again," Elwyan lectured. "To do so we must first travel to Stormbender's keep. That is where you have spent most of your time in this land, so it is there that the affinity between you and your homeland will be the strongest."

"There I will try my magic. If it is successful – and it may not be, and you shouldn't give me her books in payment until we see whether it is – if it is successful, we will travel together to the place the Swift came from. You can drink water and breath air, and then we shall return."

An affinity is the key?

"Definitely. The gods themselves could not so move without

one. The world would be profoundly different if they could."

Then, do I really have an affinity to get there? After all, I was hatched here, in this time and in this land.

"I think you do, in part because you are a Swift, and in part because you were – what was it you called it, 'in the egg'? – at the time your mother was brought here. And if not, I am pretty sure your knapsack does. I was going to ask you – it doesn't look like any kind of leather I have ever seen. Isn't it made of the skin of something from your native land?"

Yes. I inherited it. I had not thought of that. She tapped her slate for a moment, then wrote again.

I have another question. You spoke as if both of us must go. Such a voyage might be dangerous. Is it necessary to expose yourself to risk, as well as me?

Elwyan nodded grimly. "It may be very dangerous. The affinity will be strongest for the time of the disaster that befell the Swift. We are likely to end up in the middle of it, whatever it was. I will try to get us there a little earlier, but I am not likely to miss it by much, and maybe not at all. But if you are going to get back here afterward, I have to go. It will be the affinity that I have for the here and now that provides the way back. Without something bound up with here and now, there would be no path for your return, and without my magic there would be no way for you to travel upon it."

Well, then, could you not send something with me that has such an affinity, so you could stay here and call me back with it? If a pack will do for one direction, surely something else

will do for the other.

Elwyan was impressed. "That's the right idea but the wrong kind of magic. Staying here and drawing something is what Stormbender did. She was the best at it there ever was, and now she's dead. No one else alive could do that, certainly not me. So I have to go, so I can work the kind of magic that I myself know best how to do."

There is no other way to get back?

"Well, if you are willing to be very, very patient, you could just wait..." For a moment, Elwyan wondered if she was going to get the joke, but sure enough, her coat rippled as she continued writing.

I have no means to return from the mouth of forever. Only the Mother of the World has such powers, and she does not use them casually. But I had in mind a serious question. How can the magic of Wizard Darleialys work if there is no affinity in the first place?

Very impressed. He smiled approval. "Half the secret of that kind of magic is developing an affinity. I don't have the knack, so I don't know for sure how she did it. But I don't think she deliberately called *you* up. I doubt she was looking for Swifts. I suspect she found a way to go fishing in the river of time, and you and your family were what she caught. Even if she were alive to do the same thing again, she would likely catch something else."

I see. So perhaps we must go together. Moon Hunter thought for a moment, then wrote again. *If no one had ever heard of*

Swifts, how could she have known there were any fish to be had, in the first place?

Elwyan beamed at her. "You ask wonderful questions! I have no answer for that one, none at all. Yet I can conjecture. Some of our oldest myths hint of elder races, beings of a different sort, that lived before humans, with different powers and knowledge. My guess would be that Darleialys decided to see if there was any truth to the old tales, and cast her net widely, to see what she could find. A lot of us make discoveries by looking for truth in myth. She might have used some of the attributes in the stories to develop an affinity, then gone looking for a ripple out of time, that matched."

Elwyan looked at the creature before him, so sleek and alien, so beautiful and lethal. He shook his head slowly. "But it wasn't you that she had in mind. Most beings of legend are just variants on the human form. They're bigger, or smaller, or more muscular, or have a few body parts of animals, or differ in little details. There is nothing like the Swift, not in any legend. You are something else entirely, something nobody knew was there, that fit some of the qualities of our own mythical creatures, just by chance. Darleialys didn't get what she wanted."

Forgive me, but are not Swifts real?

"What?"

I think you have it backward. Wizard Darleialys went fishing for elder races that lived before humans, and got us, and we are not legends. So there was truth in the myths after all. She may

not have gotten exactly what she expected, but she did get exactly what she wanted.

Elwyan's jaw dropped. "You're right... I hadn't thought of it that way." He blushed. "There is an old human curse, 'May you get what you wish for.' It's sort of a joke, but I guess the joke was on Darleialys." He continued, reddening more thoroughly. "And for that matter, on me."

Moon Hunter changed the subject. *But I still do not see why you are willing to travel to my homeland with me. Do you really think there is something in those notebooks that is worth a serious risk to your own life?*

Elwyan took a breath and let it out slowly. "No," he replied, "though the magical notebooks of Darleialys Stormbender would be of immense value to any wizard. What motivates me is curiosity. Your land must be full of wonders. I would like to see some of them, for myself."

Are wonders to die for?

"No... But wonders are to live for. That is ultimately why most wizards study magic. If you do not seek the things that make life worth living, you might just as well be dead anyway. So it is worth a certain amount of risk. That is the price of magic. That is the price of scholarship."

I hope you do not fall victim to that same curse again, of getting what you wish for. Even though I want to go, I think that if I were to give advice, I would advise that you not accompany me.

Elwyan laughed. "You are getting entangled with another old

curse, you know."

What would that be?

"May your friends take your advice." Moon Hunter snorted and rippled her fur. "Seriously," he continued, "aren't you willing to undertake the journey for that kind of reason – because having children is a thing that makes life more worth living?"

Yes, but... She stopped writing and stared at him curiously, tipping her head to one side. After a while she tilted it the other way, still staring.

"Would it help if I stood on my head?"

She brought her head straight upright and lifted her coat in the way that meant laughter. Her pelt rippled for a long time before she wrote again.

That was funny. I was going to write that it was very different, I mean, that wanting children was very different from wanting knowledge. Then I changed my mind and was about to write that you and I seemed to be very different, when I realized that of course we are very different. You are not a Swift.

"I was wondering if you were going to notice."

What do you mean? Of course I noticed. How could I not notice?

"I was trying to make another joke. You didn't get it. See? That proves you are right about our being very different."

Do you mean that humans always laugh at your jokes?

"Well... some of the time."

If they do not, then perhaps we are not very different after all, because I do not, either. She cocked her head again.

Elwyan had the feeling that he had just lost points at something, but he wasn't sure what the rules were, and he didn't even know for certain that Moon Hunter was playing a game.

She continued. *I hope you will forgive me for saying so, but it seems to me that you are more like Little Scolder than like a Swift.*

"How do you mean?"

Well, you are very logical but... your mind does not work the same way. You reason about things that seem obvious, and you find obvious things that I have to think about a lot.

Elwyan did not reply. Moon Hunter waited a moment, then resumed writing, hastily.

Please forgive me. I am sorry, I did not mean to offend.

"No, no, that's all right, what you say makes sense and does not give offense. No apology is necessary. It just made me think. Do you realize that that is exactly how you appear to me? Your mind not working the same way?"

No. She also stopped to think. Really? That is a good omen. Differences make for good teamwork.

"I would have thought that similarities were the basis of teamwork."

No, no. If you already had claws, which would you rather have, teeth or more claws?

"Um." Elwyan tried to imagine himself with fangs and talons like Moon Hunter's, and failed miserably. "I see what you mean, but suppose I had only a few claws. Wouldn't I want a complete set before I went and asked for something else?"

Yes, of course, but you know that is not what I meant.

Elwyan knew nothing of the sort. He shook his head and returned to business. "Anyway, if we are going to Stormbender's keep, we must leave soon. We can't go south, to the road you came in by – half the countryside will be roused, looking for demons. The road north is less well traveled, with no settlements till we get to the river, but it's high country up that way, and it's getting on toward winter. There may be snow in the passes already."

"And there are details to attend to. What are we going to do about winter clothes for you, and can you cope with pack horses?"

I suppose so, Moon Hunter replied. I have eaten worse.

Elwyan swallowed. "That's... not quite what I had in mind..." but the Swift had continued writing.

I am joking. She looked at him sedately. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *I like horses. I think they are delicious. If you please, may I have some more tea?* She waited a few seconds, then tapped the phrase "I am joking", once again.

Carefully using both hands to steady the warm, solid, and thoroughly predictable teapot, Elwyan poured.

– We Must be Patient with Disasters –

Moon Hunter protested that it would be discourteous to her host for her to harm pack animals, but no horse in Elwyan's stable would let her near it. They all shied when they got wind of her, and even the gentlest kicked and bucked when she came into view.

"They don't get your jokes," Elwyan explained. "I suppose that makes them a lot like me. What a pity, now you will have to slow down even more, so that I can keep up with you with my heavy pack."

Moon Hunter ignored him. She fussed busily with the lacings of her new winter garment – Elwyan wasn't sure whether it more nearly resembled a cloak with sleeves or a tunic with a slit front. It was made of lightweight, tightly-woven wool, colored like ivory, with open sleeves for her arms and a closed one for her tail. It laced together from just below her head to a little beneath her breastbone – Elwyan was relatively sure she had a breastbone – but she had insisted that her lower abdomen and powerful legs not be constrained. *I will need them free to hunt, and even more so if I have to run or fight,* she had written. She

accepted warmers for her lower legs. They had to be laced in place, however, like woolen greaves, because close-fitting leggings wouldn't fit over the width of her talons. She also welcomed long, three-fingered gloves, with the fingertips cut away for her claws.

Elwyan had insisted that she have footwear, but the Swift had balked at anything that confined her enormous talons. Attempting to compromise, he presented a pair of spat-like boots, with wide, open, toes. She tried them on and promptly took them off again. *The soles raise the pads of my feet so much that my claws cannot grip the surface properly,* she said, but agreed that they could go in her pack. With Darleialys's notebooks left behind, there was plenty of room. Elwyan was glad enough to have a compromise – he wondered if she knew what real cold was.

The Swift had all of her garments settled in place. *It seems very snug and efficient,* she wrote. *Does everything look all right?*

Elwyan thought she looked like nothing so much as a duck dressed for a formal ball. "It looks wonderful!" he replied cheerfully.

I mean, does everything seem secure and well-fitted?

Moon Hunter was utterly not used to the idea of clothing. Elwyan stared at her carefully for a while, eying fit and fastenings. "I think so. How does it feel?"

The ear holes in my hood are too tight.

"Let me look." Elwyan was fascinated with her ears. What he had at first thought were furred external membranes, like those

of a wolf or a cat, were no such thing. They had no skin or flesh. Overlapping layers of short, broad feathers grew out of her true ear flaps, which were small and stubby, scarcely more than raised ridges in her skin. The clumps of feathers came naturally to points, and she had some muscular control of their shape and of where they faced. Feathers! Yet less than a finger's breadth away, her scalp was covered with the oddly stiff, resilient fur of the rest of her pelt. What a strange creature. Elwyan did not know of anything else that lived, that had both fur and feathers. Could she be a composite, some sort of chimera? There was no telling, no telling at all.

"I see what you mean," he replied after a brief inspection. "And if any feathers get damaged, it would be a while before they could grow back. We'll make the holes larger. Here, let me help get the hood off your cape." It attached to the body of the garment with lacings that were hard to reach without taking the whole thing off. He had assisted with her garments while they were being fitted, but he still felt queasy getting his face and fingers so close to those powerful jaws and teeth. As he fumbled, she unexpectedly wriggled and tossed her head.

That tickles! she wrote in explanation. Elwyan continued, using his hands a little more firmly. As he stuffed the hood into his pocket, his fingers encountered an object he had forgotten. He brought it into view.

"I have something for you, something magical." He held a ring, a narrow zigzag band of thin reddish-yellow metal, styled like her other jewelry, but set with a small, dark tiger eye.

For me? Thank you. I recognize the stone, but what is the metal?

"Bronze. That's an alloy of copper and tin. We humans used to use it a lot, before people got good at refining iron." Moon Hunter tried the ring first on one finger, then another, flexing the zigzags to fit over her claws.

It is pretty. Is it really for me? She finally settled the ornament on her left middle claw. She raised her hand, turning it this way and that in the light, then stopped and held it steady while she dipped and lifted her long neck gracefully, to look at it from various angles. Elwyan decided she was truly pleased.

And it is magic. What does it do? She adjusted the ring once more, and stared at it thoughtfully.

"It's just simple wizardry, that will help us find each other if we should get separated. Turn around and watch the jewel."

She pivoted slowly, staring at her hand.

Oh, I see! When the jewel was on the side of her body nearest Elwyan, its color lightened almost to yellow.

"You can use it to find me – actually, to find its mate, which I'm wearing. They are tuned to each other – I will be able to find you, too."

How nice that something decorative is also useful. She turned her hand so the fingers pointed toward her, and examined the ring from that angle. Apparently satisfied, she slipped it off for a moment and squeezed the band firmly, so that it gripped her finger more tightly when she finally worked it back in

place. *I thank you once again.* She bowed her head in elegant formality.

* * * * *

They set out that afternoon.

"I know it's late," explained Elwyan, "but when you start a journey, the most likely time to find you've forgotten something important is when you make camp the first time. Better to do it half a day from home than a whole day."

More likely, that the one thing you forget will be the one thing you do not need on the first night.

Elwyan chuckled. "Cynicism is an early sign of wisdom."

I am glad there may yet remain some hope for me. My father used to say that any disaster that is possible will sooner or later take place.

"Humans also say something like that," smiled Elwyan, "and now that you mention it..." he turned to greet Tomlys and Brennan as they rushed to say goodbye, loudly complaining they had been forgotten. Tomlys carried all three kittens wrapped in her apron, where they squirmed and objected as only kittens can.

"They want to say goodbye, too," the girl insisted, and Moon Hunter bent to groom the wiggling little cats gently with her long tongue. After she had finished, she turned to lick the children's cheeks. Tomlys shrieked happily and giggled, but Brennan turned suddenly timid and hid behind his sister, clinging to her broad skirt and peeping around her waist with

shy, dark eyes. The Swift solemnly lowered her head to the girl's hips, and slowly moved it sideways, tilting it so that her wide, green eyes came face to face with Brennan's brown ones at a handspan distance. He laughed at the peek-a-boo and dashed out to hug her, then again became bashful and returned to his hiding place, staring coyly out once more, now smiling happily in spite of himself.

My father also said, that any good thing that is possible will eventually happen, too, wrote Moon Hunter, after the youngsters had gone back inside, which is why we must be patient with disasters. And children are not a disaster, she continued. Elwyan was going to say that obviously she didn't have any, but caught himself just in time.

With lowering clouds hinting strongly of winter, they started down the trail.

– There are Side Effects –

Notwithstanding Elwyan's worries and the wisdom of Moon Hunter's father, the first night's camp passed uneventfully, as did the next. The trail wound steadily northward, not yet trending up, through rich, open, woodland and occasional coniferous forest.

At a stream-side stand of oaks, Elwyan pointed out a gray-backed blue and white bird burying an acorn in decomposing leaves. "Once upon a time," he said, "a crow fell in love with a squirrel, and married her. Their first child" – he gestured at the bird – "took after his father in appearance, but was always playing tricks and acting like a squirrel. His parents were afraid he might forget that he was half bird. They gave him the color of sky and clouds, so he would remember that he could fly there. Still, he is always up to mischief, and he buries nuts for hard times, just as his mother did."

The bird marked its cache with a fallen spring of foliage, then half-leaped, half-flapped to a low branch and glared down at them, scolding raucously, squirrel-like indeed. The white streak above each eye gave it a rakish look that matched its

cocksure bearing and clownish manners. Then it dove steeply off the perch, and after a series of descending shallow swoops, alit on the ground nearby.

He reminds me of Little Scolder, wrote Moon Hunter.

"I thought he might," Elwyan smiled, then continued his story. "His sister took more after her mother. She can't fly nearly so well, but she does have wing enough to glide from tree to tree. We probably won't see her, usually she only comes out at night."

The bird found another acorn, and leaped and fluttered to the tree again, where it began to wedge it under a slab of loose bark.

Ha! scribed Moon Hunter. He does not just accept his destiny, he cheats! He buries the nuts where he can use them, not where he is supposed to. That is very like Little Scolder.

Elwyan chuckled. "I don't know where the myth came from, but it certainly captures the character of that bird. If you forget he can fly, you'd think you were looking at a squirrel. And actually, squirrels hide nuts in trees, too."

Are there many kinds of animals that fly? Moon Hunter wanted to know.

"Well..." Elwyan considered. "Birds and bats are best. And lots of insects – were you counting those? And some spiders weave nets to catch the air, and travel like dandelion seeds. And there are lots of little squirrels that do, like crow's daughter."

He cleared his throat and spoke again. "And fish. There's a

fish that can soar above the waves for as great a distance as a half bowshot. They say that other fish, that are chasing it, are very surprised when it disappears out of the surface of the water."

"Is there some particular reason you are curious about things that fly?"

My mother had a sister, not a clutch-sister, just one born to the same parents – I think you would call her a "maternal aunt" – who was bitten badly by something that flew, long before we were brought here, and the scars from the wound showed tooth marks. Wizard Darleialys used to say that no birds here had teeth, so I always wondered what it could have been. I guess there are lots of other things that fly, that do have teeth, though.

"I have never heard of a bird with teeth..." He pondered for a minute. "How bad a bite was it?"

It nearly took her hand off.

Elwyan stared at her for several heartbeats. "I know of nothing that flies that could do that, teeth or not."

I never quite understood exactly what it was, or what it looked like. Perhaps you have no word for it. She paused a moment, then wrote again.

Does this world have dragons that fly?

Elwyan considered his response carefully. "I have never heard any report of a flying dragon that I consider reliable, but it's a big world and you never know for sure." After a moment longer, he nodded his head pensively, and elaborated. "I've heard

reports that I trust of flying lizards, and flying frogs, and flying snakes, but they all live on another side of the world, and none of them fly very well, and they are all much smaller than dragons are supposed to be. And none of them have a bite that would be that serious, not nearly. They are tiny."

"Actually, I am not sure we have dragons at all. They may just be mythological. There are creatures that approximately fit what a dragon is supposed to look like, that are big enough and fast enough to be very dangerous. Some are fast enough to run down a human being, and could just about swallow you or me in a gulp. But mostly they are lake and river dwellers."

As Moon Hunter glanced sharply at the nearby stream, Elwyan continued hastily.

"And they all live a long way from here."

That does not sound like what my father told me about dragons in our homeland. I do not remember him mentioning their being water animals, and I think he would have. Ours did not fly, either. Dragons that flew would have been dangerous.

Elwyan wiped his brow. Something that flew, with teeth, and a bite that could take your hand off. Yet at least it wasn't a flying dragon – why, those might be dangerous! What would she come up with next? He shook his head.

"Is there a dragon – what the Swift call a dragon – in the animals tooled into your pack?"

Moon Hunter twisted her head completely around and peered over her shoulder, down at the worked surface of her gear.

No. There is one on the pack that belonged to my sister. We

left that back at your home. Elwyan, I do not think we are talking about the same kind of animal. We only use that word because it is the best one available. It is a different kind of creature. She took off her pack and looked at it more closely.

The animals on this pack are all much less dangerous, my father said. That is Little Scolder, there in the middle. She pointed.

Elwyan furrowed his brow, trying to remember what the figures on the other carrier had looked like. He could not recall.

"Your goddess, the Mother of the World, is she a dragon, or whatever, of some sort? I mean, does she manifest as one?"

No, she is not a dragon any more than I am. She is a goddess. None of us had ever seen the Mother of the World, but in the stories, she usually manifests as that kind of creature, or as a storm cloud. I suspect she can manifest as whatever she likes. Though I suppose it might be particularly sensible to appear as a big, fierce creature. That would encourage good manners.

Elwyan was confused. "I would think, that if you were big and fierce, you wouldn't need to worry about manners."

You have it backward. If you are big and fierce, manners come for free, so why not use them?

"Little Scolder wasn't very mannerly, in the story you gave us, and he's a lot smaller than the Mother of the World," Elwyan said defensively.

Little Scolder has no manners and no sense. That is why the Mother of the World values his advice. He is clever, but he does not think the way she does. They make a good team. Just as you

and I do.

Elwyan did not know whether he should reply to a complimentary insult or to a derogatory compliment. So he shook his head slowly, and said nothing at all. Moon Hunter continued to write. The pelt at the back of her neck was rippling faintly.

It is surely odd that a snake should learn to fly, but I suppose it would be a great deal easier than learning to walk.

* * * * *

On the third day the trail began to climb, not steeply but resolutely nonetheless, toward the mountain passes. The clouds of departure had long since vanished, and the weather remained clear, but there had been storms already. With increasing frequency, patches of thin clean snow clung to the north sides of slopes and rocks, or gleamed soft and subtle in the quiet forest shade, blue-white, crystalline, and pure as thought. Here the deciduous trees had lost all but the last dry tatters of leaves. The conifers, more common at the higher altitudes, had drawn in on themselves, gathering strength and courage to face the power and majesty of winter. Fearful though he was of being caught in the high country by snow, nevertheless Elwyan loved the snap in the air and the playful nip and nibble of the chilly wind. He stopped to savor the view at every switchback and promontory, pointing out terrain features to his companion, tracing the route they had traveled, and peering intently at the higher trail yet to come.

Moon Hunter reveled in the brisk temperatures. She had not even found it cold enough to don her winter garments, but instead carried her pelt slightly fluffed, thereby increasing its thickness and insulating qualities. She stopped to investigate the first patch of snow they passed, and ended up grabbing whole handfuls at a time and rubbing them into her coat, grooming and preening. At the next snowfield, Elwyan introduced her to the joys of snowball fights, and promptly regretted it, for although his throws were slightly more accurate, Moon Hunter had greater range, and could gather and pack the chilly projectiles much more quickly than he.

"Let me show you some magic." He held out a handful of dry, powdery snow. He gestured with his other hand, and small bits and particles of the icy crystals began to fountain upward from the center of his palm, as if a jet of air were blowing them from beneath. They cascaded back toward his outstretched fingers, curved inward, and rejoined the rising stream. After a few moments, the entire mass was a cloud of swirling flakes, a blizzard in miniature, suspended above his open hand. He gestured again, almost imperceptibly, and the billow of flakes began to change shape and form, as if it were a thing alive.

"That was the first spell I learned to do, when I was a child. It's really no more than a simple trick. That kind of thing has always been very easy for me." He let the tiny snowstorm dissipate. "Here's another." He picked up more snow, packed it loosely, and held out his palm. "Watch closely." She bent and stared. He made peculiar motions with his other hand,

and the snowball vanished. Moon Hunter's ears tilted forward, and she opened her mouth in astonishment, but the gesture was interrupted as the wad of snow plopped directly onto her long muzzle, falling from where it had reappeared a few feet above her head. She jumped, then groomed off the handful of snow and held it close before her nose. She cocked her head, staring at the clump of white as if she expected it to take flight, or at least to leap from her hand again. Elwyan chuckled and moved in front of her.

"It's just ordinary snow," he said, still laughing. "The surprises are all a matter of what you can think of to do with it. That's a simple example of sending something to another place, with magic." The Swift nodded and lifted her palm. With her coat rippling cheerfully, she delicately blew a small, chilly, and entirely surprising puff of snow dust squarely into the wizard's face.

Even though I do not know how to do it, that all seemed very straightforward, she wrote, as Elwyan sneezed and dusted snowflakes out of his eyebrows. But I remember you saying that magic had unexpected side effects. What did you mean?

He turned suddenly serious and looked past her. "It's what it does to the magician. The power is too great, and people fear us. No one trusts a wizard. We are isolated. I don't dare have family or friends, for fear that someone will hurt them because of me." He met her eyes again, but his face had become an impassive mask.

Surely the issue is not what you are able to do, but what you

choose to do? Should it not be intent that matters, rather than capability?

"That's not how most people think. I wish it were different, but it is not. Consider how many fear you."

I see that. I understand what you mean, I have felt that way myself. She lifted one great talon and flexed it thoughtfully. At least you must be able to get along with other wizards. Can you not?

"They're worse." He lifted another handful of powdery snow and kneaded it between his fingers. "They – we – have seen how powerful magic can be. We all have sense enough to be scared of each other, and we are. What's more, magic users can sense each other, can sense the use of magic. If you use powers like mine – even the simple ones – there is no way to hide from other magicians. We all know we're out there, and we are all chronically suspicious. We have fights and kill each other off. There are few wizards left in the world. I am surprised we haven't died out long ago. Perhaps we will." He spread his fingers slightly. Bits of snow sifted gently to the ground.

You make it sound sad and lonely. I am sorry for you. She turned her head and pressed the side of her cheek briefly, gently, against his shoulder. He smiled a little in response, but his expression remained thoughtful and distant.

"It is as I said. There are side effects." The remaining handful of crystals spiraled up from his palm again. It caught the afternoon sunlight as it ascended, swirling like diamond dust in the cold, pure air, rising higher and higher, until

finally it was lost from sight.

* * * * *

Toward the end of the fifth day out, Moon Hunter suddenly ceased her rhythmic stride, sniffed quickly at the mountain air, and bounded off the trail. After a confused moment, Elwyan heard a loud hiss followed at once by an abrupt, snarling cough. Hastily following, he found her standing over the partly eaten and several days dead carcass of a deer. Her coat stood fluffed erect, and her jaws gaped wide open, showing a mouth full of teeth. She stood in a more nearly vertical posture than he had ever seen her use before, with much of her body supported by her stiff tail. As he watched, she shifted her weight and lifted her left leg forward, as if she were about to mount a stair. She tilted its foot upward, exposing and raising her enormous claws. Her intense stare was fixed on something part way up the hill. He followed her gaze and caught a flicker of quick motion, a patch of moving golden brown, a form not clearly seen as it disappeared into the brush.

Elwyan jumped and turned as Moon Hunter hissed again, loudly, the fat puff of her breath billowing like a gout of smoke as it swirled and condensed in the chill air. The sound was lower-pitched and throatier than the hiss of a snake or a cat. The skin on the back of his neck prickled. She was still staring into the brush. There were tracks near the dead animal, tracks of a mountain lion, and they showed clearly what had just

happened. He could see where the big cat had faced her, then turned and bounded away up slope. After a minute more, Moon Hunter lowered her pelt, and resumed a normal posture.

"That's a big one," he remarked thoughtfully, staring at where the tawny feline had disappeared.

She did not turn her head toward her pack as she pulled out her slate. She wrote briefly. *I am a big one, too.* Her eyes scanned slowly, tracing sideways in the brush, studying the hillside one patch of cover at a time. *You see, manners come for free.* Elwyan caught one more flash of the lion as it crossed the ridge, pacing with determination, not looking back.

He continued nervously. "If you please, I guess I am missing something. If it were solely up to me – of course, it's not – but if it were, I might have thought that it would be an awfully big risk for you to confront another predator, particularly a large one. From the size and stride of those tracks, I'd say it weighs at least as much as either one of us. If you feel inclined, perhaps you would tell me how you think about it?" Elwyan was amused to find himself gratuitously formal, and far more polite than was his usual habit. He supposed it was the hiss, and the disturbing view of those spectacular teeth and claws, ready for action. He was more than a little shaken.

Her gaze remained up, alert, and mobile as she replied. She only glanced occasionally at what she was writing. *It would have been risky if she had been interested in defending her kill, but look how much she has eaten already.* The carcass was half gone. *The good parts are all in her belly. She is so full she can*

scarcely waddle, and she was fast asleep when I got here. She is not going to fight about leaving some extra dinner for somebody else.

"Why the hasty approach, then? I suppose you didn't know what the situation was till you got here." Elwyan wasn't quite ready to address the issue of whose dinner would come from the dead deer that lay decomposing on the ground in front of them.

Yes, I did. I could smell a sleepy cat with meat on her breath, and three-day meat on the ground. It was obvious how things were. She cocked her head. I moved quickly from force of habit. Surprise is never a gift to refuse.

Elwyan's neck prickled again, but he continued amiably. "And the hiss and snarl, and all?"

That was for show. She had never seen me before - I mean, one of us Swifts - me. I could smell that she was surprised, and it is only good manners to demonstrate that I was equipped not to be kidding. But neither of us was going to fight about it. I would certainly have backed down if she had tried. And even if I did not, I am faster, particularly when her stomach is full. But it's not worth the risk, not for either one of us.

Elwyan nodded thoughtfully, eyes a little glazed. Once, from a great distance, he had seen a mountain lion closing stealthily on its prey. Even with enough warning to be watching it closely, its final pounce had been a blur, a wide brown streak, much too rapid for even an anticipating eye to follow. Yet Moon Hunter was casually remarking that she was faster. He remembered the rattlesnake. It might be so. It might truly be so.

She was still writing. *Perhaps this site would do for a camp.*
This – she gestured at the ripening deer – will fall apart if it
is moved, and I am hungry. Are not you?

– The Possibilities of Night –

To his surprise, Elwyan found that the exposed part of one of the deer's hind legs remained on the edible side of his personal definition of rotting flesh. Perhaps the cold weather had kept the temperature of the outer layer of meat too low for decomposition to set in. He cooked his portion very thoroughly, and munched with caution. His companion ate less fastidiously, with obvious relish, wasting very little. She did not consider it necessary to cook even the most tainted portions of the animal. What's more, she was teasing him.

I know you do not like your meat as well aged as I do, she wrote, and if that is your choice, I will respect it. Yet I must point out that you are inconsistent. You will not eat perfectly good three-day meat, but those turnips you put in the stew last night had been drying since – when? – over a year ago? And I myself would not even have called them edible to begin with.

Elwyan shook his head and chuckled. "If you are suggesting that I do not like turnips, you are right. Yet I do not object to dried meat, but what you are eating is rather too... juicy... for me. And I do not recall ever saying that I was consistent. Or if

I did..." he paused long enough to catch her eye. "If I did, perhaps I've changed my mind."

Her fur rippled up and down the back of her neck. As she stirred the fire with a stick, he poured tea.

"I guess you were right about teamwork. Our needs and tastes are very different." He glanced involuntarily at what remained of the deer. "But with a little imagination, we seem to be able to find ways to cooperate that are good for both of us."

She accepted the offered cup and held it to her nostrils, savoring the heat and the rich odor before beginning to sip.

"Moon Hunter," Elwyan continued, "you are the only Swift I have ever met. I am getting to know you yourself, but I have no way to tell how you are typical or unique, and how you are like others of your species. I mean, for example, are you really big for a Swift, like you said? I'm just curious, I don't have any way to know."

Well, yes. I was larger than my father and my mate, of course – it is the other way around than with humans. I just mean height and length, though – I am actually on the slender side. Only a few of the other women – that is, Swift women – were still alive by the time I was full-grown, but even before then, I was getting to be as long as many of them. And my father told me that I had more height and length than even my mother, and she was very tall.

The Swift paused. *I scarcely remember her. She was one of the first to die. Now that I think of it, I guess I am the biggest Swift in the world. Why do you want to know?*

"I am curious what the world will be like if your quest is successful, if there are more of you again. I am asking in what ways the others differed from you, as a way of finding out what Swifts are like in general. Does that make any sense? Can you tell me?"

Moon Hunter tilted her slate and brought it closer to the firelight. *I see what you mean, but I do not know where to begin,* she wrote slowly. *I suppose I am too close to what I am to see what sets us apart. I could say we are - were - all a lot like me, but that is not really true.* She was still for a long minute.

"I don't even know the simple things. For instance, did... do you all look alike? Do you all have the same color and pattern of coat?"

No. Mine is lighter-colored and more mottled than most. What was more common was some solid color, such as this one. She pointed at a medium gold-brown area of her pelt. *Except, of course, we all had very light colors where I do.* She gestured at the front and underparts of her body. *My sister - whom you saw - looked a lot like me, though. Clutch mates often resemble one another, but even so, we were exceptionally alike.*

Elwyan shuddered. He was not at all comfortable at the memory of what Moon Hunter had done to the body of her sister. He still had no idea of how to bring the subject up, and his memories disturbed him enough to make him much happier putting it off.

The Swift continued to write. *That is how I got the "Moon" part of my name, from my coloring. Even when I was little, as*

soon as my adult coat started to come in, my parents thought I looked like the colors of the moon. We do not get adult names till we are grown, of course. But you did not know that, either.

"No, I didn't. And how about 'Hunter'?"

Well, we all hunt, but my father used to say that I always seemed to be hunting for something more than just dinner. I never thought so, I seem to be hungry all the time. He meant I was curious, I guess. And I have always particularly liked the night, so perhaps it was natural to give me a name that suggested a hunter in darkness.

"I begin to think that your father was very wise. Why do you like the night?"

Because of the uncertainty, I think. When it is dark you never know what is there, what is going to happen next. It seems as if anything can happen. And that means that everything is possible. There are a lot of things I would like to be possible.

"You are talking about darkness the way it was in the story of Little Scolder and the destiny egg."

She paused again. Elwyan wished he knew how to tell whether she was upset, or just being thoughtful. That is right, she finally wrote, I guess I am.

"What would you like to be possible?"

Moon Hunter did not answer directly, or at once. I have not thought about the moon and my father for a long time, she mused. He used to say that the moon was the only thing in this world that was the same as it was in the place we came from. He said that everything else was different – the leaves of the trees,

the shapes of the animals, the taste of the water, the smell of the air – none of them were quite the same. He said that even the color of the sky was different, just a tiny bit.

But as long as the moon was in the sky, he said, there would be something here that was truly ours, something we could use as a starting point to make this world our home. I would like this world to be our home. Do you suppose there will ever be a night dark enough for that to be possible?

For a long time, it was Elwyan's turn to be silent. He stared quietly at the young crescent moon, waxing bright pale gold in the wide band of indigo sky above the western horizon, beneath the lowering threshold of night.

"I am only a wizard," he sighed finally, "and not really a very good one, at that. I don't know how to answer a question such as yours. I need more than just magic. I don't know where to begin." He took a long breath, and continued more firmly. "Yet there is one thing that I can give you, even without magic."

"I don't know what disaster destroyed the Swift, or why it happened, or how. Yet disaster or not, you are as much a creature of the world – a child of earth – as I am, as much as any other thing that lives, or has ever lived. You were born here. You live here. You *fit* here – I can tell by the way you interact with the things around you. This world is already your home. It was your home at the time your people came from, and it still is. There is no need to do anything to make it possible – it is already so. I mean that."

"But I don't know whether Swift can live here – now – or not. I don't know why your people all died. And I do not know whether we can ever make your eggs hatch, whether there are ever going to be any more Swift in the world again. I wish there were something more I could tell you, truly I do, but I just don't know."

"But remember – whatever else, you are home. In all your people's wanderings, you have never left your home. Never forget that, and never doubt it."

The low fire illuminated the nearby slate well enough for Elwyan to make out the writing, but the declining light of evening left the Swift's body vague and indistinct. With a human, he would have worried about not being able to see her expression, but Moon Hunter's face had none. Yet her position and posture said all too much. She had stopped eating and sat quietly, head bent a little and shoulders slumped. No ripple moved through her coat. Even her springy tail looked limp.

Elwyan shifted position around the circle of firelight, seeking to offer comfort. As he knelt at her right side, his knee touched something dense and ominous, one of her great talons. He had bent close enough now to see her more clearly. She stared silently into the coals with fixed gaze and vacant eyes, not looking at him. Her irises were mysterious; their emerald green had darkened in the orange glare of the embers. The fire was bright enough to give a hint of their color, but not so bright as to show clearly what it was. Her pupils had widened to nearly round, with only the faintest, shallow trace

of points at top and bottom. They were almost dark, but something deep inside them reflected the ruddy light, so that her eyes flickered red from within. Elwyan winced at the sharp odor of rancid meat on her breath. Her jaw was hard, the grim edge of her mouth sinister and void of expression. Dark flecks of blood and less pleasant fluids stained her chin and teeth. More smears splotched her hands and claws. The powerful muscles in her neck and shoulders shifted and flexed as she breathed. She glanced sideways, and her unblinking gaze met his, eyes glowing like coals. Her mouth was open enough to reveal the points of her teeth, gleaming wetly in the firelight. Shining up from below, the glimmer of the embers cast the planes and shapes of her face and neck into strange, unsettling patterns of moving shadow and shifting contrast.

Seen thus in darkness, without her irrepressible ebullience and cheerful prose, Moon Hunter was suddenly terrifying. Elwyan had at first sight thought her a demon, but now he needed a stronger word. She was frightening at a more fundamental, instinctive level. Something deep in the fibers of his being strained to scream and run, to climb a tree and hide in the leaves, to dig a hole and pull in the dirt behind him. Yet he knew that if he yielded to panic, he would be so frightened he could scarcely move. She was a terror of tooth and claw, a horrifying vision to call up nightmares from the depths of his soul. What was he doing, all alone in the dark with this hideous creature, anyway? Why was he here? Sweat broke out on his brow, and he felt himself start shaking.

She turned her eyes away abruptly, then twisted her head to face nearly away from him, as if she could sense his fear. Seeking something calming and familiar, Elwyan lifted his eyes again to the sky. The stars shone clear and steady high above, countless bright points of splendor, a rich blaze of glory strewn thickly across the gather of darkness. Above the western horizon, the shadowed features of the old moon lay round and pale and almost invisible in the glare of the new one, gently cradled by the wide, embracing arms of the ripening crescent. Elwyan took a deep breath, held it a moment, and let it out slowly, with deliberate control. Another. A third.

Bit by bit, tranquility returned. She was right about darkness and uncertainty. Where vision could not see, where perhaps even imagination could not reach, it might well be that anything was possible, that some unanticipated horror lay hidden in the shadows. Yet although the night might hold a thousand ways to die, it also held a thousand wonders, a thousand things of beauty and of joy. It always had. All those things were possibilities, too.

Elwyan was ashamed of himself. Nothing the Swift had done hinted of harm or malice. His fears were his own. They were not Moon Hunter's fault.

Gently he put his hand on her shoulder. She was trembling. He put an arm around her, not pulling or leaning, just holding on. Her body was like iron, strong and powerful under the resilience of her coat. After a while he started kneading her muscles, massaging gently, first with one hand, then with both. For

perhaps a hundred heartbeats there was no response, but then she began to relax a little. Her body was still rock-solid, but it felt less tense. She let the slate drop. She took a deeper breath, and let it all the way out, and slowly began to flex her long neck from side to side. He could hear her vertebrae creak. He could feel her tendons stretch and relax. She was still shuddering, but she had closed her eyes. He continued, probing strongly with fingers and thumbs, careful not to press too hard. She gasped as his hands found knot after twisted knot in her flesh, her breath coming in steamy spurts in the chill night air as he rubbed and loosened the tight masses.

As her muscles eased, her neck swung through a wider arc, and now it traveled far enough for her cheek to brush his right shoulder. She stopped moving and held her head there, touching him lightly, a warm and comfortable presence against the wool of his cloak. She was shaking harder. He slid his right hand and forearm upward and hugged her to him, pressing and fitting the long, flexible curve of her neck across his chest, twining his fingers into her rich coat, bending his face down into the thick soft fur at the back of her skull, drawing their bodies together. She was ever so much warmer than a human. She radiated heat. The scent of her skin was clean and fresh, the air trapped within her coat clinging and moist. He inhaled deeply, and relaxed. He could hear and feel the slow ebb and flood of breath in her lungs, the measured cadence of her pulse, even the steady surge of blood in the great veins and arteries of her neck. He shut his eyes and held her, held her for a long time, rocking

gently, held her until neither of them was trembling any longer. Presently the rhythms of their breathing matched, and then the beating of their hearts.

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The moon verged on setting and the fire was all but dead. Elwyan dozed warmly, snug and relaxed, more in trance than not, scarcely even thinking. He all but glowed. Yet his companion stirred. She pressed her head more firmly against his shoulder for a moment, then lifted it carefully away from his cloak, up and across his face. Her ear feathers briefly tickled his nose. She turned the coals with a stick until they brightened, then fumbled for her slate.

Thank you, Elwyan, was the first thing she wrote. *I had thought that no one was ever going to hold me again.* She dropped her stick of charcoal and bent to pick it up. Elwyan looked at her, a little puzzled, and she turned her face to meet his stare. He had never seen her uncoordinated before. He wondered what it meant or foretold. His sleeves and the front of his garments still kept the impression of the contours of her body, still retained her warmth and humidity, still held a hint of her faint, alien scent.

And by the way, our lioness is back, the same one. Over there. Still watching him, she inclined her head toward a clump of bushes a stone's throw up the slope, on the edge of thicker woods. Elwyan peered into the gloom, but could see no sign of

the big cat. *I smell her. I smell many things.* She arose and stretched luxuriously, lifting first one foot and then the other, slowly rotating each ankle in turn, flexing the claws, then sat again, facing him. *She is hungry again. All cats seem to want to do is eat and sleep. They are not like us, are they?* She yawned widely, curling her slender pink tongue between rows of glistening white teeth, as she tilted her head from side to side. Then she closed her mouth and gazed at him once more.

"Is there going to be a problem?" he asked.

Not with the deer here. There is still a good deal of meat on the doe. As he read, she lifted her hands to her face, tongue flicking in and out, licking the stains from her fingers and hands, neck gracefully bent as she eyed him demurely. *If we put our bedding a little way off, nothing will disturb us tonight. Do not worry.* She flexed her shoulders and lazily arced her long neck and tail left and right. Her tongue darted delicately at the edges of her mouth, then curled outward to moisten the tips of her claws, as she cleaned and combed her face. She moved with grace and composure, so feline she must surely purr. Her wide dark eyes caught the warmth of the fire as they stared into his.

"What if she just gets curious? Cats do."

Will she have anything to be curious about? Moon Hunter blinked thoughtfully, stretched again, and cocked her head. *Are we planning something out of the ordinary?* Her grooming was complete. Her pelt gleamed in the firelight. *What could you have been thinking of?* The fur on her neck rippled ever so slightly. She was still staring at him.

"I'm... I'm serious. You can't always predict what's going to happen in unusual circumstances."

How very true. She dropped her gaze for a moment, then lifted it.

Elwyan was puzzled. Moon Hunter settled her coat and straightened up, looking directly at him.

The trees and terrain break up the breeze into little eddies, so we will get scent from all directions. There is no downwind. So if she comes close, we will notice her and wake up. If we are sleeping. But she knows what the wind is doing as well as we do, so she probably will not try. When you think it through, there is really nothing to be afraid of. I think you have figured that out already. She brushed the side of one slender finger lightly against an ear, smoothing a wayward feather into place with its claw. *I suppose I cannot predict exactly what will happen, either. The circumstances are definitely unusual. We are very different. So it will be a surprise. I like surprises. Do not you?* Her coat rippled as she inclined her head once more.

"Um. Yes, but I never thought, I didn't mean... I wasn't thinking..." He shook his head in dawning awareness. The Swift bent her head to the slate as she wrote, then looked coyly up at him. "Moon Hunter?"

Well, you are now. And I certainly am. She looked past him for a moment, the curved, graceful profile of her head and neck an elegant silhouette against the luminous night sky. *There is a wolf farther up slope. I glimpsed him before the sun went down. I have only sensed the one so far, so maybe he is a solitary.*

She turned back to face him.

You cannot understand how terrible a thing it is for a creature of the pack to be completely alone. Perhaps after the lioness has finished eating, there will be something more here for him, if he wants it. I hope so. She held his gaze for a long moment, then wrote again. Elwyan. She trailed the fine tip of one claw gently under his name. Elwyan. She glanced at him once more, and her eyes lingered. There is something more here for us, too, if we want it. A lot more. You know there is. I can tell that you do.

She lifted her head, and now the liquid light of the setting moon shone deep in her eyes, golden, rich, and warm. Elwyan felt as if he were drowning in their softness.

We have imagination and tenderness. We know each other. We care for each other. That is enough. All it takes now is choice. I have made one. Will you?

She put down the slate and extended her arms part way toward him, then hesitated and stopped, her slender hands half-open and seeking, as a child reaches out for wonder. With sudden understanding, Elwyan realized that for all her superior strength, she was vulnerable; for all her ferocious armament, she was frightened; and for all her awesome capability for destruction, she was trying to create, to build something fragile, something that might be as unique and beautiful as she herself. After a moment, he lifted his own arms in response, and slowly twined his fingers between her claws, clasping their palms together. And the setting moon drew down the limitless

possibilities of the night.

* * * * *

At dawn, only a few scattered tufts of hair revealed that a deer had ever been there. Tracks and a frost-free depression in the dead grass showed where the sated mountain lion had spent most of the night watching them, in comfortable repose, scarcely fifty feet away.

"I guess she found something to be curious about, after all," said Elwyan, smiling slightly, dazed and happy at the same time.

Rippling her fur, Moon Hunter lifted her head to his shoulder and licked the rim of his ear.

Later in the day it began to snow.

– To Distinguish What Is Human –

Elwyan stared upward with suspicion and concern. The clouds had grown thick enough to block the blue of the sky, yet they still retained a translucent quality, almost an opalescence, especially where they grew dazzlingly bright in front of the not-quite-seen noontime sun. Small flakes of snow fell irregularly in the still air, as they had since the middle of the morning. They did not melt when they reached the ground, yet the whole of the snowfall so far had not yet completely obscured the dry grass beside the path. Even the most exposed boughs of the nearby conifers still showed green under their tenuous mantle of white.

"We're just about at the pass. We should keep moving," he said nervously.

Moon Hunter nodded. Her slate was packed – she could not write clearly while walking. She fell in beside him as he quickened his pace perceptibly. She had not put on her cloak, and indeed, he had loosened his somewhat. The temperature did not warrant full winter gear, at least, not as long as he kept moving, and that was perhaps the most unsettling thing about the

weather. Warmth suggested a storm system moving in from the sea, scores of leagues distant to the west. An oceanic storm would be heavily laden with moisture, so that if it indeed stayed cold enough to freeze – as it just barely was – there might be a great deal of snow to come.

“Once we start descending, this will turn to rain.” He spoke as much to convince himself as for his companion’s information. He peered into the west again, but the high terrain and distant peaks to their left stood far above the horizon, and blocked his view.

Moon Hunter nodded, and leaned lightly against him for a moment. He smiled. Yesterday, as in all other days they had traveled together, she had kept a space between them as they walked. Even when rocky ground eliminated worries about Swift tracks on the trail, she had stayed distant by the length of her own body or more. Now her manner was very different. She remained close by his side, and did so with remarkable ease. Elwyan thought about how much coordination it took to walk arm in arm or hand in hand with a lady – with a human lady. Hips were always banging together, or elbows getting in the way, or one hand would jiggle up when the other dropped down, and someone would have to lift or stretch to keep from losing contact altogether. The task was difficult and clumsy even on a wide avenue, not to say a narrow and irregular forest path.

Yet Moon Hunter flowed effortlessly against him, her firm lean flank or the soft pelt of her leg continuously touching him, as omnipresent and gently unobtrusive as the breath of the

wind. Elwyan had seen such intimate, graceful association among walking cats long familiar with one another, and once in a family of wolves. Yet among human beings, he had encountered its like nowhere except possibly on the dance floor, and he danced poorly enough to have no first-hand experience of the quality of contact in such a place. It felt like magic. The rational part of his mind told him that it was probably a simple consequence of the Swift's own quick reflexes, fluidly adapting to any motion of his own that might have become a collision had a less adept companion been at his side. It felt like magic, even so. After all, most real magic was composed of things just as simple, yet just as wonderful.

Whatever it was, he liked it a lot. He let his hand rest lightly on the small of Moon Hunter's back as she strode beside him. Her spine was not quite horizontal, it sloped ever so slightly downward from the swell of her hips forward to the base of her neck, which rose in turn as a smooth S-curve to the back of her head, an arm's length in front of him. She enjoyed the contact, he could tell. From time to time he would knead his fingers against the bands of muscle beside her spine, or trace the outline of a vertebra. She liked that too, and would flex her muscles or arch her back just a little, almost imperceptibly, to meet the pressure of his hand.

Now she drew back a half step, so that her shoulder was a little behind his waist, and gently took his hand in one of hers. With the tip of one claw she started tracing delicate patterns in his open palm. It took him a minute to realize they

were letters.

Last night, she slowly spelled, repeating the tracery.

"Yes?"

Thank you for not fearing.

"I did, at first."

I know. I smelled fear. It meant more than if it had been easy.

Elwyan smiled softly. "Before I met you," he replied, "I would have been horrified at the choice you offered." He shook his head a little, eyes twinkling, the corners of his mouth slowly turning up in an incipient laugh. "Now I am far more frightened to think that I might have refused it." He opened his mouth as if to speak again, but no words would come. He shook his head. "I don't know what else to say."

She leaned against him briefly. *Fine.* Then, after a pause, *You have no mate?*

"Well!" He chuckled quietly. "I trust you mean, 'no mate of my own species.'"

She stretched her neck upward and sideways, and pressed the underside of her throat across his face, hard. "Hey!" he cried, stumbling. She steadied him with both hands, then spelled again.

You speak well for having nothing to say. She reached toward her pack as if for the slate, but glanced at the lowering sky and kept going.

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As the day wore on the snowfall imperceptibly thickened. By mid afternoon the brightness of the slate-gray sky no longer told where the sun lay, and the blanket of snow on the ground had begun to impede walking. Visibility below the clouds deteriorated sharply, and their bases descended to obscure the high terrain on either side. Elwyan sighed in relief when the way before them opened out, and the trail began an obvious descent, more steeply than the shallow rise they had covered in the last few days.

"We're through the pass. From here on it is all downhill. We should press on as far as we can today. Every foot lower means the way will be that much easier after the storm has ended." He increased their pace once again, and they plodded onward and downward.

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It was nearly dusk when Elwyan signaled for a stop. The rate of snowfall had lessened. He leaned against a tree, rubbing aching shins. "When it gets just a little darker, I will start tripping over my own feet. How about you? And how do you feel?"

Moon Hunter produced her slate. *I am fine. And I see much better in dim light than you. I could go on for perhaps another hour and still easily find the way.*

"Really..." Elwyan sighed. He stretched regretfully – his very bones ached. "Well, in that case, we should certainly keep going. But if it gets too dark for me to see, you will have to

lead the way."

You cannot use magic to provide light?

"Well, yes, I could, but if I use it, it will be hard to concentrate on keeping my footing while we walk. Actually, the easiest way to get some light would not be magic – we could just make up some torches. Most of these deadfalls are still pretty dry. But they would make our presence a little more obvious than is wise, I think. Some parts of this trail are visible for leagues from the lower ground ahead." He peered into the gloom, trying to judge how much the snow restricted visibility. "I don't believe anyone would be out on a night that threatens storm, to do deliberate harm to travelers, but I don't want trouble on account of you being you, if we can avoid it. So the fewer people who know that anyone is here, the better."

Moon Hunter put on her winter cloak for the first time, and they continued.

* * * * *

Elwyan had for many minutes been following a pace behind the Swift, one hand against her tail for guidance, concentrating on the dim details of the path below his uncertain feet. Suddenly she came to a halt. He drew himself upright and shook his head to clear it. Her body showed only as a dim silhouette as she turned and took his hand.

Camp site? she spelled, and gestured. Peering into the darkness, he made out a young fir whose thick branches, weighed

down by their white burden, overhung and rested against an enormous fallen trunk. The hollow under them was still clear of snow.

"Yes. A good one."

They added boughs and leaves to the natural lean-to, and started a low fire just outside the improvised shelter. They fussed constantly to keep it burning, as the wet, clinging snow fell with ever greater intensity. The temperature had grown almost warm enough to turn it to rain. Elwyan ate mechanically, munching on traveler's rations, but Moon Hunter had gorged enough the day before that she was not yet hungry.

Meal completed, they moved back into the hollow and sat facing the dying fire. They brewed tea and drank it steaming hot, but both were too tired to converse. Elwyan tried to think with clarity about plans and intentions for the next day's descent toward more inhabited terrain. Suddenly he noticed his companion staring intently into a nearby patch of low underbrush, a thicket no more than half seen, a formless shape of black on darker black, beyond the edge of the dim circle of light cast by the coals. He turned toward her to ask if something was wrong, but she gestured for silence. She was alert, yet nothing in her posture suggested alarm.

He peered into the blackness, but could see no trace of motion, and no untoward form or outline. No sound reached his ear save an occasional pop or crackle as the edges of the fire battled the relentless, silent fall of clumpy snowflakes. They

sat still for long minutes, and presently he became aware that something small and furtive was moving stealthily toward them through the thick shadows under the snow-covered trees. Yet its shape foretold no greater disaster than petty domestic larceny.

The raccoon was careful in manner but bold in goal. Perhaps it had raided the camps of other travelers. It crept cautiously forward from the safety of the brush, eyeing the handful of scraps left over from Elwyan's dinner as it edged ever closer. From time to time it turned toward them and froze completely, pointed face aimed directly at Moon Hunter and Elwyan, eyes meeting their own, made suspicious by some motion too tiny for the wizard to be aware of, or perhaps by a particularly intense puff of scent wafted by some vagary of movement of the night air and the falling snow. Finally it reached the food, and shifted its posture to eat, squatting bipedally with hind feet under its midsection. A long, ringed tail and fat haunches balanced the weight of the upper body. It bent its head and stared intently at the edibles, then began to fiddle at them with nimble hands, bringing first this tidbit and then that one to its mouth for tasting, rejecting some and gobbling down others. Bristling whiskers twitched as it nibbled. Alert, intelligent eyes flicked back and forth between the unexpected dinner and those who had provided it.

Carefully not moving his head, Elwyan glanced at his companion. He was not sure whether she was just watching, or planning to take the raccoon as a snack. Her posture was almost an exact duplicate of the little animal's. She sat still as

stone, light flecks of granular snow sifting occasionally off the branches of the lean-to and lying where they fell, upon her coat or cloak. Her hands were still, gracefully folded, firelight glinting off the zigzag metal bands of her rings. The Swift's eyes peered forward, unmoving and expressionless, but the slight lift to the pelt at the back of her neck betrayed quiet amusement, and the forward set of her ears revealed the intensity of her curiosity. Very slowly he let his elbow bear against her shoulder, and felt an answering pressure in return.

Then Elwyan looked back at the raccoon, and blinked and almost shook himself in amazement, remembering only at the last moment how necessary it was to keep absolutely still. Were his eyes playing tricks on him in the dim light of the fire? Had great fatigue had cut loose his imagination, or had his deepening association with Moon Hunter merely blurred his ability to distinguish what was human from what was not? For suddenly he no longer saw just an animal, but a diminutive person, a tiny, stoop-shouldered beggar woman, wrapped and robed against the cold, whose eager hands greedily searched the heap of scraps for something to eat. He blinked again. It was as if he were seeing double. The shapeless bulk of the creature's fur was the folds and fall of an old cloak and the tattered skirts beneath it. The dark band across the eyes was the gap in a light-colored scarf drawn about face and forehead, leaving only enough space to see out. The tightly-drawn shoulders and confined, fussy movements of grasping little hands made the illusion complete. Elwyan could remember his grandmother sorting

through shucked peas or fresh-picked berries with just such motions and just such bearing.

The raccoon lifted its head to meet his gaze once more, and still the vision held. For a moment he saw fear and hunger in its eyes, yet also resolution and canniness, and a kind of determined optimism, qualities all plainly seen as he read the animal's face as easily as he might have read a human one. Then he must have moved, or perhaps the little creature had eaten everything it found palatable, for suddenly it was all raccoon again, bounding on all fours, scampering away over the snowy ground with lithe agility, diving headfirst into the underbrush in a puff of scattering white flakes, and silently gone.

Elwyan stared after it in solemn wonder, then arose stiffly, and turned to their improvised shelter. He left a piece of blackberry tea cake beside the dying fire, thinking as he did so that it probably was not necessary, for the raccoon had been rather on the fat side. Then he and his companion crawled wearily into their bedding.

– Tracks –

Morning brought a sky free of snow. Occasional bright spots in the clouds gave sign that the weather might improve. Moon Hunter lay on her side under the blankets, back tight against Elwyan, snuggled into his embrace, stiff tail twined between his legs and beside his ankles. She had drawn her legs up against her chest in the manner of a roosting bird, so that their great talons curled gently over his enfolding arms. His back was cold – Moon Hunter had managed to accumulate more than her share of blankets – but her body temperature so much exceeded his that he felt positively toasty; perhaps even too warm. Her faint scent filled his nostrils, still strange and unfamiliar, yet beginning to be very pleasant.

If she had been human, Elwyan's face would have been pressed against the back of her neck and head. Instead, the Swift's long neck reposed in its natural s-curve, so that her head lay under his – he was using the hollow of her throat as a pillow; the hinge of her jaw lay just ahead of his temple. Moving slowly, so as not to disturb her, he opened his eyes and drew back a little, gazing fondly along the lean, strong lines of her face.

She was so powerful and yet seemed so delicate. He might have worried about sharing a bed with a creature who could certainly disembowel him with an accidental kick, yet he had slept deeply and without dreaming, holding her. He had moved so little that one arm and leg were all pins and needles, only now starting to regain sensation as he consciously began to shift his position to favor them. Moon Hunter herself had turned out to be a more quiet sleeper than the oldest and sappiest of tomcats.

One ear protruded close before his eyes, every vein of its layered feathers starkly outlined against the increasing glimmer of dawn. The bulk of it comprised densely overlapped pinions, each wider than his thumb, yet immediately adjacent lay the thick fur of the rest of her pelt, in remarkable juxtaposition. Feathers and fur growing side by side – who ever had heard of such a thing?

He stared intently. Actually, that wasn't quite right. Close by the base of her ear he could see gradation in the length and especially the width of the feathers. Wide ones, that surely must focus sound, were flanked by a row or two of quills so narrow that their shape was barely distinguishable, and then there was fur. Hmn. He looked more closely, and considered. Was it really fur? Could it be that her entire coat was composed of narrow feathers, feathers so fine as to be indistinguishable from hair, and not fur after all? Elwyan thought about the different kinds of feathers on all the birds that he knew. Maybe so. Maybe so, but what did that make the Swift – some kind of giant, flightless bird? And if so, where did they get teeth and

clawed hands? What was this creature? What possibly could she be?

He remembered Moon Hunter saying something about how Little Scolder lost his ears, another Swift folk tale she had not gotten around to telling. He remembered her story about the toothed flying thing with the powerful bite. Maybe birds were originally creatures like Moon Hunter who had somehow lost their teeth, and changed their hands to wings. He chuckled softly, trying to imagine a road runner with claws on its wings, or a sparrow or cormorant with teeth, but stopped abruptly, thinking of Evening Star, the eagle. A bird of his character would understand very well what to do with fangs and clawed hands. Moon Hunter moved a little, starting to wake up in response to the sound of his laughter. Her flexing body reminded him of another of its unbirdlike characteristics, for who had ever heard of a bird with a long tail, like a lizard's. That would be as ridiculous as a lizard with feathers. He chuckled at the thought of a tiny avian version of the Swift, flapping its wings and trying to fly.

She opened her eyes part way, reached for his hand, and spelled into it.

Up and go?

He craned his neck to look at the western sky, and took a thoughtful breath of the air. It was only just below freezing. The bit of tea cake had vanished, and more raccoon tracks covered the campsite. The rest of their food remained secure. Elwyan had carefully hung it by a rope from a tree, several

score paces from camp, in case there should still be bears about who had not yet gone to sleep for the winter.

"I think this is going to start melting. We have about half a day's walk to get below the snow line. It will be easier if we wait." Elwyan wondered if he might merely be rationalizing. He did not relish the thought of leaving his warm, snug bedroll.

Okay. She nuzzled his cheek with hers. Two votes for rationalization. A clear majority. He thought they might doze some more, but after a few minutes she spelled again.

Why no mate?

Elwyan was puzzled for a moment, but then he remembered yesterday's conversation and sighed. "I've told all but the details. I said that if I have friends or family, people will try to use them to hurt me, or to make me do things. I wasn't just speaking about maybes, it's happened. My father died that way. There have been women in my life, but just as lovers. It wouldn't be fair to them or to me to get serious." He looked at her. "I'm not sure it's fair to you, either."

How lovers not serious?

"What?"

Moon Hunter reached for her pack. She pulled out the slate and wrote a full sentence in hasty agitation, then tilted the surface so he could read it. *What I meant to enquire was, how is it possible that you can be lovers with someone without it at once becoming a matter of paramount importance?* She cocked her head back at him for a moment, became quieter, and wrote again. *Yet you made the remark casually. Is this something about humans*

that I do not presently understand?

He hugged her closely. "I think that most of us usually are looking for something serious, but we don't always find it. It doesn't always happen that when humans are lovers, they become permanent mates, or mates for a long time. It's not automatic. Sometimes, but not always. And there are people to whom it never happens, and people who don't want it to happen. They'd rather have a lot of lovers."

She wrote again, then twisted her head around and watched him as he read, his face scarcely a hand's breadth from a mouth full of gleaming, pointed teeth. *It always seems to be permanent in books and stories.*

"Books and stories tell about a world the way we'd like it to be, not the way it is. Fairy tales are always full of romance."

She twisted her head back forward and scribed some more. *I see. I might rather not, but I think I do.* She wrote something else, then erased it and wrote again. *You wanted to know what Swift are like as a people. With us it is very serious. No lovers, just mates. I cannot imagine it being otherwise. In that way we are different. The family, the clan - it is everything. Loyalty is all, and having a mate is one of the things that creates it.*

"But..." Elwyan thought rapidly. "In that case," he replied, "I guess I am confused myself. Excuse me for mentioning it, I don't know how to talk to you about this. Until - what - about five weeks ago, you had a husband, partner, mate - you have used several different words - of your own species. And you say that

it is a serious matter."

"Can that be enough time..." He stopped and started over, carefully. "Among humans, five weeks would probably be too short a time to get over the loss of one truly serious mate and start looking for someone else. So if you were human, I wouldn't know what you really wanted or intended, or thought about me. And since you are not human, I know even less." He stared uneasily at her teeth for a moment. "Somehow I suspect the uncertainty is mutual."

She started to reply, but did not complete her sentence, or show it to him. After a moment, Elwyan continued. "You know, I always liked fairy tales. I mean, the romantic parts of them."

Moon Hunter erased once more, and turned her head and stared at him before writing again.

Thank you. You speak almost as well when you do have something to say as when you do not. You are very perceptive.

He smiled lamely. "Well... but I did mean it, about it not being fair to you, too. It's too dangerous. Wizards don't feel comfortable having people they care about close to them. It's too dangerous for them, it really is." He was still confused, and decided not to push the issue any further unless Moon Hunter did – but she did not.

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Though the sky continued to lighten, the air stayed colder than the day before, and the snow did not melt. The path slowly

descended into a valley on the northern side of the mountains. From the first outlook they saw a thin white blanket extending all the way into the flatlands beyond. The great river to the north rolled westward to the sea, unfrozen. A thick, vertical curtain of ice crystals hung over it, condensed from the relatively warm, moist air rising from its surface, following its every bend and curve from horizon to horizon, as if the water burned. Here and there in the landscape plumes of real smoke rose from sources unseen, then bent reluctantly over and clung unexpectedly to the ground, dissipating slowly in the still, calm air.

"Damn." Elwyan swore at the smoke. As Moon Hunter stared curiously, he took a long breath and continued. "There shouldn't be anyone here. This is king's forest, reserved for hunting and timber." He pointed at the largest billow of gray. "That's a smallish keep – more hunting lodge than anything else. It shouldn't be occupied this time of year for any other reason than hunting, and even that's not likely, this close to the winter storms. But by the size of that plume, there must be a considerable party there."

"With this amount of snow, there is no real hope of making much progress off the trails. And again, because of the snow, your tracks are going to be pretty obvious. I don't see how we are going to keep from being found out."

Moon Hunter took up her slate. *By whom?*

"Royalty, probably. Maybe some of the people who have been hunting you. Likely someone who at least knows about you, at any

rate. Damn! We knew soldiers were heading north, a few weeks ago, but I would not have expected a royal party here, not at this time of year."

Shall we go back? Or is there another route?

"The pass would be difficult as is, and likely fatal if we got another storm before we were well down the far side. Remember, it's a shallow descent that way – we'd be much longer at the higher elevations. And no, there's no other trail out of this area till we get to the river. We'll just have to try to stay out of trouble."

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They descended ever further into the valley. Elwyan had to move slowly – the fronts of his shins had stiffened and grown sharply sore from the forced downhill hike late in the day before. Here at lower altitudes, a thick layer of fine powdery snow rested on a thinner crust, not quite strong enough to support a footstep, where yesterday's snowfall had partly melted as it landed and then frozen solidly during the night. Occasionally they slipped and slid on treacherous patches of glare ice, dangerously hidden beneath a thin coating of snow. They encountered no travelers and only occasional hints of animal life.

I am surprised you do not carry a sword, or some other weapon such as humans use in combat, Moon Hunter spelled into his hand. I would think you might need one occasionally.

"Weapons are heavy, and besides, I might hurt someone with it," he replied.

She glanced at him. *Is not that its ultimate purpose?*

"I mean, me. It takes a lot of training before you can use one well, and you have to practice or you forget. I never had the time, or wanted to."

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As the terrain gradually changed into flatlands at the base of the hills, Elwyan paused and stared ruefully back over his shoulder. Moon Hunter followed his gaze and spelled into his hand.

Tracks.

"Yes. Like a sore thumb, if anyone crosses our trail. Mine they might ignore, but yours..." He shook his head ominously, and did not finish. The imprints of the Swift's huge talons were anything but ignorable.

Moon Hunter took out her slate. *Can we go off trail?*

Elwyan stared into the scrubby forest. The weight of the snow had bent the understory of herbaceous growth close to the ground, and depressed and spread the branches of conifers. Solid-looking hummocks of snow and brush lay where the wet fall had drifted and gathered before it finally froze, or where bending tree boughs had shed their white overload and rebounded upward. Only the trail itself was generally clear of obstacles. Moon Hunter followed his gaze, and did not even wait for an

answer.

I should wear my boots?

"No. Hmn, on the other hand, maybe. Let's try them."

Moon Hunter fished in her pack for the foot gear, and sat back, leaning on her tail, to put it on. Presently she arose and stepped back and forth in the unfamiliar confinement of the spats, flexing the protruding talons experimentally.

"Make a footprint in clean snow. Over here. Let's have a look at it." The Swift complied. Elwyan frowned as she stepped back. The indentations from the tips of the claws were plainly visible around the front of the print, which was in any case the wrong size and shape for the mark of a human foot. "Well, beforehand any passerby would have said that a barefoot demon had passed. Yet here we have the footprint of a demon who is sufficiently civilized to wear shoes."

It is kind of you to say so, wrote Moon Hunter, but it was after all you who provided the boots, and who insisted that I wear them. So perhaps I am not so civilized after all. Elwyan would have expected her to lift her coat in amusement, but she did not. Had he hurt her feelings?

"If they are not too uncomfortable, perhaps you should leave them on. Those tracks won't fool anyone when they are fresh, but if they should go undiscovered till they have started to melt a little, or if it starts to snow again, they will be unrecognizable sooner than if you were barefoot."

She remained quiet. Something about the set of her neck was not as cheerful as it had been. He took a long breath, faced

her, and spoke seriously.

"I apologize. I didn't mean that you are really a demon, or uncivilized. I won't say that again. I was trying to make a joke."

I got the joke, and I know you do not think that. But many do, and many will. Accepted, and thank you for being thoughtful.

They had walked for a little while longer, when Moon Hunter gestured for a halt and pulled out her slate again.

Elwyan? He lifted an eyebrow, momentarily forgetting that she had never understood the gesture before, but after staring intently at his face for a moment, she continued. *What you did to your home, to make it seem small and unremarkable at first sight, that was some kind of magic, was it not? A spell?* He shook his head negatively a little, anticipating what she was about to suggest. *Could you do it to our tracks, too, to make people not notice them?*

"I could," he replied, "but it I would have to turn around and do it every few hundred paces, and it takes long enough that we would end up spending three times as long traveling than if I didn't. That might be worth it, except..."

Would it not be worth taking three times as long, not to get caught?

He sighed, and continued. "It's the way it was at the house — I could only make the tracks unremarkable as long as no one looked at them closely. I couldn't hide them entirely. With all this new snow, the fact that there are tracks present would be obvious. Anyone who saw them, out here isolated like this, would

surely take a closer look at them, and see through the magic, and figure out that magic had been used. And that would make it all the more likely that we would be followed. It's good that you are thinking about things like that, though."

I feel foolish suggesting something magical to a wizard.

"Don't. Magic doesn't make me smart. I hadn't thought of using wizardry to conceal tracks at all, until you mentioned it now. I might be too used to my limitations to think of new possibilities. Just bringing it to mind might have prompted us to think of something that would work."

Moon Hunter was writing again.

Well, then, how about making some more tracks? Could you not lift the snow with magic, and fountain it away, like you showed me the other day?

Elwyan lifted his eyebrows and brought his hand reflectively to his chin. He smiled a little, eyes distant and thoughtful. "I... certainly could. Not everywhere, but at places like where paths cross, I could set false trails, just short ones. And I could fill in our real tracks with snow for a little distance, the same way. That would be fast and easy. If someone were trying to follow us, they would take a false trail that would peter out in a while, and have to backtrack and search to find the real one again. Thank you. That sounds like a useful thing to do. We'll give it a try." And they continued.

– The Consequences of Hunting –

Elwyan could never make up his mind whether the combination of still air and coldness near the ground allowed sounds to carry uncommonly far, or whether the unnatural silence of such conditions merely made them easier to detect at a long distance. In any case, he and Moon Hunter heard the whinny at the same time, from far ahead and to the right of their path.

"Can you hear anything more?" He spoke quietly, glancing nervously at his companion, as she stared intently forward, ear tufts up and alert. Her coat rippled in a way he had not seen before, then she rather stiffly swung her head from side to side in negation. He wondered if the new coat motion meant "no", or "alarm", or anything at all.

She took his hand. *I scout*, she spelled, and then stooped to take off her boots.

"All right," he whispered in reply.

She moved swiftly and silently into the woods. The wizard took cover in a thicket close by the main trail, then busied himself with the snow trick, filling their tracks behind them for the distance of a long bowshot, as far as that particular

power would reach. With the task accomplished, he kept as still as possible, trying to be aware of any sensation that might be out of the ordinary, and from time to time turned slowly, watching the jewel in his ring for signs of his companion's whereabouts.

Her return surprised him even so – he had just turned around, noting only a faint flicker within the tiger eye, when she reappeared abruptly, silently, at the edge of the thicket. Her breath steamed in the cold air. Elwyan busied himself magically filling the tracks that marked her approach, as she wrote a report onto her slate. He noted with dismay that she was writing slowly and cautiously, obviously trying not to make noise. That could only mean that someone else was very near.

I did not get too close, only enough to hear and take a peek. There are eight men on horses – soldiers – in the livery of the king. They spoke of meeting more soon. They are riding on a side path that winds this way from the general direction of the keep. If they turn left when they cross the main trail, they will come toward us. This trail is bigger than the one they are on now, so perhaps it is likely they will turn.

"Damn," Elwyan whispered, looking back where they had come from. "If they go past where I backfilled, they will find fresh, unusual tracks that suddenly disappear, and will start a search for whatever caused them. They will find us for sure, there's no avoiding it. We can't hope to keep ahead of horses, not in these conditions. Damn." He pressed his lips together and shook his head.

Moon Hunter stiffened and stared forward. After a few more moments, the clink of tack and armor became suddenly noticeable.

The wind is eddying, she spelled into his hand. The horses will smell us as they pass.

"I'll fix that," he whispered back, and felt with his power for the substance of the nearby air itself, setting it in motion from the trail toward the hiding place, so that their scent would not betray them. As the first faint hint of artificial breeze began to caress their faces, Moon Hunter turned abruptly and stared at him. Moistening a claw tip in her mouth, she silently wrote a single word upon her slate.

Windfarer. She cocked her head at him and snorted, inaudibly but visibly. The pelt on her neck was rippling.

Elwyan whispered again, "There's another way to keep them from finding us —" and abruptly fell silent, as the first of the riders came into view around the next bend.

The horsemen passed in single file, close enough that Elwyan could have tossed his glove and hit any one of them, but the thick shrubby vegetation hid him and Moon Hunter from view. With no betraying tracks in sight, the soldiers had no reason to pay particular attention to their thicket. Elwyan noted that their livery bore the special emblem of the king's household guard. The horses carried no bedrolls or other gear for prolonged travel — they were a patrol, not an arrival or a departure. A small, mongrel dog accompanied the party, bounding zealously through the snow and dodging from side to side of the path. Something rustled in the brush on the far side of the way from

their hiding place – Moon Hunter turned an eye to Elwyan and found him smiling again – and the distracted hound went by their concealed location on the other side of the trail.

A few heartbeats after the last of the party had passed, Elwyan gestured, and a quail flew from cover ahead of the riders. As seventeen pairs of eyes – human, equine and canine – followed its flight, the wizard stepped suddenly and smoothly into the path, pulling the startled Swift after him. He quickly directed a swirl of snow dust to settle into the few tracks they had just left, obliterating them completely. It looked for all the world as if the two travelers had just sprouted from the earth, or descended from the sky. Moon Hunter cocked her head and looked long and hard at the wizard. Elwyan cleared his throat and spoke.

“Good morning!” he said, brightly.

The horsemen were too professional for what followed to be complete discord, but it no one would have called it organized. First to react was the dog, who whirled around, charged a few steps, then stood in place, barking furiously. The hindmost soldier turned in his saddle, swearing in astonishment at being surprised from the rear, then his eyes widened in fear and amazement as he saw that one of the unexpected figures was not even remotely human. He drew his sword. Others, further ahead, turned also, and insofar as they could see, reacted similarly. The leader – who led – had advanced so far down the trail that he knew nothing except that the rest of his detachment had stopped and turned around. It took several tens of heartbeats

before he had managed to reverse course and get back past his men.

As the force regained some approximation of order and walked toward them, not quite threateningly, Elwyan felt for the air again, and made certain that it drifted past Moon Hunter and then to the horses. When her scent reached them, pandemonium replaced discord, for no rider could completely control his panic-stricken, bucking mount. Two men fell and three more had to dismount in haste, swords and other weapons forgotten, or at least temporarily ignored. The dog whimpered loudly and cowered, urinating into the snow.

The leader of the band kept his seat, but only with difficulty. As he drew near, Elwyan let the telltale current of air die off a bit. It wouldn't do if the soldier dismounted, then he would have hands for his weapons; it was far better to let pride in horsemanship keep him busy. Even so, the horse would come no closer to Moon Hunter than twice its own body length. The rider glowered down at them and started to talk, but curses replaced his words as the animal whinnied and reared again. Elwyan let the wind die completely, but before the mount had quieted, he himself began to speak.

"I am Elwyan Windfarer. My companion is Moon Hunter. I apologize for interrupting your patrol, but I have heard that his majesty has asked that she be brought to him. Perhaps you would you be willing to escort us to the royal keep, so that I myself may present her properly to the king?"

At the name "Windfarer", the other drew back a little. His

gaze became less wrathful, or at least more circumspect, and perhaps even a touch fearful. "I recognize you, at least," he said, glancing suspiciously at the Swift. Moon Hunter had ignored him. She was staring watchfully at the rest of the troop.

The leader nodded suspiciously, and spoke again. "I remember you from the great battle at Tarran's Ear. How did you get here?" He stared at the snow-covered ground, obviously looking for tracks of two travelers, and did not find any.

If Elwyan was displeased by the bluntness of the soldier's enquiry, he decided not to show it. "I traveled as wizards commonly do," he replied politely.

One of the other men at arms peered into the sky, then looked nervously at Elwyan and his companion. Moon Hunter's coat rippled merrily. The leader, however, was not so easily fazed. "As usual. You have strange friends, it seems to me. That looks like one of the things we've been hunting." He looked Moon Hunter up and down, as she returned his gaze unblinkingly.

"She is under my protection," said Elwyan quietly, "and I am here to present her to the king."

"Well, we are here because the king has ordered us to chase down the likes of her." The dog circled sideways part way around them, to sniff and growl inquisitively within the thicket where they had watched the troop pass. It had found their hiding place by scent, but there were no tracks to give the position away to the human members of the party, and none of the soldiers thought to pay attention to the little animal.

"She is part of my household," Elwyan said formally, but still quietly. It was not quite a challenge. The leader paused for a moment, glared harshly at the wizard, and changed the subject.

"If you are so anxious to see the king, and are so good at wizardly traveling, then why don't you just, just... travel yourselves straight into his hold?"

Elwyan raised his eyebrows. "That would be rude," he said, a little pointedly. "And disrespectful. But you must forgive me, I myself am being thoughtless and inconsiderate. I have asked for an escort, when no doubt you have your own orders to carry out. Never mind, I am sure we can find his majesty on our own." He started to turn away. Moon Hunter continued to watch the horsemen.

"Hold!" The wizard stopped his turn, and contrived to refrain from looking amused. "I mean, if you will wait a moment... If you please." The soldier's brow furrowed. He had the air of someone thinking rapidly, and a little unwillingly. "I think... I think it would be within the scope of our orders to do what you suggest. If you will allow us to escort you."

"We would be honored if you would do us such a kindness," said Elwyan Windfarer. "We are in your debt for your polite and unexpected offer."

* * * * *

The little convoy wended its way toward the small castle.

Elwyan contrived to stir up occasional wafts of breeze that blew from ahead of them, so that the horses had to precede or be frightened by Moon Hunter's scent. He smiled grimly. That way it did not quite look as if they had been captured. Three soldiers had dismounted to pace behind them, while their fellows led the riderless mounts. The commander remained seated, in the lead, and had dispatched the last of his men ahead, to the king, with a message. The dog trotted where it could keep close watch on Elwyan and Moon Hunter. It followed in trail where snow made footing uncertain off the path, but when the ground was open and more nearly clear of snow, it circled them curiously, well out of arm's reach, occasionally barking or whining. The Swift watched it sidelong, never turning her head directly toward it or even glancing at it for more than a moment. Once, when it faced them squarely and barked longer and more loudly than usual, she dipped her head in a little bow, still not looking quite at it. Her action somehow mollified the animal a little.

The humans were at least as curious, the more so when Moon Hunter extracted her slate from her pack and began laboriously to write upon it, producing script not nearly as legible as her usual crisp hand, but readable nonetheless.

Can they read this?

Elwyan thought not, but did not want to say so aloud, and did not consider himself capable of writing anything remotely readable while he was walking. Instead he took the Swift's hand and spelled into it, as she had been doing into his.

I doubt. Maybe leader. Spell. There was a snicker from the

ranks at the sight of human and other holding hands. Moon Hunter looked around at the sudden sound, but Elwyan ignored it.

I thought you were going to keep them from finding us. She glared at him for a moment, neck stiff with tension.

I did. We found them instead, he replied.

Moon Hunter glanced at him sharply. *Indeed. Yet I am not entirely comfortable with our escorts. She kept turning her head as she spelled, trying to watch all the soldiers at once.*

I trust safe-conduct. At one letter a time, Elwyan's spelled reply was time-consuming, but there was not much else to do while walking. He elaborated slowly. Your showing up with me was not something they had orders for. They know me. They know Elwyan Windfarer has been advisor to the king many times. They won't risk royal wrath by taking initiative to do something he might not like, and will get credit for bringing us in, in any case. What's safest for them is to wait and let him decide.

I had thought of that before I pulled us into the path. I am sorry I had to act in haste, but there was no time to warn you. I thought it better to take the initiative. They were going to find us anyway, there was no avoiding it.

Moon Hunter relaxed visibly and spelled a reply. *I suppose that does make sense. Nevertheless, she continued to look from side to side, and over her shoulder. And I did not know you had been advisor to the king. Did that have to do with the battle of Tarran's Ear?*

Yes. It's a long story, and that's only part of it.

What advice did you give?

I told him how to win it. Actually, I helped to win it. They rounded a bend in the trail and came upon the royal holding before he had a chance to elaborate.

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The king was out. That fact showed in the the ebullient curiosity and general lack of demeanor which met the unusual party, as it passed over the drawbridge and through the main gate of the keep. The messenger on horseback had evidently broadcast his news loudly, for everyone had contrived to find some reason to stand in the yard, or peer from the roofs and sentry posts, or perhaps sneak a glance curiously from a narrow window, at the unusual guest. The hold had few residents, and they were outnumbered by the temporary detachment of soldiers – perhaps three score in all. It looked as if almost as many dwellers in the surrounding countryside had come in as well, whether in fear of the prospect of Swifts or in hope of selling goods and services to the military, Elwyan could not say.

In any case, resident and transient alike all vied for a glimpse of Moon Hunter. Elwyan read in their faces and gestures a good deal of curiosity and much more of fear. He frowned, but fear was to be expected – she bore all too much similarity to what demons ought to look like, according to some of the popular mythology. Yet most of them knew him, by hearsay if not by face, so he smiled and nodded genially at anything that might pass for a friendly expression. Soon they were within the walls, and the

drawbridge was up, and someone was showing them to a modest, warm room in the main building within.

The fortress was constructed more of wood than of stone – one could only with great liberty label it a castle. Yet no one tried to lock the door behind them, and although the narrow window was shuttered against the cold, the latch was on the inside and the opening was unbarred. Elwyan chuckled – with his reputation, no one would think it any more possible to contain him, than the wind itself.

“Heat!” he exclaimed happily at the warm fire burning in the pleasant small hearth. “Food!” The table was temptingly set. Someone had had the presence of mind to figure out that Moon Hunter was a carnivore, for the edibles included a huge, meaty cut of salt beef. “And hot water!” Wafts of scented steam arose from a capacious washbasin, set on a side table by a stack of towels. Elwyan’s mood improved by leaps and bounds. He took off his boots, stretched his toes and wiggled them back and forth, and began to massage his aching shins. They were being treated well, housed in rich accommodation – one window even had glass.

The scratch of Moon Hunter’s stylus upon her slate interrupted his bliss. *Is something going to happen?* she had written.

“Not for the moment. They won’t budge without checking with the king first, and he will want to look at us before he makes up his mind what to do. There’s nothing to worry about.” In the warmth of the room, he found himself suddenly heated from the walk in. He stepped to a window, unlatched the shutter and

opened it outward.

I do not think you would say so even if you thought differently. And you do not smell entirely tranquil. What might go wrong? Elwyan grinned wryly and shook his head, staring into the courtyard.

"I hope I never try to lie to you, you won't even let me be dishonest with myself. There are a lot of things that might go wrong. We will just have to keep alert, and cope with them if they do. I expect we can do that." He changed to a more mundane subject. "We should unpack and clean up. We will have a royal audience with King Lyoran when he gets back from wherever he has gone. He's probably out riding. Lyoran loves nothing so much as to hunt."

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After making as much of a toilet as he could, Elwyan stepped again to the window and gazed into the court below. The royal party was not large, but even so, here there were far more humans than he had seen in one place for many weeks, not since long before he had met the Swift. For a while he watched them moving to and fro below, and shook his head in puzzlement. Something peculiar hovered at the edges of his consciousness. He frowned. There was something odd and awkward to their motions, something strange and unnatural in their appearance. He knit his brows in confusion.

Moon Hunter's familiar touch on his shoulder startled him.

She had groomed, and her coat was gleaming. She bent her head gracefully, staring sidelong at him as she wrote.

What is the matter?

"I don't know. The people here look different, somehow." He groped for words. "I think it is because I have been around you so much. They don't move like Swifts, and it is a Swift whose movements I have most often seen recently. It's quite odd. It's as if I had never really noticed how humans behave before, or what we really do."

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Twilight had fled entirely, and the thick waxing crescent moon, occasionally visible through widening breaks in the layers of cloud, had begun to turn pale orange as it neared the western horizon. A hesitant knock at their door finally hinted that king and counselors had decided to acknowledge their presence. The page who conveyed the message stood respectfully outside the threshold, fidgeting nervously. Perhaps he was inexperienced.

"If you p-please, my lord and... and l-lady, his majesty will see you now."

"We thank you." Elwyan gestured the lad in and turned to make sure the fire was securely damped, but his brow furrowed slightly as he watched the young man from the corner of his eye. It would have been natural for the youth to be nervous about Moon Hunter, but no, he was standing in the center of the room, not trying to keep away from her. Yet he was obviously reluctant

even to glance at the Swift. How strange.

"Is his majesty in good health?" inquired Elwyan, politely.

The reply was still nervous. "As well as ever. Er, I mean, well, that is."

More odd comments about the king. Elwyan wondered what was going on. "Has he supped yet? Are we to dine with him?" Such a question should be familiar protocol, and might put the page at ease.

"No, I mean, yes, he has supped. Excuse me for not saying so sooner, you are to meet with him, I mean, he asks you to join him, in the trophy room, as soon as will be convenient."

Elwyan knew what monarchs usually meant when they spoke of another's convenience. A peasant or a foot soldier would likely make haste to demonstrate that by fortunate coincidence, his will happened to match the wishes of the king in every detail. Yet the position and dignity of a wizard might well require a little more time. Besides, it never hurt to give people in charge a dose of humility. They needed it so often, and never seemed to have enough. So he painstakingly dusted a trace or two of ash from his cloak, then inspected his reflection closely in the shiny surface of a metal dish cover, all the while watching closely to see what the page thought of a few minutes' delay. The young man's nervousness did not increase. Hmm – royal impatience was not part of the problem.

"How fares your hunt?" Elwyan continued the conversation.

"The storm must have driven a lot of deer down out of the hills."

"Well!" the boy's face brightened happily. Elwyan guessed that he loved to hunt. Most boys of a certain age did. "T—that is," he blurted, with sudden great agitation, "f—for those who have gotten to hunt. But I haven't! I haven't done any h—hunting at all this trip. That's for the older men. And for the soldiers. I h—haven't gone hunting at all!"

Somehow the matter of hunting was very upsetting. What in the world could be the trouble? Elwyan tried to make small chat as he thought.

"My companion also hunts. May I present the lady Moon Hunter, of the Swift." Moon Hunter bowed slightly as the page turned full to face her and responded in kind.

"I—I'm sure she does — I'm sure you do, my lady. An honor to make your acquaintance." He stared round-eyed at Moon Hunter's sharp teeth and great claws, but even so, the change of subject had obviously relaxed him. What in the world was going on? *Oh, well,* Elwyan mused, thinking of his cats, *perhaps it won't hurt to ask for what I want.* He drew a breath and broached the subject directly.

"What's bothering you, lad? Is there something about us that makes you nervous?"

"Oh, n—no, my lord and l— lady, not at all! Yes, I'm nervous — I was trying not to let it show — I'm sorry you n—noticed. But it's not anything you have d—done, or anything I've done. I want you to kn—know that."

Elwyan was about to ask if there were anything he could do to help with whatever the young man's problem was, but the

anguished look on the boy's face made it clear that the subject was much better dropped entirely.

"Well, then, I guess we're ready to go." Elwyan fastened his cloak. "Moon Hunter?" He held out his arm. She hesitated for a visible moment, then slowly figured out that she was supposed to take it, and did so. The page opened the door and stepped through it, all manners and formal decorum once again.

"If you would please be so kind as to follow me."

They crossed the inner court. Boisterous bursts of laughter resounded distantly from kitchen and dining hall. The trophy room comprised most of the second floor of a wood and stone structure, on the far side of the main keep. The edifice appeared to be the original hunting lodge, that the rest of the hold had been built around. The page ushered them up a stair, showed them in, announced them to someone with a long, forgettable title, and disappeared in haste. The room held some twenty men, nearly all in military garb. No doubt some of the royal party had retired here to relax, after dinner. King Lyoran stood in the middle of the floor, flanked by a handful of armed guards and a few aides. He frowned and turned toward the new arrivals, and began to speak in harsh and angry tones. His companions seemed fearful of his words.

Elwyan set about humoring royalty with the protocol that royalty always thought it was due. He was halfway through a bow when a Moon Hunter's sudden, sharp intake of breath made him look first at her, then where she was looking. What he saw made entirely sensible the page's desperate wish to distance himself

from anything that had to do with royal hunting, and more importantly, from certain of the consequences of hunting. For in a corner of the room, prominently displayed, with all the shine and scent of newness, was a taxidermic mount of a Swift, positioned in a caricature of fierceness, with jaws open and one great clawed foot lifted in threat. It was smaller and more darkly colored than Moon Hunter, and once again, there were no external signs of gender to be seen. Yet there was only one Swift whom it could possibly be:

Moon Hunter's mate.

– Feet First and Kicking –

Moon Hunter had lowered her body almost to the floor, legs compressed and tail all but touching the boards. She held her neck curved much more than usual, carrying her head more in front of her body than above it. She seemed to be cowering from the force of unexpected royal wrath. The king glanced from her to the taxidermic mount, then to Elwyan, and continued his tirade.

"... so we find it appropriate that – things – such as this should decorate our hall of trophies." He gestured at the walls of the room, where mounted heads of countless animals hung, mounted on boards with placards and inscriptions. "There is no place in our realm for such unnatural beings as these. Even now my son, my own fine son, lies injured by a murderous arrow shot from one of their evil bows. We will spare this one tonight, not for any merit of its own, but merely to humor the wishes of our occasionally useful hireling, Windfarer, who has been so bold and so foolish as to place it under his protection."

King Lyoran did not notice Elwyan's cynically raised eyebrow, or the sudden hardening of his mouth. The wizard glanced at Moon

Hunter sidelong, wishing she had an expression, wishing he knew more about how to read her posture and demeanor. She remained stationary and tense; she had almost visibly diminished. He had never seen her behave that way before. She held slate and stylus, but had made no move to use them, and in any case, the king's words came too fast for her to write responses. There had not even been any chance for Elwyan himself to interject comments. Not that Lyoran had yet said anything rational enough to warrant serious reply. It made no sense for him to be so wildly angry, so capricious. What could be the matter with the man?

The king paced back and forth, gesturing angrily. "Hereafter in our kingdom the life of this creature is forfeit wherever it may be found. And the lives of all its kind as well – should the world be cursed, now or ever, with more such abominations."

Elwyan started to interrupt the diatribe, but decided it was not worth wasting words. What could he do to shock some sense into the damned fool? He glanced again at Moon Hunter. What was she thinking? The Swift was always so intent on manners and correct behavior. Had she given up completely, under verbal onslaught? Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that even the toes of her great talons had drooped downward, so that the points of all her claws were touching the floor.

"We will now take our leave. Both of you, be gone by break of day tomorrow. And –," he pointed dramatically at Moon Hunter, "go in fear of your life and the lives of all your kin!"

Elwyan's skin prickled. Something was not right. Something in

the forward set of the Swift's neck did not convey submission or surrender, not to one who knew her, not at all. As he stared at Moon Hunter, Elwyan realized with dawning fear that her lowered posture might have a different import entirely. *The lives of all your kin.* That wasn't an ultimatum that would sit well with a Swift who wanted children. Not well at all. As he drew a breath, wondering what to say or do, the king snorted in contempt, turned disdainfully away, and took a stride toward the door. In crisp, military unison, his guards started to shift their weight, in the first gesture of an about-face whereby they would close ranks to follow him.

Moon Hunter sprang, a golden blur, silent but for the sudden exhalation of her breath. Her cocked legs thrust hard against the floor, then lifted and stretched forward as she covered fifteen feet in an eye blink, hurling between the two rows of armed guards before any of them could even start to react. One powerful talon struck the unsuspecting monarch off center in the lower back, its great claws sinking a handspan into muscle and kidneys. The other, the left one, gripped his neck, toes spread wide to straddle it, claws slashing deeply. Ruby blood geysered across the ermine collar and rich gold cloth of the royal robe, as veins and arteries ripped and gaped on both sides of his throat. The momentum of her strike carried them forward together, his mouth open in an astonished, inhaling cry, trying to gather breath for a scream. As he toppled, she flexed her legs and leaped again, with a thick, cracking pop, and the inchoate shout ended before it had truly begun. She landed

behind the throne, crashed through the heavy glass and shutters beyond, and vanished into the night. The fastest of the king's men had barely drawn sword clear of scabbard, and now the guards stood in stupefied horror, mouths open, staring after her.

Elwyan let his breath out slowly, seeking calmness amid calamity, marshaling his magical abilities. A burly guard lifted his bow, arrow already nocked, and aimed at the wizard. Elwyan gestured, and the amulet at his neck flickered with a hint of light. The bow lashed wildly, and the trooper swore in surprise. The bowstring had disappeared. Elwyan glanced briefly at the man. "That's enough." The body of the king still thrashed where it lay on the floor, gushing an enormous volume of blood. Nothing else moved, except for a misshapen round object that wobbled irregularly, and spattered bits and droplets of ruddy gore as it bounced and rolled to a halt. Elwyan eyed it curiously. It still bore a jeweled and decorated circle of gold, bent and wedged in place by collision with the stone of the thick exterior wall. She had simply kicked his head off.

The broken window showed only silent darkness, and there were no shouts of alarm outside. Where could Moon Hunter have gotten to? What was she doing? A glance at the tiger eye in his ring showed it very light in color, which meant that its mate was still nearby. He thought rapidly – what would a Swift do? She wouldn't want to take unnecessary risk, but she had spoken of pack and loyalty, and that might well drive up the standard of what she thought necessary. Damn. She might be concerned for his own safety. She might return in his defense. A free-for-all

would be full of uncertainty and death. There was no need for either. It might still be possible to avert a melee.

The sergeant of the king's guards had come to his senses. He pointed at Elwyan, and began to shout orders. Elwyan gestured again, and as his amulet gleamed, the shouts disintegrated into an explosion of choking coughs. The officer hacked again and spat out the handful of fireplace ashes that had suddenly appeared in his throat. A soldier dashed for the door, but at another gesture, it slammed abruptly in his face, and latched from the outside.

"I said, enough." Elwyan struggled to keep his voice mild. His whole body was trying to shake. It took great effort to maintain even a facade of calmness.

The spreading pool of thick blood began to steam in the draft of cold air from the broken window. The headless corpse now lay almost still. In a corner of the hall, someone doubled over and threw up. Contemplating the carnage, and still reeling from its appalling speed, Elwyan realized that he at last knew why Swift always worried about correct behavior, why they had no survivable choice but always to be elaborately, formally concerned, with manners.

He turned from side to side, watching the jewel on his finger from the corner of his eye as he scanned the room. It glimmered as he faced the window. Could she be clinging to the sill? Elwyan tried to remember whether the building had ledges or gables outside. She had gone through the opening so fast she could not possibly have stopped in place.

The soldier with the stringless bow dropped his weapon entirely and charged, barehanded and cursing. Elwyan moved his hands another time, and the man cried out and dropped writhing to the floor, his face ashen with pain, first clutching at his back, then simply trying to hold still.

The guard master had cleaned out his mouth enough to start gasping more commands. Some of the younger men looked as if they might still be thinking about obeying them. Elwyan gestured once more, and an ominous dark haze began to take form around his head and shoulders. Its half-formed and changing shapes hinted of things not yet brought quite into reality, things perhaps better not wholly seen. The candles shining through it began to dim as the nebulosity expanded and thickened, slowly becoming more nearly real as it mixed with the mass of condensing vapor rising from the hot blood. The amulet at his neck emitted a faint, continuous glow. The room smelt of smoke and old fire, and from somewhere came the stench of raw, decaying meat. A dark, bulbous arm – or perhaps only a shadow – began to extend outward from the tenuous cloud that surrounded him. It approached the guardsmen, moving reluctantly, almost leisurely, yet rippling ever so slightly as it came. It lacked some vital quality, it could not quite be a thing alive, yet it was not wholly inanimate. Inch by drifting inch, it advanced toward the suddenly hesitant soldiers. Elwyan lifted a restraining hand, and the apparition paused.

He spoke a little louder, a little more firmly. "Quite enough." The room grew very quiet. "Let us all be calm." With

any luck, Moon Hunter would be listening, too. "I see no cause for more sudden death tonight. I would much rather there be no more. I should hope that we can all make another choice." Even as he spoke, Elwyan knew he sounded like a fool – he always sounded like a fool when he tried to make speeches – but that last was as much for Moon Hunter as for any of the guards, if she were indeed close enough to hear. He looked intently at the soldiers. "I believe I see some faces here from Tarran's Ear. Perhaps you remember what happened there." A fool – a boastful, vainglorious fool. But it was working! The men looked at one another nervously, and remained in place. The guard master glowered fiercely, yet held his tongue.

Elwyan bent over the king's decapitated head and gripped the twisted crown with both hands. He placed his foot on the bloody shock of hair wadded against it, pushed on the cranium, and pried off the diadem. It came free from the mess all at once, sliding with a sucking sound against red wetness, as the shattered bone beneath shifted position and gave suddenly away. Elwyan's gorge rose. Fighting back the acrid taste in his mouth, he threw the crumpled circle of metal violently against the middle of the floor. An emerald bounced loose and rolled, skittering beetle-like into the fireplace, facets making tiny mechanical clicks against the irregular sooty flagstones of the hearth. The dark cloud swirled and roiled around his head and shoulders. Now and then, briefly, shapes appeared in it that might be faces. Some were laughing, but their half-seen expressions showed not the slightest trace of amusement.

He swallowed, and scanned the room for anyone familiar. In one corner stood the officer, the captain of the group of three, whom he had met weeks ago upon the trail. Damn. He still couldn't remember the man's name. He caught the soldier's eyes and held them.

"He didn't use to be like this." Elwyan mused, almost as much to himself as to the officer. "When I put him on the throne, he was kinder and even wise now and then." He nudged the head with his toe, glanced at it with disapproval. "At least, he was sensible. What an incompetent, capricious fool! Or had he just gone mad? How long had this, this..." he sputtered and took a breath, carefully returning to calmness, "...this ridiculous behavior been going on?" The dark cloud billowed toward the ceiling and drifted close by the wall, swirling through wide antlers that capped the preserved heads of elk and deer. The man lying on the floor rolled to his side and pushed himself half upright. His breath came in short, agonized gasps, and sweat glistened on his chalky face.

The officer Elwyan had addressed stammered something unintelligible.

"Speak up! It's not treason now, he's dead." Elwyan brushed a wayward lock of hair back from his face.

"A..., about two years, Lord Wizard."

"Really..." He shook his head. "I suppose I should have been paying closer attention. I could have... Oh, well..." He thought for a moment, then let his gaze widen to include the entire company. "You know, you could have done this yourselves." He glanced at

the royal head and snorted wryly. "Well, maybe not. But something almost as good." Damn Lyoran and his crazy family. Elwyan drew a breath and continued.

Biting his tongue to suppress his churning stomach, and frowning severely, he picked up the head for a careful examination. Her terrible claws had slashed through ligament and muscle as well as blood vessels; it had been well on its way toward release, from their work alone. "Feet first and kicking," he said quietly, to no one in particular, and then spoke loudly. "Tell Eritvorrán that Elwyan Windfarer says that he is not king, eldest son or no." The spine had separated cleanly, just below the second cervical vertebra, or was it the third? It was too messy to see for sure. "Say that if anyone has taken any oaths to the contrary, he will release them formally, at once, and advise them by messenger that he has done so. Tell him to break his own oaths, and renounce the crown. Tell him Elwyan Windfarer says to do what he is told! And tell him to be polite about it." He shook his head and spoke more calmly. "I suppose Prince Br'wen can be king now, if he wants the job."

"Yes, Lord Wizard."

Something under Elwyan's foot felt rough and sharply indented. It was part of the floor — it didn't move when he scuffed his sole over it. What could it be? "Tell Eritvorrán. tell him first, that I say he is not to hurt you for bringing news he will not wish to hear. Go in company, so that he cannot harm you if he is fool enough to disobey."

There was a thin *snap* from the fireplace. Elwyan glanced at

it briefly. The emerald had fractured. The heat of the coals had released some hidden flaw within it, and caused it to yield and shatter.

The officer was replying. "Yes, Lord Wizard. Immediately, Lord Wizard. Thank you, Lord Wizard." And then, uncertain and nervous, "Lord Wizard?"

Elwyan looked down for an instant. Splintered gouges in the floor boards showed where her claws had dug in as she started her leap. The largest gaped as deep as the length of his thumbnail.

"Please go ahead, Captain. Have I overlooked something?"

"What if Prince Br'wen doesn't want to be king?"

That stopped Elwyan for a moment. "Thank you for bringing the possibility to my attention," he replied carefully, and sighed. "Then I guess he doesn't have to be. I don't suppose it makes any difference. Draw straws. Take turns. Cast a ballot. Or something. Or, do without." He moved to brush his hair out of his eyes with a hand, then realized that his fingers were now running with blood from the king's head, and stopped. "Just don't make a fuss about it. And don't bother me any more."

He stuck the head on the antlers of one of the trophies, a deer. He couldn't get the balance right, it kept tilting to one side. He moved it to a candle holder bolted to the wall, and jammed the open esophagus down over one of the wrought, pointed flutes that caught dripping wax. Now it stood straight, except for the slack jaw, gaping sideways. Yet the head was still not symmetric. Impact with the wall had crushed the front of the

skull. The eyes no longer pointed in quite the same direction. Elwyan shrugged. It would have to do. Elk and deer looked down with expressionless eyes upon the newest member of their company.

"I'm sick of all this nonsense. I want the entire royal party out of here by moonset tonight." He wiped his hands on the side of his robe. "You have about an hour to saddle your horses, roust your lovers and sober your drunks. Take the staff here with you, and shoo out anyone who has come in from the countryside. Take the road south, and don't come back. Now, move." Elwyan gestured magically one more time, the blackness in the air swirling as he lifted his arms, and all the weapons in the room disappeared. "I don't mean tomorrow and I don't mean maybe! I said, MOVE!" He pointed at the door, and it unlatched and swung open. Footsteps advanced toward the exit, first hesitantly and then with increasing speed. The man on the floor rolled over and crawled after his companions.

Elwyan slowly let the forbidding cloud begin to dissipate. The widening puddle of blood had reached the first of the claw marks. It hesitated for a moment at the edge of the indentation, then abruptly spilled over the rim, and quickly filled it.

"If you please, Lord Wizard?" Last in line at the door, the captain turned back and spoke up once again. Elwyan raised an eyebrow and tried to answer mildly. "Yes, Captain?"

"If you please, what shall I tell the Queen – I mean, the former Queen – about the disposition of the body of her husband?"

Elwyan swore softly to himself, and sighed again. "Thank you again, Captain, I am indeed forgetful this evening. I suppose you can... no, wait a minute..." He paused, and thought about manners. "Captain, it is not for me to say. It's not my kill." He took a deep breath and let it out. "It is she whom you must ask." He glanced at the gemstone in his ring, then faced the window and spoke more loudly. "Moon Hunter, please come in." The Swift's face appeared out of the shadows beyond the sill. She climbed gingerly back through the shards of splintered wood and broken glass. The Captain swallowed nervously; the lower part of her body still dripped crimson blood that had spouted from the king's neck. Her talons made dull tapping noises on the floorboards as she approached the two men, carefully skirting the widening puddle. The steam above it swirled in the chill air that followed her movements. She picked up slate and stylus, then returned to the place at Elwyan's side that she had left a mere handful of heartbeats ago. As her flank pressed gently against his, he found himself nauseated by the coppery stench of fresh blood. Trying to ignore his unsettled stomach, he rested a hand gently against the small of her back. The Swift wasn't even breathing hard.

I heard all and saw most, she wrote. Elwyan noted from the officer's glance and raised eyebrows that he could read. So did Moon Hunter, for after her next words were written she turned the slate so that he could see it clearly. I must beg your pardon, I have not yet heard your name mentioned. If you please, may I inquire to whom I am speaking? I hope it is not rude of me

to ask. She bowed gracefully.

"Callidoren of the Eastern Plains, Troopmaster of the King's Third Hired Horse." The man's pale visage dipped as he bowed nervously, yet the routine of protocol had put him noticeably more at ease. "At least, I was until a minute ago."

I am Moon Hunter of the Swift. I am honored to meet someone who can work with horses, particularly such a large and imposing one as your own mount. I fear I have had no success at cooperating with them. I have often wished I possessed such talents as yours.

Callidoren nodded politely, but his stare remained intense and worried. Elwyan watched as his brows knitted for a moment, then raised slightly. The man was quick with his wits — Moon Hunter had mentioned his great warhorse, and he had figured out almost at once that she had been a hidden presence at their earlier encounter.

And I overheard your question, she wrote. I know that humans have customs for the care of the dead, but I do not know what they are. Thus I must defer to the judgment of Elwyan. If he has no objection, you may do with the body as is appropriate in your own tradition. She looked at Elwyan, then back thoughtfully at the headless corpse on the floor. I confess I am reluctant to waste all this meat, but I believe I understand that it is more consistent with human manners to forbear, and I would not wish to give offense. Callidoren was turning paler still. Elwyan hastily took up the thread of conversation.

"Come back with a couple of men and haul him out. It's cold —

he'll keep well enough across the back of a horse, till they can get him home. I suppose you may as well take that, too," he added, pointing at the lopsided head. As he spoke, he held Callidoren's eyes firmly with his own, raised his eyebrows slightly, then glanced briefly at the taxidermic mount of the dark-colored Swift.

Pale or not, the troopmaster was gratifyingly quick. "Ah... If I may ask..." he spoke cautiously, glancing at the stuffed Swift. "We do not know your customs on that subject either. Is there something more appropriate, that is, is there something appropriate you would like us to do with your own dead?" The Swift did not reply immediately, so he continued. "We bury our dead. Shall we do that for yours?" Moon Hunter still did not answer. "He died in combat, against overwhelming odds. By our custom, he has shown great skill and courage, and earned great honor."

Elwyan left Moon Hunter's side and made a tour of the room, extinguishing candles and torches one by one. The Swift remained quiet and immobile for a time, then wrote deliberately. *Burial of your dead makes sense for you, I suppose. If not, other creatures would eat them, and some of us might acquire enough taste for human meat to become troublesome. And yes, there are some things I might do for my former mate.*

Callidoren's jaw dropped as he read the final word. "We didn't know," he gasped. "Who ever would have thought, I mean..." His voice trailed off as he stared open-mouthed at the stuffed Swift. After a few moments, he lifted his eyes to the other

mounts that circled the room, and began to stare at them as well.

Moon Hunter had continued writing. *But I would like to do them far from here, and I fear that he may be too cumbersome for Elwyan and me to bear him by ourselves. Since you are so courteous as to have offered assistance, perhaps you could find us a small cart to carry him in? Something we could push or pull?*

"I will do that gladly, Lady, if I am allowed to..." He glanced at Elwyan, who had moved to the open window, and begun cautiously to stare into the courtyard below. The wizard replied without looking at the Troopmaster.

"I exempt you from the terms for departure, Captain, and also return your weapons." He gestured, and they reappeared. "But please return here as fast as you can. I fear we may have stirred up a hornets' nest, so we must depart quickly."

After Callidoren had left, Moon Hunter turned to Elwyan and stared a moment before writing. *I am sorry I had to act in haste, but there was no time to warn you. I thought it better to take the initiative.*

Elwyan sighed as tension began to drain out of him. He nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose that does make sense."

She gazed thoughtfully back at the corpse. *I hope I acted correctly. He seemed so determined to declare war – that was what he was doing, was it not? I would have been willing to negotiate. It would have been much better to negotiate than to fight. It is always better to negotiate. But his manners left me*

no opportunity even to start.

Elwyan nodded slowly. There were shouts and wails from other parts of the building, but they sounded more astonished and uncertain than angry. "I don't think that was quite how he was thinking about it." He shook his head, lifting his hands to smooth his wayward hair, but stopped before touching it, remembering his bloody fingers. "No, not at all. 'War' isn't a word we use for chasing down one individual. He probably had something more like hunting in mind. It doesn't really matter. And I suppose that hunting does look a lot like war, if you are the quarry."

There was activity in the open area below as members of the King's party moved from place to place, but Elwyan could see nothing that looked like another threat of attack.

Moon Hunter turned and approached the stuffed mount of her former husband. The feathers of one of his ears did not mesh together smoothly. She lifted one hand and straightened them, with the gentle touch of a claw. *And I do not comprehend how anyone could think a whole ocean of honor worth a solitary drop of blood.*

She gazed at the body on the floor again, then turned abruptly away from both corpses, and approached Elwyan. She bent her head and sniffed at the wizard's clothes. *That cloud. It was chimney soot, was it not?*

"Much easier to control than the real thing," he replied.

Elwyan and Moon Hunter stood careful watch at the hall windows, waiting for Callidoren's return, but no disturbance or

threat arose. "They're scared of us now," said Elwyan, "and that makes them particularly dangerous – if they decide to attack, they will think before they move. I want to get away from here as fast as we can. We are going to have to be very careful from now on."

– An Evil Nonetheless –

They buried Moon Hunter's mate in a grove of ancient spruce on the south side of a hill, in a sheltered spot where the warm rays of the morning sun had melted the frozen surface of the ground. The Swift stared quietly at the disturbed earth, face and posture as impassive as ever, while Elwyan scraped rich black forest loam into the grave, and covered it with leafy debris. She began to keen softly, in low, aspirated hoots that alternated irregularly with gasping inhalations. He had rarely heard her strange and alien voice, but nonetheless, its broken rhythm sounded disturbingly familiar. It reminded him of something he had encountered in the past, many times, but for a long time he could not remember when, or what it was.

Finally, he realized that she was crying.

* * * * *

Later in the day, as the temperature continued to rise, the remains of the snowfall melted completely. "Fewer problems with tracks," he said thoughtfully. Notwithstanding, the Swift had

returned to her former practice of walking to the side of the trail, so that the unavoidable signs she did leave would be less obvious.

Elwyan was exhausted. They had remained at the keep only long enough to make sure that the departing royal party at least started off in the direction he had specified. Then they hiked west through the remainder of the night. Now it was mid afternoon, and they stumbled more than walked. Presently Moon Hunter drew him to a stop, and they napped in brush off the trail till almost nightfall. When they arose again, she took up her slate and started writing.

Elwyan, I must know. Have I broken some convention of human manners that I did not know about? I understand very little of your rules about combat, of how your warriors are supposed to behave.

Elwyan fumbled in a pouch at his belt, and extracted something. It was Moon Hunter's dead egg, that she had given him for magical study. He turned it absentmindedly in his hand, staring at it as he twisted it this way and that, as if seeking to fathom the mysteries of the species that had produced it.

"No," he said, finally. He swallowed and pressed his lips together, thinking carefully before he spoke again. "You did something so impossible for one of us that I am sure no one had ever given a moment's thought to what the conventions about it ought to be."

But surely, kings have been killed before.

"Indeed. But to my knowledge, never by frontal assault by a

single foe, in public, while well-guarded within a stronghold of their own. It's not a thing that humans know how to react to. It's not a thing we do."

I did not make a frontal assault, she objected. I waited till he had turned his back. That was much less risky. And he was not guarded at all, against me. It is scarcely rational to declare war when your intended enemy stands unconstrained within easy leaping distance.

Elwyan shook his head. "I am sure he had in mind hunting, not battles. And I don't think anyone in that room really understood just how fast you can move – certainly I did not. But I agree, his actions were not rational at all." He frowned. "And I have no idea what was the matter with him. Half his family seems to have a wild streak." He sighed, shrugged, and turned back to the trail. "We have to keep moving. The more distance we put behind us, the better, 'Lord Wizard' or not.

Moon Hunter was not yet satisfied. She wrote something more on her slate, and held it in front of him.

Tell me about the battle of Tarran's Ear.

"All right." Elwyan sighed again, glad for a change of subject. "It was... almost twenty years ago. That was the final battle in the war that put Lyoran on the throne. I helped win it."

How? Why?

"The 'why' is because we were outnumbered three to one, and without assistance he was going to lose." The wizard glanced at his companion. "Lyoran never liked losing."

His neck was stiff from sleeping on the cold ground. He flexed it, and twisted his shoulders to loosen them. "And as for 'how'... Well, you've seen me move things from place to place magically, without their going through the space between. Telgoan— that was the other man who wanted the throne — was feeding his troops out of big pots of stew, the night before the battle. I put some stuff in as many of the pots as I could, to make them sick. I had to get pretty close to do it — it took lots of sneaking around after dark."

You poisoned them.

"Yes. Not fatally," he added, "I used something you can prepare from chicken entrails. It doesn't kill healthy adults if you are careful about dosage, but it gives people stomach cramps and diarrhea for a day or two, so they're not good for much fighting. Oh, a few died, but not many."

A commendable tactic, she replied. Most effective and most considerate, introducing such a substance where it was not expected.

"Not everyone approved."

Why not, if it saved lives? Surely, people would rather just get sick for a while, than be hacked to ribbons with a sword, or be beaten to pulp with a mace?

"People like tangible enemies they can meet face to face. It's one of those rules you mentioned."

The more to your credit that you broke it. How did you happen to think of such an idea?

"I sometimes administer medicine directly to the stomach or

bloodstream of the person I am treating. Poisoning stew pots at a distance is the same kind of magic – moving small doses of stuff through a distance.”

Moon Hunter blinked thoughtfully. *So the battle was easily won?*

“No,” answered Elwyan, grinning wryly, remembering.

Why not?

“Well, I didn't get all the stew pots, and some soldiers ate from their own provisions, and what's more, as near as we could tell, about a quarter of Telgoan's troops were too scared to eat anything at all, and they fought like demons. It was a near thing, and pretty bloody. Almost a thousand died. That's the total for both sides.”

She thought for a moment. *A thousand. Seven dozen dozen.* Then, after a further pause, she wrote again. *When I asked "why", I meant, why were you backing Lyoran? You did not seem to like him any more than I did.*

Elwyan snorted. “He was the lesser of two evils. And besides, he's changed since then. I have been out of touch. I never pay enough attention to things like king and court. Last night surprised me. I don't understand it.” He frowned and shook his head slowly.

The lesser of two evils is an evil nonetheless. If Swifts were in a position of having "two evils" compete to be some sort of leader, I suspect we would choose neither. Surely it would be preferable to look for someone who would do a good job.

“It's not how we do things.” He stared at her uneasily. “You

probably think our way wastes life and fresh meat."

I am sure all the dead at Tarran's Ear got eaten by something sooner or later. Meat rarely goes to waste. And all it got you was a ruler you finally were glad to get rid of. That does not make any sense. I think you should have run off both pretenders – is that the word? – before they could start a battle. Everybody seems to want to be king. Surely you could have found someone qualified.

"Neither would have run. I would have had to kill them. And Lyoran did not rule too badly, at least at first. Twenty years of relative peace and tranquility is worth something."

True, but what if you had found something better? And what a shame to accept a thousand deaths for so little purpose. Just two would have been much preferable. I would have a long way to go if I were to try to match you and your compatriots at killing. A thousand humans the size of the ones you usually put in armor would feed me for half a lifetime.

Elwyan had gone from feeling uneasy at Moon Hunter's bloodshed to feeling uneasy about his own. A little shamefacedly, he tried to make amends.

"I was beginning to think about disabling Lyoran last night. I could have done it as easily as I put that soldier's back out, and then have made some arrangement to get him off the throne. Or I could just have stopped his heart."

Moon Hunter was not to be distracted. *You restricted yourself to a bad choice just because no other choices were easily available. I think that was a risky mistake. You should have*

spent some effort trying to come up with something better.

Elwyan grimaced. There was only one thing he could say.

"You're right."

After a moment, he continued.

"I have a question about last night, myself. You have been talking as if you expected beforehand that killing Lyoran would get you out of risk. Why is that?"

A rapid strike from behind gives prey no opportunity to defend itself.

Elwyan smiled thinly. "So I noticed."

It also provides a quick death, which is particularly courteous.

He frowned and stared at her. "What? Why do you worry about being courteous, if you are angry enough at someone to be willing to kill him?"

He may have family or friends to avenge him. Suppose that I had fallen into their hands. If I were about to be killed, would I not want to have given my enemies cause to treat me with good manners and consideration in the means of my death? Would not his friends and family at least take some comfort that he had died swiftly, and reciprocate?

Elwyan shook his head in confusion. It made perfect sense, it just wasn't the common kind of sense, that he was used to. Of course, Moon Hunter was scarcely a common creature.

You talked about traditional curses once. We have one of our own: "May your enemies all have patience."

Elwyan opened his mouth, then shut it again. He chuckled deep

in his throat. "You mean, 'may they wait long enough to find a successful opportunity to strike back.' That's a fine curse."

"But what I meant was, why did you think there would be no further violence? I'd think you'd have been worrying about immediate vengeance from his guards."

Nobody smelled angry. Nobody was poised to move. There was no intensity or attention among his companions. It seemed obvious that they would not support him. I was worried there might be danger to you, before people settled down and started thinking. Now I see that I was wrong. You were very impressive, especially with that cloud. By the way, where did the weapons go, when you made them disappear?

"Into the moat."

But the weapons of the Troopmaster not wet when you brought them back?

"I didn't work the return spell for water, just for the weapons. It can be very precise, and it's good practice to set magic up so that it doesn't do any more than you want. It shouldn't be like life – the idea is that when you get what you wish for, you ought to get only what you wish for." He paused and grimaced.

"And, speaking of getting things you didn't wish for, Eritvorrán may not take kindly to his father's death at your hands – at your talons, the more so on top of he himself having been wounded by Swift. I ought to put all the wards I can on you, next time I am rested. That might give us a little warning and protection if he should try to track us, to do you harm.

Eritvorrán is smart and clever, and by all accounts an excellent hunter and a brave warrior. He would make a very dangerous enemy. He's far too much like his father."

How would he know where we are going? Moon Hunter inquired. *Is there some way he could know where to start looking for us?*

Elwyan sighed. "By inference, most likely. He knows what places you fought humans, and therefore in what direction you were heading. Then you turn up at the King's lodge, in company with me, and clearly going somewhere else. North and east is wild and impassable, and we came from the south, so we are likely headed west, and there is only one real route that goes in that direction – down river. And besides, you know from your prior experience that even with great care not to leave a trail, you may nevertheless be tracked."

I understand, wrote the Swift, and thought quietly for a while. Then she added something more.

Elwyan, it seems obvious that it is you who is the real power in this land. I cannot help but wonder if there is some reason why do you not simply take the crown yourself?

The wizard chuckled distantly. He knew his strange companion well enough to guess that she was worried about somehow breaching protocol by asking a personal question. He ran one hand through his hair, and answered with a half smile.

"Well. As you have perhaps noticed, kings often die violent and messy deaths. Surely, that is a fate to be avoided. And there are other wizards to worry about. What's more, if I did take the crown, when would I ever have a chance to read?" Moon

Hunter's pelt rippled as he elaborated. "Seriously, I don't want to be a king, I only want to live in a land not too badly ruled. But I truly wish good help wasn't so hard to find."

"Now, we should get going again. It's hours till moon set, and we should make more distance while we can. I'm exhausted, and I suspect you are too, but we have to move."

– The Song of Humanity –

Elwyan did not install his wards against Prince Eritvorrán until after the night's camp. He could tell that his magic had succeeded, yet the familiar patterns and rituals of the ceremony had done little to restore his own personal tranquility and peace of mind. Shaking his head, he reviewed with Moon Hunter the capabilities and limitations of the spells he had just cast.

"Above all, don't get overconfident. The wards will probably give you a little warning against the things they are set for. It will very likely be in the form of a sudden fright, or perhaps a feeling of unease, or a very bad feeling about doing some particular thing. There should be time for you to react. And they should also give you some actual physical protection against the hazards themselves – things like weapons and projectiles – just as long as you don't deliberately try to overpower them, and get yourself into harm's way."

"But remember, they are not perfect – far from it. What's more, we ourselves are not perfect. I mean, if Eritvorrán does try anything unpleasant, he may come up with something we simply haven't thought to ward against, so we will have no protection.

We must both try to keep thinking of things that we might have missed. What is most likely to get you is something you weren't expecting."

Could you put some sort of spell on Eritvorrán himself, to keep him from trying to harm us, or at least so we would know where he was and what he was doing? Moon Hunter remarked.

"That would make good sense," Elwyan replied, "except that if the spell were on him, then he, or someone around him, would be likely to detect it. Then it would get removed. Besides, I couldn't put a spell on him without being much nearer to him, to do so. He's not here, and I don't have any idea where he is."

Elwyan's brows furrowed for a moment. "If I had to hazard a guess, if Eritvorrán is indeed recovering satisfactorily from his wound, he is probably heading toward the keep we just left, thinking to pursue whatever Swift remained, and to join with his father. If so, then I dare say that he will be wrathful when he arrives. I would be."

Indeed, replied Moon Hunter, and they set out upon the trail once more.

* * * * *

After the fear, excitement and scant rest of the last two days and nights, Elwyan and Moon Hunter were both bone-tired by the time they were ready to make camp. Scarcely had the sun set when they tumbled half-awake into their bedding, and clung comfortably to one another for warmth. Yet Elwyan could not

sleep. His memory was haunted by the sudden violence with which this creature had killed. The unquestionable good sense of her reasoning and explanations did not reach the level of his psyche that was disturbed.

'Feet first and kicking,' he thought to himself, feeling the warmth of her great talons, once again drawn up and curled over his forearms. Yet he spent the night drifting between nightmares about the times he had seen those talons work, and periods of sweating wakefulness, when he returned from his dreams to find their owner nestled calmly and trustingly, fast asleep in his arms.

* * * * *

The trail they followed trended obliquely toward the west, paralleling and eventually adjoining the Great North River as it rushed through its tumultuous course, westward toward the distant ocean. Only small boats plied its length. Frequent, treacherous, white water forbade the passage of vessels large enough to carry any substantial cargo, so that most of the commerce went by road. Yet occasionally a light canoe or open rowing boat sped past westbound, carrying some person in haste, exploiting the speed of the flowing water at the price of laborious portages around the more dangerous rapids.

"Any one of those could be a messenger," Elwyan pointed out. "News of Lyoran's death will be ahead of us."

The path ended at the river road. That highway cut for the

most part through woods and scrubby vegetation. Fortunately, the early snowfall had melted, so that Moon Hunter could avoid being seen by keeping to the side of the thoroughfare.

"There are towns and settlements, and here and there some agricultural land," Elwyan lectured. "We may both have to go off road for a while now and then. And there's the question of getting across the river, too. There are no bridges, not anywhere on the entire river, and no fords, either, not where it's this fast and deep. And you would be rather too conspicuous on a ferry, I suspect." He chuckled thinly before continuing. "There are places where it's calm enough that we can get across by ourselves in a small boat. I am sure I can find one to rent or buy. It will be a day or two before we come to a good place to cross, though."

* * * * *

On the second day down river, someone saw them. They both reacted at once, to the startled whinny of a horse, echoing loudly from a bare spot, high on the half-wooded slope overlooking the road. When Elwyan finally located where the sound originated, he saw a rider, a man at arms, trying to control his mount. The horseman succeeded almost at once, and galloped off.

"Damn." Elwyan swore. "The wind's blowing up slope. It must have brought your scent to the horse." He swore again, and spoke more calmly.

"That looked like one of the local militiamen. He'll report, and his superiors will get the word out. I wish that hadn't happened, but I suppose it was bound to come, sooner or later. We'd better make some plans."

* * * * *

The clear, liquid whistle of a recorder drifted up from the village below, as a beginning musician carefully practiced a folk tune. Elwyan and Moon Hunter watched stealthily from cover at mid slope. They crouched behind thick underbrush, well clear of the road, but far enough below the ridge top to eliminate any risk that they might be seen in silhouette against the skyline. A steady breeze blew from the northwest, from the village toward them.

"There are lots of boats," Elwyan was whispering to his companion. "They fish, and carry people across, and move a little cargo on the river river now and then. This is a good harbor, just below one long section of bad rapids, so it is a natural place for the transition between water transport and portage. Such places usually end up with villages at them."

I see, wrote the Swift. And what are the other buildings?

"Some are residences, of course, but there are other kinds as well. There is an inn, a temple, a few market stalls, a couple of sheds where tradesmen work at this and that, a livery, that's a water wheel under construction..." His voice trailed off as he stared carefully at the little settlement. The would-be music

maker had completed his piece, and started it again.

Is there any sign of the horse of the person who saw us? I have been looking myself, and I do not see him, but I am not familiar enough with the use of horses to have noticed the details of his gear at a glance.

"I'm not sure. It was a long way to see fine points, and I only had a glimpse. But there is a horse that looks like the right one tied up by the inn."

Do you mean the light colored one, the dappled gray, or -

"That does it," Elwyan interrupted her. A nondescript small-headed bird had fluttered out of a window of the inn. As they watched, it mounted to the sky on quick beats of powerful wings, then flew rapidly toward the east. A thin white streak wrapped the base of its neck, and a broad shadowy band spanned the aft end of its tail feathers.

"That's a carrier pigeon. It will be bearing some kind of message."

Will it necessarily be about us?

"Probably. We shouldn't go getting all vain about it, but there's not much that happens out here. We're certainly the big news."

Could it be about the death of the king? They might have just got word.

"I doubt it. The royal party would at least have dispatched messengers this way, and they can go faster than we can. They likely heard of it a day ago, or even two. See, the windows in the inn are covered with black cloth, and the market is closed.

That's the kind of thing you do when there has been an important death. Besides, the pigeon was headed east."

"Look, there goes another." The brisk slaps of the bird's wingtips, striking each other on the downstrokes, sounded faintly as the courier left the window and gained altitude in a steep climb. Elwyan grimaced. "They probably sent the same message twice, to make it more likely that at least one copy gets through."

A third bird appeared and climbed, but this one turned away toward the west. Flying powerfully, it soon vanished into the distance. "Drat," said the wizard. "Now, news of our whereabouts will be ahead of us as well as behind. That's bad news."

What do we do now?

"Nothing, till nightfall."

So be it, wrote Moon Hunter, then rippled her neck pelt in amusement. *Our musician seems very determined to practice. That is bad news, as well. I am getting a little tired of it. Is that his seventh time through, or the eighth?*

Elwyan chuckled in spite of himself. "I don't know. I've lost count. After a while, you don't notice it any more, just out of familiarity. At least, I don't."

I can hardly wait.

"Well... Let's move cross-slope to where we can see the waterfront, and look for likely boats. Maybe that will distract you from your ears. We want one that is pulled up on the beach far from the center of town. And not so big that we can't handle it by ourselves." He lowered his head and began creeping

silently through the wet underbrush.

* * * * *

I do not see anything upriver, Moon Hunter wrote later, after a careful inspection of the waterfront, but that hut a little way downstream has a rowboat drawn up beside it, on the side away from the center of town. Perhaps it would suit our purposes.

"I believe it might," said Elwyan, who had reached the same conclusion himself.

* * * * *

For a time, they sat quietly, watching the late-afternoon activity in the village below. Presently the careful touch of his companion's clawed hand distracted the wizard from his scrutiny. He glanced at her in surprise, and found that she had several sentences already prepared. He had not noticed she had been writing.

You have been watching steadily for a long time now. You seem very intense, and you smell perplexed. Is something the matter?

He shook his head slightly, and tightened his lips together. "Yes. I'm... It's like it was in the castle the other day, before we were summoned by the king. People look different. What they do doesn't seem quite the same. I don't understand it."

He turned to face her. "It's not that the people are

different, it's that my own perspective is different." He fumbled for words, then suddenly began to smile.

"Did you notice that our repetitious friend with the recorder has stopped playing?"

The Swift blinked. *No, not till you mentioned it just now. I guess you were right, after a while I stopped noticing entirely, out of familiarity.* She cocked her head and stared at him thoughtfully. *Does that have something to do with what is bothering you?*

"No, but it will serve as an example. The tune he was playing is a beautiful melody – to human ears, at least, or at any rate, to mine. It is one of my favorites. Yet even so, I also found myself ignoring it after a while, and I myself did not notice that he had quit playing until long after he had stopped."

"Seeing all these people – all these humans..." He hesitated, frustrated, and started again. "I think that living among creatures like myself all my life has made me not notice them, in the same way. Too much familiarity has dulled my perceptions of my own kind. I have never noticed the things we do and the way we behave, the things that are particular, the things that are odd or don't make sense. I didn't see them at all, before now. I'm not sure I ever did. Do you understand?"

About too much of the same music, yes. About what you are saying, not yet. Please go on.

"I mean that knowing you has gotten me far enough away from humans to see them. I've known you so long – well, not so long, but so intensely..." he blushed and stopped. "It's like I've heard

another song than human now – your song, the melody of the Swift – for so long, that now I can really be aware of the song of humanity, of my own people. I've gotten far enough away that I can notice it. I don't think I ever have, before. I feel like I am seeing my own people for the first time, looking at them from somewhere else, not from too much familiarity."

Elwyan frowned. "I'm trying to use a metaphor and I seem to be failing miserably. Am I making any kind of sense?"

The Swift wrote carefully. *I think so. You mean, because I am unhuman, and because you have interacted with me intently – she continued writing sedately enough, but briefly stroked her flank against his hip – your perspective has widened enough to see humans as one among many possibilities, not merely the only thing that can be?*

"Yes. That's about right. And it makes me see humans much more sharply, it brings them into focus." Elwyan touched her head behind her ears and traced his fingers in a zigzag path down the back of her neck, twining a boot lace pattern around and between the many closely-spaced vertebrae that gave it its flexibility.

I rather envy you the experience. Though now that I think of it, I can experience a little of the same thing, even though my contact with other Swifts is all in in the past. I see all these humans and think back on my clan, and seem to see them more clearly in my memory. She leaned closer against him, pressing her neck against his throat as he curved his arm around her sleek back and warm shoulders.

Elwyan gazed once again at the figures moving below, and laughed softly. Moon Hunter touched an interrogative that she kept handy at the edge of her slate.

What?

"Nothing. Change in perspective."

She had said 'unhuman'. What a ludicrous word! Where once it would have echoed powerfully of the smug superiority of men and women like himself; now all it did was bespeak their limitations with a subtlety beyond most of them to understand.

He twisted half way round and stared back up the slope. The pale figure of the moon shone high in the south, a luminous presence behind the azure veil of the sky. It stood exactly half full, at a key moment in its growth, caught poised in transition between one phase and an entirely different one.

Them? Elwyan chuckled at himself for unconsciously denying his birth, and hugged Moon Hunter more tightly as she molded her body against him. Truly he did feel different, more alone than ever before, in a life already isolated by the power and rigor of magic and scholarship, more solitary, and yet more at peace. But in stepping away from one thing he had stepped toward something else, in turning his back on the human race he had come unexpectedly face to face with a wider whole, with a unity that he did not fully comprehend. Yet it felt good. It felt right.

He thought of mother bears and their cubs, of curious voyeuristic mountain lions, of small ring-tailed beggar women with blackberry tea cakes, and always, always of the achingly

beautiful alien lover now warm and comfortable against him. Human. Unhuman. Elwyan snorted. He was ready for a larger word. His world had changed, he knew that now, yet he had not stayed behind. He had changed with it. And that was perhaps the strangest change of all.

* * * * *

Early that night, Elwyan and Moon Hunter stole the rowboat they had identified. The nearby house lay dark and empty, its chimney emitting no trace of smoke. Tied to a tree branch where the small vessel had been drawn up, Elwyan left a purse of silver that ought to be worth far more than the little craft. He felt guilty, and wanted the gift to be sufficiently generous.

"It's not just the value of the boat," he explained. "In case the people who own it use it as their means of livelihood, then I want to leave enough extra so that they can buy what they need to live on, until they can get a new boat."

The two voyagers set forth in the moonlight. Elwyan sat on the midships seat, looking aft, while Moon Hunter squatted facing forward, tail braced atop the transom, extending out over the water beyond it. Together they worked the one pair of oars. Water purred against the hull, and low clouds blew before the chill wind, but the crossing was marred only by the occasional need to stop and bail, for the small boat leaked.

You paid too much, Moon Hunter spelled into his hand.

"We could always return it and swim across," he grumbled in

reply.

As they approached the far side, Elwyan gestured that they should stop rowing. "We may as well get as much of a free ride as we can," he explained. "The moon doesn't set till past midnight, and it's at least that long a float to the next batch of rapids. The current is carrying us faster than we can walk. We don't even have to row, just bail. There's a trail on the far side of the river, we can cut in and pick it up wherever we land."

* * * * *

For a time the river banks drifted silently by. Between spells with the bucket, Moon Hunter gestured at occasional passing lights on shore, and spelled into his hand once more, fingers clumsy from the cold and the wind.

How sad to go alone with others close by. You asked once, how I can take a new mate soon after the death of my old one? It is because it is hard for a Swift to be alone, but "alone" has two meanings. I took my old mate so as not to be alone, not because I got along with him well. Not that we did not get along - we were good companions - just that we were not close. There were so few, neither of us had an opportunity to choose. I was not glad to lose him, but it was not the way it was for my father when my mother died. She stopped spelling and remained quiet for a little while.

So once again, I was alone, and did not like it. And now

there is you. You are not of my people, but I get along better with you than with him. There is concern for each other. There is sharing. The kind of people does not matter. You have become even more family, more clan, than he ever was. And with us, with the Swift, that means everything.

I hope this is an answer you can understand.

Elwyan held her close for a while, until wet feet reminded him that it was his turn at the bailing bucket.

* * * * *

As the moon settled into the clouded west, Elwyan brought the boat to the rocky shore, and they disembarked. "We'll let the boat drift – there's no point in taking the risk that someone might find it here and trace us."

Should we sink it?

"I suppose we should. But it's wood, and I don't see any loose rocks big enough to weigh it down. Here, let's swamp it and let it go. That way there will be less chance for it to be seen than if it were riding high in the water." Reluctantly they entered the cold river, and accomplished the task.

"It's too bad we can't do this every night." He stared unhappily at the departing boat. "But someone would be sure to notice a pattern, and then there'd be guards trying to catch us, or a more precise search for strangers during the day. I'm sure they are searching already."

I am very wet. Let us make camp and get warm.

– What Terrible Revenge –

The next morning dawned sodden and foggy. A wet gray cloak lay thickly over everything, denying sight and muffling sound. No tinder remained dry enough to start a fire, so Elwyan laid out a cold breakfast of trail rations while Moon Hunter rolled and tied gear.

"Things will probably dry out later in the day. We will have to collect and cover some firewood in the evening, before we bed down." The Swift nodded, and busied herself with her equipment.

They had not the slightest warning. Brush at the edge of the clearing bent and rebounded with a sudden swish, loud and unexpected in the foggy silence. The wizard turned abruptly, to see prince and would-be king Eritvorrán, half-cloaked in mist, emerging abruptly from the thick underbrush that should have hidden their little clearing. The intruder's eyes glared wild and angry, above a three-day growth of black, stubbly beard. Deep wrinkles creased his clothes, and dark stains of perspiration streaked the shiny inner surfaces of his leather riding breeches. Elwyan's purse, the one they had left to pay for the stolen boat, dangled from a cord around the prince's

neck, and there was a faint hint of magic about it, a hint that told Elwyan in a flash that the leather bag itself had been the tool to lead their pursuer directly to his prey.

And suddenly Elwyan knew what possible plan, what terrible revenge, he had forgotten to ward against in all his spells. For the drawn longbow the enraged prince carried was aimed not at Moon Hunter, but squarely at Elwyan himself, and from point-blank range. Eritvorrán's eyes blazed with madness and triumph as his fingers loosened from the fletched end of the barbed war arrow. Elwyan knew, even as he began to raise his arms in a futile attempt at a countering spell, that no human reaction could possibly allow him to dodge or to protect himself.

Yet as the bowstring whistled, a golden streak hurled between archer and target. The speeding arrow thunked solidly into flesh. Moon Hunter gasped, stumbled, and collapsed forward, arms clutching at her chest. The startled assassin hastily snatched at his quiver for another arrow, fumbled, and dropped it with a curse. Before he could pick it up or draw another, the talisman on Elwyan's chest lit up, and he heard his own voice speaking in stern, measured cadence, speaking as if from an enormous distance, cold and remote, with a chill, calm, certainty that was far more frightening than even the greatest heat of rage.

"Damn you, Eritvorrán son of Lyoran. Damn you. Damn you. Damn you forever." And the last Elwyan saw of the furious prince was his wide gray eyes, still full of terrible wrath, only beginning to show the barest hint of fear.

* * * * *

She lay writhing in half-conscious agony. "Moon Hunter!" Elwyan cried as he quickly knelt beside her, "Hold still! You must be still! HOLD STILL!!" Blood flowed steadily from the wound in her chest, but in small volume. Perhaps the arrow had not done major damage. Heedless of what she might do in pain and panic with claws or teeth, he tried to hold her body steady while not pulling at the area of the wound itself. She gathered herself together a little, in response to his pleas. Her motions became less jerky.

One vial in his kit held a drug that was a soporific for humans, but he had no idea what it would do to a Swift. No matter, there was no other choice. Drawing on his magic as rapidly as he could, he moved a small dose of it directly to her bloodstream, fearfully awaiting unexpected consequences. After a few moments she became calmer. He increased the dose. Now she lay quiet, dozing at the edge of consciousness, and he could devote his full attention to the wound. He placed his hands gently around the entry-point of the arrow, if only to stop the blood while he gathered his thoughts and powers, and found to his increasing horror that his palms were centered directly over the beat of her heart.

"Damn," he sobbed softly. "Damn, damn." He took a deep breath, and then another, and called up all the images of symbols, of all the ritual associations he had ever made with calmness or with tranquility. He put aside his feelings for the

person inside the injured body, thoroughly grounding himself in spite of his agitation, drawing on years of study, training, and practice to bend his emotions to follow his own will. He let his mind consider her wound, her anatomy, the functions of her organs, all with detachment, as if he were looking down on her from a great distance. Carefully mustering his ability to transport things, he focused it on the organs and muscles under her skin, not letting tissues move but continually starting to do so, using their response and their affinity for the flesh that surrounded them as a kind of sixth sense, to see what attached to what, and how well, and how badly it was damaged. The amulet at his neck glimmered as it sensed the delicate spell.

The arrowhead had glanced off bone – he could feel the scrape it had left. That impact had taken most of its force, otherwise the shaft might well have gone all the way through her. Perhaps the wards had helped some, after all. Nevertheless, the point had penetrated the outer muscle of the lower part of her heart. That muscle also formed the bulk of the wall of one of the organ's blood chambers. It still held, but the arrowhead had pierced it disturbingly far. The damaged tissue yielded a little more with every beat of her heart. Soon it would give way completely, and no power he possessed could then halt the fatal escape of her blood. His magical ability to push and poke at a distance was too crude to reinforce the tear directly.

He let his probing widen in scope, sensing how her heart lay in her body and how it worked. "Let's see," he muttered to

himself, "blood comes in *here*, and goes out to the lungs *there* and back in – no, wait..." He shook his head. It was all backward, everything was turned around, compared to the hearts of humans and of all the large animals he had studied. The great veins and arteries were on the opposite sides. Everything was reversed. Her heart was like the heart of a bird, and almost as complicated. He shook his head again, and continued his careful examination, tracing out the flow of unfamiliar blood vessels, feeling the ebb and flow of the precious liquid within.

Now, carefully maintaining his calmness of mind, he called forth magic. He applied the same spell in four places at once, continuously working, transporting the blood from the veins that approached her heart so that the liquid never reached it, but reappeared instead in the corresponding passages that led away. Now his own magical energy – not muscle – kept the vital fluid flowing; it did not pass through her heart at all.

It was not enough. Blood surged backward, driven by the pressure in her veins and arteries. It flowed into her heart and kept it expanded, kept pushing relentlessly at the tear. He fumbled quickly under the layer of wet leaves and debris, seeking rounded cobbles in the earth below. He moistened them with blood flowing from the wound – its affinity with her heart would help. Casting magic, he moved four of the small, smooth rocks into the great veins and arteries near where they met the heart, plugging them almost completely. Her heart was all but bypassed. The stones allowed only a little fluid to pass, to nourish the heart itself. Carefully he added more magic, to move

some of the blood within the chambers out into the arteries. The pressure on the heart walls slackened. Yet even so, the torn muscle was not yet safe, for the heart still beat, or tried to, and its strong muscular contractions placed it in jeopardy from the expanding wound.

Elwyan thought rapidly through his pharmacopoeia, then introduced a tiny quantity of yet another drug, one that caused muscles to relax, a drug so powerful as to be fatal in large doses. He infused it directly into the smaller blood vessels that fed the heart itself. The muscles beat less strongly. He fed more of the drug, increasing the dose in tiny, careful increments, till their contractions nearly quieted. He did not dare to bring her heart completely to a halt, for fear of never being able to get it going again. But at last, the strain on the tear diminished. That would have to do. Now he could get the arrow out by the magic he had used to put the pebbles in – it clattered harmlessly to the ground an arm's length away from her, clean of blood. Its feathers, and the ties that had held them, fluttered separately onto her chest, for he had worked the spell on only the arrowhead and its shaft. The ebb of blood from the external wound slowed to a trickle – at least the arrow had pierced no major vein or artery on its way in. He applied a bandage and gentle pressure with his hands to stop the flow, and after an hour no longer needed to press.

Still working the magic that kept her blood flowing, he stepped back and look critically at his patient. She lay unevenly on the damp ground, unconscious, shivering with wet and

cold and pain. He could make her more comfortable – he had already thrown his cloak over her – but she would need to lie still for days at least, and there were far better places than here. It would be safer to move her while he himself was still fresh. Once again he marshaled his abilities – it had taken more than a decade of study before he could keep so many spells going at once. He raised his arms, took a deep breath, and concentrated carefully. His amulet flashed momentarily, and the scene around them dissolved, to be replaced by another scene, a place for which he had great affinity, a room that he knew and remembered well from the years of his childhood apprenticeship.

* * * * *

Not for decades had Elwyan been in the home and keep of Darleialys Stormbender, but the great hall had changed only by the recent acquisition of dust and a musty smell. He stood on a thick rug before the enormous fireplace, and Moon Hunter lay at his feet. He sensed at once that the castle was empty; its former occupant's staff had left, and the wards and other defenses that protected the hold from intruders still partially worked.

He brought logs to the huge, open hearth, stuffed tinder around them, and made a spark. As the flames drove away the cold and dampness, he rummaged further, and found blankets and bedding. All the while he fought a sudden upset stomach, a side-effect that came every time he moved himself from place to place

by means of his magic. Once again he transported Moon Hunter, to the pallet he had made, close by the fireplace. Then he settled down, all his energy focused on the steady need to keep the magic working that let the blood bypass her wound, and that kept the plugs in her veins and arteries clear of clots, all for long enough for the muscle of her heart to begin to heal.

Three full days passed before he could allow himself even a moment for sleep.

– How Very Human –

Moon Hunter opened her eyes and stared weakly. Her heart beat nearly normally again, pumping blood as before, but Elwyan cautiously kept her still sedated.

"You must rest," he said softly, but she made writing motions. He brought her stylus, and held the slate propped where she could reach it easily. He knew her well enough to anticipate what symbols she would touch first.

Thank you.

"Not required. You saved my life, too."

I live, she wrote next, a little slowly because of the sedation, and touched the interrogative sign on the wooden frame.

"You do. You do." He sighed and shook. "But you must rest a while longer, till the wound is fully healed. You are making a good recovery."

She fumbled weakly at the slate again, trying to write out a long sentence containing the word "infection".

"Not a chance. When I brought us here I made sure not to bring along any of the poisons that cause it. They are a kind of

life-form in their own right – there is some kind of life force almost everywhere, even where we cannot see anything. We don't know much about it, but it seems to be what causes infections. When I brought you here, I arranged that the magic just transported us, not the life force, so as to leave behind any of it that had entered your wound. It's routine to arrange that a spell affect only what you want it to affect, and when you do that with magical transportation, it's a good medical tool. Now sleep."

He gave her more of the soporific drug, then tiptoed quietly off in search of a privy. His stomach continued to complain. He had herbs and some strong cheese, that in time would settle his gurgling intestines, but even so, it would be many days before he could eat anything substantial, before his body returned to normal, the more so with his present lack of sleep. Oddly, his patient had shown no such distress. Perhaps it was merely that she had not filled her stomach for several days before she was shot. Or maybe her different diet explained it.

At any rate, Moon Hunter continued to improve rapidly, almost visibly. On the next day she ate some soup that he had prepared. Elwyan did not let her use her slate again till the following morning, though. He had reduced the sedation. He sat beside her, stroking her neck and face as she wrote.

Can this really be the home of Wizard Darleialys?

"You should know that it is. You have been here before."

True. But it happened so very fast. How did we get here?

"I brought us."

Moon Hunter thought for a moment before continuing.

By magic?

"Yes. That's the real reason why they call me Windfarer. It's not flying – what I did was the kind of magic where things go from place to place without going through the space between – but people say it's as if I could walk the winds." Elwyan was nervous. He had a sinking feeling that he knew what would come next.

It was that easy?

"Yes." Sinking deeper. She stared at him unblinkingly, but changed the subject.

What happened to Prince Eritvorran after he shot me? How fortunate we were that he was impatient – that was not a well-planned ambush, not at all. But I do not remember very much afterward. I remember hearing you curse him, but what became of him? Where did he go?

"Well, I'm a wizard, and as you see for yourself, I can move things and people from place to place."

Moon Hunter stared at him.

"There is a mythological underworld, a spirit land beneath the ground. I'm not sure there really is such a place. But it will do – it did do – as a metaphor for spell-casting. Condemning someone to go there is one of the most popular curses, though it's nearly always just wishful thinking and hot words." He took a breath and shook his head.

"But not in this case. What I did, was to damn him to the fires that dwell at the heart of the world." He paused again,

but there was no response from the Swift. "I mean, I sent him there, magically. To the physical place, not the mythical one. He won't be back, it's all molten rock down there."

And that was easy, too?

"Yes." Elwyan cringed, and attempted a distraction. "I'm sorry I wasted the meat. I wasn't thinking clearly."

Well, I was in no shape to eat it anyway, and I doubt you would have been capable of finishing it all by yourself. But... why did we have to go so far on foot in the first place? Why not just come here by magic, directly from your own home? Why did we have to make a long journey, and both nearly get killed along the way? Was this trip necessary?

He tried to dodge. "It's a long explanation, are you sure you are up to hearing it?" It sounded ridiculous and lame even as he spoke the words.

Elwyan. She tapped his name on the slate. Elwyan. I have no other engagements planned for this afternoon, so I would be happy to hear what you have to say. Plenty of time runs between my claws at the moment. He had not heard that idiom before.

"Yes, we need to be here. But I had to make up my mind what to do with you, and I needed to know you better to do that." Once again, she just stared.

"Moon Hunter," he began again, nervously, "do you see what it is you are asking with your request to help your eggs hatch?" Still staring. "Now there is only one Swift in the world. If you have babies, then after they grow up, they will make more Swifts."

She cocked her head at him for a moment before she answered.

I do seem to recall once being told something like that. But I confess, I did not quite know whether I should believe it. The pelt on her neck rippled faintly. Elwyan blushed. I am glad to hear the rumor confirmed on the authority of such a learned scholar as yourself. Your expertise spans so many different fields. I wonder how you ever found time enough to acquire it. You must scarcely sleep at night. Or is that perhaps when you do your research?

Elwyan sputtered, then took a breath, gathered himself together, and proceeded. "I am serious," he sighed. "I couldn't help introduce a whole new race of creatures into the world without at least trying to understand the consequences of what I was doing." He shook his head. "What would the world be like if there were as many Swifts as people? Would there be conflict? What if there were war? Can we get along? If not, it might be all humans, or all Swifts again, or all of both of us, who end up asleep in the..., in the mouth of forever."

"I had to know as much as I could about what you were. I had to use all the time I had, to find out more. I wanted to learn how you behaved around humans. I was hoping that we would encounter other people as we traveled, so I could see how you interacted with them. If we hadn't met any, I would have found a way to make it happen. I took the north road because the settlements there are smaller and sparser, so it wouldn't so likely that a disaster would happen, that things would get out of control." He spread his hands helplessly.

"At any rate, that's what I thought. But it didn't turn out that way. I'm sorry." His shoulders sank. "I'm sorry."

You did not see fit to bring us directly here after I killed Lyoran? How can I meet other humans when everyone is hunting us?

"You're right. But I didn't trust my judgment. I wanted more time. I waited too long, there's no doubt about that, but I was afraid of acting too soon."

"Your story told about shaping destiny. Can you see what a shaping it would be, to let this world become full of Swifts?"

Moon Hunter looked away from him. Her pelt rippled in agitation, then quieted and lay flat. *I begin to see what you mean. A pause. I must ask if you will forgive me, I did not mean to burden you.*

Elwyan looked at her in amazement. There was no sign of laughter. She meant it. What an utterly astonishing creature.

"I nearly got you killed! You have done nothing to burden me. Don't talk like that!" Elwyan fumbled for words.

"Even if I hadn't, the need to make a decision is not a burden, it is an opportunity. It was you, yourself who showed me that. If you were not here, that would be one less chance to do something right. Every choice is precious, a gift. A decision avoided is an opportunity lost. Uncertainty and choice are all that stand between us and fate. But there is a responsibility to decide wisely, or at least, as wisely as we can. That is what I was trying to learn how to do."

You were testing me. Do I pass?

"Moon Hunter, I..." He stopped, and started again. "You passed

a long time ago. For most of the journey I was no longer testing you, I was testing me. That's what I meant when I said I waited too long. I had gotten to care so much — you had come to mean so much to me, that I no longer trusted my judgment. That made it harder, not easier. I had to take time, to think, to make sure I would have reached the same conclusion if I had been able to remain detached about it."

She blinked at him. *You sought to make a decision based on how you think we might get along. And you were unwilling to allow any consideration of how we actually do get along, to influence your choice. How very human. What singularly remarkable logic. I understand perfectly. Do continue.* The pelt on her neck rippled ever so little as she wrote.

Elwyan blundered onward.

"I still don't know. I was afraid — I am afraid, that I would do whatever you wanted, no matter what I thought about the consequences for the rest of the world, just because of the way I feel."

"There isn't any right answer, and even if there were, I would never long live enough to know if I had found it. But I've reasoned as carefully as I can, and I am convinced my decision is the best one I can make. So now we can—"

He stopped, taken by surprise. Moon Hunter had turned her head to his hands, and was licking his fingers. "What's the matter? What did I say?"

Never mind. She caressed his wrist with her tongue, then stroked it gently up the veins that lay along the inside of his

forearm. You would make a good Swift, even if you are not fast enough to go dodging arrows. And you have fulfilled two very different responsibilities, both to me and to your sense of ethics, with one choice. That it is right both ways makes the decision stronger, not weaker. Do you see that? You cannot separate your actions into little pieces – they have to be a whole. Do you understand?

“I was beginning to think about it like that. But what did I say to... ?”

Now if you please, would you do again whatever it is that you have been doing to make me sleep. I must recover quickly if we are to make the journey while I can still lay eggs that might live.

Elwyan obliged. Then he thought for a long time, but could come up with no idea of what she had been talking about. Make a good Swift? And why had she started kissing his hand? She was so different from anything human. Sometimes it seemed a wonder that he could understand any part of her at all.

– The Hatching of the Moon –

A fat, waxing moon peeped through broken high clouds strewn irregularly across a troubled midwinter sky. A handful of beeswax candles, guttering and flickering in transient eddies of cold, moisture-laden air, gave faint illumination to the wide inner yard of Darleialys Stormbender's island keep. The gray stone walls of the rectangular court reflected their light but dimly, while in the gloom further above, the massive corner towers loomed in somber austerity, against the luminous night sky far beyond. A faint hint of breeze brought the thick scent of tidelands, and the clammy salt chill of the nearby sea. Elwyan lifted his head from the careful arrangement of magical paraphernalia that he had set up in a small area swept clear of snow, and tossed back a wayward lock of hair. Moon Hunter stood motionlessly beside him, watching his preparations curiously. He cleared his throat, and caught her eye.

"Last chance to back out," he said quietly. "And I must ask you once again. You are certain there is still reason to go? You can still lay fertile eggs by your previous mate? Are you sure?"

I am certain... She held the slate next to a candle so that he

could read it. *...though not for too much longer. It is well that I am so soon recovered, sufficiently to make the trip.*

"Remember, it may be very dangerous, perhaps immediately so. I cannot avoid taking us almost precisely to the disaster that destroyed your people."

Feet first and kicking, she wrote. The wizard grinned thinly in reply, glancing at his lover's powerful talons, then rested a hand at the base of her neck, kneading, and pressed his face to the side of her own. "If kicking had helped, there would still be Swift in the world." As he embraced her, she took his hand and spelled into it.

One yet remains, so perhaps it did. And there was nothing he could say to that, so after a time he let her go, and turned to face the center of the precisely drawn circle that encompassed them both.

Elwyan breathed deeply and lifted his arms. He tilted his face upward and began to invoke power, chanting steadily, but almost inaudibly. For several long breaths nothing happened. Then the amulet at his neck started softly to shine, responding to the magic of the spell. Its light came faintly at first, all but unnoticeable in the moonlit night, but as he chanted, the glimmer slowly increased to the cool, steady radiance that told of great magic in process. It reflected from his arms and robe, and returned peripherally from the snow-covered ground about them, ruining his night vision sufficiently that he could no longer see the stars. The glow cast everything beyond its immediate influence into blackness, everything except the

gibbous lunar disc, shining pale and wan in the invisible sky. They stood within an illuminated bubble, a single sheltered place of safety, alone in moonlit eternity. Elwyan finished the words, and lowered his arms across his chest. The wind died, and the stationary air smelt stale and dank. The candles had disappeared. His skin prickled. Moon Hunter stirred uneasily. It was as silent as if the gods had never seen fit to endow the world with sound.

Then the glow from the talisman diminished, and the cold air roused itself and slowly began to move. It sighed and drifted past his cheek, and he felt the touch of a warmer breeze, a breeze of summer. The rich, thick smells and half-sensed, subtle tastes it brought filled his mouth and nostrils, strange and unexpected. Somewhere a creature of the night sang sweetly, and another replied in answer, but he had never heard its call before. The rough texture under his boots was no longer courtyard flagstone. The light at his chest died out entirely, and as it faded, one by one the stars returned.

Yet as his night vision improved, Elwyan shivered and drew in his breath, half in fear and half in awe, for the stars were all different. The sky held no trace of the patterns of the familiar constellations. Even the shape of the Milky Way, ghost-like and faded in the shining of the moon, was utterly and completely wrong.

They stood in the middle of a broad, dry wash, thick with variegated scrubby vegetation, set scarcely knee-deep below the surrounding terrain. It was a seasonal river bed, that trended

away from shallowly rising ground in back of them and descended toward an open plain which sloped gently away toward the east. The night felt benign and summery, and the gibbous moon hung high above, its features still the same, still comfortingly unaltered, the only shred of everyday things anywhere to be seen. Yet everything that Elwyan could sense was entirely at peace. The strange, unfamiliar land overflowed with a serene, quiet beauty all its own. The wide reach of sky above all but glowed, clean and pure in the eternal lunar light. The sharp line of the horizon stood out clearly, impossibly far away. The gentle wind blew warm and soft, out of the south. He looked around, feeling the tranquility of the place. The world was fair and vast. No sign whatsoever hinted of incipient disaster. He began to relax a little. Moon Hunter breathed deeply of the smooth, strangely-scented air, and half the task was done.

Unfortunately, there was no water immediately at hand. Far away toward the horizon, a darker streak perhaps indicated a flowing river and the foliage on its banks. If so, then it must have side streams and rills that also carried water, and no doubt some of those ran nearby, but it would take time to find them. Elwyan turned full circle. Close behind stood hills and the start of a forest. The trees looked a little like redwoods, but held their branches lifting rather than depending. Mountains lay beyond, farther in the west, and here and there on the plain, irregular clusters of dots might be creatures of some sort. He peered again into the face of the moon, and a flicker of motion not far away, high in the sky, caught his attention.

It could not be a falling star, for it moved more slowly and left no trail. It was a dot like a star, but not twinkling, descending from somewhere near the zenith, dropping toward the southern horizon, slowly growing as it fell. It became elongate as it descended, and showed hints of a mottled pattern, like the moon. As it grew larger still, he felt a great foreboding.

"I don't like this." He cleared his throat nervously.
"Something is wrong."

Moon Hunter stared at him for a moment, then began to cast purposefully about, head low to the ground. He continued to watch the object as it plummeted toward the earth. It had plunged more than half the distance from zenith to horizon. It was larger now, a third the size of the moon, and gave off a light that was just as pale, but unlike the moon, it showed jagged edges, and had tumbled a very little, ever so slowly, as it dropped. It looked like nothing so much as a great shining rock, falling out of the sky.

Abruptly its color changed. It grew orange, then quickly darkened to red, like the moon entering eclipse. Swiftly it disappeared completely, snuffed out like a lantern deprived of air. It had gone. He shook his head and stared, wondering what had become of it, what it meant, and whether he had really seen it at all. What might such a thing portend? Yet as his eyes followed the path the strange apparition had taken, suddenly, not far above the faint band of sky glow near the horizon, he saw a star wink briefly out and then resume its sparkling shimmer, as if something huge, distant, and invisible had passed

for a moment in front of it.

"I don't like this at all," Elwyan said with even greater unease. He licked his lips and swallowed. "Can you find any small animals?" He nocked an arrow. Moon Hunter shook her head no, then turned and looked at him, uncertain what was the matter, not knowing what to do.

Suddenly the sky changed. Great streaming sheets and rippling curtains of color, roses and greens, yellows and purples, materialized like spirits and danced in silent beauty from horizon to horizon. It was an aurora – the northern lights – in awesome display, brilliant streaks and veils showing clear color despite the all-consuming pallor of the moon. They twisted and writhed like candles dying in the wind, like a wildfire raging across the land, like souls already damned yet not accepting, begging in vain one last chance of rescue and redemption from a god who could not help, or did not care.

But only for a moment. Then a vast and terrible light billowed up from beyond the edge of the world, and the moon was gone, the night rolled back, the sky blazed brighter than day, and nowhere, nowhere, was there any conceivable place to hide. It was more dazzling than the sun and bluer than lightning, a great fan of incandescent violet fire flaring up, and up, and up still higher, expanding from a point well beyond the southern horizon, increasing in intensity from below and yellowing in color as it drowned the world in impossible radiance.

He could feel the heat of it on his face. He turned his head aside from where he had thrown up his arm to protect his eyes,

squinting into the overwhelming glare. High in the sky, in sympathy or in echo, the moon reappeared, and it had brightened incredibly, glowing pale blue with wild intensity, a fierce sister to the sun. Then it dwindled and vanished once again, lost in the awful illumination rising up from the south.

Here and there across the plain, animals reacted to the unexpected dawn, animals that came from the menagerie toiled into Moon Hunter's pack. In the middle distance, a small group of herd beasts galloped frantically away from the sudden light. They were heavy-set, massive creatures, with wide ruffs of something stiff and rigid growing around their necks. Each had three horns – two pointing forward from near the back of the skull, and a third, shorter one at the tip of its thick snout. Closer in, a band of something that might have been deer stirred in agitation, but they had too many antlers, that were far too short.

A half bowshot off, a creature with the same body plan as Moon Hunter, but thicker of proportion and vastly heavier of muscle, lumbered to its feet from a thicket where it must have been sleeping, and it was tremendous, as big as a house. Bigger. Bare, horny hide covered its powerful frame, and its muscular, claw-tipped forelimbs were short and stubby – grotesque caricatures of arms. The enormous animal turned to face the changing glow, cocked its massive head to one side, and peered intently at the horizon. The underbrush heaved again, and another of its kind, a little smaller, stood up beside it.

Something stirred and rustled nervously in the grass nearby,

only it wasn't grass. Elwyan drew his bow and shot quickly, bringing down a small fleeing creature that did not entirely resemble a rabbit.

"Eat that," he said to Moon Hunter. "Eat it all. It must drink water regularly, or at any rate its body fluids ought to do."

She understood at once, and seized the small furry body immediately, devouring most of it in a single bone-crunching gulp.

The moon reappeared again, as the terrible light dwindled and yellowed. And now in eerie silence something flame-colored, monstrous, and deformed began to loom up above the horizon. It was the upper rim of a great irregular sphere of fire, glowing like molten metal, laced here and there with darker streaks and gobbets of twisting, half-solid substance, as if a gigantic pustule of conflagration had burst, spewing forth its blazing, virulent contents. It rose and expanded visibly, even as they watched.

"Let's get out of here," he said intently, and raised his arms to call forth the magic that would return them to their own world. And there was none. No hint of power came to him. There was no suggestion of any power to be had. He had thought that the beings and forces he knew and worked with to create his magic were immortal and omnipresent, but here he could detect no trace of them, not so much as an echo of their essence, no indication that they had ever been present. They did not exist. Perhaps they had not yet been born. He tried again, but there

was nothing at all. Nothing.

Moon Hunter watched quietly, expressionless as usual, but no quiver betrayed uncertainty or agitation. Her neck and ears stood upright, and her bearing remained calm and curious.

Elwyan gestured once more, still with no effect. "It doesn't work here." He struggled to keep his voice from breaking. "We can't get home. I can't get us away." Fighting panic, he tried desperately to think.

The thing in the south had expanded irregularly, so that it no longer resembled a ball. Now it appeared as a great misshapen flower, bearing many twisted petals, colored in glowing reds and yellows and whites, streaked here and there with irregular veins of pestilent black. The petals lengthened, and some of them stretched out toward him. Its light had stopped dimming and began to increase again, as more and more of it unfurled and opened.

"I don't know what I can do. I'm sorry... I'm sorry." Maybe it was destiny after all. Maybe there was no hope. Maybe there had never been any hope. Elwyan stared helplessly into the onrush of doom.

Without warning, Moon Hunter leaped at him, wrapped her arms around his torso, almost knocking him down, and held him in a furious embrace. She pressed her face hard against his neck, shuddering violently. He could feel the sides of her teeth against his skin, and the points of her claws, faintly through his cloak. She drew her head back and stared silently at him for a moment, then nestled again against his throat, warm and

incredibly strong, soft and clean-smelling. He hugged her back as hard as he could, digging his fingers through her coat, feeling her powerful muscles ripple under his hands. They clung together, shaking, as the looming horror grew and grew.

"I'm sorry," he tried to comfort her. "I'm sorry."

Part of his mind still tried to think. One of the pouches at his belt was squeezed between them. Inside it, pressing against his stomach, he felt something rounded and ever so slightly flexible. A moment passed before he recognized the shape. It was the ruined egg he had studied, in his futile effort to learn more about the problem that had brought them here. Its presence brought a slowly growing memory of something else, a thing that he had in fact learned, something that barely, possibly, might actually make a difference.

He let go his embrace and pushed Moon Hunter back to arm's length. There might be an alternative source of power in this place, a source from another reality, a source he could never have had any way to test. He stared intently at the Swift and spoke hastily. "Do you remember the story about Little Scolder, and the Mother of the World, and the destiny egg?" he asked, hurriedly removing the sad leathery thing from its container. Her ears were alert – erect and curious – despite the cataclysm rising from the horizon, but she was trembling visibly. As was he.

The convoluted monstrosity covered half the southern sky. Its appearance had changed again. The flower had opened to the likeness of an enormous sea creature – an anemone, an octopus, a

giant inverted jellyfish – and cast forth long glowing tentacles, festooned with knots and concentrations of material, in graceful, soaring arcs. Their flickering, ruddy glow suffused the landscape. The moon shone dimly through them, reddened and angry, dimming as the mass extended and grew thicker, as the darker approaching arms began to block the central part of the malignancy. Its terrible heat burned intensely on his face. The lower tentacles began to curve downward. In a few minutes the first of them would reach the surface of the plain. Yet still there was near silence, nothing but the sounds of nighttime creatures suddenly disturbed.

Ignoring the looming terror, he brought all his attention and awareness to bear on the dried-up egg. He started to work it between his fingers, bending it back and forth, trying to weaken it. Its surface crumbled like rotten leather, but the substance of the shell itself remained pliant and strong. He spat on it and seized it with his teeth, biting and chewing, trying to tear it apart. Finally it gave.

Moon Hunter's jaw had opened. Her ears twitched back and forth erratically. She crouched, hunched forward, and hissed, not threatening but uncertain. "Remember the Mother of the World, what she said when Little Scolder was going to eat the egg? Do you remember?"

She did. She came full upright, ears forward again, with her head half to the side, watching as he ground the pieces of egg between his palms, spat on them again, and threw them on the earth. Even in his fear he felt ridiculous – how could he summon

a god not his, a god he had never known, a god that might never have been any more than a myth in the first place? How could he even hope to get her attention? Any attempt to call her could be based on no more than guesswork, guesswork and a hint from an ancient legend. There was no way to tell whether it would work.

The leading edge of the onrushing swarm of glowing material overreached the zenith and obscured the moon. To view the sky was to look at a log half burnt to coals. The overpowering heat grew and grew.

If you ever so much as touch one of my eggs, I will know it immediately.

There was nothing else left.

He stomped madly on the bits of shell, and on the dusty remains of the delicate membranes and the tiny, half-formed embryo they had enclosed. He drove them into the dirt with his feet, then scuffed his soles in the dust where they had gone. He felt the fool even for trying, but a detached part of his mind reminded him wryly not to worry, that if he failed, no one would ever know. He lifted his arms again, calling for magic.

And still nothing happened. Elwyan shook with fear and frustration. The lowest fingers of the radiating mass were almost upon them, vast clouds of molten debris and tumbling, shattered rock, aglow with the heat of the titanic explosion that had produced them. Their tips took on a new fire, blazing and sparkling as they descended. They seemed to gather speed, angry sparks and dark coals flying in silhouette against masses of red, yellow and black that still rose and expanded beyond.

The huge animal in the near distance lifted its head to meet them and roared. The echoes of its challenge rang powerfully across the land. Its mate joined it, and they roared again, louder, and again and again, standing firm and unyielding, thundering pride and defiance at the heavens as the sky burned and fell.

Now there came a different sound, a sound from nowhere and everywhere at once, a deep, directionless, basso rumble that trembled his very bones, as the whole earth spoke with a single voice. As it built alarmingly in volume, the ground under his feet began to shiver and to shake.

One glowing coal drew near, brightening swiftly, trailing fire like a shooting star. It passed overhead, descended steeply, and struck somewhere behind them, leagues away on the rising terrain. Huge boulders and smaller fragments flew outward from the point of impact, followed by a billowing cloud of dust mixed with traces of incandescent substance. The galloping herd beasts vanished in an instant, and an enlarging spherical tremor in the air grew outward from the crater, faintly visible in the infernal light, coming toward them with impossible speed.

The heaving ground shuddered, then bucked roughly and threw him into the air. He landed hard, half dazed, and flew upward again, with even greater violence. Rocks broke and cracked as the rumble increased. Dust swirled and roiled, its earthy, summery smell incongruous amid incomprehensible disaster. More glowing masses and irregular swarms of blazing debris fell toward them, tumbling everywhere, down from the sky. Trees bent

in synchrony in the distant forest, then began to break and fall, as wave upon wave of tumultuous motion shuddered with increasing intensity across the face of the world.

He lifted his fist to the sky and shook it in rage and anguish, coughing and choking in the thickening dust. "Damned stupid incompetent god! What have we got to do? Get down here and help! What are you good for, anyway? Damn fool! Idiot!" He cried out once more, a great wordless wail of frustration and despair, his voice raised in anger at the heavens.

The ground rose up and struck him again. Moon Hunter screamed.

With an incandescent flash and a report that deafened even amid the agonized bellow of the tortured land, the amulet at his chest exploded. He clutched at his torso in pain from the burn, as within the flames and darkness above, a greater darkness loomed, expanding downward in front of the evil red beyond. The air turned suddenly humid and almost cool, as it might before the approach of a vast thunderstorm. The darkness extended upward forever, reaching down from the sky like an inverted bottomless pit, and now its sides flashed here and there with jagged flickers of lightning. It grew huger still, widening, and the shaking of the earth dampened and quieted, as the rumbling muted and grew distant. Two lightning bolts streaked horizontally across the sky, their edges zig-zagging in parallel, like sharp-edged teeth in enormous gaping jaws. The light dwindled rapidly, the illumination vanished into the abyssal depths above them, and the terrible heat diminished.

Thunder boomed, and something warm and friendly, something full of life, welcomed them in its shuddering, resonant echoes.

The maw engulfed the very horizon, and all was black. The last sound he heard was the reverberating cry of the great beasts, ringing out a challenge to destiny that resounded through the hallways of time, down the corridors of eternity, defiant and unsundering to the very last, as the mouth of forever closed over them all.

* * * * *

Elwyan dreamed, though could never recall what about. Presently he realized, that he had known for some time that the darkness above was sprinkled here and there with the lights of stars. Slowly, he came awake. He lay naked and shivering, half on the ground and half on a pile of snow-covered straw, looking up at a night sky partly covered with storm-torn lower clouds and long, translucent fingers of swift, high cirrus. Lightning flashed in the middle distance – odd and unseasonable for late winter. The bulbous rim of one rapidly drifting cloud mass brightened into dazzling silver and gold, and the moon emerged, high and fatly gibbous in the eastern sky. He could see enough of the heavens to be sure that the constellations had regained their accustomed patterns, that the unsettled stars had gone back to their habitual, comforting places.

The staccato bark of thunder sounded remotely, like half-remembered mighty laughter, like an echo from long ago.

Somewhere in the forest a falling tree cracked and rumbled, a testimony to the vast power of the dissipating storm.

His garments had vanished without a trace, as had his shoes and weapons, and most of the contents of his pouches and pockets. A smear on his belly looked vaguely greenish in the bright moonlight, exactly where his belt buckle had been. A black stain around his left middle finger was all that remained of the band of bronze that had circled it, yet on the ground under his hand the tiger eye lay unchanged. A ring of gold survived, but strangely altered, for instead of the elegantly worked figure of a hunting cat, the metal now formed a cluster of irregularly fused crystals, all alike but for size, incompletely circling his finger. Here and there they bore tiny pockets of debris and discoloration.

Lightning flared again, bright and irregular. For a moment it turned the high and twisted scraps of wind-torn thundercloud into things almost alive, into sculptured likenesses of the incredible creatures he had seen on the plain of wonder and terror long ago. Yet the next stroke showed the clouds once more as only clouds, the half-hinted fantastic shapes dissolving and tearing into fragments, like unused memories, like the recollection of a dream, like the shift of crystals in a kaleidoscope, and the storm was moving farther away.

Distant thunder rolled again. Elwyan shook his head and sat up, full awareness gradually returning. The pile of straw lay in the back courtyard of his home. Candlelight glowed softly in the windows. He was all right. He was safe. His elbow touched

something warm and gentle and familiar. It was Moon Hunter, lying on the ground next to him. But she was not all right. Her back was broken.

– **Destiny** –

It took Moon Hunter over a month to die.

They made her comfortable. He had power enough to do that, and to tend to less massive hurts, like the claws that had been ripped from her left hand by tumbling rock. Yet although he could keep her motionless enough that nothing could harm her further, and could lend coordination and energy to the daily processes of her life, nevertheless the intricacies of her spine, and of the nerves it contained, were broken beyond his ability to fathom or to understand, and without that knowledge, all his magic could no more mend a shattered back than a shattered dream. She lacked all conscious control and most feeling, everywhere below her shoulders. He had no means to heal her. So bit by bit, her body slowly ceased to function.

She could not write, of course, but only look on with expressionless eyes as he groomed her coat, wondering that its luster should be so much richer and healthier than before. It all but shimmered. She would listen intently to his words, or to the half-grown black cat yowling lonely at the foot of the bed, or to the children, Tomlys and Brennan, as they tiptoed in cautiously, round-eyed and teary, old enough to sense incipient loss but not quite old enough to know what to say, or how to say

it. Even Evening Star, the great eagle, perched regularly in a branch outside the window, a mute and brooding sentinel.

She wanted to be touched, he knew her that well by now, so he stroked her face and her long soft throat, and drew the backs of his fingers along the curve of her jaw. She extended her tongue and curled it around his thumb, tugging gently, and he let his hand be drawn into the snugness of her mouth, amazed at how warm and protecting she was, at how gently and delicately her teeth caressed his skin. He put his face against hers and cried then.

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And so one day she died. He sat with her, trying to offer comfort, and to make sense of the message she had left. For she had bitten the tip of her tongue raw and bloody, and written with it on the wall, unfinished, "*As for my sister*".

"*As for my sister, so for me,*" he filled in, realizing what she referred to but not knowing what she meant. He looked at the wise and gentle creature lying still before him, and remembered the same being, intense and powerful as she gutted the body of her own kin with terrible strokes of great curved claws, scarce minutes after life had left it. He remembered the strength of those blows, and how the blood had flowed, and how the offal had spread in convoluted lumps upon the unyielding autumn ground.

And he remembered her laughter. He did not know whether it was in him to wreak such violence on the body of someone he had loved so much, or why he should, or whether it mattered. He had

loved this creature against all expectation and beyond all reason, and had been willing to trust her with his life again and again, but there were so many things there had been no time to ask, no time to understand.

Her body had not yet begun to cool.

He wandered outside, aimlessly, wanting to grieve but not knowing how to begin. To his surprise, it was morning. The warming sun sent trickling meltwater disappearing beneath the tattered shreds of remaining snow, where it rippled and purred like laughter, in damp and secret places. The trees burst with buds, and the earliest of the returning birds chirped and fluttered in the branches, or circled and called in great eddying flocks far overhead. The clouds had changed from gray winter blankets to clean cotton frocks, unpacked in anticipation of summer and summer courtship, airing in the wind under a cool blue sky. The clinging moist air teased and promised of spring. It should have been a time to be happy.

And here was a squirrel, digging with frenetic determination in a newly-bared patch of ground, using its forepaws to open a tiny cavity, pulling out shreds of wet vegetation and tearing furiously within. Decomposing leaf litter steamed in the cool spring air. Bits of earth and tiny clumps of debris flew in all directions. It stopped and stared at him, then resumed its excavations, holding its face close to the hole and peering into it. All at once it found what it sought, and seized it firmly, with single-minded eagerness. The little animal glared at him as if he were a fool, then chattered and chattered again,

long and urgently. It scampered away up a tree and looked back, still scolding, bearing its prize, a plump nut fresh from winter storage.

And then he knew.

There were eggs in her lower abdomen, a full dozen, still warm from the heat of her body, firm and smooth and precious with life within, round and ripe and glowing in the filtered light, colored like the full Moon, rich pale cream and mottled brownish black, waiting to be hatched, all the colors of destiny, asking only to be chosen.

- End -