

2<sup>nd</sup> Author's Note: Here's the next installment from the first draft of *A Turn of Light*.

Since putting up the first, and finishing the book, I've learned my wonderful publisher, DAW Books, has elected to put some heavyweight promotion behind it. That's great for me and the book, but it means more time for production and to amass reviews.

As in another year. Groan with me, folks, but smile too. It's a positive step for the book. Publication will be next year, 2013. When I have the exact date, I'll let you know.

On the plus side, my editor, Sheila Gilbert, is delighted that I'm putting out these installments, so I will continue. Hurray! There will be additional goodies to come during 2012. As I promised, what here's will continue to be in order and contain the story as I've written it, with the exception of the maps.\*

Keep in mind this is raw first draft, before editing and revision. Kindly bear with my Canadianisms and commas.

If you've questions about what's here, feel free to ask me. If you've questions about what's to come...?

Wait and wonder, dear readers. Because there's a great deal more.

I hope you enjoy,

Julie

\* Of course, to read the entire thing, you'll need to buy a copy. Glee!

***A Turn of Light***

by

Julie Elizabeth Czerneda

Coming from DAW Books in 2013

(trade paperback and ebook)

~ Three ~

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Jenn stood before the Trevv porch and smoothed her skirt. The open door was framed by shoulder-high vases filled with dried flowers. The overhanging canvas -- which tended to accumulate snow and collapse in winter, but there was no arguing with Trevvs, as the saying went -- provided welcome shade to the benches beneath, though these benches weren't for sitting. The one on the left was home to a row of pale grey crocks waiting their turn in the kiln; Jenn paused to study them carefully, but found no hint of the lovely colours and patterns sure to be revealed, once fired. Hettie said, having heard it from her Auntie Cynd, that her grandmother's latest glazes used rare pigments all the way from Thornloe. Davi had collected a mysteriously heavy package from Aunt Sybb's coach when she'd arrived. Not that Lorra would say.

Tiny bells chimed softly. They hung from the birdhouse at one end of the porch, to ring when its occupants came and went. The right-hand bench stood up against the wall to allow room for a quilt to hang in the light breeze. Frann wouldn't put such special work in the sun.

Jenn rubbed dust from her shoe.

She'd reason to be nervous. Aunt Sybb was a lady of refined manners, whose idea of expressing disapproval involved a certain sternness in the stirring of her tea, and whose heart was as soft as her brother's. Lorra Trevv was also of refined manners, but visiting her domain was more like plunging into a bear's den. Where a short-tempered and hungry bear could be waiting. Or rather, two.

Lorra Trevv, as she'd remind anyone who might have forgotten, had done more than rule a prominent family in Avyo. She'd been the head of its famed potter's guild and, as such, fully capable of expressing her disapproval in terms as sure to shock her illustrious riverside neighbours as they were to wilt the most stubborn dockside apprentice. In the company of peers -- or family -- she relied on verbal flaying and dismemberment to end any argument in her favour. Or at least silence her opponent.

When the prince's decree stripped her title and wealth, or more precisely, ended all leases held by those of Mellynne descent and restored such properties to the crown on behalf of true Rhothans, Lorra had chosen, like most, to go north with the shards of her household. A daughter, Wen. A son, Davi, and his wife. The wife's brother -- Anten Ropp -- and his family.

Though she doted on Davi and was glad of the rest, exile became bearable, to hear Lorra tell it, when she'd discovered her arch rival, Frann Nall, at the settlers' camp in Weken. Frann's properous holdings had included Avyo's riverfront warehouses, used by, among others, Lorra and her guild. Their battles had been legendary. Guild representatives cried foul in the Lower House time and

again over what they called outrageous fees and preference for foreign artisans; the barons of the House of Keys, beneficiaries of the fees and fond, truth be told, of the luxury of owning foreign-made art, heard such recommendations from the commons and dutifully ignored them.

When Lorra and Frann met at a social gathering, those nearby would lay wagers on the length of time before sparks flew. Without doubt, none would have bet the two could survive in the same village, let alone thrive in the same house.

But the two recognized in each other a kindred spirit and left their feuds with the wealth that spawned them. They arrived in Marrowdell with an eye for new opportunities. Lorra, seeing the quality of the clay lining the riverbanks, immediately instructed her beloved son to assemble her potter's wheel, then build a sequence of larger and larger kilns. Frann claimed organization of the village stores, keeping records for the mill as well as overseeing trade. Lately she'd taken up weaving, trading for wool from Endshere to add to flax. Useful, lovely things came from the Trevv household.

Not that it was ever peaceful.

Jenn stepped up on the porch, careful of the pottery, and eased inside the door.

The Trevv home was twice the size of the Nalynns'. Davi and Cynd slept on one side of the loft, Wen the other. Lorra and Frann each had their own rooms on the main floor. The large airy central room, where Jenn stood, served as kitchen and workroom. It extended from front to back, well lit by windows at both ends and by light streaming through the open doors on either side, and held an argument unlikely to end while its proponents lived.

Tidy shelves filled the left wall from floor to ceiling, with clever pegs to hold bobbins and spindles of thread. Baskets of leather and fabric scraps shared space with bottles of homemade buttons. The irreplaceable scissors and forms and needles, Frann's most precious millinery supplies, were, Jenn knew, safely tucked into the long boxes on the topmost shelf. In front stood a loom, threads hanging from the rafters above, beside a small desk and chair.

The wall to Jenn's left formed the opposing side. Great messy clumps of clay sat in bowls on the floor. Or on the floor. Bits and pieces of a pottery wheel leaned against the wall. The wall itself?

Bare but for a single painting, showing a tall young man beside a table. Jenn leaned from side to side, entranced as always by how the eyes in the portrait seemed to follow her. Creamy lace erupted from the young man's collar and cuffs, gold brocade shimmered down the front of his coat, and he looked, in Jenn's opinion, thoroughly uncomfortable. The table in the painting held a bowl of exotic peaches. The bowl was a Trevv family heirloom; the elegant young man, hard as it was to imagine, had grown into Davi, the village smith.

The room was divided by more than each woman's passion. A wavering line of chalk, fresh by the look of it, led along the floor from front door to kitchen. Streaks of clay and bits of thread crossed it here and there, sorties into enemy territory. Jenn wasn't surprised. The shouting that went on when both women were at work could be heard all the way to the mill, if the wind was right.

For now, to Jenn's relief, serenity reigned. Davi must be out in his smithy, attached to the barn beside the house. Cynd, his wife, would be in her garden. As befitted her former station in Avyo society, she was accomplished in embroidery and other fine hand work, skills she turned to good use during winter when she, Wen, and Frann sewed most of the village clothing. Though uninterested in plants before, she'd quickly realized gardening would keep her out of the house in summer, when Lorra and Frann were most at odds. To no one's surprise, the Trevv gardens produced the best guords and potatoes. Cynd's childless state hadn't endeared her to her husband's mother in Avyo; her abilities in Marrowdell did. They'd grown closer.

Which could not be said of mother and daughter. Wen Trevv lived in the same home. She sewed and cooked with Cynd. She listened to the flute Frann would play come winter evenings and drew designs for her mother's pottery, but Marrowdell had claimed her more than any other.

Wen talked to toads.

Not only toads. She chatted with birds and squirrels. Jenn had once caught her lecturing a butterfly, her face animated and glad, mouthing some soundless language of her own.

Come a person too close, and Wen fell still. By her actions, she understood what was being said, but no matter how others railed or coaxed or reasoned, she uttered not a word in return.

The silence of her daughter might have explained something of Lorra Trevv's fiery temper. Or Lorra's temper explained the silence. No one was quite sure.

"I swear, Lorra Trevv, you'll poison us by the time you're through. What are you thinking? Get this mess out of here!"

The heated complaint came from the kitchen. Jenn took a step back. This might not be the best time for a visit.

"I'll work where I want in my own house!" Hotter and louder. "And how many times have I asked you, Frann Nall, not to leave your wretched great loom in the middle of the floor so no one can move without you shrieking? Cynd! Stop fussing with those loaves and help me carry this --"

"Don't you dare take that mess near my loom!"

Not the best time at all. Jenn turned and fled out the door.

“Hello, Jenn.”

She started and almost knocked over one of the doorside vases, steadying it with a hurried grab, then smiled with relief. “Hello, Wainn.”

Wainn Uhtoff stopped short of the porch, his hat crumpled in both hands, a shy smile on his handsome face. “You’re wearing shoes.”

“I do.” She lifted a foot for his inspection. “Were you visiting Davi?”

He blushed bright crimson.

Ordinarily, Jenn wouldn’t have noticed. After all the talk of husbands and who was suitable at supper, she blushed herself, unsure why.

They might have stood there like fools a while longer, but Davi chose that moment to step out of his barn for a piece of harness hung out to dry. Spotting them, he waved a greeting, aimed a big thumb towards the river, then went back inside.

“What does he mean?” she puzzled.

She hadn’t thought it possible for Wainn to blush hotter, but he did. “That’s where she is.”

Shouts still rattled the dishes inside the Trevv house. “She” could be only one person. “Wen? Good. I was looking for her.”

“That’s where she is.” As if she hadn’t heard, all the while twisting his hat. “May I visit with you?”

Visit Wen. Suddenly, Jenn felt ridiculous. What was she thinking? She’d left Peggs with her aunt and the dishes. The two of them probably thought she’d rushed after her father to apologize, which she should have done and assuredly would do as soon as possible, as well as the dishes, but she’d known Lorra Trevv most definitely would not welcome a visitor after dark and ...

Jenn couldn’t wait. The sun was abandoning another day, leaving her behind. Wen was the only person in Marrowdell who might know if toads could be made into princes. Yes, she didn’t speak, but surely she could give an informative nod or two?

When Jenn didn’t answer, Wainn gazed longingly towards the river, then back at her. “I’m not allowed to visit alone.”

Her lips formed a soundless “Oh.”

He waited patiently, another of the ways he wasn’t like the other young men of Marrowdell. Wainn could stand so still, you forgot he was there. If it wasn’t for his father being Master Uhtoff, their teacher, he might have truly been forgotten. But Dusom Uhtoff and his brother had made sure Wainn was included, in classes, in activities, in the chores they all shared.

Though until this moment, despite what she'd said to her aunt, Jenn hadn't thought that could include being a husband one day. As for Wen Trevv? She was ... she was old, wasn't she? True, Wainn was twenty-five, but no one thought of him as grown. And Wen? She had to be at least thirty.

Not to mention the toads.

The reason she'd come in the first place.

Jenn gave a resolute shrug. If she helped Wainn, she hadn't totally wasted her time. She took off her shoes and tucked them safely inside her shirtwaist. "Come with me," she offered.

The sun touched the first of the Bone Hills, drawing long shadows from the village buildings, torching the fields to red gold. A swathe of light paved the road towards the valley's mouth and everything she wanted, an invitation she wasn't allowed to accept. Turning from it, Jenn led Wainn through the Trevv farmyard to the riverbank. There, she took the path through the bushes to the shore.

The river sparkled and bubbled to itself. Behind the Trevvs', it was shallow and rich with reeds, home to waterfowl and frogs. No one hunted here, other than down from old nests or to collect the occasional egg from a large clutch. In return, the birds would sound the alarm when a log floated downstream and lodged in the shallows, a treasure the villagers would quickly pull to shore.

The water was a deep blue, almost black. Beetles whirled in the still patches, playing tag with their tails. Tiny midges careened back and forth in straight lines from shoreline to midriver, faster than the eye could see, preoccupied by their own affairs. A heron stalked past as Jenn and Wainn came down the bank, its great yellow eyes alert for careless pollywogs. Other than the clang of Davi's hammer and the river, the loudest sound came from crickets in the grass. The air smelled of water and growth and decay. With a hint of summerberry.

Wen Trevv stood bent in the shallows, skirt hitched to her thighs, her mass of brown curls dusted with cobwebs and pollen. Her eyes were fixed on something in the water.

"That's where she is," Wainn said breathlessly.

His voice drew Wen's attention. Her eyes were grey, almost colourless. Her eyebrows met in a distracted frown that cleared when she saw Wainn. "This is where I am," she agreed.

Wen spoke?

Heart thumping in her chest, Jenn glanced over her shoulder at the Trevv house, tensed to rush back and tell the family the news.

Then, she hesitated.

Wen's speech or lack of it wasn't her business. Didn't she run to her secret friend in the meadow at every chance? Maybe Wen did the same, in her own way.

Meanwhile, Wainn had waded into the water, stopping when it reached his knees. "Hello, Wen," he said happily. "We're not alone. Jenn Nalynn let me come with her to visit."

The pale gaze switched to Jenn. A brow lifted. "Why would she do that?"

"I've a question," Jenn said carefully. She moved forward until her toes sank into dark bubbly mud. "About toads and princes."

Wen, it turned out, possessed the same quality of stillness Wainn could display. For an endless moment, she regarded Jenn. The river eddied around her knees and a curl fell loose over one eye. A fish gulped air near Wainn, as if making a comment. A dragonfly landed on Jenn's wrist, regarding her with emerald eyes. Just when Jenn began to believe she'd imagined Wen could speak, she did. "I know toads. The only prince I've heard of is the one who sent us here. Mother calls him the Fat Old Fool. She writes him a long letter once a year and gives it to Davi, who is supposed to ask your aunt to deliver it. He burns it in his forge instead."

"My father calls him Prince Ordo Arselical," Wainn offered. "He rules all of Rhoth." He lifted his foot from the water and splashed it down again. "Except here."

Wen's smile transformed her face from plain to extraordinary. "Except here," she agreed.

From what Jenn had been taught, Marrowdell was indeed part of Rhoth and so subject to its prince, because the prince had decided it should be. Rather than leave the quiet north to the hunters, trappers, and foresters who made it home, he'd declared to his barons that an unsettled northern border was an invitation to invasion, Rhoth being in a constant state of disagreement with its prickly eastern neighbour, Ansnor, and never sure of the intentions of the vast civilization of Eldad to the south. As to the west, well, there lay peaceful Mellynne, who'd put up with the prince's great-grandfather's border raids no longer than it took to overrun the Rhothan capital and place its own people in positions of influence, before leaving with a treaty of binding friendship.

A treaty that hadn't spared those of Mellynne descent when Prince Ordo needed families to settle the north for him and, not coincidentally, wealth to buy the support of both the House of Keys and Lower House in Avyo. He'd declared all the original property leases at an end, offering those left penniless the choice of Mellynne, a domain as foreign to them as to any Rhothan, or to take his gift of land to the north and start anew.

Twenty years later, a handful of settlements hung on, Marrowdell among them. No other domain contested the border. No one of Rhoth appeared to care about those sent into the wilds and left to fend for themselves.

Not that Jenn thought of the world in such terms. Her breath caught imagining what it would be like to travel to scholarly Mellynne, with its fountains and art, or to cross the inland sea to Eldad's great cities, said to spread across the horizon -- even mysterious, dangerous Ansnor had its charm. Anywhere, she decided, coming back to her problem, but here.

"I've heard there's a way to change a toad into --" Jenn paused. She didn't need or want a prince, she needed a husband willing to leave Marrowdell. "To change a toad into the perfect husband. For me."

"I would be a perfect husband," Wainn asserted, looking at Wen.

Wen actually blushed.

She was doing an excellent job helping other people's futures, Jenn fumed to herself, just not her own. "Wen. I need a toad," she insisted.

"Toads prefer other toads," Wen told her, pushing the curl from her forehead. She appeared amused. "Why would one want to marry you?"

"I don't want to marry a toad." Jenn collected herself. "I want to know how to change a toad into a man. A man to be a husband." Now her cheeks burned.

"Have you tried this?"

"How could I? I don't know how."

"Then toads should be grateful. For if anyone could do such a thing, it would be you, Jenn of Night's Edge."

For a woman who hadn't spoken for most of her life, Wen Trevv had no trouble robbing Jenn of speech.

"I can't tell you how to accomplish this," Wen continued. "Nor would I betray the small ones. But I do know a change in shape does not bring a change in nature. If you want someone to give you his heart, I suggest you follow your own." Wen bestowed her glorious smile on Wainn once more, then bent to the water again, her face behind a fall of cobwebbed curls, to talk to fish.