

3rd Author's Note:

Here's the next installment from the first draft of *A Turn of Light*.

I'll step out of the way now, in hopes you're more interested in what's next than what I have to say.

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

Julie

Of course, to read the entire thing, you'll need to buy a copy. I love this plan! 2013, folks. I'm counting the weeks.

A Turn of Light

by

Julie Elizabeth Czerneda

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(trade paperback and ebook)

Be aware this manuscript is first draft and will doubtless change before publication, so is not suitable for review or quote. For review copies, please contact DAW Books.

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~ Three ~ continues ...

* * *

“Well, isn’t this convenient.”

The ox thought so, having pulled the wagon halfway off the road before agreeing to stop.

“I’d say someone wanted to help new settlers, sir,” Tir agreed, coming back to the wagon. He’d been walking alongside the animal to stretch his legs and escape the dust.

“The ideal spot, too.” Bannan glanced upwards. What sky showed between treetops was the deep blue of a late summer twilight, a warning they’d soon have to break out lamps to see the way ahead. And here they find the first roadside clearing since Endshere wide enough for one or more wagons, complete with a patch of grass beside a burbling mountain stream. Pretty.

Unfair. Having left the border guard, he’d hoped to look at a pleasing landscape and not see where lurkers could hide or how easily any escape be cut off. For that matter, he’d like, for once, to look at an earnest face, like any in Endshere, and not see the lie.

Tir leaned on the wagon as Bannan jumped down. “Do they think we’re fools, sir?”

“The good people of Endshere did warn of bandits.” And been willing to provide escort -- for a steep price. An escort likely to be the bandits themselves, in his opinion, but he’d been polite in his refusal. No sense leaving ill will behind.

Or revealing himself.

Doubtless word had gone ahead. The wagon and its contents had worth here; there was always the chance of a once-wealthy settler had hidden something valuable, not that he had.

“A fire,” Bannan decided. “And a good supper.” He took an appreciative sniff. The afternoon’s warm pine lingered, mixed with road dust, fresh ox droppings, and the grass underfoot. Nothing of the city, nothing of before. “We may,” he added cheerily, “need to open the brandy.”

“Here? Sir?”

“Relax, Tir.” Bannan pursed his lips and gave a soundless whistle. Scourge jerked his head from whatever had him rooting in the bushes. “Watch,” he told the horse.

There was something anticipatory in the baleful stare this produced.

“No bandits tonight,” he announced. Scourge rarely had to attack. Few on foot waited to learn what crashed towards them in the dark, and no strange horse would approach if they had his scent. The wily veterans of his company had valued that assurance, especially during their endless patrols into the broken wilderness across the

Lilem River, land Ansnor had claimed and defended as fiercely as Rhoth. The soldiers would curse the horse with affectionate pride by day, and sleep better by night.

When anyone slept, he reminded himself. They hadn't been at war; they'd never been at peace. Patrol was -- had been -- a weary sameness of hunting one another through the dark. They'd aimed to survive it, not win. He supposed the Eldad treaty accomplished that much.

"He has his use," Tir admitted, watching Scourge shove his head back into the shrubs, hunting whatever feckless rodent had his attention. "But on a farm? You can't tell me, sir, he'll let you hitch him to a plow."

"There might be bears." Bannan grinned. "Or wolves. Rabbits -- right, Scourge? You like rabbits?"

An ear flicked in his direction.

"Oh, and that's going to be easy to explain." At Bannan's look, Tir added, "Sir. You do realize it's not normal for a horse to eat rabbits."

"In Rhoth," Bannan reminded him. "Scourge is Ansnan."

"If you say so, sir."

"I do. And so must you, from now on. After all, he could be." Since no one had ever seen an Ansnan mounted, and they used tall horned cattle to pull their wagons, who was to know what their horses looked like? When it came to it, Bannan reasoned, Scourge easily passed for a horse -- a powerful, oversized, and ugly one, to be honest -- from a respectful distance. Any closer, and there was something odd about the lower jaw, a predatory awareness to the eye, and no stallion had balls quite that shape. Mind you, that close and you'd best be a friend or quick on your feet.

In a public stable, Scourge would mouth hay, though he preferred the mice that nested in it, and delighted in sweet mash, provided Bannan or Tir slipped in meaty tablescraps.

Whatever the great beast was, he was a legacy. Bannan's father had been his rider, as had his father's uncle. Scourge chose who he would endure, as he had ever since stalking from the mist that morning into the Larmensu paddock.

Had the closeness of the Larmensu holding to the troubled border attracted him? Or simply a temporary overabundance of rabbits?

Regardless, as a mount, Scourge proved more than ready for what he loved most. Battle and blood.

If Bannan didn't produce a worthy heir to Scourge's saddle, he assumed the war steed would abandon him to seek his own. Eventually. He'd miss him. Cantankerous, irritable, dangerous. Tireless, courageous, and, above all, loyal.

Well, above all, bloodthirsty. Scourge's loyalty depended on his opinion of what his rider had in mind.

That he so willingly took this road?

“Rabbits,” Bannan said firmly.

* * *

Jenn stormed all the way to the village fountain before she noticed her shadow. She stopped. Wainn stopped. He didn't speak. His eyes were wide and sad and unutterably patient.

“What do you want?”

“I'm not allowed to visit alone.”

Did he expect her to walk back to the Trevvs' with him and spend more time watching Wen mouth soundless words at perch? Before she could snap a reply, Wainn continued. “I wanted to thank you, Jenn Nalynn, but you walk very fast.”

What was wrong with her? After dipping her finger in the water, Jenn shook her head and sat on the fountain's ring. She patted the stone in invitation. “I'm glad I could help, Wainn. Wen's talked to you before?”

He dipped in finger in the water too, catching the droplets on his outstretched tongue, then sat his lanky frame with care. He did everything the same way, she realized, as if unsure the world around him could be trusted to wait as it was. “I hear everything she says. I'm a good listener.” A mottled grey toad hopped towards them over the cobbles and made itself comfortable against Wainn's bare feet. He bent to look at it. “You won't turn him into a man, will you?”

Jenn eyed the toad. It blinked its limpid brown eyes at her, then yawned toothily. “Not,” she said dryly, “if it means a man who wants mice for supper.”

Wainn chuckled. “You have a good heart.”

Good or not, it felt empty. She offered the toad a toe to rub its chin against. “All I want is to see more of the world,” she said gloomily. “Why is that wrong?”

“I thought you wanted to marry a toad,” he said, looking confused.

Jenn burst out laughing. Birds chirped in answer and a late beam of sun found its way through the apple trees to sparkle on the fountain. “I can't believe I bothered Wen with such nonsense.” She lost her smile. “I guess I was desperate. Be glad you aren't a girl, Wainn. Maybe you can't visit Wen alone, but I can't choose my life alone. Until I take a husband, I'm sure Poppa won't let me leave Marrowdell.” She patted his hand; it still clutched his hat. “And you, dear fellow, are spoken for.”

“Spoken for?”

She touched the concerned furrow between his brows. “Wen likes you.”

“Yes.” His puzzlement faded, replaced by a dazzling smile. “I'm a good listener.”

“You are indeed. Let me know when you want to visit again. I’ll come if I can.” Jenn looked along the road to the mill, thinking of her father working when he should be home, eating his supper alone if he had any appetite left. Her fault. She’d best go and make amends. He could never stay angry at either of his daughters; it wasn’t fair to leave him unhappy. Then she would spend time with her aunt, as much as she could. “I have to go. Good night.”

Wainn stood and offered his hand to help her to her feet, a courtly gesture as natural as his muddy bare feet. Hers, Jenn thought ruefully, were no better. She might be wearing black stockings.

“My uncle has a book,” Wainn informed her as he released her hand. “A book about changing one thing into another.”

From nonsense to instruction?

She shouldn’t encourage this, Jenn told herself, fighting a surge of hope. Not in herself or Wainn. “It’s not possible.”

“Wen said if anyone could do such a thing, it would be you.”

The sunbeam disappeared. Silence made a wall around them until a bee buzzed past on her way to the hives. One of Kydd Uhtoff’s bees. Not the lesser of the two brothers, Jenn reminded herself. Not in knowledge. In Avyo, Kydd had been in the midst of studies at the university when his family was exiled. What those studies had been, no one said, but his keen dark eyes had a way of looking through a problem -- or person.

If anyone here could have a book to help her, it would be Kydd.

Wainn nodded as if he’d followed all this. “I can ask him for the book for you, if you like.”

If anyone here would immediately want to know why she was borrowing that particular book, it would be Kydd. He was curious to a fault -- and, like his brother, a close friend of Radd Nalynn. Jenn swallowed. “Leave that to me, Wainn. I’ll visit your house tomorrow.” If it was on one of the many shelves, she should be able to borrow it with no one the wiser. Dusom was always glad to share, particularly if a former student took interest in reading. “What’s the title?”

“It’s not in the house. It’s in a hive. All the Mellynne books are in the hives. The books from Ansnor are in the hives too. Uncle says they make good winter coats for our bees.”

Books from Mellynne? Ansnor? Who would ... Jenn closed her mouth and took Wainn’s sleeve, tugging him with her. “Show me.”

The main orchard nestled in the lee of the cliff behind Marrowdell, protected from wind, exposed all day to the sun. There were six more apple trees where the road split in the village centre to go around the fountain. At this time of year, every branch bent under its load of ripening fruit, tempting the milk cows on their way to the shed and driving Wainn’s aged pony to feats of inventiveness at the latch. Or, as now, to lean his head over

the gate to nicker plaintively about his lack of apples, hairy lips working as if to summon the fruit closer.

Beneath the trees, behind the Uhtoffs' home, were the hives. Whenever Uncle Horst found a wild colony, he'd tell Kydd, who'd would march off with his sack to invite the bees home. Jenn didn't think there was conversation involved, other than gentle hands and a knowledge of their nature. Once in Marrowdell, the bees seemed content to stay. Like most villagers, they avoided the Bone Hills and meadows beyond, but there was plenty of nectar to be had between the village gardens and the wildflowers lining the gullies.

Despite the lengthening shadows, they droned back and forth, head height, knowing better than any where to go.

Seven hives. "Which one?"

Wainn peered into the nearest. Bees bumped into him, crawled over his shoulders, then flew off on their routes. "Wen could ask them for you."

She could use Wisp, not Wen. Wisp enjoyed playing with bees. He'd whirl them dizzy then set them on a flower without a hair of their bodies left ruffled. Then again, bees didn't appear to find this game as entertaining as she did. Best not have Wisp involved.

Not yet.

Which was as far as she let that tendril of thought go. The book first. Learn what was needful.

A bee landed on her nose. Jenn went cross-eyed trying to read its face. "Would you help us find a book, please?" she asked.

"You have to use its words, not ours," Wainn told her. "Like Wen."

The bee left. Feeling foolish, Jenn crouched to look inside one of the hives. Something lined the outer walls, but she couldn't tell if she looked at honeycomb or leather binding. Bees walked softly over her hands and arms, wings never still, their hum its own kind of music.

Music that would change to a battlecry if she tried to take anything from their hive. Jenn had watched Kydd lift a panel of honeycomb, dripping and golden, using his free hand to guide the bees back inside. He cared for them, they trusted him.

Who'd think to look for books here? Even if they did, who could, without being stung? She wasn't sticking her hand in there.

As for why these books were hidden instead of on a shelf -- only Kydd Uhtoff could explain that.

"What if he wants to read one?" Jenn mused aloud. "Isn't it too much trouble?"

"No trouble. He asks me. I know all the words."

She straightened to stare at Wainn. “You do?” She hadn’t known he could read Rhothan, let alone any other language. He’d been with them during classes, yes, but she’d never seen him open a book.

He nodded. “I know all the words in all our books. Father calls me his library. He asks me for words too, if he doesn’t want to reach to the top shelf.”

“So you know what this book says about changing one thing into another.”

“Oh yes.” A wide smile. “All the words.”

Jenn smiled back. “Would you like a piece of Peggs’ pie?”