

Winter Death

by Michelle West

Kayla was born in the harsh winter of life in the mining town of Riverend. Her father had been born there, and her mother had come from the flats of Valdemar's most fertile lands. An outsider, she had learned to face the winter with the same respect, and the same dread, that the rest of the villagers showed. She had come to be accepted by the villagers in the same way, slowly and grudgingly at first, but with a healthy respect that in the end outlasted all of their earlier superstitious fear of the different.

Margaret Merton, called Magda for reasons that Kayla never quite understood, *was* different. She could walk into a room and it would grow warmer; she could smile, and her smile would spread like fire; her joy could dim the sharpest and bitterest of winter joy could dim the sharpest and bitterest of tempers, when cabin fever ran high. How could they not learn to love her?

Even in her absence, that memory remained, and when her daughter showed some of the same strange life, she was loved for it. More, for the fact that she was born to the village.

The Heralds came through the village of Riverend in the spring, when the snows had receded and the passes, in the steep roads and treacherous flats of the mountains, were opened. Heralds seldom stopped in the village, although they rode through it from time to time.

When they did, Kayla took the little ones from the hold and made her way down to the village center to watch them ride through. She would bundle them one at a time in the sweaters and shawls that kept the bite of spring air at bay, and gently remind them of foreign things—manners, behavior, the language children *should* use in the presence of their elders.

She would remind them of the purpose of Heralds, and promise them a story or two *if* they behaved themselves, and then she would pick up the children whose toddling led them to cracks in the dirt, sprigs of new green, sodden puddles—in fact, anything that caught their eye from the moment the hold's great doors were opened—and hurry them along; in that way, she managed to keep them from missing the Heralds altogether.

This spring was the same, but it was also different; every gesture was muted, and if she smiled at all, it was so slight an expression that the children could be forgiven for missing it. It had been a harsh winter.

A terrible winter.

And the winter had taken the joy out of Kayla so completely the villagers mourned its passing and wondered if it was buried with those who had passed away in the cold.

On this spring day, the Heralds stopped as the children gathered in as orderly a group as children could who had been cooped up all winter.

There were two, a man and the woman who rode astride the Companions that set them apart from any other riders in the kingdom of Valdemar.

"Well met," the woman said, nudging her Companion forward at a slow walk. Kayla heard the whisper that started at one end of the small group and traveled to the other. She almost smiled.

Almost.

Mitchell and Evan began to shove each other out of the way in an attempt to be at the front of the group. Kayla set Tess down and separated them, grabbing an elbow in either hand. She didn't need to speak; her expression said everything.

Bells caught light and made of sound a musical cacophony, which was not in fact dissimilar to the sound it evoked from the children, whose quarrels fell away in the wake of shared wonder.

Well, almost all of the quarrels at any rate; there was still some scuffling for position, with its attendant shoving and hissed accusation. Given everything, this was almost angelic behavior; it wouldn't be good enough for the old aunts, but it was good enough for Kayla. Two years ago, she would have asked for more—and gotten it, too—but two years ago, behavior had seemed so much more important than it was now.

These children were the children of winter, and the winter was harsh; she knew that if half of them lived to be eight, the village would count itself lucky; if half of those lived to be fifteen, it would count itself more than that.

The Herald, an older woman with broad hips and an easy smile, watched the children from the safe distance of her Companion's back; her Companion, on the other hand, had no difficulty wandering among the many outstretched—and upstretched—hands. The second Companion seemed to have a more obvious sense of personal dignity—or at least a healthy caution when it came to children; it was hard to say which. Her rider was a handful of years older than Kayla, if at all, but his face was smooth and unblemished by either time or war, and he seemed both grave and dignified in a way that reminded her of her dead. Riverend was a harsh, Northern town; the dead were many.

"Youngling," the older Herald barked, her voice loud but not unfriendly.

Mitchell leaped up about six feet, straining to look much older than his handful of years. "Yes, ma'am!"

The young man who rode at her side laughed. "Ma'am, is it?" His glance belied the gravity of his expression; Kayla liked the sound of his voice.

"Obviously I don't look as young as I'd like to think I do. Ah well, time is cruel." Her smile showed no disappointment at that cruelty as she looked down at Mitchell. "You know the people of the village by name?"

He nodded.

"Good. I'm wondering where Kayla Grayson lives." Mitchell lifted a hand and pointed toward the large hold.

"Will she be down at the mines, or up at the hold?" He frowned. "Neither."

Kayla said nothing.

But she felt it: a change in the older woman's mood and intent; there were currents in it now that were deeper than they should have been. She snuck a glance at the man, and listened carefully. There, too, she felt a determination that was out of place. It put her on her guard.

"Why are you looking for Kayla?" she asked.

"We've heard a bit about her, and we—well, I at least—thought it would be nice to meet her on our way through Riverend. We don't often get much call to travel this way."

"What have you heard?"

"Well, for one, that she's Magda Merton's daughter, the last of four, and the one most like her mother."

Kayla hesitated a moment, and hid that hesitation in the action of lifting a child to the wide, wide nostrils of a very patient Companion. She had the grace to wince and pull back when the child's first act was to attempt to shove his whole hand up the left one.

"That's true," she said at last. "At least, that she's the last of her daughters. You'll have to judge for yourself how much alike they actually are." She straightened her shoulders, shifting her burden again with an ease that spoke of practice. "Because I'm guessing you knew my mother."

The Herald's expression shifted; it didn't matter. Kayla already knew what the woman was feeling. Surprise. Concern. Hope. "So you're Kayla."

"And you?"

"Anne," the woman replied. She reached out with a hand, and after only a slight hesitation, Kayla shifted the boy to one hip, freeing one of hers. She shook the Herald's hand and then turned to face the quieter young man. "If you want to join us, there's food, but I'll warn you, it's spare; we can offer you news, or trade, or water—but we barter for most of our food, and only Widow Davis has stores enough to entertain important guests."

The Heralds exchanged a look, and then the young man smiled. "We're well provisioned. We'd be happy to offer food for our discussion or news."

"He means—and is too polite to say it—gossip."

But Kayla felt the twinge of guilt that hid beneath the surface of those cheerful words, and her eyes fell to the saddlebags that his Companion bore without complaint. It occurred to her that the Companions and their Heralds seldom carried much food with them, for the villages who fed and housed them were reimbursed for their troubles, and at a rate that made it especially appealing for the poorer towns.

But when the man dismounted and unstrapped the bags from the side of his Companion, she knew, she just knew that they had been brought solely to be offered to Riverend. And she didn't like it, although she couldn't say why.

"Your pardon," he said, dipping his head slightly, "for my manners. My name is Carris."

"And her name?" She asked, staring at his Companion.

The Herald smiled. "Her name is Arana. She is a queen among Companions. And knows it," he added ruefully.

Kayla nodded quietly and turned away. "The hold is dark, even at this time of day; there is only one room with good windows. Shall I send for the mayor?"

"No. No, that isn't necessary. It's really an informal visit." Anne frowned. "And yes, I did know your mother. She was a very, very stubborn woman."

"You know that she died."

Anne nodded, and there was a very real weariness in the movement. "Aye, I know it." But she added no more. Instead, she turned to her Companion and began to unstrap her saddlebags as well. They were equally heavy.

"I won't lie to you, Kayla," Anne said, as she took a seat while Kayla set to boiling water for the tea and herbal infusions that the Southerners often found too thin or too bitter. "I did not know your mother well. This has been my circuit for a number of years, and although we're often sent out on different routes, we become familiar with the villages along the King's roads.

"Your mother wasn't the mayor, but she was the center of Riverend. I never met a woman with a cannier sense of the dangers of living in such an isolated place—and I grew up a few towns off the Holderkin, so I'm aware of just how dangerous those fringes can be."

"But your mother had a great love for your father, and for the lands that produced him. And she had a gift, as well, a...clear understanding of people." She hesitated, and Kayla felt it again, that low current beneath the words that seemed to move in a different direction from their surface. "A clearer understanding than perhaps most of us have." She waited.

Carris said nothing, but he did clear his throat.

"We've brought a few things that the village will find useful," he said at last, looking to just one side of her face, as if his dark and graceful gaze had become

suddenly awkward. "Magda often asked for aid for the rough times, and—and— she made it clear what was needed. There are medical herbs and unguents here, there are potions as well; there are bandages and cleansing herbs, as well as honest tea. There's salted, dried meat in the second bag; a lot of it, which might help. The harvest in the mainland has been...poor this year. There's also some money in the last bag."

"You shouldn't be telling me this," Kayla said quietly. "You should talk to Widow Davis; she's the mayor hereabouts, or what passes for one. She'll know what to do, and she'll be very grateful to you both."

They exchanged another glance.

"Well, then, maybe you'd better call for the Widow Davis after all."

Kayla smiled politely. "If you think she isn't already on her way, you don't know Riverend all that well."

But Kayla knew something was wrong.

The Widow Davis did, indeed, arrive; she scattered the children with a sharp inquiry about the current state of their chores, and an even sharper glance at the children who had the temerity to tell her they wanted to stay with the Companions, and then eyed the saddlebags the Heralds carried with an obvious, and deep, suspicion.

"Kayla, go mind the children. If you can't teach them to heed their duties, no one can. I'll deal with the strangers."

Kayla felt her jaw go slack, but she hid the surprise that had caused it as she nodded to the widow and retreated. These were *Heralds*, not medicants, and she had never heard the Widow Davis be rude to a Herald before. She was glad that the children had been sent back to their work.

She did not see the Heralds leave, but when she had time to glance outside again, they were gone, the white of their uniforms, and the white of Companion coats, little glimpses into the heart of winter, a hint of the future.

And when she at last tucked in for bed, she fought sleep with a kind of dread that she hadn't felt since she had slept in the arms of her own mother, at a time of life so far removed it seemed centuries must have passed. The nightmares had been strong then; they were strong now.

Many of the village children dreamed. They found a place in her lap when they wished to make sense of all the things that occurred only after they closed their eyes, and she had spent years listening, with both wonder and envy, to the hundreds of broken stories that occupied their dreamscapes.

Not so her own.

She had two dreams.

There was a black dream and a white dream, set against the mountain's winter.

As a child, the black dreams were frightening, bewildering; she would wake from sleep to search for her mother; it never took long. Her mother would come, precious candle burning, and sit by the side of her bed.

"What did you dream of, Kayla?"

"The dragon."

She had never seen a dragon; the stories that the old wives told described them as terrible, ancient beasts who had long since vanished from the face of the free lands. Books in the hold were so rare they were seldom seen, and books with pictures tipped in were rarer still.

But there was something in the shape of shadow that reminded her of those pictures.

"What was he doing?"

"Crying."

"Ah. Try not to listen too carefully, Kayla. Dragon tears are a terrible thing."

"I think...he's lonely."

Her mother's smile was shallow, even by candlelight. "Dragons are lonely; they sit on their cold, cold gold, their hard jewels, and they never come out to play."

"He would," she would tell her mother, "if he could find us."

"I think it best that he never find us, Kayla. Riverend is no place for such a creature."

The white dreams were different.

The snows were clearer and cleaner, and the pines that guarded the pass stretched beyond them to cut moonlight and hide it. But the light was strong enough to see by, and she always saw the same thing: the white horse.

He was the color of snow, of light on snow. And in the hold, in this place just one edge of rock and mountain, where spring came and went so quickly and summer's stretch was measured in weeks, snow was the color of death. Even as a child, she had understood that.

He did not speak to her until her father died.

"You can talk?"

:Yes. A little. It is difficult now. But... *I heard your voice, little one. I heard your singing.:*

"Singing?"

:*Aye, song, a dirge, I think, to break the heart for its softness. I heard you sing years ago, and your song was so light and so joyful, I waned all of my compatriots to stand, to listen, to feel. There was such love in that song. And in this one. In this one, too.:*

She knew what he spoke of, and said nothing, but looked down at the back of her hands. They were child's hands; smooth and unblemished by calluses and dirt. Because it was a dream, she did not ask him how he had come to hear her heart's song.

:If I asked you to come with me, what would you do?:

And because she understood something of the nature of dreaming, she allowed herself to be honest. "If you had asked me as a child, I would have tendered a child's answer. But I have children now, and they need me greatly, and you are not a creature to be confined to a place like Riverend."

He had met her eyes with eyes, she thought, that saw whole lives as if they were the course rivers ran, beginning to end, and he might map them out, might remark on where the rapids lay, and where the oceans, at last, waited, for the movements of rivers to cease. And he said, *:Tonight then, dear heart, I will not ask.:*

But she knew that the time was coming when he would, and she was afraid of it. Because Riverend was her home, and she wanted to leave.

He came to her often in her dreams after that, and she spoke with him, he with her. But his was not the only dream which changed.

For one night, huddled alone in the cold, she dreamed the black dream, and it was different: The dragon took flight. It searched; it searched for her. She could hear it roar when it opened its lips, and its voice was a song of death and desire.

And when it sang, she heard over voices as well, thin and terrible, the wailing of children, of grown men reduced to that earlier state, of women whose losses were so profound that silence—even the silence of the grave—seemed to offer mercy. They were lost, these voices; she knew it. They were lost to the devourer, the shadow, the dragon.

And if she were not careful, if she were not silent as mouse, and hidden in the darkness of a hold's small room, it would find her, it would consume her, and it would add her voice to its song.

She woke, sweating, her voice raw; the walls of the hold were solid, but she could hear footsteps in the halls beyond her room. They paused a moment outside her door, but no one knocked; no one entered. Her mother was gone.

After that, she dreamed of the darkness often. It grew stronger and stronger, and she, weaker.

On the morning of the worst of these dreams, the Heralds had come with their ominous gifts, and she had left them with Widow Davis.

Tonight, the darkness had not yet fallen across the field of her vision. He was waiting for her, cold beauty.

She felt the howl of winter wind through passes closed by snow and storm; memory of spring and summer faded until only the cold remained, essential and eternal. The ice glittered from the heights of the mountains' peaks; caught light in a skirt around the fringes of the evergreens that stretched a hundred feet in height to the edge of her vision.

The snow did not swallow him; his weight did not bear him down, down through the thin crust of snow. Silent, he waited for her.

As he always waited.

But it was different, tonight, and she knew it.

She said, "You cannot carry an Oathbreaker."

He met her gaze and held it, but she heard no voice, and she found the absence unsettling, for in dreams like these, she had spoken to him for much of her life.

"Did you send the Heralds? Did they bring gifts that were meant to take my place?"

He offered no reply.

And she was afraid. Her arms were cold; the day was fading. Night in the mountains was bright, if not brighter, by moonlight, but the colors—winter colors, to be sure—were leached from the landscape until only shades of gray remained beneath the black and white of sky and star.

"This is no dream," she said quietly, the question a shadow across the words.

He nodded.

She did not know what to feel; the winter had settled deep within her.

In the morning, he came. He came after breakfast had been prepared, but before the miners had gathered in the hold; the sun cut crisp, long shadows against the sparse growth.

The children carried word of his presence from one end of the village to the other, but they came in numbers to where Kayla cleaned the heavy ceramics that held the morning porridge. Kayla quietly washed and dried her hands, while smaller hands tugged at her apron's hem and strings.

"There's a Companion in Riverend!" Tess said, her dark eyes wide and round.

"I know," Kayla told her softly, bending and gathering her in shaking arms.

"It's got no Herald!" Evan added. "It's got no rider!"

"I know," Kayla replied. She straightened.

"Everyone wants to see it. Do you think it's come searching?"

"Aye, little, I think it's come searching."

"For who?" Tess asked, insistent, and unaware of the stillness of Kayla's expression. "Do you think he'll take Evan away?"

Evan was her older brother, by about four years. "Not yet."

"Too bad."

She laughed. "I'm sure Evan thinks so, too."

"But do you think he's lost his Herald? Do you think he needs help? Do you think—"

"I think," she said, "that he'll have died of old age before I can see him if I answer all your questions first."

"Just one more?"

"One more."

"Do you think he'll let me ride?"

"No, little, I think you'll fall off his back, and Companions aren't in the business of visiting villages just to injure the dearest of their people." She kissed the girl's forehead, just as she would have once kissed the forehead of her youngest.

Tess wrapped her arms around Kayla's neck. "But what do you think he wants?"

"I think," she said quietly, "that we'll find out soon. Now hush."

Widow Davis was there, in the clearing by river's side. The river itself, cold and loud, was a thin one, but it was clear and the water, fresh. She looked up when Kayla approached, her eyes narrowed and wrinkled by exposure to wind, to cold, and yes, to the scant sun. "Well, then," she said, "You've heard."

"I've...heard."

"Your mother told me," the widow said, turning back to her bucket.

"Told you?"

"To be careful of the Companions."

"They're not evil, Widow Davis."

"No, I'm certain of it. All of our stories say so, and they've come to the aid of the village at least three times in my living memory." She was silent a moment. "But this will be the first time they take more than they offer."

"Widow Davis—"

The old woman's look stopped her flat. "Come on, then. You're here, and we might as well have it out." She offered Kayla an arm; Kayla shifted Tess to one side and took it.

Together they crossed the uneven ground that led from stream to the shadows cast by the tall, white Companion, caparisoned in livery of blue and silver, belled so his movements might evoke a sense of music, a sense of play. But his eyes were dark, and large as the palms of a child's hand, and he did not blink when he turned his massive head toward the two women. Children dogged their steps, crossed their shadows, whispered eagerly and quickly amongst themselves. Not even the dour expression of the Widow Davis could silence them completely.

The widow's hand tightened; Kayla's arm began to tingle. She did not, however, ask the old woman to let go.

"He's here for you, girl," the woman said, pulling her arm free

Kayla looked up at the Companion, and then she reached out with her free hand. Her fingers stopped inches from his nose, and she let that hand fall. She said, quietly, "Do I have to go with you?"

He looked into her eyes and said, in a voice that made all song seem flat and thin, *:The choice is yours.*

:I have waited long for this day. I have waited, bright heart, and promised myself that I would let you lead the life the mountain would give you.:

:But I have heard your cries from across the continent; I have been with you when you buried your dead, when you cradled the living that you knew you could not hold on to.:

She looked up at his eyes; his gaze never wavered. "You know that this choice is no choice."

He was silent a moment; she thought he would offer no answer. And then, quietly, he said, *:Better than you would understand.:*

"Because the choice has always been yours to make."

:Because the Companions Choose, yes.:

"And the Heralds?"

:They are Chosen. But they feel the bond, and they desire it, and they accept it for all that it is; all that it can be.:

"And my oath?" she asked him, voice steady, arm now drawing on an young child for support.

:There are oaths that are made that cannot be kept in the manner that their maker envisioned. If a child promises to love you, and only you, for all of forever, could you hold him to that vow? Would you desire it?:

"I was no child when I made that vow."

:Dear heart,: he said gently, *:you are barely an adult now, and you made that vow when your older brother moved away, long before you had husband or children.:* He stepped forward, and she shied away.

Because she wanted what he offered.

Because she had never wanted anything so badly. *:I choose you, Kayla.:*

She heard the song of his name, although she had never asked it of him, and he had never offered it—as if they both understood, in the dreams of her youth, that his name was a binding they had avoided by careful dance until this moment.

"Darius."

Widow David coughed. The old woman's face was set in its harshest lines. In the distance, children that had been silent until that moment surged forward as Kayla did; they came in a press of small bodies, eager and excited.

But she knew that they would understand it truly later.

For now, all they said was, "You're to be Chosen, Kayla? You're going to be a Herald? Will you wear white? Will you have a sword? Will you have a bow?"

She answered all questions gravely, until one lone boy spoke. Evan.

"Will you come back?"

"Yes," she said, fiercely. "Often. I will come back with a saddlebag full of Northern toys and treats and books, and I will come at the edge of winter, just before they close the passes, like some foolish, green merchant."

Darius had saddlebags. She knew, without looking, that they were full; full enough for a long journey.

"Widow Davis," she said softly. "Can you do without me?"

The old woman had some mercy. "Aye," she said gruffly. "We did before your mother came. We managed." She started to say something else, and then stopped. "They must need you, Kayla, They must need you even more than we do."

Kayla said nothing.

Because she knew a lie when she heard it. What could they need from her that a hundred other girls. couldn't give them? They had Heralds, full-trained; they had soldiers, they had lords, ladies, Kings. They had so much.

And Riverend had so little.

"I'll be back," she whispered.

Widow Davis met her eyes, without blinking, and then to Kayla's astonishment, the old woman stepped forward and wrapped arms around her shoulders. "Come back, child," she said, although it had been years since she had called Kayla a child. "Come back whole."

Kayla flinched. She felt her eyes sting. "Widow Davis—"

"You've not come back to us with the spring. We missed your song in the winter. It may be that you need what it is he offers; it may be he'll help you to sing for us again."

Kayla buried her face in the old woman's shoulders.

Before lunch that day, she was on the road. Her neck was cramped; she'd done nothing but gaze backward, over her shoulder, until not even the hills that were home to Riverend could be seen in the distance. All of her life lay in that village, or beneath it; all of the things she valued.

Promise me, Kayla, that you'll stay. Promise me that you'll take care of Riverend when I'm gone.

I promise, Mother. But you won't be gone for a long time, will you?

Not if I have anything to say about it. Of course, she hadn't.

Riding was nothing like it had been in her dreams. It was hard work. And painful. She could feel Darius' rueful smile. She could not see his face, of course.

"They need me, you know," she told him, the accusation soft.

:I am sorry, dear heart, but so do we.:

"Why?"

:That I cannot tell you yet. But you will understand, I fear, as we approach the city.:

"What city?"

:The King's city, he told her quietly. :The capital. Or what's left of it.:

"What do you mean, Darius?"

Darius didn't answer.

"Are we at war?"

:We are always at war, Kayla. But the battlefields shift and change with time.:

He had to tell her what to do for him when they stopped by the Waystations left for Herald use. She did not know how to brush him, water him, blanket him; was not familiar with the food that he ate. Everything about the life beyond Riverend was strange and unexpected.

But sleep was bad. Every night she spent away from the hold, she spent beneath the great, unfurled wings of the shadow beast, the devourer. She knew that she would never have the white dreams again.

Darius would nudge her out of sleep, and she would cry out, reach for him, and then stop, letting her hands fall away.

"I don't see you in my dreams anymore." The words shook as much as her hands did.

:I know.:

"Will I ever?"

:Yes, Kayla. But... it was never easy to reach through your dreams to you. It takes gift. Talent.:

"But you—when I dreamed of you, I didn't dream of the—of the—other."

:I would claim that as my action, but there will be too much between us to endure a lie. If you found peace and haven from the—from your dreams, it was not a haven I could create. Not then. Not now.

:If I not been meant for you, if I had not known of you when you were a child, I would never have been able to breach the barriers set by—:

He fell silent, and after an awkward pause she asked, "How did you know of me?"

:I heard you.:

"You traveled through Riverend?"

:No. But I heard you. I heard your fear and your terror. I heard your sorrow. I heard your song. Your song is powerful.:

"My mother used to tell me song was my Gift."

:Did she? Interesting. Song is the only way that I have seen you use your Gift. You sing, and others listen. You listen, and you hear the harmonies and disharmonies that are hidden in a speaker's voice. But that is not your gift, Kayla.:

"What is?"

His mane flew as he shook his head. *:The dreams are worse, yes?:*

She knew that that was as much an answer that he would offer, and it made her uneasy. She said, simply, "My mother told me I was safe as long as I was in Riverend."

:You were safe there. But others are not.: He was silent while she gathered her things. Only when she was safe upon the height of his back did he continue. *:What you dream of...it is true in a fashion. We are closer to it. We will draw closer still. I am...sorry.:*

On the fourth day, she woke from dreaming with Darius' muzzle in the side of her neck. She was sweating, although it was cold, and he caught the edge of her rough woolen blankets in his perfect teeth and pulled them more tightly around her.

His eyes were dark, his gaze somber.

"Darius," she whispered, when she could speak past the rawness in the throat, "I heard bells."

He was silent.

"Not bells like yours, not bells like the ones you're decorated. with. But... bells. Loud and low."

:I know.:

"There are no bells here, are there?"

:No. Not on these roads; the next village is half a day's hard riding away.:

"What are they?"

:You know, Kayla.:

And she did, although she did not know how. Death bells. "Tell me?"

He shook his head. *:It is forbidden for me to tell you what they are; you will know. We will reach the capital in the next two days.:*

As he spoke, the hairs on the back of her neck rose. She thought of Riverend. Of Tessa and Evan, of Mitchell, of the Widow Davis. For no reason at all, she wanted to weep.

The first large town that Kayla entered seemed so vast she assumed it was the capital. Darius laughed, but his laughter was gentle enough that it reminded her of her father's amusement at her younglings antics a lifetime ago.

"But it's so—so—big!"

:It is big, yes. But... it is not a city. The town is large. That building, there? That houses the mayor and his family. And that, that is as close to a cathedral as you

will find. But this is a tenth, a twentieth, of the size of the city you will enter when we—Kayla?:

She sat frozen across his bare back, her legs locked so tightly her body was shuddering.

:Kayla!:

She could not even shake her head. Her mouth, when it opened, was too dry to form words. *Darius...*

:Kayla, what is wrong?:

The screaming. Can't you hear it? The screaming.

:Kayla! KAYLA!:

She was on her feet. Not his back, not his feet. She could not remember sliding from the complicated bits and pieces of baubles that announced his presence and his station so eloquently.

The cobbled streets passed beneath her; she noticed them only because they felt so strange to her feet, so unnatural beneath open sky. The screaming was so loud she could hear no other words, although she thought she could glimpse, from the corners of her eyes, the opened mouths and shocked faces of the strangers she hurtled past, pushed through.

She was through the doors and into the light before she realized that she had entered the cathedral; that she stood in the slanting rays of colors such as she had never seen captured in glass. A man, ghostly and regal, illuminated her and the ground upon which she stood.

She stopped only a moment because given a choice between beauty and terror, beauty could not hold her. She knew what she heard. She knew it.

The cathedral was an open, empty place of light and space, with benches and an altar at the end of the apse. She ran down it, boots pounding the ground, footsteps echoing in heights she would never have dreamed possible in Riverend. And she forgot to feel small, to feel humble; she knew she had to read the person whose screams were so terrible, and soon, or it would be too late.

And she never once stopped to wonder what too late meant.

She found him.

It wasn't easy; there were doors secreted in the vast stone walls, beautifully oiled and tended, that nonetheless seemed like prison doors, they opened into a room so small. Curled against wall and floor, huddling in the corner, was a man. A stranger.

In Riverend, strangers were always eyed with suspicion, greeted with hearty hospitality and an implacable distance. She had shed both of those the moment she had heard his terrible cry.

And she heard it still, although she could see—with wide eyes—that his lips were still. But his eyes were wider than eyes should be, and they stared ahead, to her, sightless, as if he had gone blind.

:Kayla! Be careful!:

Darius' voice.

She realized then what was so wrong, so cutting, about this man's cry of terror: it reached her the same way that Darius' words did, in a silence that spoke of knowledge and intimacy. Without thought, she bent to the man huddled against the floor, and without thought, she tried to lift him.

Realized that lifting him would strain the muscles she had built in the hold, lifting even the largest of the children; he was not a small man.

And she was a small woman. But determination had always counted for something. Always.

She caught him in her arms. Caught his face in her hands as his head sought the cradle of arms and breasts.

His screaming was terrible.

But hers was louder, longer, as insistent as his own.

Look at me!

He whimpered, but the sound was a real sound, a thing of throat and breath and lips. His eyes, glassy, brown, deep, shifted and jerked, upward now, seeking her face.

"The darkness," he whispered. "The darkness. The emptiness. I've lost them. I've failed them all." For a large man, his voice was small, tiny. She should have been terrified, then.

But as he spoke, she felt what he felt, and she knew, knew, that she had passed through it herself.

Her own children were gone.

And she was young enough that the visiting merchants never realized that she had had a husband—gone, too—and a family; that she had had everything she had desired in her youth.

And what was the point of that desire, but pain? In the end, what was the point? Her children had not disappeared in the mining accidents that killed the men, when the men did die; they had not gone missing in the terrible snows that could strand a person feet away from the doors of the hold, and bury them there, as a taunt, a winter cruelty.

No. She had held them.

She had held them, just as she had held this man, in this dark, cramped room, in this empty place that had no words of comfort to offer her.

The cabin in which she had lived was hallowed by the terrible silence of their absence; she might walk from room to room—for there were only three—and listen furtively to catch their ghostly voices. This was the way she evoked memory, and memory, in this dark place, this gloom of log and burning wood and little light—for light let in cold—was unkind. It led her into darkness.

And that darkness might have devoured her, if her mother had not held her, held on to her, filled the emptiness with her words and the blessed sound of her voice. Mother's pain, always.

She spoke to this stranger.

She spoke to this man who understood, who was somehow—at this instant—a part of all the losses she had faced.

And as she did, she opened her eyes to a dream. Heard the voice of the devourer, all his voices, the cries of terror and emptiness.

Promise me, Kayla. Promise me you will stay and protect Riverend. Promise me. I promise. I promise, Mother. I promise.

She forgot the cathedral, then. Forgot the lines of this stranger's face. She held him, as if a storm raged just beyond her bent shoulders, her bowed back. She found voice; she sang. She sang to him.

And the singing did what the words she had spoken—for she was aware that words had left her lips, aware that they were a failure before she had finished speaking them—could not.

Dark eyes turned to her; dark eyes saw her; the agony written and etched in terrible lines across a gray face shifted as eyes she would have sworn couldn't grow any wider, did.

He clung to her, his face made her breasts ache, her spine curved in until it was almost painful just to sit, but she sat. She sat.

And the priest came.

She heard his voice at a distance. She heard his words as if they were spoken from within her. He was praying. After a moment, she joined him, although she didn't know the words that he spoke. Hers were as heartfelt, and they were all she had to offer.

"Come home," she whispered, kissing the sweaty, damp strands of this stranger's hair, stroking his face as if it were the fevered face of her eldest. "Come home."

Darius was waiting for her. Companions, it seemed, were not considered beasts of burden in even the grandest of venues; he stood in the light of the windows as if he were a dream. He walked forward slowly as the priest helped the man to his feet.

:Kayla,: he said gravely. :What you did here was bravely done.:

"What did I do?" she whispered softly.

:What you were born to do.:

The priest was staring at her. She turned to him and bowed. "I—I'm sorry," she stammered. "But—I—I—"

He shook his head. "He came to this place seeking help. And you came to this place offering aid that we could not offer. Do not apologize, child. But—"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know what—what I did."

"You saved him," the priest whispered. "I was so certain—" He closed his eyes a moment; she thought he might retreat into prayer again. But he shook himself free of the words, and when he stood, she saw that he was over six feet tall, his shoulders wide and broad. As her father's had once been, before the mines.

"There are others," he said after a moment. He turned and bowed to her Companion. "She is your Chosen?"

The Companion nickered softly.

"But she wears no white, no gray. Child, can it be that you have not yet made your journey to the Collegium?"

"I—no. I think we're on the way there."

"Might I ask—if it's not too much—that you come to the infirmary?"

She looked at Darius. Darius was absolutely silent, as if he were adornment to the statues, the windows, the altar of this place.

Her decision, then. She nodded.

He led her through the cloisters; she realized later that this was a courtesy to Darius. Darius was comfortable in the apse, but once the halls narrowed, movement would be restricted, and it was clear what the Companion—no, her Companion—thought of that.

She even smiled, felt a moment of almost gentle amusement, until she glanced at the older man's face. Care had worn lines from his eyes to his lips, and she thought that no matter what happened in future, they were there to stay.

They grew deeper as he left the cloister; deeper still as he walked down a hall and stopped in front of a door that was slightly ajar. "Here," he said quietly.

She nodded and opened the door.

And stopped there, beneath the lintel, staring.

There was more than one room; she could see that clearly in the streaming light of day. And there were beds, bedrolls, makeshift cots, with only barely enough room between them to allow a man passage. Each of the beds was occupied.

Darius.

:Kayla.: The word was urgent, but real.

She was afraid.

"I can't—I can't go in there," she whispered. *:Kayla.:*

But the door was no protection; it was open. She could hear weeping, whimpering, screaming. Her hand caught the frame of the door and her fingers grew white as she held it.

:Bright heart.: Darius said firmly, *:see with your eyes. Hear with your ears; hear only with your ears.:*

She drew a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. See, she thought, with your eyes. She could do that. She could look.

Men lay abed. Women. There were children as well, although they were mercifully few. They gazed up at the ceiling of the room, or at the walls, their eyes unblinking. They did not move; their lips were still. She shook her head to clear it of the sounds of despair, and as she did, the priest gently pushed his way past her.

"They have been this way," he said softly, "for weeks. They will eat what we feed them, and drink when we offer them water; we can clean them, wash them, bathe them. But they will not rise or move on their own; they do not speak. Some of them have families in this town, but—but most of their families can only bear to visit for the first few days." He walked over to one of the beds and set upon its edge, heavily.

"More and more of my people are brought here every day. And throughout the town there are others whose families can afford the cost of their care."

"They—they have no fever?"

"None. No rash, no bleeding, no outward sign of illness. But they are gone from us." He looked up; met her eyes.

"The man that you—you found, today, would have joined them by evening at the latest."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen it. I know the signs. All of us do."

"But—"

"We have no doctors who can aid us; no healers who can reach them." He closed his eyes. Opened them again. "What did you do, Herald?"

She shook her head. "N—nothing. And—and I'm not—not a Herald." She walked into the room, to shed the weight of the bleak hope in his eyes.

And as she did, she passed a small cot and stopped before it, frozen.

It held a young child, eyes wide, hair damp against his forehead. Were it not for the slack emptiness of his features, he would have been beautiful. She forgot Darius; forgot his words.

She listened with her *heart*.

And her heart shuddered, and nearly broke, from the weight of what it heard. She had once been near the mines when a shaft had collapsed. The roar of falling rock had deafened her; the shouts of fear, of terror, the commands for action, had done the same. And through it all, one guilty thought had kept her still: she should not

have come here. Children were not allowed by the mines. But she had wanted to see her father.

Standing in this room, at the foot of this anonymous cot, she felt the same deafness and the same guilt. Some part of her urged her to turn, to run, but she ignored it because she had heard it for most of her adult life.

What loss could she suffer that she had not suffered?

She took a step, and then another, pushing her way forward as if through a gale, until she stood by the child's side. And then she reached for him.

He was not large; she did not know if he had once been chubby, as children his age often were; he was not that now; he weighed almost nothing. She lifted him, as she had lifted one other sick child, almost two years ago.

He was screaming now, in the silence behind her silence, and she joined him because it was the only way she knew to answer the memories that even now threatened to break her.

Her son.

Mommmmmmmmeeeeeee

Her child.

MOMMMMMEEEEEE

Her own son had not wept or cried or struggled. The fever had spared him terror, and he understood, in the height of its grip, that she held him in the safety of her arms.

Almost unconsciously, she shifted her grip on this stranger until it was the same embrace; her shoulders were curved forward, her spine rounded at the top, as if, hunched over him, she might hide from the death that was waiting, waiting, in the winter's depths. She placed her lips against his forehead, and tasted salt.

She was crying.

He was screaming, but she knew how to comfort terror by now. Her arms tightened and she began to rock him, gently, back and forth, whispering his name, her son's name, as if they were the same.

It happened suddenly: His arms jerked and trembled as he tried to lift them. She did not know how long he had lain in that cot, inactive, but his hands were so weak they were like butterfly wings against her neck.

"The dragon," he whispered, his voice a rasp, a creak. "The dragon will eat us."

"No," she told him firmly. "The dragon can't land. He can only fly, making night wherever he goes. He can roar. He can scream. But he can't land."

"He hates us."

"Aye," she replied. She had never lied to her children; she felt no need to lie to this one. "He hates all living things. All happy things." And as she said those words, she felt the truth of them, although she had never thought to speak them before. The boy's hands touched her cheeks. "You were scared," he whispered.

"No."

"But you were. You have tears on your face."

She could not dry them; both of her hands were occupied with his scant weight. But she turned to the priest who was watching in utter silence.

"You can breathe now," she said.

The priest's eyes were wide. "Herald," he said again, and this time she did not correct him, "can you reach the others?"

"I—"

:No.:

She frowned. It was Darius' voice. *:Darius—why?:*

:You are exhausted, Kayla. You are light-headed. You will put yourself at grave risk if you attempt to proceed. These people have lain immobile for some weeks, and the townspeople are decent; they will care for them.

:But if we do not reach the capital before he finds you, they will have no way back:

:Before who finds me?:

Darius was silent.

She drew the boy up in her arms, into a hug; her arms were as gentle as she could make them in a grip so tight. She felt his bony chin in the hollow between her neck and her shoulder, and the weight of it, resting there, was everything she desired for that moment.

But this is how she had quieted her sorrow; she had filled it with life, small life, the immediacy of children.

"Where are his parents?" she asked the Priest.

"He has no parents. I am sorry. They passed away a year and a half ago in the summer crippling plague."

"His family?"

"He was their only child. They were newly married. His grandmother is in the town to the east. She is his only living relation; it is why he was here—when it happened."

She pulled the boy away from her chest and her neck; held him out so that she could meet his serious, brown eyes. He was so damn thin. "Daniel," she said softly, "my name is Kayla."

"I know."

"I am going to the capital. I am going to learn how to become a—a Herald."

He was too tired to look awed, and she loved him for it. Was afraid of that emotion, because she knew it should not have come so quickly, so easily, for a stranger.

"But I don't want to leave you here, alone. I dream of the dragon. I have always dreamed of the dragon; he hunts me in my sleep. But he has never caught me, never once. If you want—if you would like—you can come with me."

:Kayla, that is not allowed—:

:I don't give a damn.:

The boy slid his arms around her neck and held her tightly, and that was his entire answer. She turned to the priest, a mixture of defiance and possessiveness lending strength to the soft lines of her face. "I cannot help them all," she said quietly. "Not yet. But I promise, if it is in my power, that I will."

And wondered what the word of an Oathbreaker was worth.

Looked at the child's head, his messy hair, the wax in his ears that hadn't been cleaned out by whoever had been attending him.

And knew that the word was everything. Mother, forgive me. Forgive me. I will return to Riverend when I am done.

"I am taking this child with me," she told the priest. She almost lied. She almost told him that if she didn't, he would lapse back into his state of wide-eyed immobility. But she didn't believe it.

"Will you take him into safety, Herald—"

"Call me Kayla. Kayla Grayson."

"Will you take him into safety, Kayla? Or into danger? If you ride toward the capital, you will find this...disease...is far more prevalent as you approach the palace. We have had care of him for two weeks, and we are prepared to care for him until—"

"Until he falls victim to the terrors once again? No. If I take him into danger, I take him with me, and I know—I know how to comfort a child."

"You will have your duties."

"What duty is more important than this? I will protect him. But—"

And a head appeared in the doorway; a white, large head, with deep blue eyes the size of palms and a long, straight muzzle wearing a silver-and-blue strap and bells. Companions had no words to offer anyone but each other—and their Heralds—if the stories were true, but Darius did not need words; he butted the priest gently in the chest, and met his eyes, unblinking.

It was the priest who looked away.

"I won't abandon you," she said softly, and hesitantly, as Riverend flashed before her eyes. "But...but I think I understand now why I was called."

"What are you, child?"

"I don't know."

:Tell him your Gift is Empathy.:

"Darius says my Gift is Empathy."

The priest closed his eyes. "Then he is taking you to an unkind fate, Kayla."

"Why do you say that?"

"The Empaths, the greatest of the Empaths, were the first to fall."

The town's many inns offered food and wine and water when Darius entered their courtyards. But they were silent as they made their offers, and the fear that she had sensed in the infirmary had extended outward in an echo that was terrible to witness. On impulse, she said, "I have with me one of the children who was in the cathedral infirmary. He's not very talkative," she added, as the boy shyly turned his face into her shoulder, "but he's recovering. I know it's been bad on the town, but as an outsider, I'm amazed at the way the town has come together to help the fallen, even when they don't understand the disease."

"There's hope," she added softly.

And the innkeepers, their wives, their guests, leaped at the words that she had spoken aloud, a clear indication that eavesdropping was a way of life in any place, be it small hold or large town.

They might have called her a liar, but she was astride a Companion, and the Heralds did not lie.

So they breathed a sigh of relief instead. "We've been pleading for help," the innkeeper's wife said, as she added four extra pies to their load. "But the only help the King sent lies in the infirmary with the others. We didn't know—" She ran the back of her hand across her eyes. "My brother's in back, same as them that you saw. Thank you, Herald." Kayla had given up telling people that she wasn't. The woman composed herself, although the redness of her eyes spoke of unshed tears. "You'll want a blanket for the boy; it's chilly on the hills in these parts."

The boy ate like a pig. Which is to say, he ate everything they put in front of him, and he ate it in a way calculated to leave the most food on his clothes. The innkeeper's wife—a woman, and a mother, who therefore thought of these things—had seen fit to pack him extra clothing; Kayla was grateful for it.

She did not let the boy leave her, and he did not wander farther than her hand could reach. But his ordeal had left him easily tired, and he slept frequently, his back against her chest, her arms on either side of his upright body to stop him from plunging the distance between Darius' back and the forest floor.

"Is it true, Darius?"

:Yes. In the capital, where there are so many more people, many have died from the...ailment. They cannot feed themselves, and if they fall in the streets before the Heralds or the Kings' men find them, they're often robbed and left for dead.:

"How long has this been happening?"

Darius was silent.

"Darius, I think I've figured out why you came to Riverend by now. How does my ignorance serve your purpose? Tell me. If I'm to help, I need to know."

:I would tell you everything in a minute, but there are oaths you must swear, and vows you must undertake, before you become Herald; and if you are Herald, there is no information with which you cannot be trusted.:

She knew when she heard his words that she suddenly didn't want that much trust.

Daniel chattered as they rode. And he helped with the food that was meant for Darius; helped with the blankets that were meant to keep him warm in the night. But he helped in a way that he didn't understand, for he would not sleep without Kayla's arms around him. She held him.

When the nightmares came that night, they were subtly different. The beast that roared with the voice of a thousand—tens of thousands—of screams, had eyes that were focused. Its flight was lazy, the circles it drew in the night sky slow and deliberate.

He was searching, Kayla realized. For her. For the child she had taken from him.

She did not scream. She wanted to, but she knew what it would cost the boy, and she kept it to herself.

And because of that, she reached the capital, and the Herald's Collegium, before sun's full height the next day.

The Kings' guards bowed quietly as Darius approached the main gates, and although it was evident that they were curious, they merely welcomed him home.

:They are usually more friendly,: Darius said apologetically, *:but things in the Collegium have been dark for many months. I— Come, Kayla. Here is a woman you must see.:*

A Herald?

:Yes. She is the King's Own, second only to the King in authority, and she is beloved of the Heralds. I should warn you, though that it is not for the quickness or sharpness of her tongue that she is loved.:

Kayla learned this almost instantly. A Herald met her at the front doors to the dauntingly huge building; he bowed to Darius. "So you've brought her," he said. "Finally."

"Yes," Kayla replied, although the words had clearly not been directed at her. "He did. And I guess he didn't tell you that I'm not used to being talked about as if I'm not here."

The man raised a brow. "I see that you have more in common with Magda Merton than it seems." His frown, edged with weariness, deepened. "Darius—you did not choose someone with a child that young?"

"No," she said flatly. "He waited until all mine were dead."

The Herald had the grace to look shocked, and she regretted the words almost instantly. Such a grief, such a loss, was never meant to be used as a weapon; it was wrong. It was just wrong. She slid off the back of her Companion, gently extricating herself from Daniel's arms. "My pardon, Herald," she said, to the chest of the man in Whites. "I woke the child from a...from a deep sleep. It was safest to bring him here."

"There is no safety here, if the child was affected by the—" He grimaced. "The Kings' Own has been waiting for you, if you are Kayla; please, follow me."

She hesitated a moment, and then Daniel said, "It's all right, Kayla." His words were thin and shaky; she could see the fear in his eyes. But he drew himself up to his full height, as if he were adult; as if he could bear the weight of her absence. "Darius says that he'll take care of me."

"Darius says—" Her eyes widened. "You can hear him?"

"Sometimes. When he's talking to me."

She pondered that as she followed the Herald. He led her down the hall into a very finely appointed room—a room that was the size of the gathering hall in the Hold of Riverend. There, a woman was standing by the great window that ran from floor to ceiling, an ostentatious display of glass.

Kayla had the ridiculous urge to kneel; she fought it carefully, although she did bow deeply.

"I am Gisel," the woman said.

"I'm Kayla."

"Kayla Grayson, Margaret Merton's daughter."

"Her youngest, yes."

"Arlen says that you've been through Evandale."

"Arlen?"

"Ah. My Companion. She has been speaking with Darius. It appears that you...met with...the victims of the shadow plague. And that you saved two."

Kayla nodded hesitantly.

"I guess that means that Magda took it upon herself to teach you."

"T—teach me?"

Gisel frowned. "Yes, teach you. Your Gift." When silence prevailed, the unpleasant frown deepened. "You must understand your Gift?"

"W—what Gift would that be?"

Gisel raised a hand to her gray hair and yanked it out of her face. "I wish I had time, child. I don't. Your mother was one of the most gifted Empaths the kingdom of Valdemar has ever known."

"E-empath?"

"I really do not have the patience for this."

It was true. Kayla could feel the older woman's anger, but it was mixed with a terrible sorrow and a deep guilt. Guilt, in her experience, had always been a double-edged sword; it could drive men mad. In the hold, it had.

"Empathy is a Gift that is deeper than words, and more subtle. You have that Gift. And if your mother didn't teach you how to use it, and you've survived the passage through Evandale...then you are more than just her daughter." Gisel walked away from the window and the light in the room grew. It was a cold light. "There are people who are born with other talents; you must have heard their stories. Some can summon fire; some can work great magic; some can heal with a touch; some can hear the words that men don't speak aloud. Any of these, untrained, are a danger to themselves, or to others. But Empaths can exist without such training; they are often sympathetic, or perhaps skittish, because of what they can sense. Feelings often run deeper than words; most men and women never really learn how to adequately speak of what they feel.

"I have wine here, and water; would you care for either?"

Kayla shook her head.

"As you wish. I intend to have a great deal of the former before this is over." True to her word, she poured herself a glass of a liquid that was a deep crimson, and stared at its surface as if she could glean information from it.

"An Empath can do these things. It is why empaths have often made better diplomats than those whose Gift it is to read the thoughts, the unspoken words of others."

Kayla had only barely heard of people like that, and she had always feared them. She said nothing.

"You'll be given your grays, and settled in, but you won't have the chance to train and learn with the newest of the Chosen. Your work is already waiting, and—I'm sorry child—but we don't have the time it would take to prepare you.

"This is a risk. I apologize for forcing you to take it. You know that the King has three sons, yes?"

"And two daughters. Which is more children than—"

"Yes, yes."

"And they've all survived," Kayla added, unable to keep the bitterness out of the words.

"It depends. The youngest of his sons was a...difficult lad. He doted on his mother, the Queen. When she passed away, he drifted, and his father was not a sensitive man; the running of the Kingdom during the border skirmishes kept him away from the capital for much of the year.

"But Gregori was Chosen, in spite of his black moods and his despondency. His Companion—" and here, she did flinch, "was Rodri. Rodri was as sensitive as

Gregori, and gentle in a way Gregori was not, and when Rodri did Choose him, we rejoiced." Again the words were bitter.

"We rejoiced anew when we discovered that Gregori was Gifted; that he was an Empath of exceptional power. It was part of the reason he was so withdrawn and so moody as a child; he could not bear the constant anger, fear, and hatred that he felt around him.

"The court...is not a suitable place for a child of such sensitivity."

"It's not just those things."

"What isn't?"

"That you feel. That I feel. There's more. There's joy. There's silliness."

"Magda did teach you, even if she didn't tell you what it was she was teaching."

"Rodri did teach Gregori to listen to those things, and Gregori—flourished. We were grateful. The King was grateful."

She knew that the story was going someplace bad, and she almost raised a hand to stem the flow of this autocratic woman's words. But she knew that would be a mistake.

"Rodri died, didn't he?"

Gisel raised a brow. Lifted her glass. "Yes. He died."

"And Gregori?"

Gisel closed her eyes. Set the glass down and filled it again. "There are Empaths among the Heralds," she said, when she chose to speak again. "I am not one of them.

"If I were, I would not be here to speak to you now."

And Kayla knew, as the words left the lips of the King's Own, that she was angry; that had it been up to this woman, Gregori would be dead.

She took a step back, a step away, and lifted her hand.

Gisel's dark eyes became narrowed edges into a harsh expression. "Yes, Kayla, you're right. If it had been up to me, I would have killed the boy. If it were up to me, he would be dead now."

"But the King—"

"Yes. The King feels guilt. Even though he sees the cost of Gregori's continued...existence, he feels that if he had somehow been present, he could have prevented what did happen. What is happening even as we speak. And he has summoned every Healer in the kingdom to the side of his son's bed in an attempt to revive him, to bring him back.

"They have failed, all of them."

"And the Empaths?"

"Two of them were my closest friends," Gisel said. She walked back to the tall window and stood in its frame, looking out. "The bells have tolled for the youngest."

"But—"

"But?"

"I don't understand."

"That much is clear. Ask, and ask quickly."

"If the Empaths couldn't help him, why have you been waiting for me?"

"I don't know."

"P—pardon?"

Gisel turned; the light was harsh; it made her face look like broken stone. "I don't know. I don't know what it was that Magda—that Margaret—Merton might have done to save him. I was there when Sasha fell. I was there when Michael joined her. I've been all over the city looking at the sleepers who are just waiting to join the dead. And I can hear what they think, when their terror has any words at all. It's my belief that if Gregori died, they would wake."

Kayla listened as Gisel spoke.

:Darius.:

:Kayla?:

:It is—the King's son—he is—:

:Yes.:

:The dragon.:

"You're wrong," she heard herself say.

Gisel raised a brow.

"If you killed him, he'd take them all with him when he went. All of them."

Gisel closed her eyes. Her turn. But she snapped them open quickly enough.

"And you know this how?"

Helpless, Kayla shrugged. "I don't know. But...I'd bet my life on it."

"Well that's good, because you will be. Go and get a bath, get food, settle into your room. We'll come for you."

Kayla nodded. "Can I have—"

"What?"

"Darius. Can I have Darius with me?"

Gisel hesitated. It was a cold hesitation. "It would be...better...if you did not."

In her room—and it really was a single room—she found Daniel perched on the edge of her bed. He started when he saw her, and leaped up from the bed's edge, shortening the distance with his flight of steps. She caught him in her arms and held him tightly, seeing another child in his stead.

"You need a bath," she told him gently.

He said very little, but she managed to ask for water, hot and cold, and she tended him first. She had spent most of her life taking care of the children of Riverend, and this one was no different.

Or so she told herself.

:*Darius*,: she said, as she worked, soap adding to tangles of hair and the murk of what had been clear water, :*What was Gregori doing when Rodri died?*:

:*He was at the Border*,: Darius replied.

It was strange, that she could speak to him from such a distance, and that it could feel so natural. :*During the skirmishing?*:

:*Yes*.:

:*Why?*:

:*He was a Herald*.:

:*That's not enough of an answer. If he was so sensitive...Gisel spoke of training. Was he trained?*:

:*He had better teachers than you, if that's what you meant*.:

:*But he—*:

:*He was very, very powerful, Kayla*.:

:*Then why did it take so long to figure out what he was?*:

:*He let no one know. No one but Rodri*.:

:*He was in the middle of battle*.:

:*Yes*.:

:*Constantly?*:

:*Not...physically. But there is evidence that he was aware of it. He could sense the movement of our enemies well before any others could. War breeds fear and hatred*.:

She pulled her son—no, this child, this stranger's son—from the bath water and set him in the towel in her lap.

:*Darius. I need the truth*.:

:*I have not lied to you, Bright Heart. Between us, there can be no lie*.:

:*Could he use his Gift as a weapon?*:

Darius did not answer.

Answer enough.

She did not sleep that night. She knew that sleep, in this place, was death. Close her eyes, and she could see the black spread of dragon wings, the lift and curl of air beneath their span. Close her eyes, and she could hear those borne aloft by that terrible flight; the screaming and the terror of those who had not yet realized they were dead.

Kayla, her mother said, from the distance of years, from the safety of death, *people make weapons out of anything. It's important that you understand this.*

Her mother's voice, sad but firm, was all that remained her. She could not see her face in the darkness. *In the hands of the wrong men, guilt is a weapon. Love is a weapon. Hope is a weapon.*

You have the ability to make weapons far sharper, far harsher, than others can. And the only person who can choose how those weapons are wielded is you.

She hadn't understood what her mother meant, then. She had been younger.

Young Caroline makes a weapon of desire every time she wanders past the boys at the mine. She understands this, but she wants only the power of their adoration.

Others are not so kind.

You cannot be Caroline.

I'm not beautiful enough.

Hush. You are far, far more beautiful. To me. But that's not the point, and I won't let you distract me tonight. There is a difference between manipulation and motivation. Sometimes desire is good, sometimes it is bad; she will discover that in her time.

You must understand it now. You understand love as a young girl does, and not as an old woman, like me. You must let it come to you; you must never force it upon another.

But—

I've seen you. I've seen you make Caroline cry because you're jealous of her. I've stopped you from doing it myself, but I will not always be here to stop it. She will grow, child. She will change. Let her. Instead of forcing others to respond to you, become something worthy of the response you desire.

Kayla was silent. In the present, with a child cradled against her, she lay open-eyed in the dark, hearing his heartbeat as if it were her own. Her mother's words continued, the past seeping into the present in a way that Kayla would never have foreseen.

Why do you think I came to Riverend?

Because of Father.

Yes. And no. Why do you think I tell you this, now, when I could keep it hidden?

I don't know.

Because I killed a man, Kayla.

She felt the harsh shock she had felt upon first hearing the words; felt the panic as she had attempted to deny the truth of them by finding the lie in her mother's mood. It wasn't there.

B—but why? How?

I forced him to feel my despair, my self-loathing, as if it were his own. He was not trained; not aware that what he felt came from outside of his core; he could not cope with what it was I placed there. I did not lift a hand, of course, but the end was the same as if I had.

And worse.

I look at my hands now, and I see a killer's hands. I look at my hands, and I see worse: I taught this Gift. I passed it on.

But—but what does that have to do with Riverend? Nothing. Everything.

The Holds are so dark and so isolated people can go mad in the winters. And do. But...with my Gift, here, among these people, I can remind them, without words, of the spring and the summer; I can give them hope. They take hope, and they make of it what they will, and we survive until the passes open.

But is that so different? If you make them feel what they don't feel

Is there a difference between watering a plant and drowning it? Here, in Riverend, there are few. The ore the mines produce is needed by the King. I have chosen to help these people, as I can, because I have grown to love them.

She had been silent, then.

Promise me, Kayla.

I promise, Mother.

In the end, she slept.

And the great beast was waiting for her, eyes red with fire, wings a maelstrom of emotion. He was despair, anger, loathing, but worse: He made mockery of the transience of the things Kayla valued: Love. Loyalty. Hope.

And who better to know of transience than she? She had buried a husband, a mother, a father. But worse, so much worse.

The dreams had always been her terror and her salvation.

When she lost her oldest child, Darius, unnamed and unnameable, had come to her in the untouched winter of a Riverend that was barren of life, and she clung to his back and wept, and wept, and wept.

Her youngest was old enough to walk, not old enough to speak, and he was also feverish, and she prayed to every god that might have conceivably lived, and in the end, weak and almost weightless, her second child's fever had broken.

But he never recovered, and although he seemed to take delight in the coming of spring, in the warmth and color of summer, the weight he had lost did not return. And she had wept then, at the start of winter, because she knew what it would mean. But at least, with her second, she had time. She told him stories. She sang him songs. She held him in the cradle of aching arms, and she comforted him, and herself, until she was at last alone.

But she was considered young enough in the village, if her heart was scarred; she was twenty-two. Her oldest son had survived six years, which was better than many, and the oldwives gathered to discuss her fate, and to ask her to marry again.

She had almost forgotten her mother's words, that day, and the promise she had made to her mother—for her mother was dead, and that death was so less painful than this terrible intrusion of the living.

She had had nothing, nothing at all. She had carried the blackness and the emptiness within her until it had almost hollowed her out completely. She felt it now; it was a visceral, terrible longing.

A desire for an end. An ending.

And she knew it for her own.

The dragon nodded, wordless; swept back huge wings, opened its terrible jaws. They were kin, she thought. He offered nothing but truth.

Two things saved her.

The first was the flash of white in the darkness: Darius, the Companion of winter in Riverend. And the second, more real, more painful, the small fingers that bruised her arms, the whimpering that reached her ears, that pierced the fabric of a dream she could not escape, tearing a hole in the wall between sleep and the waking world.

The child was weeping. She held him, and the ache in her arms subsided. This was what she was. This was what her mother had taught her to be: comfort. Hope. But when he called for his mother in the darkened room, she answered; she could not deprive herself of that one lie.

In the morning, grim, she rose. The child was sleeping, and his peace was fitful, but it was there. She dressed in the odd, gray uniform she'd been given, admiring the quality of its workmanship, if not the choice of its colors. Then she lifted him, waking him. He was disoriented, but only for a moment; she let him throw his arms around her neck until she could almost not breathe for the tightness of the grip. She loved that breathlessness.

"Daniel," she told him gently, "I need you to talk with Darius. I need you to stay with him."

The boy's smile was shy, but it was genuine.

"I—I have work to do today. Darius is not really allowed inside."

"But he's not a *horse*!"

"No...he's not a horse. He's better than that, and I'm sure he'll let you ride him if you want. Come. Let's find him."

The halls were bustling; there were more people in the Collegium than she had ever seen in the Hold, and she found their presence almost overwhelming. But she discovered two important things from the young—the very young—man who stopped to talk to her. The first, where breakfast was served—and when, that being important—and the second, where the Companions were stabled.

She knew breakfast was important, and stopped for just long enough to feed Daniel. Then she carried him to where she knew Darius was waiting.

He met her eyes, his own dark and unblinking.

Without preamble, Kayla set Daniel upon his back. He accepted the burden.

:You made a weapon out of him.:

:No, Kayla. He made a weapon out of himself He thought that that was the best way of proving his worth to a distant father.:

:But his father—:

:His father loved him, yes. Loves him still.:

:If he was truly an Empath, he would have known that

:The Kings, Darius said sadly, :are taught to shield themselves. Against all intrusion, all influence. They must be strong.:

:And his youngest son was so insecure that he couldn't infer that love.:

Darius was silent.

:My mother knew him.:

:Your mother...knew him, yes. Your mother could have reached him, had she lived; your mother was the one who discovered his Gift, the strength of his Gift. Your mother was the woman who insisted that he be moved from the court and taken to a place without the politics of power.:

:But she must have known—the dreams, the dreams I had—she must have had them:

:I...do not know. She could have reached him. The Heralds who have some hint of your Gift...could not. He made a weapon out of himself and the forging was completed with the death of his Companion.:

She knew, then.

:He...he killed his Companion?:

:No! No. But the loss broke something in him. No other Companion can reach him now, and believe me, Kayla, we have tried. He is one of the Gifted; he can hear us all, if he so chooses.:

:But this must have happened years ago—:

:Yes, but few.:

:That's not possible. I felt him years ago. In my dreams. I...: But the dreams had been different. She had felt loneliness, isolation, the desperate desire to be loved. Not madness.

:You are powerful, Kayla. What you felt then was true. It is far, far less than what you will feel now. Far less. Kayla, I must warn you—:

:I know.:

:Those who are affected, always, are those who have some hint of the Gift. When the Gift is strong, the effect is not sleep...:

:It's death.:

:Yes.:

Gisel summoned her shortly after. Darius informed her of the summons, and she hastened back—with some difficulty, for the building really was a maze of

passages compared to the simplicity of the Hold—to the rooms in which they had first met.

"I'm ready to meet him now," she said, before Gisel could speak.

Gisel raised a brow. "There are things you should know about—"

"There is nothing I should know that you will tell me," Kayla replied softly. "But I believe that this—this prince—has been hunting for me for much of my life, and it's about time I stopped running."

"Hunting for you?"

"In my dreams," Kayla replied.

Gisel added nothing. "The Grays will do. Gregori is here, in the Collegium. We've sent all those who might be affected as far away as we can; distance seems to have some affect on his ability to—to reach people."

"But not enough."

"Not enough, no. Understand that we have not explained this to the world at large. It is treason to speak of it. I will have your oath, child, that you will comport yourself as a Herald—as a true servant of the King."

Kayla nodded. And then, quietly, she knelt, her knees gracing the cold stone floor.

The two women traveled; Kayla let Gisel lead, and made no attempt to memorize their journey, to map the long halls, the odd doors, the hanging tapestries and the crystal lamps. She could see other things more clearly. Once or twice she reached out for Darius, and when he replied, she continued.

Until they reached a set of doors.

She froze outside of them, almost literally.

"Do you know why Darius waited?" she asked Gisel softly.

"Waited? To Choose you?"

Kayla nodded.

"No. He told us that he knew where you were to be found, but he refused to tell us how to find you until this spring."

She nodded again. Touched the door. It was cold. Winter cold. Death cold. Within these walls, beyond these doors, the dragon lay coiled.

"Will you wait outside?" Kayla asked. It was not possible to give an order to this woman.

Gisel ignored the request; she pulled a ring of keys from her belt and slid one into the door's single lock.

Whatever Kayla expected from the rooms of a prince had come from stories that Widow Davis told the children. She had long since passed the age where stories were necessary, but she wanted them anyway. She gazed, not at a room, but at a

small graveyard, one blanketed as if by snow, hidden from sight unless one knew how to look for it.

She knew.

Her dead were here. Her dead...and the losses that death inflicted. She faced them now. Swallowed air, shaking.

"It's hard," Kayla whispered. "When they're gone, it's so damned hard."

"What?" Gisel's sharp tone had not softened in the slightest.

"To feel loved. To know that you are loved. I think—I think sometimes it's the hardest thing in the world." She entered the room unaware of the weight of the King's Own's stare.

A young man lay abed.

He was older than Kayla; he had to be older. She knew this because of her mother's words, her mother's memory. But had she not known it, she would not have guessed; he was slender with youth, and he lay curled on his side, shaking slightly, his eyes wide and unseeing. She felt his pain as if it were her own. As if it were exactly her own.

She did not know if she loved Darius.

That was truth. He was part of her in a way that she could not fathom, did not struggle to understand. But she did not know if she loved him.

She could say with certainty that she had loved her husband. Could say—no, could not say, but could feel—with certainty, that she had loved her children, the children that life in Riverend had taken from her one by one.

And she could say with certainty that this man—boy, this terrible dragon, this hunting horror, had loved his Companion. Or had felt loved by him.

The loss she felt was profound and terrible. It dwarfed all losses that she had ever suffered but one. "Leave us," she whispered.

Gisel hesitated for only a minute, but that minute stretched out into forever. And then she was gone. "All right," Kayla said quietly. "It's time you and I had a talk."

She touched his face; his skin was clammy.

His eyes, wide and unseeing, did not turn toward her, but something beneath them did.

Kayla looked into the red eyes of the dragon.

And trapped within them, she saw a child. Or a mirror.

She had never dreamed of flight, although the other village children often spoke of it. She had never dreamed of wings; the only time her feet left the ground in her dreams was when she rode a Companion who could cross the walls that darkness imposed upon her dreaming.

"Gregori," she whispered.

He did not move.

But the beast did. It knew exactly where she was, and the waking world offered her no protection, no place to hide.

Gregori.

Dragon name. Prince name. Powerful name. He turned. *You!*

Yes.

I know you.

Yes. I am Kayla.

Despair washed over her. Despair and more: death, images of death. The loss of her home. The loss of her village—of Riverend, the home she had promised her mother she would protect. But there was more. She felt the death of her husband as the mines collapsed, as oxygen fled, slowly enough that fear and hysteria had time to build. She felt her father's death, the snap of his spine, saw—although not with her eyes—the pale whites of eyes rolled shut when no hands were there to gently drawn lids across them.

Her mother's death followed.

And after that, the deaths of her life: her sons. One by one, in the absence of Healers, in the winter when no one could travel through the pass.

She was alone. Terribly, horribly alone. Everyone that had ever loved her, gone; she was like a ship without anchor.

All that existed was this darkness. She wandered within it, weeping now, her arms so empty she knew they would never be full again.

But she was not terrified. She felt no horror.

How could she? The things she had feared, the things that made fear so visceral, that made her feel truly vulnerable, had already come to pass.

She could not speak; her lips trembled, her jaw; her shoulders shook as if she were caught in the spasms that collapsed whole tunnels dug in rock.

And because these things were truth, she accepted them as she had managed just barely—to accept them in the village of Riverend.

How? How had she done it? For a moment she could not remember, and then her mother's voice returned, distant and tinny: *Promise me that you will care for Riverend.*

Duty. Just that, only that, hollow and cold. Despair gave way to anger.

:Is that the worst you can do?: she asked the dragon, she so small she was almost insignificant.

:I killed them!: The dragon roared.

She almost believed him, the emotion was so compelling. So much, so very much, like her own. But she said, as she had said to herself over and over again for the last year, *:Life killed them. Winter killed them. Work killed them.:*

:How dare you! Do you not know who I am?:

:Oh, yes, I know you. Despair. Terror. Fear. I have lived with nothing but you for the last several months of my life.:

:I killed them!:

:No.:

:I killed them.: She could no longer feel her feet. She threw her weight forward because she had some hope that she could land on the bed instead of the hardwood floor.

:No, you didn't.:

"I killed Rodri.:

:No.:

He laughed, and the laughter was terrible, the most terrible thing she had heard from him. In all of her nightmares, the dragon's voice had been a roar of pain. But this, this mirthless sound, was worse.

It was true.

She could not see for darkness, but sensation returned to her hands, and beneath her hands she felt the clammy warmth of his body, the fever of it; she could count his ribs as her palms traveled the length of his slender chest, child's chest. He was dying. He was dying; the fever-root had done nothing to drive the fires away, and he was burning from within. He—

No. No.

:Tell me.: she said softly, as her hands touched his chin. *:Tell me.:* His hair was a tangle, matted and thin, child's hair. The sensation was almost more than she could bear, and only the fact that she knew he was too heavy for her to lift kept her from gathering his body to her.

She had carried her son.

She had carried him for three hours, in the cold, while her toddler wailed.

:Mother?:

She could not answer him; could not lie to him. Instead she continued to stroke his hair.

And after a moment, she sang, her voice a little too dry, a little too shaky. Song had been her gift. She had never found a person in Riverend who would not listen to her song, not be gentled by it.

:I wanted to help them. I wanted to help. I couldn't wield a sword. I tried. I tried for so long. I cut my legs, my arms; I cut Rodri's flank. I couldn't do it. And I couldn't pull the bow. I could wind a crossbow. I—:

His hair.

She saw images of a child, thin and awkward, and she knew what that child represented. The Prince. Gregori. She saw the ghostly image of a mother, a specter composed of a child's loss, a child's longing; she saw the gray, distant ice of a

father's disappointment and contempt. She felt his isolation and his loneliness so clearly she could not separate it from her own.

Nor did she try.

:Rodri loved me.

:Rodri found me when I was lost. He called me, and I came.

:They gave me Whites. They tried to train me. We were happy here.:

She felt his terror building, and she knew the storm would return. But she had lived life in Riverend, and she had wintered there. There was no storm that she could not weather, not now.

:I could tell where the enemy was. I could tell them by what they were feeling. I—

:

They had not made a weapon of the boy. She saw that; he had made a weapon of himself.

She saw her mother.

She saw an assassin. She knew, then, when her mother had killed, and why: to save this boy.

He had begged her to teach him this Gift, and her mother had fled, taking her love—yes, even her mother—with her to the farthest reaches of the Kingdom's border.

That desertion had hurt him; she could feel the pain clearly. But she could also feel the determination that followed as he dismissed Magda Merton for a selfish, powermongering woman, like all the other women in court.

In silence, she let his story unfold. It was not neatly told; it was broken by storm and rage, by fear, by self-loathing.

He had taught himself. He had used his power, his full power, for the first time; it had been a surprise. A Gift. A thing to give his father, a way to prove to his friends that he, too, could help save the Kingdom from invasion. He had turned his Gift outward, reflecting emotion, magnifying it. It worked. It struck the enemy, scattering them, breaking their lines.

But the bond between Companion and Herald was strong; the creature most affected by the sudden outward blow was Rodri. Would have to be Rodri.

Gregori screamed. He screamed, not with his Gift, but with his voice. And she, seeing her own graveyard, and knowing what lay beneath the earth, screamed with him.

And then, soundless, he turned, dragon wings wide. He listened for the sound of singing, for the songs of joy or hope or love that he had heard for almost all of Kayla's life. She knew: It was her song.

And what he found was her pain, her despair, her endless rage at fate and winter and people who still had children to love.

She continued to stroke his hair.

Darius woke her.

She rose at the sound of her name, and found that she could see the room clearly; the storm had passed for the moment. She turned to look at the man who lay in the bed; saw that his eyes were closed. His lashes were long, like boys' lashes so often are; his skin was winter-pale.

On impulse, she bent and kissed his forehead.

"He isn't doing it on purpose," she said quietly, her arm around Darius' neck.

Darius said nothing.

"The King had little patience for him, and no affection."

:He loves his children.:

"Gregori felt what the King felt, Darius. He wasn't just guessing."

:He felt part of it; some people remember best the things which wound them.:

She thought of her children. After a moment, she said, "He would have killed himself."

:Why didn't he?:

"I don't know." But she was beginning to. She said, instead, "You lied to me. He did kill Rodri."

:He did not. The enemy shot Rodri.:

"Rodri was mad with terror and fear, and it was Gregori's."

Darius said nothing.

Kayla let her arm slide away from his shoulder. "I have to speak with Gisel," she said softly. Just that.

Gisel was waiting for her, tense and pale. She looked old, Kayla thought, bent with Gregori's weight. But she smiled a moment when she saw Kayla enter the room.

And looked surprised.

"He can't stop," Kayla told her.

"You don't believe in idle chatter, do you?"

"I'm from the Holds," Kayla replied tartly.

"But you survived him. You...touched him, and you survived."

Kayla nodded. "I know why Darius waited," she told the King's Own. "And I know that what you thought he waited for can't happen. Not here."

"You can't reach him?"

"I can. But—" She shook her head. Stared at her hands for a moment.

"But?"

"Not here."

Gisel rose, mistaking her meaning.

"Not in the capital," Kayla told her gently, almost as if she were speaking to a child.

"What do you mean?"

"Let me take him home."

"This is his home."

Kayla rose. Rose and walked to a window whose splendor she had never seen in Riverend. Light broke upon the river that ran through the city; the river was murky and slow. She thought it must be warm, as warm as the air in this almost endless spring. Without turning, she said, "I have to take him to Riverend."

"You can't. Here, the Healers and the Empaths have worked to contain him."

"And they're failing. One by one, they're failing. He speaks to sorrow and loss, and speaks so strongly that that's all that's left to those who can hear his voice."

"You hear him."

"Yes."

"Magda—Margaret Merton—was the only Empath to equal Gregori in the Kingdom. You—and I mean no offense, child—are untested."

"Yes. And I will remain untested. For now. I am safe in Riverend. Do you know why I can hear him, feel him, listen to him, and walk away?"

"No, child, although I am certain there are those within the Collegium who would love to know it."

"Because I have felt everything he offers, and I have learned to...walk...away from it. Let me take him home."

Gisel hesitated. And then, after a moment, she nodded. "I will need to speak with the King. Wait outside."

But Kayla did not wait.

Instead, she went to her room, and found Daniel. He smiled when he saw her.

"Daniel," she said quietly, "I have to leave the Collegium. I come from the North, near the mountains, and I have to return there."

"Can I come with you?"

"Yes." She held out her arms and he ran into them; she lifted him easily, catching most of his weight with her right hip. "But first, I want you to come with me."

"Where?"

"To meet a Prince."

The door was open slightly. No one, Kayla realized, had touched it since she'd walked away. She took a deep breath. "No matter what you feel or hear here, remember that I'm with you. That I will always be with you."

Daniel nodded.

She nudged the door open with her foot and took a step inside. The Prince was sleeping.

"Is that a Prince? Really?"

"Yes, Daniel."

"He doesn't look like much of a Prince."

"No, he doesn't."

"Is he sick?"

"Yes."

"Can you make him better?"

"Maybe." She walked to the side of the bed and sat on it.

The eyes of the Prince opened. She felt Daniel's sudden terror, and she held him tightly, pressing her chin into the top of his head and rocking him. This sensation was as real as any sensation, an echo of another time. She'd been happy, then.

She remembered it.

Drew on it, calling her ghosts. This boy was her son. This boy was her child.

She loved her children, and for her children, she could sing. She remembered the sweet, gentle nature of her oldest, and the stubborn fury of her youngest, and for the first time since she had bid them farewell, she laughed in delight at their antics.

The man in the bed stirred.

She had survived their loss because of her vows, and she had found that sorrow, in the end, could not keep her from the other children in the Hold. They needed her. Their parents needed her. In the worst of winter, she could soothe temper, displace boredom, still fury; she could invoke the love her mother invoked.

Even after the deaths.

Even then.

"Gregori."

The sound of his name drained the room of light. But Daniel was safe; she felt his fear struggle a moment with her love. And lose.

Such a small thing, that fear.

She reached out to touch Gregori's forehead; his eyes widened in terror and he backed away. But he had been abed many, many months; he was slow. And she, mountain girl, miner's daughter, was fast. She ran her fingers through his hair and let go of all thought.

What remained was feeling.

Love.

Loss.

Gently, gently now, she brushed his hair from his face. She felt the raging fury, the emptiness, the guilt, and the horror that he could not let go. Not on his own.

But surely, surely she had felt this before?

A child's emotions were always raw, always a totality. They existed in the now, as if the past and the future were severed neatly by the strength of what they felt in the present.

:Don't touch me! Don't touch me! I'll kill you!:

But she continued to touch his face, the fine line of his nose, the thin, thin stretch of his lips.

"You need my song," she whispered, "and I had forgotten how to sing. I am sorry. I am sorry, Gregori."

She did not question; did not think. To do either was death. Instead, she gave in to her Gift.

To her mother's Gift. What she felt, she made him feel, just as he had made his enemies feel. *:Don't—don't touch me:*

:Don't touch:

:I'll kill you:

:I'll kill you, too:

:I don't want to kill you, too:

She sat in the room with her younger child in her lap and her older child in his bed. *:Hush, hush.:*

And when the older child began to weep, she held him.

Darius was a patient Companion. And a large one.

He did not complain at the weight of three passengers, and had he, Kayla would have kicked him. After all, she was no giant, Daniel was less than half her weight, and the Prince, tall and skeletal, probably weighed less than the saddlebags.

The King had agreed to let his son go, but with misgivings; it was therefore decided, by Royal Decree, that a Healer, and three attendants, would accompany them.

She was grateful for that; the spring in Riverend had already passed into summer, and in the winter, with a Healer, there might be no deaths. A winter without death.

"Kayla?" Gregori said, as the Hold came into view. She felt his anxiety.

"Daniel's fallen asleep and my arm's gone numb. I don't want him to fall—"

"You won't let him fall," she told the Prince gently. "And I won't let you fall."

"Will it be all right? Will they accept me?"

"I was so lonely here," she answered. "I was so lonely. I don't think they'll begrudge us each other." She smiled, and the smile was genuine. "Do you think you've learned the dawn-song well enough to sing it with me?"