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CHAPTER 1

Betrys stood upon the shore of her harbor staring out to sea. The cool water lapped at her toes; the large rocks that she stood upon, worn smooth from the centuries of advancing and receding tides, were still warm from the day's sun; the night blossoms were scenting the gentle breeze; and the triple moons of Dahrè, rising above the distant horizon, were reflecting upon the nighttime sea.

It was glorious.

It was perfect.

Finally, a break from that dream, the one with the young man tied to the whipping post, the one where she could see naught but his bloody, whip-slashed back, his sweat-drenched hair. She took a deep breath of the salty air and allowed the peaceful sound of the lapping waves to wash away the sound of his screams.

For the last month, it was the only dream to visit her. Each night, try as she might, she was unable to cease the beating, to untie him from the post. And never, no matter what she did,

how loud she called to him, was she able to see his face. She knew not why she dreamt of this man, nor why she was denied his identity.

The hem of her nightgown caught in the evening breeze, fluttered against her thighs, pulling her from the morbid thoughts.

A secret smile tilted the corners of her lips. Only here would she dare wear such a garment or lack of garment, when in reality, she wore a nightgown of much sturdier construction and modest covering. The straps hanging upon her shoulders were thin cords and would easily snap beneath a man's rough handling. The tiny, white gown reached just above the middle of her thighs and the slits on either side reached above her hips.

Best of all, the moonlight rendered it transparent, exposing her nude body beneath.

Only in her most private dreams would she ever be so daring. Only in her dreams did she ever wish... She touched her thighs, slid her hands up underneath the gown and caressed the slight outward swell of her stomach. She was tempted, oh so tempted, to tease her fingers over her bush, mayhap dip one between the lips and touch what was hidden within her intimate folds. Her breath caught as she started to allow her hands to fall... Could she? Did she dare?

"A more beautiful sight I have never seen," a deep voice rumbled from several feet away.

Betrys spun towards the voice, her hands raised and magik shimmering. "Who dares trespass?"

"Is it considered trespassing when a husband seeks his wife?" Rayn slowly approached the scantily clad woman, his eyes moving over her, taking in her wonderful, lush figure; the round curve of her buttocks, the dip of her waist, the high swell of her breasts—the dark, aroused nipples.

He lifted his eyes to her face and knew he wanted to have a portrait of her commissioned for his boat. He loved the way the bob of wine-colored curls framed the rounded oval of her face, emphasizing the high cheekbones, the slight tilt to her black eyes. And her full lips were made for his kisses.

"That I consider you not my husband, the question you ask is void." She refused to extinguish the magik she had ready to throw.

He laughed. "That ye wear my cuff, renders my question valid."

“Then you care not if I am willing?”

“Always would I want ye willing, Betryst. I look forward to the day when ye come in my arms, my name upon yer lips.” The beautiful woman before him entranced him, aroused him. He knew he had to touch her.

To keep her mind off the way his voice, seductive and dark, affected her, the unwanted shiver teasing her spine, she retreated a step and...

She found herself in his arms, the spells surrounding her hands doused by her startle. She stared up into a face covered in shadows, the light of the moons behind him blinding her to all his features save the long braid draped over his shoulder.

He touched his nose to hers. “Betryst, my beautiful wife, a kiss I would steal from ye.”

“Why?” she whispered, but then shook herself out of the daze she found herself in, remembering her ire. She shoved her hands between them and pushed; he was immovable. She refused to admit she liked the feel of his arms around her, that he made her feel safe. Worse, desire. “Release me, pirate.”

“Nae.”

“No right have you to invade my dream.”

His lips brushed her temple as he spoke, his eyes closed as he reveled in the sensations of being near her. “Unable have I been to search for ye in the realm of reality. Do ye fault me for searching for ye in my dreams?”

“Why were you unable to search for me?” she asked almost against her will, her curiosity too great to hold the question in. She wanted to take the question back the moment she felt his satisfaction.

“Much turmoil has there been on Argos since the death of Davo. Those of us whose families have made the island home for many centuries have been inviting those of his crew to find homes elsewhere. Many of them have refused and so we fought.”

“But...”

Betryst jerked awake upon her carriage hitting what she thought was a rut in the road, startled from her dream. She sat up and looked around, orienting herself. She was in a carriage, traveling to the Royal Palace of Tartyn, not on the shore of her estate; it was also daylight, not

evening. Feeling once more in control, she took a deep breath and stretched her arms out in front of her.

She glared seeing the binding cuff on her wrist; it had been a month since that scoundrel married her without due ceremony. Bringing it in close, she once more examined it, twisting it back and forth. What really got her yullie was that she had been unsuccessful in finding a spell to unlock the thing. Nor had she, in all of her studies of it, found a flaw in the design that would have allowed her to break it.

Pushing thoughts of her marriage aside, she folded her arms in her lap and looked across the carriage to her traveling companion. She smiled seeing her daughter stretched out across the cushion, sleeping. Zeti could sleep through the most amazing things, even the bouncing of the carriage as it traveled along. Seeing that her daughter was fine, she looked out the window to watch the passing scenery. They should be arriving at the palace in a few hours, just in time for tea.

It would be good to see Rhedyn again. She knew Artezán's former queen was in need of a friend now that she was ensconced once more amongst her family. Having the loving support of family was always welcoming, but sometimes having a friend, one who would tell the unvarnished truth, was better.

The carriage hit another rut and started tipping. Jumping across the carriage, she grabbed Zeti and teleported out. From the side of the road, she watched in horrified numbness as it crashed and started to slide down the embankment.

Seeing her coachman crashing down with the carriage, the two horses scrambling to stop the slide, their voices calling out in panic, Betrýs snapped from her shock.

"Fuck."

She put Zeti, who had since woken up, on her feet and with a wave of her hands, stopped any further damages to the coach and horses. With a deep breath, she lifted her hands, which in turn lifted the carriage upright allowing the horses to pull it up the embankment. Closing her hand, she stopped the horses from bolting away once they were on the road.

"Mamé..."

"Zeti, wait on the side of the road." Betrýs didn't wait to see if her daughter

obeyed—knowing she would—before she slowly approached the panicked animals, her voice low and soothing as she cast a calming spell. She knew her coachman would be upset if she didn't deal with the horses first, they were his babies.

Once they settled, their heads held low, their breaths harsh billows, Betryst formed several hand signs and magikally separated them from their harnesses. She moved the carriage away from them with a wave of her hand, and then, with another set of hand signs, erected a magikal corral for them to rest in.

Satisfied that they were safe, she went to check on her coachman. He lay unconscious at the bottom of the incline, blood pooling around his head. Raising her hands, she brought him up and over to where Zeti was waiting. Checking him over, she found where his head was split open and then went about healing the wound, needing to stop the flow of blood.

“Mamé, is Master Hark going to be well?” Zeti bit her lower lip, concerned. She loved Master Hark.

“I do my best to insure that he will be.” Betryst looked up, eyed the damaged carriage and swore. “Take it to The Firebreath!”

“Do you have me fetch your healing bag, Mamé?”

“The carriage looks unsafe for you to fetch it for me.”

Instead, Betryst summoned her bag from the carriage, hoping the contents weren't broken, but she had no such luck. The only thing to survive was a small, silverin canister of headache powder, which did her no good. She was unable to call any healing supplies to her from her sacred space; the security measures surrounding her estate could not be undone from two countries away. To get to them she would have to teleport back to her estate and deal with the security measures in person; she wasn't ready to do that just yet, nor to move Master Hark unless it was necessary.

Before she and Zeti started on their journey, there had been an attempted break-in at Telia, her Dusalla estate. She was certain that it had been a couple of Watchers from one of the more fanatical factions determined to learn the secrets of the Keepers, the group of women selected by the High Guardian Zasara from the very Beginning to collect and keep knowledge throughout the ages. That she was High Keeper of all Keepers made her the perfect

target—whoever it was had better hope she never learned their identities.

Now, because of the attempted break-in, she had been forced to treble her usual security measures. If those nosy bastards tried again while she was away, they would become a red mist for their efforts. And deserve it they would for putting her to the trouble of it, especially now. She waited for the time when those fanatics would learn to leave her be, but she held not her breath.

In *The Beginning*, the Keepers and the Watchers were allies. The High Guardian Yeryl had created the Watchers to watch over the citizens of the lands and to make sure that the laws were upheld. Over the years, men in search of power found their way into the group.

Betrys thought the guidelines for acceptance into the Watchers should be more stringent. Mayhap then, there would be fewer fanatics to contend with.

She continued with her healing efforts, moving from Master Hark's head to his abdomen, when the thundering of hooves bore down on them. She felt her daughter move closer to her side, but continued healing her coachman. She was so deep into what she was doing she never noticed the hoof beats cease.

"Mamé, the approaching carriage has stopped." Zeti nudged her mother, concerned, until she watched a tall, blond man leap down from the new carriage and approach them, his finger against his smiling lips.

* * *

"Why do we slow, I wonder?" Maryn ayn Gyl, the Queen of Vyksen, looked out the window of her carriage and saw the stranded travelers on the side of the road. "Travelers in need of aid."

She grinned; she had been right to take this road despite it being out of their way. She looked to her grandson. He was sitting with his arms crossed over his chest, a scowl on his handsome face. He hated dealing with royal functions no matter what country they were in. In all these years, his feelings had yet to change.

His mood had been even worse since he awoke from his nap ten minutes earlier. She

wondered what he had been dreaming about to put him in such a foul mood. She asked, but he had been tight-lipped about it, and trying to read her grandson, to delve with her Sight, when he didn't wish it, was impossible. Her guess would be his wife.

“Why do you smile so, Majesty?”

“I wonder how long 'twill take you to finally learn your lesson, my dear boy.”

Prince Aryn ayn Gyl, heir to the throne of Vyksen, glared at his grandmother. He loved her, but there were times when he cared not to be in her company. Right then was a good example.

“Still pouting because you were unable to catch your reluctant bride?” Maryn continued smiling.

“I was unable to chase her if you recall. With her shores in sight, called home I was to deal with our uninvited guests.”

She waved him off, unwilling to hear his complaints yet again, since he had failed to listen to his mother's advice. “It matters not. Let the driver know that I wish to stop and offer aid.”

“As you wish, Majesty.” The annoyed prince signaled the driver to stop and then leapt down from the carriage, waving off the royal guard sitting next to the coachman.

Approaching the woman and child, his eyes flared and then settled into satisfaction. He smiled at the child and held his finger up to his lips. Seeing that she understood, he knelt down next to her mother, his eyes roving over her. She was beautiful in the sunlight.

Clearing his throat, he forced himself to speak. “Are you in need of aid, mistress?”

“My carriage tipped. My daughter and I escaped before it crashed, but my coachman had not the same luck.” Betrys never looked up.

“Mamé's healing supplies were destroyed in the crash.”

“Always does my grandmother travel with basic healing supplies. Gladly would we let you use them.” Aryn called the bag to him and placed it before the woman. “Will what we carry do for you?”

Betrys stopped healing long enough to rummage through the bag. Finding what she needed, she pulled out the jars and linen bandages, and then handed the bandages to Zeti before

continuing with the healing. Her coachman was more injured than she first suspected; he was suffering from internal bleeding. The healing needed to be done with a delicate and precise hand.

“Is all well, Aryn?” Maryn stepped down from the carriage and made her way over to the group.

“Their carriage crashed, Grandmama, and the coachman was injured.”

“Anyone else injured? Are the horses well?”

“I have had not a chance to look the horses over.” Betrys kept her eyes on Master Hark, afraid of losing concentration. “After settling them, I turned my attention to my coachman.”

“I will look them over.” Aryn stood and made his way over to the corralled animals.

“Might I help?” Maryn summoned her wrap from her carriage and laid it on the ground so that she might kneel upon it, protecting her old knees and her skirt from the ground. “I am Keeper and have some healing ability.”

Betrys finally looked up and stared into bright blue eyes. “I would appreciate the aid, Good Keeper.”

“And gladly will I give it, High Keeper of all Keepers. I am Maryn ayn Gyl, High Keeper of Vyksen.”

Maryn added her healing magik to Betrys’s and soon the coachman was only suffering from minor bruising, which Betrys applied the salve to.

Betrys sat back and stretched her arms over her head. “Majesty, ‘twas an honor to have you aid me.”

“No, ‘twas my honor to aid you, High Keeper. And you, young lady,” Maryn smiled at the young girl, “you aided your mother well.”

“Her Majesty is correct, my daughter, you aided me well.” Betrys rubbed her hand up and down Zeti’s arm, her eyes filled with love and pride.

Hearing the horses shuffling around, she looked over and found the animals misbehaving; they had knocked the blond man down. “Warned him I should have, that my horses seem only to care for Master Hark.”

“They care for you, Mamé.”

“And me.” She got to her feet and brushed her knees off. “Zeti stay with Master Hark and

Her Majesty while I help keep the prince from being trampled.”

Zeti watched her mother walk over to the horses before looking at Maryn. “Are you my great grandmother?”

“I am, child. I hear your name is Zeti?”

“It is. What do I call you? I call Papa’s Mamé, Grammy.”

“Grandmama is fine. Now, we must come up with a plan to help your Mamé and Papa become better acquainted.”

Zeti looked over at her mother and father. “She knows ‘tis him.”

“Surprised I would be had the van Wyrn not known, but it changes not the need to plan.”

* * *

Betrys watched the blond man as he continued his attempt to approach her mares, but they persisted in proving difficult, knocking him down yet again. With his height, a good six-five, it was quite a ways down to fall. Actually, she was quite surprised the mares were able to knock him down. Not only was he tall, he was wide of shoulders and...

She sighed in appreciation. The man was generously built all over. His body, roped with muscles, filled out his clothing so perfectly it was almost obscene. His buttocks were tight and round in his breeches and...she wanted to grasp them in her hands and squeeze.

“What is wrong with these mares that they refuse my approach?” Aryn asked, having sensed their owner draw near.

She shook her head, shoving away the unfamiliar, lustful thoughts and then cleared her throat. “Did you pay them compliment before you approached them?”

She thought the prince must not be used to ill treatment from females of any species. Not only was he fine of form, he was fine of face as well with those sharp angles, straight aristocratic nose, thick lashes and full lips. Those lovely blue eyes probably had women sighing all day long. That is if they weren’t melting from his dark and seductive voice. Then there was all that beautiful, long blond hair; she probably wasn’t alone in her desire to touch it.

“Excuse me?” Aryn stood and dusted himself off. Refusing to give in, he again

approached the mares, his voice gentle. He once more found himself on his ass, his face being whipped by a passing tail.

“Did you...” Betrys blinked, frozen for a moment, when he turned his head, looking directly at her. Her mind, sharply trained, and filled with more knowledge than any one individual had a right to have, started connecting dots, translating.

The scoundrel!

“Excuse me?” He repeated, wondering what was wrong. She just stared at him. Surely, she wasn’t aware... “Mistress, is all well?”

“No, you rotten scoundrel! All is not well.” She stepped through the magikal corral and stomped up to him, scattering dust with each step.

“I see it within your eyes the desire to do me violence, Betrys. I ask that you contain the need and strike me not.”

Her hands curled into fists despite his warning and popped him on the chest. “What mischief are you up to that you would act as if you know me not? That you come masquerading as a prince?”

“I am a prince.” He reached out to touch her, but she swatted his hand away. “Had I known you saw through my spell...”

“Of course I saw through your spell, I am *the van Wyrn*.”

Aryn sighed, and looked over Betrys’s shoulder at her mares, who were attempting to eat the grass on the other side of the corral, kneeling down onto one knee and poking their heads through the bottom, lips reaching. He wished not to argue with her. “Might I ask why your horses refuse my aid?”

“Change not the subject, Rayn! I want to know what mischief you are up to!”

“For this outing ‘tis Aryn, not Rayn and appreciate it I would that you remember the name. I need not everyone knowing who I am other than the Prince of Vyksen.”

“Do excuse me, *Prince Aryn*.” She turned and started out of the corral. She really wanted to strike him.

He followed her, putting his hand on her shoulder. “Betrys, I care not to have you walk away from me.”

Betrys spun around, shrugging his hand away, disgusted that she had found him attractive, that his touch sent erotic pulses through her. “You come here and dare act as if you know me not and expected what from me?”

“I thought to woo you.”

She swatted his hand away again when he once more tried touching her. “Are you lacking in intelligence then?”

“There is no need for insults, wife. ‘Twas not my plan to come to you as Aryn. Desired I did to find you sooner, and had set sail moments after your departure from Argos, but the need to rout Davo’s men from the island delayed me.”

“And yet here you are, pretending to be prince with thoughts of wooing a woman who would know not you were her husband?!”

“Pretend I do not, for I *am* prince.”

“Does your grandmother know what you are?”

“Of course she does. I keep no secrets from her.”

Betrys’s eyes narrowed as she turned her head and looked at Maryn, her mind once more filtering through translations.

“Betrys,” he grabbed her hand while she seemed distracted and started nibbling on her knuckles, “I wish to woo you.”

“At this moment I wish to turn you into a slug!” She tried pulling her hand away, but he held firm. Flame flared in the depths of her black eyes when he dared grin at her.

“Heard I have the van Wyrn is known for turning those who annoy her into taods.”

“’Tis a parlor trick and a waste of magik where you are concerned. Give me back my hand.”

“No. Then if turning me into a taod is a waste of magik, what would turning me into a slug be?”

“Expedient!”

He laughed. “You are most refreshing, my beautiful Betrys.”

“Think me joking?” she growled, truly tempted to turn him into that slug when he seemed not to take her seriously.

“Never would you strike out...”

Seeing Luta charging, mouth open and teeth bared, towards Rayn...Aryn...whatever his name was, Betryst shoved him out of the way, slamming her shoulder into him—they tumbled to the ground. Landing on top of Aryn, she rolled with him when Luta reared, her hooves pawing.

“Desist, Luta!” she yelled. “Or I tell Master Hark of your behavior.”

The mare restored her front feet to the ground and backed off, returning to her grazing at the other end of the corral as if nothing untoward had happened. Never would she want Master Hark to know she misbehaved, he would withhold her treats.

Betryst rested her forehead against her husband’s chest, her breathing harsh from the encounter. “Fuck. Too close that was.”

“Your mares leave much to be desired in regards to their dispositions,” his voice was dry. He did not mind though the feel of his wife on top of him. He kept his hands from caressing her rounded backside, but it was hard resisting.

“Master Hark spoils them.”

“That is no excuse for such behavior. What if Zeti were here?”

“Never would they act in such a way towards Zeti. Nor does Zeti go into their corrals without chaperone.”

Aryn rolled Betryst out of the corral, and then underneath him. He rested on his elbows, his loose hair curtained around them. “Then ‘tis only me they dare attack?”

“Luta is my personal horse and most sensitive she is to my moods. Certain I am she thought to aid me when she sensed my upset. Besides, never did you pay them compliment. They are most vain and need to be told how pretty they are or never will they respond in the warm manner one might seek.”

“Is that so?” His lips once more spread with a grin. “Never have I heard such a thing.”

She tried to keep the blush off her face. His smile was lethal, and strangely, it seemed, she wasn’t immune to his charm. *Bastard*. “Mayhap you spend too much time upon the sea to understand such things.”

“The sea I understand, ‘tis your horses I understand not. Might I ask where you obtained such loyal mares?”

“Idrys gifted me with them for my birthday five years past. He breeds them upon his estate.” Yeryl and Zasara she loved his scent, that of the sea though he posed as prince, and the feel of him on top of her sent her heart racing. She itched to touch, but resisted.

“A fine eye he has for conformation, but unsure am I about his knowledge towards disposition.” Aryn’s head lowered, with plans to steal a kiss.

“Stop!” She was appalled how breathless she sounded, especially when his eyes warmed as if she offered him invitation. “’Tis time for you to remove yourself from atop me or Zeti and Her Majesty will infer the wrong notion about us.”

“My wife you are, Betryst, and I wish for a kiss.”

She wedged her hands between them. “I wish to arrive at the palace before dinner. If we stay here much longer, that will never happen.”

“I will have my kiss before the end of the day, beautiful wife.”

Betryst growled and teleported out from underneath Aryn, taking satisfaction when he landed face down in the dirt with a loud *oof*. She stood and brushed herself off the best she could; some of the dust was taking up permanent residence within the weave of her breeches. Shoving her hands through her hair, she teleported over to where her daughter and the Queen of Vyksen waited with Master Hark.

“How does Master Hark fare?” She could see her horsemaster still lay unconscious.

“I checked him a moment ago, and he rests peacefully, High Keeper, though he has not stirred.”

“When he wakes he will suffer a horrible headache and aching ribs, but he is alive and that is all that matters.”

“I agree.”

“Zeti, please keep watch over Master Hark, I must speak with Her Majesty for a moment.” Betryst turned towards Maryn after her daughter nodded. “Majesty, if you will follow me?” She did not wait to see if Maryn did as bade.

“Do you scold me, High Keeper?” Maryn asked once they were several yards away. She could see that her grandson had walked over to stay with Zeti while she conferred with Betryst.

“I care not to be fucked with, Your Majesty. What mischief do you and...*Aryn* play?”

Betrys crossed her arms over her chest and waited.

“No mischief, High Keeper. Aryn wished to find his wife, as he had been unable to follow you because of Davo’s men. When I heard you had received invitation to Tartyn, I contacted Queen Gyrti and informed her of the situation and she most happily extended invitations to my grandson and me.”

“Do I need worry that Her Majesty places Aryn and I in the same suite?”

“I know not what she may have done, but certain I am that were you to request separate rooms she would gladly do so.”

“I must inform you that I care not for this interference. I care not for the forbidden magik I felt when I was upon Argos. And I certainly do not care to find myself played with. That you and Aryn thought to keep from me who you both were...” A nearby plant exploded with her ire as flames briefly danced within her eyes.

“The forbidden spell you speak of was given to my House by Zasara herself when we took to the sea in The Beginning. ‘Tis obvious you saw through it.”

“Of course I did. Why would it be believed that it might affect my memory?”

“We apologize, High Keeper. Never did we mean any harm. My grandson is hard of head and prone to go his own way despite counsel to the contrary. He only wished to find you and woo you. Never have I seen him so taken with another.”

“He knows me not to be so taken. That you are Keeper and know my situation...”

“Never would he have listened to advice to leave you be. Certain he is that you are the one he is meant to settle with and by no means could I deny him such a belief. Would it hurt to be wooed?”

“I am the van Wyrn and not one to be wooed. As you wished to aid your grandson, I cannot find fault with your motivations, and so all is forgiven. Though for future reference, know that this plan lacked intelligence. Had your forget-me spell worked upon me, I would have thought Aryn to be married and where would that have gotten him. I may have been tricked into this marriage, but never would I have betrayed my vows.”

“‘Tis understood.”

Returning to Zeti, Betrys tried to figure out how they were going to get to the palace. She

was certain Queen Maryn would willingly take Master Hark and the luggage, which would leave the horses to be ridden the rest of the way; she knew her carriage would never make the trip. Except both mares were too spirited for Zeti to handle either one by herself, especially bareback. She could ask the queen to take Zeti and Master Hark, but she was unable to handle both horses together by herself.

Fuck!

“Do you need help driving the carriage?” Aryn asked. He was standing directly behind Betrys and caught the little shiver racing up her spine when his lips grazed her ear.

“The wheel is broken and even were I to fix it magikally, I think it still unsafe for travel.” She stepped away from Aryn and walked to the road, studying it. Something wasn’t right.

It wasn’t rutty enough to tip a carriage. In fact, it was a well cared for road and had no ruts at all. Meaning, someone had either sabotaged her carriage, or a trap had been laid. Her carriage was quite distinctive with its red and black coloring and could easily be spotted. Not to mention, the van Wyrn crest of twin dragons breathing fire was emblazoned on the doors for those unfamiliar with her colors.

“We can, if you wish, tie the mares to the back of our carriage,” Maryn offered.

“Never would Nami and Luta stand for it, Your Majesty. Nor do I think ‘twould be very comfortable having all of us within the carriage, especially since Master Hark is not yet awake.”

“Enough room there would be if I took Master Hark and Zeti while you and Aryn ride the mares to the palace. Despite his earlier clumsiness with the horses, he does indeed have a fair seat and a fine hand. Your luggage can easily be loaded onto the back of my carriage.” *A perfect plan*, Maryn thought. Though it was up to her grandson to do the actual wooing. Yeryl and Zasara, she hoped he did not screw this chance up. “Once we arrive at the palace, Zeti is welcome to stay with me until you arrive. Enjoy it I would, spending time with my only great granddaughter.”

Betrys wasn’t keen on the idea of being stuck with the scoundrel prince the rest of the way to the palace, but she had to admit there was no other way. She looked at Zeti. “Would you mind riding with Her Majesty, my daughter, keeping watch on Master Hark in case he wakes?”

“He would be very confused, Mamé, if he were to wake in a strange carriage knowing not

a soul, would he not?"

"Yes, he would. 'Tis a most grown up duty you would be charged with. Do you think 'tis something you can do?"

Zeti nodded, her silvery blond curls bouncing everywhere and her gray eyes bright.

"Very well then, I charge you with the care and transport of Master Hark. Should he wake, I charge you with the duty of informing him of what happened and that I insist he rests."

"Should he ask about Nami and Luta, what do I tell him?"

"That they are under my care and will be in their stalls by this eve. Now, you are to stay with Her Majesty when you arrive at the palace, is that clear?"

"Yes, Mamé."

"Give me a hug and then go enjoy your adventure." Betrys opened her arms and caught Zeti, holding her tight. After Rayn...*Aryn* took Zeti to Argos last month without informing her, she had been unable to allow her daughter out of sight, afraid he would show up once more to take her. Besides, she had missed Zeti while she was at the Academy; discovering she preferred to have her daughter at her side.

Maryn stood and held out her hand to the young girl and took her back to her carriage while her coachman loaded the luggage and the horses' harnesses on top—all but the bridles. Once they pulled away from Betrys and Aryn, and Zeti settled down onto her seat after waving to her mother, Maryn and Zeti looked at each other and grinned.

"Think you this will work, little one?"

"Only can I hope. Mamé deserves to be loved."