

Author's Note: I'll offer installments from the first draft of *A Turn of Light* until its publication, currently scheduled for April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012. Why? To thank you for your patience, dear readers, as this book has taken me longer to write than my others. I appreciate it.

I also hope to whet your appetite. This is a fun, romantic, and, admittedly, different sort of story. I've tried to write brief, succinct descriptions. Not only is that frustrating for me, I really don't see how you can get much out of them.

So here you are.\* I haven't decided, yet, how many installments I'll put up. If you like them, there'll be more than if you don't. What I do provide will be in order and contain the story as I've written it, with the exception of the maps. Of course, to read the entire thing, you'll need to buy a copy. I love this plan!

As I've noted at the bottom of each page, please keep in mind this is raw first draft, before editing and revision and even (fingers in ears) running spell check to make everything just so. Bear with my Canadianisms and commas.

Grab a cocoa (or beer), get comfy. *A Turn of Light* is about exploring somewhere else. Oh, and check for toads.

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and Thank You.

Julie

\* Chapter "One" was up last Christmas, which is why I've added "Two." Fair's fair.

***A Turn of Light***

by

Julie Elizabeth Czerneda

Coming from DAW Books in 2012

(trade paperback and ebook)

Web Installment # 1

~ One ~

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Jenn Nalynn dug her toes deeper into the sweet meadow grass and scowled at the river sparkling in the distance. For good measure, she scowled at the golden fields spread between the crags that cradled Marrowdell in sunkissed arms, then at the blue arch of sky that dared be dotted by clouds whiter than the daisies nodding shoulder-high around her. Even the small village nestled by the river had taken on a glow, its crude wooden structures burnished rich bronze. Home. She scowled at it too, so fiercely her eyebrows almost met.

A cage was a cage.

Eighteen days from now, not counting today, she'd turn nineteen. Adult at last, with all that meant. Freedom. Choice. Adventure! She'd urged the summer to end, excepting the daisies, eager to start her travels. Wasn't it cooperating? Just yesterday, Old Jupp had complained fall was in a hurry. His joints could tell. Everyone agreed the weather couldn't make its mind up this year, so best be ready for an early change. Sure enough, today purple asters, with eyes of gold, bloomed like a royal cloak all around her.

All for naught.

Because her dear, doting father wanted her married before she left home.

Jenn sighed and dropped her gaze to the flowers spilling over her lap. Someone thought she needed cheering up. "Thanks," she mumbled, though the last thing she wanted right now was to make daisy crowns. Her fingers fretted at a stem; it snapped instead of split.

She plucked petals instead. "Go." *pluck* "Stay." *pluck* "Go." *pluck* "Stay." *pluck* Petals began to fly like snow and an approaching butterfly thought better of coming close. "Go. Stay. What do you think?"

Given the little meadow where the girl sat was home to nothing larger than butterflies, single-minded bees, and the occasional indiscreet mouse, it would seem unlikely she expected an answer. But this wasn't any meadow; this was hers. Too close to the old trees. Too close to the Bone Hills. Too close to sunset's first, deepest shadows. Night's Edge, the settlers called it and no one else came here.

Which made it hers. For as long as she could remember, Jenn had come to Night's Edge as often as chores and her father allowed. From harvest till planting, she'd run across the fallow fields, past the empty farm, to where her meadow waited within its shelter of dark pines. Now, at summer's end, with ripe grain bending the stalks, she walked the longer way within the cool shade of the Tinkers Road, or rode, if she could borrow Wainn Uhtoff's fat pony. How didn't matter, so long as she could be here.

Where she was never alone.

Sure enough, a voice softer than the petals in her hand warmed her ear. “Go home? Stay home? Both. Sunset’s close, Dearest Heart. It’s time you left.”

Jenn’s round cheeks flushed and her eyes flashed rebellion. “It’s too soon. I don’t want to go home. Not yet.” She flung the petals into the air.

The air shimmered. *Snap, snap*. The petals disappeared. “You must leave before the sun touches the Bone Hills. I shouldn’t need to remind you.”

The note of aggrieved, if tolerant, patience was a perfect match for her aunt’s, today’s reason Jenn had fled to the meadow. Something about hems. Or had it been husbands? Her aunt’s speeches on proper deportment and dignity blurred to a sameness on rainy days, let alone when the sun peeked in the windows and birds sang. She hadn’t paid proper attention, Jenn thought contritely. Instead, she’d squirmed until her aunt threw up her hands in atypical frustration and shooed her away.

Had the point been to hem a husband or husband a hem?

Was one behemmed or behusbanded?

Jenn laughed. The sparkling sound brought up the nose of a curious digger, crowned with a moist dab of soil. Nearer the forest, a rabbit paused, ears flat back to listen for the swoop of an early-hunting owl, and found the strength to jump into the safety of a thornbush.

While on the Northward Road, a weary stranger lifted his head and caught the scent of sunwarmed pine.

“You shouldn’t mock what keeps you safe.”

She’d laughed at her own silliness, not in disrespect, well, not exactly. Jenn dumped the remaining flowers from her lap, and drew up her knees. Her skirt, the one with the hem she wasn’t supposed to drag in damp grass, presumably in case of husbands, she tucked snugly around her ankles to discourage curious ants. “I’ve rules enough at home, Wisp,” she complained. “I don’t need more from you. Night’s the same here as anywhere else.” Except for being forbidden to her, like the rest of the world. “I’d like to stay --”

“No. No. No!” The shimmering spot beside her on the hill began to whirl, the long rays of late afternoon sun picking out confused motes of dust caught by its frenzy, yellow pollen spiraling up in streaks of gold. “You can’t. You mustn’t!” The little whirlwind swept up the ruined flowers and spun them into chains. “Go or it will be dark!”

Dark? Her lips twitched. “I’d never finish my outside chores if I worried about the dark. Besides, there’s a lovely full moon tonight. Really, you make no sense at all, Wisp.”

Neither did husbands. Jenn’s small round chin jutted in rebellion. Her father knew she longed to leave Marrowdell and see the world. He’d -- to be fair, he hadn’t said she could go at nineteen, but he hadn’t said she couldn’t, had he? What he had said, far too often this summer and again at breakfast, was that fall was the season favoured by the Ancestors for weddings, and how happy he’d be when she and her older sister took husbands.

What possible use would a husband be? There wasn't a filled set of pants in the village interested in anything outside the valley.

Making them fools. There was so very much outside. Marrowdell might be in the backpocket of beyond, but Master Uhtoff was as good a teacher as any in Rhoth and they had books. Books that spoke of innumerable wonders. Oceans and plains. Creatures with legs like trees and mines that dove to the heart of the earth. Jenn's curiosity stole the rest from her sleep, her peace when awake.

Outside must be what she longed for so desperately. This summer, as the light of each day faded, she felt emptier than the day before, as if she slowly starved from the lack of ... what? She didn't know, only that it wasn't here. She'd know it, when she found it. It had to be among the wonders she dreamed about.

It had to be.

Which led back to husbands, her father, and her visiting aunt. Her aunt's stories of life in Avyo, the great capital of Rhoth, made her longing worse. Chandeliers and peaches. Parties and dances!

Her aunt, who carried her campaign to salvage the manners of her widowed brother's so-neglected daughters to the supper table, regardless of its impact on anyone's digestion.

Meaning shoes.

"I won't mind being late for supper," Jenn announced with great sincerity, digging her bare happy toes deeper into the sod. "Let me stay just a little longer. Please?"

The pollen stilled, a column of dust leaning towards earth. A flower-scented whisper caressed her cheek. "If you answer not to law, Dearest Heart, answer friendship. Go home now. For me. Because I ask it. I wish you safe."

"That's not fair --"

"Neither is abandoning your father and sister to fend for themselves. Hurry to save them. Dearest Heart. Good Heart."

Good-hearted Jenn. That's what everyone said of her -- usually before asking a favour. The bane of her life, she decided, vowing to work on being strong-minded.

Tomorrow.

Jenn gently brushed the line of ants from her skirt, lifting the hem by handfuls to check for stains. "I hope you know --" She paused, lips parted.

There, in the shadow of her skirt.

The tip of a claw.

Not like a hawk's or chicken's. Not like any of the old bear's claws hung above Uncle Horst's fireplace.

This was a blade of ancient bone, as long as her longest finger. The underside of its elegant, deadly curve was serrated, as if the needle-like tip was insufficient threat.

One glimpse, then it lifted into the light and was gone.

“ -- what I’ll have to put up with,” Jenn finished as she stood.

Over the years, there’d been other shadows, other glimpses. A tuft of wiry hair, curled like the end of a beard. Paired tendrils of what might have been steam -- or breath. A patch of textured cloth or skin that had reminded her of woven chain, but tighter, smoother, as fine as the best linen. Now a claw.

Wisp didn’t want to be seen, that much she understood. If she reacted to a glimpse, he’d shred grass and sulk.

She couldn’t imagine a shape that fit the glimpses, let alone how Wisp kept the rest of himself from sight. Nothing in Marrowdell -- and nothing in any book she’d read -- held such a being.

He might let her see the whole of him one day. She sighed inwardly. Might. One day. The world kept its best secrets from her and demanded she wait and wait and wait.

It wasn’t fair.

“I’ll go home before sunset,” Jenn said, resigned for now. “If I didn’t, Aunt Sybb would fuss.”

“Dear Heart.” A contrite breeze tickled the fringe of pale hair on her forehead. “Your aunt means well.”

She did. Their father’s sister was neither hardy nor young, but every year she undertook a pilgrimage to Marrowdell for the summer, bringing drygoods and cloth for dresses, impractical shoes for her nieces and a pair of her husband’s barely worn boots for her brother, books and biscuits and delicious hard candy. Best of all, she brought stories of life in the great cities, for Sybb Mahavar’s impeccably Rhothan marriage had saved her from the politics that sent so many of Mellynne heritage to the north woods.

She and her coach would head south again after Jenn’s birthday. Her coach of black and gilt, that smelled inside of leather and lavender. When they were little, Jenn and Peggs had played in it, closing the doors and pretending they traveled along Avyo’s magnificent cobbled streets, waving at imaginary passersby out the windows.

“That’s it!” Jenn pushed her hair back. “You’re brilliant, Wisp!”

“I am.” The breeze flipped her bangs forward again, then paused as if confused. “Why am I?”

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. Aunt Sybb has lots of room. They have a huge house -- bigger than all the homes of Marrowdell put together. All I have to do -- all we have to do --” she couldn’t leave her sister to take over all the chores “-- is climb in her coach and hide --”

The breeze went from tickle to grit-heavy shove. “What’s wrong with you?” Jenn caught her balance, coughing, eyes wide. She hadn’t meant it. She’d been daydreaming out loud.

“Go home.” A breath in her ear. “Stay home.” Another.

Then, so feathery soft she might have imagined it, save for the uneasy stir of fine hair along her neck, “Never leave.”

“I won’t spend the rest of my life here, not for my father and not for you!” Jenn tossed back her head, braid thumping her shoulder, and stomped away through the meadow, skirt gathered in her hands and uncaring where she stepped. Though, somehow, her feet missed both asters and ants.

She wouldn’t come back tomorrow, she fumed. Or the next day. Or next. Let the opinionated wind play with mice and bees. Serve him right.

She hadn’t been serious. Now she was.

No matter what anyone planned for her, she’d find a way to leave Marrowdell and see the world.

She would.

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~ Oh, that went well. ~ From above.

Sarcasm from his peers wasn’t safe to ignore. The being Jenn Nalynn knew as “Wisp” shrugged his shoulders, which were in no way like hers, and made his slow way to the shelter of the old trees and what lay beyond. ~ She’ll be back. ~

~ And if not? ~ A different speaker, from below. They cared not for the pretty meadow, nor did they waste effort to bend its fragrant air into words. ~ What then? ~ From behind. They circled him, mocked his care-filled steps with their grace and speed and power, buffeted him with wind. They didn’t dare touch him. Power, he still had.

From above. ~ Will you fail? ~

They’d crossed hoping for trouble; his penance, their amusement. Once word spread of the girl’s outburst, would there be bodies pressed against bodies for their next meeting? Had they nothing better to do?

He’d supply a pestilence to keep them occupied, a whimsical something with pus and a fearsome itch, but those whose opinions did matter would know. Know, and likely visit it on him threefold.

Instead, Wisp shrugged what weren’t shoulders once more. ~ She’ll be back. ~

He would miss her, however long frustration kept her from the meadow this time. She’d grown dear to him, goodness and bright expectation being rare in his life. Something he hoped no one discovered, or that life would swiftly become a greater misery.

Of course, should Jenn Nalynn, turn-born and forever cursed, try to leave the valley, his would be the first teeth in her throat.

He would regret that most of all.

~ Two ~

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The pound of Jenn's callused feet on the packed earth was almost as loud as the pound of her heart. Wisp and his stupid law and silly tricks ... he was worse than her father. Much worse! At least Radd Nalynn truly needed her. She helped him in the gristmill, as much as she could, and did her share, almost always, in the gardens and around the house. Little wonder his cheerful face would cloud whenever she or Peggs talked of life beyond Marrowdell. How could he manage without them?

If Aunt Sybb could stay year 'round to keep house for him, everything would be different, but she had a home of her own, a better one, in Avyo. As for her father taking another wife? Jenn shook her head. Even if he'd been willing and let it be known, Marrowdell was home to just two unmarried women of the right age. Riss Nahamm had her hands full with her great uncle's household and Wen Treff talked to toads.

Jenn paused at the river to hitch her skirt well above her knees. Though this time of year most of the ford was ankle deep, the low sun caught every dancing ripple, dazzling the eye and making it impossible to discern shallow from hole. Best be safe than soggy.

The cool water soothed skin prickled by grass and ants, and eased the burn of the roadway from her soles. By the time she reached the rushes, dancing with black damselflies who flashed vivid blue as they tilted their curious heads at her, the river had washed away her temper as well. Wisp was Wisp, Jenn chided herself. As well expect sense from Wainn's pony, who would oh-so-cleverly find his way through any latch to eat himself sick on fallen apples. Both needed to be loved and properly managed. Her next visit to Night's Edge, she'd take Wisp some of the thistledown she'd collected for a new pillow. He liked to fling the fluff-tailed seeds high and wide, so they caught the wind and headed for the upper meadows. Why he never explained.

Glimpsing a white pebble under the water, she gathered her skirt and stooped to collect it, adding the small damp treasure to the others in her pocket. White was best and Jenn felt quite pleased with herself as she walked out of the river and up the slight slope. The dry sand was warm underfoot until she reached the shade of the massive oak that marked this end of the village proper. The tree had a wide curved branch it would lower, if asked politely, for a child who wanted to watch for travelers on the Tinkers Road.

Or a vantage point to throw acorns.

Squirrels excelled at that. With their help, the shade of the oak would be brown with fallen acorns; to judge by those already on the ground., they'd started. It'd soon be time to open the gate to let the big sows amble through. Satin never minded a child lying on her warm broad back. Or acorn throwing, especially close to her clever snout. Filigree, though covered in pretty black spots, had no patience

when feasting and, if bothered, she'd grunt a terse command to the hanging branch, which would shake loose both child and acorns.

For now, the tree was empty of children and the gate closed. Jenn climbed its cedar rails and jumped down the other side. The road led through the commons, as her aunt called the pasture where the villagers kept livestock in summer. High hedges surrounded it, full of twittering birds and the deep drone of bees. Davi Treff's great draught horses stood slack-hipped and nose-to-tail with Aunt Sybb's fine matched bays in the shade of the trees by the pond. The sows and Himself, their lordly, if lazy, boar, lay in the pond's shallows and wagged their long ears at flies. Good'n'Nuf, the Ropp's pampered bull, must be hiding behind the shed again. His cows crowded the middle gate, anxious to be milked. Seeing them, Jenn picked up her pace. Must be closer to suppertime than she'd thought.

This year's weanlings, a tight little herd of brown and white, pranced towards her through the thick grass, huge eyes brimming with curiosity, then suddenly lost all interest and turned their attention to a game of head butt.

Last year's calves and the riding horses, all but Uncle Horst's and Dusom's, grazed the ravines beyond Marrowdell under the watchful eyes of the Emms' twins, Allin and Tadd. Bandits, a menace on the Northward Road, had never set foot in the valley but every so often a horse or calf would manage to get itself stuck or slip into a chancy mountain stream, not that many, she'd heard, were as dangerous as the deadly cataracts that roared between the tips of the Bone Hills. The animals would be brought back through the village and let into the fields after the harvest, there to fatten with the rest of the livestock till frost.

Maybe this fall, Allin Emms would realize she had no intention of marrying him, ever, and Tadd would break his abashed silence to speak his heart to Peggs.

Then again, Jenn grumbled to herself, some things never changed.

Come winter, everything else did. Here, snow didn't conveniently melt, as in the cities to the south. Marrowdell shrank to narrow icy paths between homes, barns, and larders, those structures roofed in white. When the weather permitted, Davi would take his team from the village to the more-trafficked Northward Road and back, the horses' huge feet and wide chests doing what they could to keep a passage open. After storms, every adult who could lift a shovel or rake helped dig out the road. It was that, or risk being cut off from the outside until spring. Isolated, an entire village could die unnoticed, by starvation, fire, illness, to be smothered by snow.

With the sun warming her shoulders, the road dry and warm beneath her feet, Jenn found it hard to imagine winter. Fall, yes. By her birthday the grain fields would be harvested, their bounty stored as feed and flour. Larders were already filling with that from gardens and orchards: sacks of dried beans, jars of jellies, chutneys, and pickles, precious pots of honey, and onion braids. Wheels of pale cheese and crocks of brined butter rested in the cool dark of the spring house while sausages and hams -- last year's piglets -- hung in fragrant smoke. Soon they'd press apples for cider and dig the root crops. The children would collect

rushes and down from nests by the river. The older ones would gather kindling; charcoal bins were already full, fuel for the cold months, and barrels of ash stood waiting. They'd be traded for a share of lye in Endshere; no one in the village had the knack.

Jenn climbed the far gate, more mindful of her skirt within the village proper. Cynd Treff looked up from berry picking and smiled, her big hat tilted so the sun caught her freckles. From the clanging, her husband Davi was busy at his forge. Off to milk the cows, Hettie Ropp and her stepmother, Covie, waved a cheerful greeting. Cheffy and his sister Alyssa went ahead, arms wrapped around empty milk jugs almost as tall as they were, laughing as they tried to bump into one another. Birds chirped in the apple trees, laden with fruit, that filled the heart of the village; Zehr Emms whistled as he worked on his house. Supper smells filled the air. Everyone was busy. Everyone content.

Jenn scowled. Didn't they know?

The world was bigger than this.

[li #]

Dark and twisted trees, skirted in moss, lined the road. Their tips leaned together, hiding the sky. The road twisted as well, hiding its future and past. A fine place for an ambush, Bannan Larmensu thought, and didn't care. There'd been a time he'd have been on alert, his every sense tuned to the limb out of place, the rock ready to fall, the deadly lurkers in the brush.

No longer. Rhoth's prince had lured the merchants of Eldad to his bed at last, with Vorkoun and the eastern marches the dowry. What generations of raids and thievery couldn't defeat, a stroke of a pen laid waste. Once-proud Vorkoun now belonged to Ansnor and he was on this road.

"Lovely place, sir." Tir Half-face used a thumb to pry up the pitted metal that gave him his name. He spat at a lichen-crusting boulder. "Just lovely." He settled the crude mask over the ruin left when a sword took his nose and most of his chin.

"It's a road, not a place." Bannan used the whip to flick a bloodfly from the ox's wide back, not that the creature appeared to notice, then leaned back, boot braced on the plank that separated the front of the settler wagon from the end of the ox. He regarded his companion with fond exasperation. Easier to leave behind an arm than shed the man who'd guarded his back since he'd come new and foolish to the border, and been his truest friend since.

A short wiry beard, brown with traces of grey, sprouted below the mask; above, bright blue eyes returned his regard. What tanned skin showed was scarred and puckered, his ears were ringed in metal, and, on his bald head, Tir wore the straw hat he'd bought in Endshere. To blend in, he'd professed, tossing his helm into the wagon to rattle loose. Blending, Bannan noticed, hadn't extended to removing the throwing axes from his belt.

He'd removed his weapons. Removed them. Dropped them. Walked away from them without a second glance or regret. As he'd done with his life. The

settler's garb was too new for comfort, but the leather and woven flax would fit better after sweat and rain. And work.

He needed work.

"When will we arrive -- at a place, sir?"

He had no idea. He'd claimed a settler's portion from Vorkoun's treasurer, a woman who knew him, his family. She'd been flustered but managed the right stamps and seals. The law was dusty, not changed: any citizen of Rhoth willing to move north for life, upon relinquishing his or her property to the crown, was entitled to supplies and land. In Weken, signed and witnessed by a rather surprised magistrate, the document became binding. It also became a sleepy-eyed ox, a wagon, older than he but sound, and the wagon's contents. Contents he hoped would prove worth their weight. It was one thing, Bannan thought ruefully, to live off the land while scouting enemy terrain, quite another to prepare to live peacefully in one place forever. The trader had given several of his purchases, and himself, an amused look. Worrisome, that.

Tir, who knew all about farms and life on them, could have helped. Oh no. He'd disappeared into a tavern, since it was Bannan's name on the document, Bannan who wanted to dig dirt for a living, and Bannan who had them heading away civilized parts where they might have found work wearing fine for-show-only swords, with the worst hazards being parade duty and sore feet from standing outside the House of Keys through long debates, and had he mentioned the admiration of beautiful, civilized ladies for uniforms?

What, he'd asked, was wrong with that?

Everything, Bannan thought bitterly. Officers from the border guard were being scattered across Lower Rhoth, their companies disbanded, while the people of Vorkoun, people he'd protected most of his life, waited for their new overlords. Too many had histories better forgotten, for Vorkoun had been rife with smuggling and secrets. How else to survive, when your enemy was closer than any ally?

Now, they'd be at the mercy of Ansnor, who'd shown none before.

"I'm in no hurry," he said aloud. "The Northward Road goes beyond Upper Rhoth -- all the way to the unclaimed barrens, if you believe the maps." An ancestor of the current prince had built roads to knit the halves of his domain into a whole, reaching where navigable rivers didn't, connecting the fertile lowlands with the rugged north. Including this path to nowhere.

"The domain of a few hunters and trappers who wisely flee its winter. A winter, might I say, sir, coming closer by the day?"

"I promise we'll stop before it snows."

"Ancestors Blessed." A moment's pause, during which Bannan enjoyed the unopinionated sounds of creaking wood and the breathing of the ox, but a sly look warned him Tir wasn't done. Sure enough. "Could be, sir, we should stop sooner than later. They say the best land was that before Endshere. Behind us. They say there haven't been settlers this far north since those Naalish squatters were kicked out of Avyo."

Explaining the twisted politics of the “Fair Lease” law to Tir, the legal loophole that stripped property titles granted to those from Mellynne generations ago, wasn’t how Bannan wanted to spend the next few hours, nor did he expect his pragmatic friend to sympathize with once-wealthy city dwellers sent packing. Before their time, anyway. What had it been ... twenty years? More? The settler’s bind and land grants, so to his advantage now, had been the prince’s sop to the newly poor. And there was another topic, being newly poor, not to broach with Tir or he wouldn’t hear the end of it all day.

Better safe than sorry. He grunted something noncommittal.

“They say, sir,” Tir needed no more prompting to continue, “that the locals call this the Doubtful Road. Seems no one who takes it past Endshire can trust their future.”

“‘They say. They say.’ Heart’s Blood. When did you take stock in gossip? There are valleys. Settlements.” Bannan shifted listlessly. “The place doesn’t matter.” A dirty brown shadow strutted up to the wagon and blew a noisy response to this. Without a change to his plodding walk, the ox tipped his horned head nervously at the sound. The two animals weren’t friends; the ox, being wiser than he’d looked, had to be hobbled at night to keep him close. “Scourge agrees with me.” Bannan stretched to slap the horse’s dusty shoulder. “Don’t you, boy?”

Tir’s forehead wrinkled. “Bloody beast.”

Thus addressed, Scourge flung up his huge head and rolled his eyes till the red showed. At least he didn’t show teeth. This time. “Peace, Tir. I couldn’t leave him behind; he’d eat my nephews. What would my sister say then?”

Stiffly. “I would never presume to speak for the baroness.”

“‘Baroness,’ is it?” Bannan chuckled. “Lila’d box your ears for that, after all the times we got drunk together.” In the worst part of the city, too: the slum beneath the high bridge where no one would expect a Larmensu, let alone both heirs. His mood soured. They’d left Vorkoun as if for another patrol, pretending nothing had changed, that the farewells weren’t forever. Lila had hugged him more fiercely than usual, that was all. “You could have stayed in her household. You didn’t have --”

“And risk the baron’s jealousy?” Tir protested. “I’ll have you know Lila was heartbroken to see me leave. She confessed her undying love, sir, but had to send me with you. To protect her marriage vows. Such a brave woman, she is.”

Bannan half smiled and shook his head.

The brows came down to scowl over the mask. “Not in so many words, of course.”

Bannan waited.

“Hearts’ Blood!” Tir threw up his hands. “All right. Sir. Being every bit as mad as you are, sir, your dear sister told me if I let you turn around she’d take off my ears herself. I’m allowed to hit you on the head, but no unnecessary maiming. Ancestors Witness --” with vast admiration “-- I believe she meant it.”

The truth at last. “I’m sure she did,” Bannan replied mildly. “Right, Scourge?”

The big horse snorted his disdain, then sidestepped into the shadows where he preferred to travel, moving his bulk between the trees and over twigs without sound. He could do it with a rider too, and carry that rider into battle. Not any rider. Not Scourge. Bannan's was the only hand he tolerated; he didn't doubt his mount would, in truth, try to eat the sons of his sister's unsoldierly husband, given provocation.

The foul-tempered war horse wasn't the only threat to Lila's household Bannan took away with him on this road, nor the worst.

"The exchange was yesterday, wasn't it?" The treaty that moved the border moved people as well. Ansnor would free any Rhothan prisoners; Vorkoun her Ansnan ones.

"The start of it, yes." Tir gave him a somber look. "It'll take a few weeks. No one wants blood on the streets." The treaty said deeds on either side were forgiven, political prisoners and soldiers alike honourably discharged, to be left in peace.

Bannan thought it more likely his fat new ox would sprout wings. Of royal purple.

"How long before they compare notes?" After eight years on the border, he'd lost track of how many "they" were. The faces blurred; easier to remember the astonished anger, then fear. Every one who'd seemed innocent until he looked at them as they spoke, until he'd declared each a liar or spy. His gift, to see others for what they were, to know the truth when he heard it from their lips.

Truthseer.

They didn't know his name. No one used a real name in the marches, not in a conflict with such deep roots on either side. Bannan had taken "Captain Ash" from the officer he'd replaced.

Those brought before him knew his face; by campfire, by torchlight, more rarely by the light of day. The Rhothan captain who was never wrong. The well-bearded Rhothan captain. Bannan fingered the novelty of a smooth jaw and chin, hoping road dust disguised the contrast between pale and well-tanned skin. All those years, the beard had hidden his relative youth; with luck, its absence would hide him now.

"They'll figure out what I must be," Bannan went on grimly.

"It'll be talk, sir," Tir objected. "Nothing more. Who'd believe?"

"Scourge does." No coincidence, that the creature chose as rider the Larmensu who saw him for what he was. "You do."

"You can't think I'd --"

"Peace, Tir." Bannan sighed. This man, as all those in his company, would die for him without hesitation; he'd seen it in their faces. Had chosen them for that true loyalty.

How different from Vorkoun's high society where, as a child, he'd been so desperately unhappy, hearing the lies, seeing through masks of flesh. As soon as

he was old enough to pass for a man, he'd taken service at the border, where he faced an honest hate and finally found use for his gift.

He was what he was. The heritage of his line, to be a truthseer. Now his curse. A fair trade, if those he loved were safe.

Bannan lightened his tone. "Lila told me to take a wife and raise brats of my own. Surely there are women in the north."

"Wife? Here?" Tir shook his head vehemently, almost losing the straw hat. "You can't be serious. Sir. They'd be -- farm maids."

"What -- you don't think one would have me?"

Tir caught his mood and gave a low whistle. "Have you? You'll have to fight them off, sir. And their mothers."

"A battle worth the effort. I'll share, by the way," Bannan grinned. "You'll need a wife too."

"I've had three," Tir boasted. "Don't be charmed by a pretty ankle. The trick's to taste her cooking first --"

"So now you're giving me advice."

"Wife hunting is serious business ..."

"Says the man who can't keep one."

"I've kept them all," Tir said smugly. "Just not in the same city."

They both laughed.

The wingless ox plodded forward, half asleep, each step putting distance between future and past.

[li #]

Jenn lengthened her stride but didn't run. Children ran, not dignified almost-nineteen adults who expected to be taken seriously; this according to her aunt, the most dignified person in Marrowdell. Also, running made her look late, and she wasn't today, not quite.

As she passed the village fountain, Jenn dutifully, if absently and in haste, dipped a finger of thanks into its cool water. The practice was one her father's generation insisted upon; like the rest born here, she saw nothing remarkable in the deep basin of gleaming blue tile, always full of sweet water that never froze or fouled. The basin was rimmed by huge blocks of weathered grey stone, so cunningly fitted that only the tiniest strands of emerald-green moss could grow between. The ground surrounding the blocks was paved in riverstone cobbles that stayed free of snow or ice.

Though she found precious little good about her brother's family's exile, Aunt Sybb declared Marrowdell's fountain to have water finer than any in Avyo, and each summer brought bottles to fill and take home.

Night was night and water was the same everywhere, Jenn assured herself. She passed the Emms' house and glanced toward the mill. No sign of her father heading home yet. She walked faster. She wouldn't be so much as tardy if she got home first.

Shoes. She mustn't forget to put on shoes for supper. She'd do whatever it took to convince her aunt she was a person who should live in the great city.

Which Marrowdell was not. The village consisted of the commons, the fountain, the mill, and seven homes linked by its meandering road and footpaths. Its buildings were simple structures, made from stacked, axe-hewn logs with any chinks between filled with red clay from the riverbank. Their slanted roofs were protected by shakes of cedar wood, themselves coated in moss, bright green after a rain. Repairs left bare patches, especially in summer. Doors, never locked, hung open on their wooden hinges in this pleasant mild weather. Precious hand-sized panes of glass, carefully framed in wood, were set into wide windows, with shutters ready to protect them from wind or weather. Some had curtains, some did not.

Each home had its privy set conveniently between garden and woodpile, so return trips weren't empty-handed, as well as a larder dug deep into the cool earth, with sturdy doors that did lock. A spring-famished bear might break through, but not quietly. More likely thieves had clever paws and snuck about on moonless nights. Three homes had barns towering behind them, with room to store feed and provide warm quarters for all the village livestock come the cold.

Cities were grander, Jenn thought as she walked. Warmer, too. For one thing, Aunt Sybb said city people didn't go outside to the larder or privy, trips that, come winter, were made only when desperate, followed by thawing numbed flesh by the stove.

Cities had oil lamps and furnaces and water indoors. They had crowded, busy roads, with pavements to keep shoes free of mud. The largest, like Avyo, had trolleys that ran along metal rails, though Aunt Sybb pronounced those noisy and abrupt. Every building was a lofty edifice of marble and brick and glass, with new ones built all the time.

Nothing new was built in Marrowdell. When the settlers arrived, twenty years ago come fall, the homes and barns had been here, empty and waiting. The fountain had been here too, though it hadn't filled until Zehr Emms touched its stones, the water having waited to be needed. The rust red road and hedges had been here, gates open, and the fields of grain. The gardens had been ready to plant with vegetables. Though they'd found berry bushes, the apple orchard arrived with the settlers, Kydd Uhtoff having filled his portion of the family wagon with saplings from their home in Avyo.

From then on, all had stayed the same. The house picked by the Nalynns stood by the tall gristmill and overlooked where the river's slow meander quickened into the first rapids and the bank became steep. The Emms took one nearer the fountain; old Jupp and the Uhtoffs lived across the garden and road, next to the orchard. The Treffs, Morrills, and Uhtoffs lived near the common pasture.

The mill was Marrowdell's largest structure, half again the height of a barn. Traced by dust, golden sunbeams slipped between its weathered outer boards into its open heart. Whole logs, stripped of their bark, rose through the floors to the roof high overhead, their girth wider than the arms of three children

could hold. At each level, support beams met them like dancers who gripped one another against the strain.

The floors were of thick planking, grey and polished by use. The main floor, reached through sliding doors wide enough for a wagon, housed the great wheel that hung over the river. In summer, the wheel was still, its leather pulleys and wooden gears loose and patient, the hopper tipped up. The millstones lay beside their open case, being dressed for the coming harvest. Jenn could draw their elegant pattern in her sleep, having spent the last few years as miller's apprentice. This season, she'd been trusted to deepen the grooves on her own, her father doing the final sharpening. The hard stone was reluctant, which also described Aunt Sybb's feelings about one of her nieces wielding a chisel. But no one else in the village had the talent.

Below, in the basement, was the stone-lined raceway, dry for now. Once its gate lifted in invitation, the river would run through to turn the great wheel. Gears would engage, leather pulleys take the strain, and everything would move. Jenn loved it all, from the millstones and their dancing shoe, to the conveyor that caught the millings and took them up to the loft to be cooled, screened, and bagged. She'd run errands up and down the wide open stairs that went up alongside the hopper, stairs in winter the villagers decorated with pine boughs and ribbon for the Midwinter Beholding, when the loft would be transformed with light and music.

Otherwise, until harvest, the mill was an empty, peaceful place, redolent of grain, dust, and the river, a useful spot to house Aunt Sybb's fancy Avyo coach, carefully tarped against the damp in a back corner of the main floor.

On the far side of the mill, closest of all to the outside world, stood the solitary building Uncle Horst called home. He wasn't really an uncle. He'd come to Marrowdell without family, so the Nalynns added him to theirs. Horst wasn't really his name, but once a very small Jenn pronounced it that way, he'd kept it as his. Uncle Horst helped Radd in the mill, when he wasn't hunting, and at all times he watched the road, though for what Jenn couldn't imagine. He avoided the tinkers' tents, other than to have his knives sharpened or boots resoled, and, though he escorted her from Endshere and back each year, likewise avoided Radd's sister. Which might have had something to do with relinquishing his place at the Nalynn table during her visits, except that Uncle Horst wasn't like that. He wouldn't begrudge family their rightful place. He respected Aunt Sybb, that was all, and was shy.

The Nalynn home wasn't full of noisy small children and bags of dripping cheese, like the Ropps'. It wasn't austere like the Uhtoffs', with Master Dusom's shelves of books, or full of industry like the Treffs'. It might not contain the fine cabinetry of the Emms' or the musty secrets of old Wagler Jupp -- and lacked bear teeth -- but it was, Jenn nodded to herself, as she always did walking up her sloping path, the best home of all.

Stripped of other wealth, Melusine Nalynn had nonetheless brought treasures to start her new life: a baby daughter in her arms and a cutting from her favourite rose. Both had grown strong and beautiful. Peggs, with her black

flowing hair, glad smile, and doe-soft brown eyes, had no equal in Marrowdell -- an opinion that whenever expressed drew a flustered blush to her fine white cheeks and a quick denial to her lips. Which made it no less true.

The rose climbed the river side of their home, covering its logs with a blaze of red blossom all summer, reaching around to frame the girls' bedroom window and nod over the roof, filling the breeze with heady fragrance. Bees and butterflies loved it. Each summer, bluebirds nested within its thorns. Each spring, Radd pretended he didn't check the bare woody stems every morning until the first buds appeared. The tender plant shouldn't have been able to survive the winter, let alone thrive.

But this was Marrowdell.

Jenn couldn't make herself scowl at her mother's rose. She'd ask it for a cutting herself, when she left. And return, often, to visit.

Feeling better, she went around back. Aunt Sybb didn't approve of bare feet in the parlour, which was what the front half of their house became during her visits, even though it was also Radd's bedroom, the dining room, and where the entire family sewed or read or talked during winter, when not at the mill. Separated by a curtain, the kitchen, with its fireplace, oven, and cookstove, filled the back half. A ladder beside the fireplace led to the loft and the warm cozy room Jenn shared with Peggs; a little too warm, admittedly, some midsummer nights, but perfect in winter.

Jenn stuck her head through the open kitchen door, too sun-blind to more than guess at her sister's shape, and whispered urgently. "Did she notice I was gone?" Their aunt also didn't approve of "traipsing off," her term for the myriad earnest excuses, some of them real, Jenn produced for having been outside in nice weather instead of inside. Inside being lectured. "Am I late for supper?"

"Not to eat it," came the tart reply.

Jenn winced. She'd promised to help with the preparations, hadn't she. Time flew in the meadow. "Sorry, Peggs."

A basket was thrust at her. "Run this to uncle, Good Heart, and all's forgiven."

Jenn slipped her arm through the handle and lifted one edge of the covering cloth. The aroma wafting upward with the steam made her mouth water. It wasn't as if Peggs needed help anyway. Until the dishes. "I won't be long."

"While you're there, Jenn Nalynn," her sister suggested dryly, "thank uncle for filling the cistern."

"Oh." Her chore, most definitely, to lug buckets from the fountain to fill the clever holding tank Zehr had built behind their kitchen. "I will."

Determined not to be at fault again, at least not today, Jenn crossed the road to the mill and took the short path to Uncle Horst's, exchanging an absent smile and greeting with Riss as the two passed one another, Riss with her darning basket over one arm and a pair of plump, skinned squirrels in hand, doubtless courtesy of Uncle Horst's arrows.

Jenn didn't slow to admire his small garden, though the pumpkins were nicely plump, with orange creeping over their round sides, and she could almost taste the pies and breads and soups. They'd lost last year's. The twins had let the yearlings lead the way into the village and, with the singleminded cleverness of cattle, they'd headed for the nearest garden, trampling what they didn't eat. She'd had words with Allin over that disaster.

He'd still proposed at her birthday. As if she'd forgive him for the pumpkins. Besides, all he wanted was to be the next miller, which he wouldn't, since everyone knew Tadd was the twin who could hear when a gear was failing, let alone --

"Thought I heard a visitor." Uncle Horst, who their father swore could hear a feather fall, appeared in his doorway, smiling. He was older than their father, the corners of his eyes and mouth creased in small soft lines, his grey hair starting to thin. His body was thin too, which only went to prove Aunt Sybb's assertion that you mustn't judge someone by their looks since Horst could outwork any man in Marrowdell and only Davi the smith could lift a heavier weight. He'd been a soldier in Avyo; beyond that bald statement, he wouldn't speak of the past, not even when a younger Jenn had coaxed, being curious how he'd lost the tips of two fingers on his left hand and what old wound made him limp in the damp chill of fall and become, as Peggs put it, cranky as a bear himself.

"Greetings, uncle. I brought supper."

"Most kind." He took the basket from her and sniffed, closing his eyes in rapture for a moment. "You're such a fine cook."

Jenn chuckled. "Peggs' the fine cook," she corrected as always, then grimaced. "I'm sorry I forgot the cistern, uncle. Thank you for taking care of it."

"It was needful." He raised an eyebrow. "Tomorrow's laundry day."

So it was. Meaning he expected an explanation for her negligence. In many ways, Jenn thought glumly, her "uncle" was more strict than her father. "Aunt Sybb was talking about hems," she began. "Hems and husbands. And the sun was shining so very brightly," that was important to mention, since Uncle Horst preferred the outdoors too. "And I thought asters might start to bloom on such a bright sunny day and they have and --"

"And you, my dear, must respect both your aunt and your responsibilities."

Quashed, Jenn ducked her head and said in a small voice. "Yes, Uncle. I am very sorry."

"Actions. You must take more care to think of their consequence, Jenn Nalynn." Uncle Horst did his best to look stern but the lines beside his mouth creased into little dimples, the way Jenn knew meant he wasn't really angry and was having a hard time not smiling. She gazed up at him through her lashes and waited. As if sensing he'd lost his advantage, he went on, "I'm an old man. I won't always be here to do your chores while you play in the meadow."

Of course he would.

“Let me do your laundry,” Jenn offered. He wouldn’t ask for himself. Not for supper. Not for anything. “It’d be no trouble.” Well, it might be. His clothing ran more to well-aged leather than homespun, and as a hunter he was particular about the scents that touched his things.

“No need, thank you.” The smile she’d been waiting for. “Now go. Behave yourself. You can tell me tomorrow about the asters.”

Jenn stretched up to kiss his stubbled cheek. “I promise.”

[li #]

Being the best sister imaginable, Peggs had left Jenn’s shiny black shoes, as well as a damp rag, by the kitchen door. Jenn sat on the barrel by the washtub and quickly wiped her feet, rubbing them dry on the inside of her skirt before working on the shoes. She was supposed to wear stockings with them, but her only pair had made a fine lining for her mittens last winter.

She stood gingerly, getting her balance. That was the worst of shoes. They tipped the world in a most uncertain manner. She drew herself up straight, shoulders back, and, upon consideration, used the rag on her hands as well. With less result. She should have washed them in the river. Maybe the green nails wouldn’t show.

Jenn folded her hands together and walked decorously through the door.

Peggs smiled. “Welcome home.” She plucked a stem of grass from Jenn’s hair, then licked her thumb and applied it lightly to the tip of Jenn’s nose. “Pollen.” She resumed arranging bowls and spoons on a tray. The bowls were white porcelain, decorated with long-feathered birds in blue; the spoons were lovingly polished silver, with handles shaped like horses jumping. The bowls were chipped, the spoons weren’t the same size, and the tray was a slab of wood Jenn had painted when she was little. Normally, she didn’t notice. Today, with leaving and cities and plans filling her thoughts, Jenn wondered what elegant matched settings graced homes in Avyo.

“Any pebbles?”

She blinked, back in the kitchen. “Some pinks. And a nice white one.” She tipped them from her pocket into the pottery jar waiting by the fireplace, then wiped her hands again. “What can I do to help?”

Peggs held out the tray. “Hold steady while I fill these.” She’d made a stew, brimming with late summer vegetables and topped each bowlful with a dollop of cream. A fresh loaf of bread waited beside the pot of butter and a berry pie sat in the bake oven, steam and purple juice bubbling through slits in the crisp golden pastry. Basic fare, Aunt Sybb called it. Her mouth watering, Jenn wondered what could be better.

Another reason to see the world, as if she needed one.

Peggs’ sketchpad leaned against the windowsill, illuminated by sunlight. Charcoal sticks of varied lengths poked up from the broken handled baby cup she used for brushes, when in a painting mood. She’d been working on wildflowers again. “I forgot to bring asters from the meadow,” Jenn said apologetically. “They’re out now.”

“And was your meadow in a good mood today?”

No one else knew of Wisp. Whether Peggs believed or played along out of kindness wasn't important. She listened. “No,” Jenn admitted. “We argued. But it was his fault,” she emphasized. “He said I'm never to leave home. Never!” The tray tipped, bowls sliding, and she quickly firmed her grip.

Her sister pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Do you know why?”

“There isn't a ‘why.’” Jenn couldn't help the sullen note to her voice. “No one will let me do what I want with my life.”

“And what might that be today?” their father inquired, stepping through the kitchen door with a broad grin. He'd scrubbed until his already ruddy cheeks shone like little apples, his sister having told him very clearly how a man mustn't bring the soil and dust of his work into his home. As Radd Nalynn was the miller, and usually coated from head to toe either in chaff and flour, or powdered rock from dressing his stones, coming home clean took special effort. That he did it with such goodwill said everything necessary about his love for his sister.

His daughters kissed him lightly in greeting, one on each damp overscrubbed cheek. Jenn showed him the tray. “What I want is to put supper on the table.”

Their father looked at the bowls, then at the door to the “parlour.” His eyes crinkled at the corners. “It's glorious outside. Birds singing. Sun shining. We could eat on a blanket by the river.”

Peggs handed him the loaf and butter, then collected the pottery cups and ewer of water. “No, we couldn't.”

“I suppose not.” Like a man girding himself for battle, Radd Nalynn led the way into his own home.

A more unlikely battlefield couldn't be imagined. The Nalynn parlour was a welcoming place, bright, warm, and comfortable. This time of year, the potbellied heat stove was filled with cut flowers and the heavy throws were neatly folded in a chest against any damp, ready for winter's comfort, while pretty quilts covered the bed in the corner. On the floor, baskets of bright rags waited to be made into rugs and bundles of straw waited to become baskets.

And, though formidable in her way, Sybb Mahavar was hardly a foe. She was the female version of her younger brother, though diligent application of powder forestalled any unseemly apple spots on her cheeks. The two had the same thick dark hair, salted white at the temples, and the same strong lines at jaw and chin. Both had soft creases at the corners of eye and mouth that suggested old grief until they smiled, which was more often than not.

Radd wasn't a heavy man, but years in the mill had laid muscle through his chest and arms until his body resembled a smallish barrel. Sybb was frail beneath her layers of linen and wool, her wrists and neck skin over bone. Neither was tall. Peggs was a head taller and Jenn, since last year, could look her aunt in the eye.

Something she carefully avoided doing as she carried the tray to the family table.

To encounter an unexpected problem.

For the first time ever, the long wooden table that filled the other half of the room was covered by a cloth; one of the sheets from the chest, by the look. Worse, there were flowers in what, this morning, had been a large jar of pickles in the kitchen.

As for the flowers ...

Radd stopped in his tracks, loaf and butter pot forgotten in his hands. "We don't pick her roses," he said in a strangled voice. "You know that, Sybbie."

"Which is why I was surprised to see them here," his sister replied calmly.

Everyone turned to Peggs, who shook her head. "I wouldn't touch them."

The roses nodded from the jar, each dewy fresh. Loose petals patterned the white cloth beneath, forming a perfect spiral outward.

"I wasn't home," Jenn reminded them. The display was Wisp's work; she was sure of it. Another apology.

But ... he didn't come to the village.

Not that she'd noticed before.

If it was Wisp ... a breeze was one thing. How had he managed the pickle jar?

And, a new worry, where were the pickles?

"I'll look after this." Peggs put down her tray to take hold of the jar, not without a meaningful glance at Jenn, and carried it to the window right of the front door. It fit, just, on the deep sill.

"Supper smells marvelous, dear. Radd?" Aunt Sybb rose gracefully from her place on what she called their settee -- a wide bench against one wall, layered with blankets and backed with cushions -- and stood by her chair at the table.

Radd's eyes hadn't left the roses.

His sister gave a delicate cough.

"Your pardon, Sybbie." He hurriedly put down the bread and butter in order to pull back her chair. It was more a lift of the chair to get it over the edge of the thick braided rug that filled the center of the wood floor, the chair itself made of rounds of birch with their bark peeled off, tied together. It was their best, free of creaks and with new soft cushions tied to seat and back.

The cushions, among with many other useful items, had been made by the Treff sisters from the dresses Aunt Sybb had brought last summer, seams carefully picked apart and every scrap of fabric saved. Their aunt had given the cushions a most thoughtful look on her arrival, but made no comment. Jenn wondered if she'd noticed the small pearl buttons were now on most of the men's shirts.

It was likely. The reversal of fortunes that left her brother penniless and exiled wasn't something discussed, nor was the ultimate use of her gifts. Wisp was right; her aunt didn't lack kindness.

Or resolve. When Jenn finally looked directly at her aunt's face, the lift of one shapely eyebrow made it clear their earlier discussion of the day – be it hems or husbands – wasn't over. She gave an accepting nod. Being dignified and adult probably included listening to all of a lecture, not just the part she couldn't avoid.

Radd helped his sister sit and took his place. As he cut thick slices of bread, steam rising from inside, Peggs placed a full cup at each setting, doing her best to avoid the rose petals on the cloth.

Having put down her own tray, with some relief, Jenn put a bowl of stew in front of her aunt, from the left, with a spoon. She served her father, then put out her supper and Peggs'.

The sisters sat, hands neatly folded. No need for a lantern or candles yet; the late afternoon sun shone through from the kitchen and played its beams over the table, picking out the deep red of the petals, embossing the simple cloth. Their aunt's keen eyes studied them, then lifted to regard Jenn's nose.

Jenn froze in place.

Aunt Sybb's brows began to draw together.

Slurp!

Her glance flashed to her brother, who halted his spoon halfway from his lips to return the most innocent look possible. "I expect poor manners from these deprived children, Radd Nalynn, not from you."

Jenn focussed on her bowl, doing her best not to smile. There was nothing -- beyond rust, according to their aunt -- wrong with their father's table manners. After all, he'd grown up in Avyo, and once owned six of the city's great mills, as well as a tannery.

"Of course. My apologies, Sybbie." He put the spoonful of stew back in his bowl. "Please say the Beholding for us."

"I'd be honoured." Aunt Sybb brought up her hands, beringed forefingers and thumbs touching, the rest of her fingers spread wide, then brought them down to frame her heart, or rather the delicate clockworks pinned to her fine lace shawl. "Hearts of our Ancestors, we are Beholden for the food on this table, no matter how plain, for it will give us the strength to improve ourselves in your eyes. We are Beholden for the opportunity to share this meal, for as you know it's impossible to keep certain young people from running wild outdoors when they should sit still to listen and learn from their elders --"

Jenn sank in her chair.

"-- We would be even more Beholden for the opportunity to find certain young women husbands to help them in their future lives before we're spirits ourselves."

Her sister gave a faint "meep" of protest; her father shook his head. "Sybbie..."

"Please let me finish. Hearts of our Ancestors, above all we are Beholden for this time we've spent together, as family. It's never --" her voice wavered.

“It’s never long enough.” Radd’s eyes softened and he touched her sleeve. She blinked fiercely as she said, “However far we are apart, Keep Us Close.”

“Keep Us Close,” Jenn echoed with the others, exchanging a worried glance with Peggs. They all shed a few tears the night before Aunt Sybb left for the winter, but that was weeks away. It had to be. “Aunt Sybb,” she began, “you aren’t -- you can’t be leaving yet. You’ll miss --” to say her birthday, her very special, coming of age birthday, would be selfish. “You’ll miss the tinkers,” she finished lamely. Their arrival and the harvest marked the high point of the year, as far as Marrowdell was concerned.

“I --” Aunt Sybb looked to her brother and Jenn’s heart sank. They’d talked about this, her father and aunt, and the decision made. It was on their faces.

“What matters is your birthday, Jenn,” he said firmly, “We’ll have our own party before your aunt leaves. Now. Let’s enjoy this excellent supper.”

He didn’t want a fuss, that meant. She struggled to be calm and reasonable, but this was the worst news and her voice cracked shamefully. “How soon?”

“Jenn --”

“It’s all right, Radd. Dear Hearts, I leave the day after tomorrow. Horst will wait with me in Endshere while my escort travels from Weken.”

In such haste? “But why?”

“Because it’s started.” Peggs, usually the quiet one, leaned forward with a troubled frown. “You’ve stopped sleeping, haven’t you, Aunt?”

“Peace, child.” Their aunt’s hand fumbled at her cup. “Eat your suppers.”

Jenn looked more closely, seeing what she’d missed. Powder muted, but couldn’t hide the dark circles beneath their aunt’s eyes. “Is it true?”

“The Hearts move us at their whim.”

“It’s this place,” she countered, furious at everything. “You know it is. Why won’t it let you stay?”

An astonished silence fell over the table. The roses on the windowsill turned in their jar to face her. Peggs, who noticed, made a point of trying her stew.

Jenn flushed and bent her head. The sun on the cloth moved from petal to petal. The ones it deserted grew dark and dull, like stains.

No one talked about Marrowdell. About how the valley rejected some and chose others. About the dreams that drove the unwanted away.

“Jenn. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, she lifted her eyes to meet her father’s.

“Don’t make this harder for your aunt than it already is. Our home’s here. Hers is in Avyo, with your Uncle Chane.”

Her aunt nodded, eyes too bright. “I miss the city, child. Don’t worry. I’ll be back next year.”

“Let me come with you.” The words fell out of her mouth before she’d thought them.

If the silence before was astonished, this was worse. They gaped at her, Peggs included, as if she'd lost her mind. Jenn pressed on. "For the winter. I'd be no trouble."

The roses withered as one, brown petals dropping to the floor.

Jenn refused to look at the now-gaunt stems. Why should it matter to Wisp or Marrowdell where she was? Others came and went. Just this spring, Anten Ropp had taken his stepsons all the way to Endshere to sell their extra bull.

Flowers hadn't died with drama over that.

"Uncle Horst helps more than me in the mill. I'd be home by spring plant-  
-"

"Enough!" A roar. "No more of this -- this nonsense, Jenn." Their father thrust away his bowl of stew, slopping its contents on the cloth. "Marrowdell is your home. High time you both grew up and took husbands!" He stood before either daughter could protest, turned, and stormed out of the house.

The three left exchanged shocked looks. Jenn couldn't remember her peaceful father leaving the table during a meal -- let alone like this.

Aunt Sybb coughed delicately, dispelling the stunned silence. "He wants what's best for you."

And it didn't matter what she wanted? Jenn's flash of rebellion faded under her aunt's too-knowing gaze. "I'll apologize." She gathered her courage. "But I did mean it, Aunt Sybb. I want to go with you. I'd listen to lectures every day."

Distress etched lines across their aunt's face. "I wish you could, child, to the depths of my heart. I wish it were possible for you both to attend university, the theatres --"

"Why not?" Jenn sat straighter in sudden hope. "My name's not on a bind. Hettie said her father wants to send Cheffy and Alyssa to the university when they're old enough. I could go --"

"Jenn, don't," her sister whispered urgently.

Too late. The petals on the table shriveled in their pattern, starting with those near Aunt Sybb's hand. She might have missed the rest of their misbehaviour, but this she did see and was transfixed; her face lost all colour beneath its powder.

"Aunt?"

She started, then covered her eyes with a trembling hand. "You must stay. I can't. Not here. Not in this place ..." her voice choked.

Peggs nudged Jenn and mouthed "Behave!" Out loud, "Let me make you some tea, Aunt." As she rose to go to the kitchen, her fingers closed on Jenn's shoulder, pressed gently. Look after her, that said.

Much as she longed to shout at Wisp to behave, if indeed the petals and roses were his fault, Jenn quieted. Aunt Sybb never grew used to what she called Marrowdell's "eccentricities." Only yesterday, she'd taken refuge in the kitchen from the house toad, as if there was anything harmful in the creature with its

soulful brown eyes, so like those of the puppies she described. Most of the time, the toad acted as a doorstop, ably keeping mice from the house. Unfortunately, it had decided to yawn and show its needle teeth when Aunt Sybb was sitting on the porch.

Whenever she visited, it was her nieces' duty to ensure nothing upset her. Which wasn't easy, Jenn thought with some frustration, when they didn't know what would.

Was the outside world so different?

She'd find out, Jenn vowed again.

Her stew cooled in its bowl. She didn't dare taste it, no matter how hungry, not with her father and sister fled the table, and her aunt sitting there, quivering, trying to be blind.

All she could think to do was sweep the offending petals from the cloth into her hand. They were crisp and dry, dead as if this was late fall and well past the frost.

No thistledown for Wisp.

Peggs arrived with tea, her lips pressed together in an unfamiliar line of disapproval. She'd cut thin slices of warm pie, topping it with strips of pale cheese, already melted. Normally, Jenn approved of going straight to the sweet course, but having missed lunch, she'd wanted her stew. She swallowed any objection. Supper had been disrupted by her selfishness, making Peggs' efforts in the kitchen for naught.

Everyone was upset, when she was the one being put upon. Jenn didn't see the fairness in that at all, but it was as it was. How did a simple request to visit Avyo for the winter mean she wasn't mature? They could have refused and that would have been that. What she'd said to Wisp had been in fun. How could she hide in Aunt Sybb's coach? Besides, their aunt would turn right around and bring her home.

The aunt who must to pack and leave, through no fault of her own. Their father worried for good reason; his sister's will was stronger than her body and sleepless nights quickly took their toll.

The aunt who was still trembling.

Jenn sighed, deep and long. Only one sure way to take Aunt Sybb's attention from the dying rose petals. She swallowed and plunged. "I won't marry Allin Emms. He's more interested in the mill than me. Besides, he's like a brother. An annoying one."

Aunt Sybb, who'd roused to grip her cup of tea with both hands, giving Peggs a murmured thanks, looked over in pleased surprise. "No one said you should, my dear."

"I won't marry Tadd either. He's moony over Peggs."

"Jenn Nalynn!" Peggs sank in her seat, having put the abandoned bowls of stew on the tray.

"Well, he is."

Her sister took refuge in her tea, cheeks pink.

As Jenn hoped, her new willingness to discuss marriage revitalized their aunt. "The Morrills come from excellent family."

Now she was well and truly stuck with it. Jenn felt her own cheeks flush.

Riedd Morrill had been a baron in Avyo, with a seat in Rhoth's House of Keys. That power and influence hadn't outweighed the heritage of a Mellynne bloodline, forcing him and his household into exile with the rest. It hadn't mattered to the horse who caved in his skull either, leaving his family to find a new life. Which they'd done, with varied success. Covie Morrill had raised her sons, then married widowed Anten Ropp and cheerfully begun raising his three children. Riedd's cousin, Riss Nahamm, took on the care of their great-uncle, Wagler Jupp, who refused to bend his ways one iota from his former life.

The grown sons, Devins and Roche, remained in the Morrill home. Both had their mother's thick brown hair and green eyes, though Devins, being tall and lean, was said to take after their father while Roche was compact and sturdy.

"Devins likes you," Peggs offered, a mischievous gleam in her eye. "Remember how he'd pull your hair when Master Uhtoff was reading to us?"

"Devins talks about udders all day," Jenn retorted. "You can have him."

"I don't want him."

Aunt Sybb's regard shifted to Peggs. "Whom do you want, my dear?"

The pink in her sister's cheeks drained away. "There's no -- I don't --"

Taking pity, Jenn stepped in. "I won't marry Roche Morrill either." She had no intention of elaborating.

Roche, when he could avoid helping his brother and stepfather in the dairy, hunted with Uncle Horst. When he wasn't hunting, he was spying. He'd followed her once, as far as the empty farm. It hadn't been a good feeling, like playing hide and seek in the hedges. She'd turned back, passing where he lurked in the shadows without a sideways glance.

The fierce wind that bent the trees behind her had done no more than fling leaves and dirt at Roche, but she'd smiled at his shout of fear.

He hadn't followed her since.

Like Wisp, Aunt Sybb was not to be denied. "Peggs, dear. You can tell us. Who has caught your eye?"

Peggs jumped up. "I should put Poppa's supper back in the pot before it's cold. Please excuse me." She grabbed the tray of bowls and almost ran to the kitchen.

Leaving Jenn alone with her aunt.

"I don't know," she said hurriedly. Who hadn't been moony over Peggs? Not that her sister offered any encouragement.

Her aunt touched the tip of her napkin to the corners of her mouth. "I wouldn't ask you to betray a confidence, child. However, unless more settlers with eligible sons arrive or you somehow conjure a prince from that vile toad of yours, if you want a husband you'll have to pick one from here sooner or later."

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“What did you say?”

A faint frown. “Pardon me, Aunt.”

“Pardon me, Aunt,” Jenn repeated quickly, blood pounding in her ears. “What did you say?”

“I said you shouldn’t waste time hoping for more settlers to arrive. It’s been over six years since the last, and they stayed but a night.” Aunt Sybb gave a delicate, unfeigned shudder. “I can’t blame them.”

“No,” Jenn corrected. “Not that. About the toad.”

Rarely was Sybb Mahavar rendered speechless. She took a too-hasty swallow of tea, colour rising to her face. “It was nothing. A bit of nonsense from an old story. My point is that you and your sister have four healthy men of the right age, right here. Allin and Tadd. Roche and Devins. Any one --”

“You forgot Wainn Uhtoff.”

“I did not.” Jenn watched her search for words. “Wainn is a kind and gentle person,” Aunt Sybb said at last, “but an unsuitable husband. He is -- disadvantaged.”

The Uhtoffs, arriving too late to join the others at Endshere, had taken the Northward Road alone and been chased by bandits. In their desperate flight, their wagon had overturned, crushing Wainn’s mother and sister, injuring young Wainn. He’d grown up with wide brown eyes ever puzzled by what they saw and a mind slow to understand. He helped his Uncle Kydd with his bees and stayed with the cows during calving.

“I’d rather Wainn than the rest,” Jenn assured her aunt. But she was thinking about toads.

While on the windowsill, had she looked, she’d have seen a jar full of pickles.

And not a rose petal in sight.

[li #]

Progress, of a sort.

Efflet had borne Wisp over the kaliia fields, to the hedge that bordered the village. Unseen, of course. They, like dragons, concealed themselves with light. Unheard would have been even better, but efflet couldn’t help but talk among themselves. Fortunately, the villagers thought their raspy little whispers came from crickets.

He’d arrived ahead of the girl, as he’d planned. Heard her shocking request. Done his utmost to express an opinion. The aunt had listened, he thought.

Now, to get home.

Unfortunately, while he’d been occupied with pickles and roses, the efflet had abandoned him. Some sound in the field must have caught their attention. A grasshopper. A bird. A foolish mouse. Though efflet were the most peaceful of creatures otherwise, whatever small life threatened the growing kaliia would be torn to shreds and fed to the soil. Larger threats? Oh, those were torn to shreds and left as reminders of the value of well-tended hedges.

Wisp hurried as best he could along the strip of dirt the villagers called the Tinkers Road. It was nothing like a road, or was much more than one. At its end was the turn-borns' crossing. Its length? Were he on his side of the edge, he'd be wading through a shallow river of the purest mimrol, its thick silver warm and far more comfortable than that chill, damp, and muddy stream he'd had to cross to leave the village. Water. Bah!

There'd been a time he could have used the air itself, or taken the solid paths of earth.

The time might come again. Or not. He'd been as he was long enough to no longer care. What mattered was his duty, what remained of it. He no longer led his kind, but he would protect them with his last breath.

From what he could. Just ahead, the Tinkers Road was forced sharply west by the massive Bone Hill the villagers called the Spine. The narrow path to the upper meadow met the road where it bent, a path hidden until one was right beside it.

Wisp cringed and twisted to keep that dreadful opening in sight until safely past. Because nothing bled through by the light of Marrowdell's day didn't make it safe. It was never safe.

Not for those aware.

The villagers, in their blissful ignorance, could walk there unharmed if they chose; not so on his side of the edge, never so. There, the Wound showed its true nature. A lure, a trap, and no escape.

But a place, nonetheless, easy to avoid. Wisp continued on, consumed by greater concerns. He had allies near the girl. The father held his daughters close, for love's sake. The aunt, who might have belonged in Marrowdell if not for heartstrings pulling her elsewhere, protected her brother and his family against the outside. The old soldier watched the road, for guilt's sake and a promise. Each helped in their way. Could they prevail against the girl's growing will? Not alone. That was the crux of it.

Why now? Or was now, why? This year's harvest would take place during a Great Turn, a moment of extraordinary potency and risk. He doubted coincidence. Wisp's next step clawed deep furrows in the packed dirt. Whatever the world, there were those drawn to power; most fools, some dangerous, a few of utter peril.

A chill, as though water ran down his spine. He didn't need the lingering daisies in their meadow to know the girl was coming into her heritage. Turn-born.

His bones felt it.

This Great Turn, for the first time in memory, there was a key on the Marrowdell side of the edge. An innocent, unknowing key.

In the shape of Jenn Nalynn.