

The Sorceress

A TALE FROM CARROCK

IT WAS DARK IN THE CASTLE, but she didn't care. This was a place of extreme power. Here the wizards, warlocks, witches, and sorceresses of ancient times had come to revive their strength. It was more than ten years since she'd taken the plunge from that window in Carrock. She stared around in the darkness and slowly sat up. Why had it taken her so long to pull out of the dream voyage? Was it the blackness that she could almost touch? She rose from the cold, hard altar of stone and clapped her hands. In an instant a strange blue light surrounded the four torches at the corners of the altar and then they burst into flame. She reached down and picked up a black robe that she'd dropped on the ground before starting her dream voyage. Now she wrapped it around her tall, slender form, almost vanishing into the folds. It had been days since she'd eaten last, but she knew where she could find food. She reached up, took one of the torches into her hand, and then left the large hall.

Up many steps and around many more bends she found the small room that she'd taken as her own. There she lit the candles in the large iron chandelier and opened the windows to welcome the coming night. They faced east and she looked very pale in the failing light of day. Her brown eyes had sunken into her still youthful face. Her once black hair was gray now, streaked with white, but she still looked more like thirty than her seventy-some years of age. She leaned one slender hand on the window sill and hungrily looked towards the east, towards the land of Carrock. That was where the object of her revenge lay. The Lord Dylan. He'd humiliated her when he banned her from Carrock with his father. He'd won over her and Alick in the Battle of the Wolf, forcing her to flee from the lands. Worst of all, he'd stolen the maiden Alisande from her power. That was something she would not -- could not forgive.

"Revenge," she hissed to herself. "Soon it will be mine." Her plans were laid, her intrigues set. She'd found willing servants and there was only one more who would submit to her power. That one was the center of her scheme. It would -- *must* work. She would have her revenge and perhaps she would also get something that she hadn't considered before but now longed for with all her heart -- the throne of Carrock.

Late afternoon was settling over the lands of Carrock. This was Dylan's favorite time of the day, when most of his work of state was done and he could come out to the small meadow just below the castle and think. Often Kyle and Asha would come with him and play in the grass. He wished that Tabea would finally get well enough to come out here again. His brow furrowed as he thought of his beloved wife. It was a year since she'd caught the same strange illness that had killed his mother. The doctors were stumped and Savoy was away somewhere. The only thing that seemed to help was the cool, dark room in the tower. The lord was certain it was some kind of sorcery, but couldn't put his finger on how he knew it. It was just a stirring of the power inside him that alerted him to that fact every time he entered the room. Who was behind this?

Still, she had been better today, praise the Word, and perhaps tomorrow he'd take her out to the meadow with the children. Then they could be together like before. He sighed to himself and remembered the night that Roanna had jumped out of the window. They'd never found the body and then, a few years ago, the rumors of someone having been seen on the pinnacles of Damrok, the castle of the sorcerers. She *had* to be alive and it was probably her fault that Tabea was dying. He remembered what his wife had told him about Roanna enchanting his father. It must have been Alick who sent the sickness on his mother. She'd just wasted away slowly for six years before dying. *I don't want Tabea to go through that*, he thought. She was much younger than his mother had been and sometimes was almost well, but that lingering look in her eyes... He shook his head. No, she wouldn't get well on her own, he knew that. There was a spell on her and perhaps Savoy could break it.

"Daddy, Daddy!" The calls of his daughter broke his melancholy reverie. Asha was charging up the slight hill, her brown hair flying in the wind, blue eyes shining with delight. She grabbed her father's hands and pulled on them.

"Look, it's Uncle Stev and Aunt Alisande," she cried. He got to his feet and let her drag him across the grass to where the horses of his friends were standing. Alisande rose from embracing Kyle as he approached. Stev came forward and enthusiastically pumped the lord's free hand.

“How are you, Dylan?” he asked with a laugh.

“I am quite well, but Tabea isn’t.”

“Yes, we heard,” Alisande chimed in, her pretty smile now vanishing. She reached out and hugged him gently.

“Thank you, little sister,” he said. She nodded, stepping back beside her husband.

“We found out when she first got it,” Stev explained, “but business kept me at Enfurt until now. Savoy was there for a short time, too, and he has agreed to come as soon as possible.” Dylan breathed a sigh of relief.

“So, he’s coming after all.”

“Is Mom going to get better?” Kyle butted in.

“I hope so, son,” his father answered, putting a hand on his golden-brown head.

“Well,” the lord prompted, finally coming out of his melancholy attitude, “you two have come a long way and it’s getting quite late. Supper is waiting for us at the castle and I’m quite certain that my dear wife will want to see you both.” With that the five of them turned and walked up the hill to the large citadell, the capital of Carrock.

For once the windows in Tabea’s room were open, letting the light evening breeze in. She sat up, staring at the moonrise. Her fingers lightly strummed the guitar in her hands. The tune was sad, just like her attitude. The fever had left her again and she was feeling better, but not strong. She hadn’t felt strong for about a year, ever since that sickness had started. It was headaches and bouts with fever, but worst of all it kept her weak, unable to go outside. She didn’t want to hear about the doctors anymore, all she wanted was Savoy to come and tell her the cure.

There was a light rapping on the door. She straightened, pushed one hand through her long, golden-brown hair and then called out.

“Come in!” It was Dylan.

“Hello, lady love,” he greeted her with a smile, sitting down beside her. “How are you feeling?” She put the instrument down on the floor.

“Better,” she sighed, “but not too well yet.” She searched his green eyes gently and could see that he was bearing the pain with her.

“Are you well enough to receive guests?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Who?”

“You’ll see.” His smile was secretive.

“Well, if they’re not too wild, I think so.” Her husband nodded and went to open the door. First of all Kyle and Asha bounded in and jumped up on the wide bed, hugging and kissing their mother.

“Now, that’s enough, you two rascals,” she laughed. “If you jump on me too much, I won’t get up tomorrow!” The boy nodded and backed off, but the little girl curled up at her mother’s side. Then the beautiful lady of Carrock turned to see who had come in.

“Alisande! Stev!” she laughed with delight. Her glassy blue eyes flamed with joy and it seemed that she’d gotten a whole lot better in one instant. Her friends came over to the bed and greeted her happily. There was quite some chatting and finally the lady announced that she would be going to dinner tonight. At the mention of that all the men hurried out of the room to let Tabea rise and get dressed. Dylan smiled to himself. So all that his wife really needed was some dear company. Still, he wanted Savoy to take a look at her. The Scholar was the only one who would really know what to do.

He walked down the stairs and out into the small center courtyard. He looked around and sniffed the fresh scent of flowers. He did not notice a bent figure sitting on the ground behind him. He left the courtyard and the figure rose silently. It was a very old woman it seemed, bent and battered, dressed in multi-colored rags. She looked towards the tower where she knew the lady of the castle was. She smiled and displayed two rows of white, perfectly even teeth -- the teeth of a young woman. Let Tabea be well for the next few days. She would fall ill again soon enough -- when the plan began to work!



ALISANDE DECIDED THAT IT WAS TIME to take a walk and think things over. She’d been away from Carrock far too long, on business. But after all, what is the grand ambassador of Carrock supposed to do? And she was the wife of this ambassador, whose only job was to go from place to place and represent the Lord Dylan when he was

unable to leave the castle. Oh, how she longed just to go home to Stev Pulleny's farm that was now run by Prisca and her husband.

She'd enjoyed the evening at the castle, eating and laughing with Tabea, who had retired quite early, her face suddenly very pale again. Dylan explained that this was the first time in weeks that his wife had been out of her chamber. This shocked Alisande. She didn't know her sister-in-law was so sick!

"I wish I could help her somehow," she mumbled to herself, sitting down on a low marble bench. She put her hands over her face and suddenly wanted to be a little girl again. Maybe then she could have a quiet cry and just let her emotions run free.

"Can I help you child?" came a crackling old voice from beside her. She looked up to see a bent old woman looking at her kindly -- or was she scrutinizing her?

"I don't think so," the younger woman answered sadly. "No one has been able to help Tabea and I don't think you can either."

"Oh, yes I can!" the hag said with a laugh. "I have more power than you think, but first you must help *me*." Alisande suddenly became wary, straightening and sliding herself away from the hunched over figure.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "And what do you want from me?" The old woman just smiled.

"I am someone that can help you, but before I reveal my name, you have to trust me fully." Her brown eyes cut into the other's, as if willing her to answer.

"All right, I'll trust you." Alisande was shocked that she'd said it. She didn't mean it, did she?

"Very well, child, but you must never tell anyone." Suddenly she straightened, her rags transforming into billowing black robes. She threw the hood back and let her gray and white hair fall to her shoulders. The wrinkled face smoothed and became proud. Very little revealed her actual age. The younger woman recognized her instantly and leaped to her feet.

"Roanna!"

"It's *Lady* Roanna to you," the sorceress corrected with a smirk. "Listen, Alisande, only I can heal the Lady Tabea now, but I need your help."

"No, I won't help you, ever," the other screamed. "I'm going to call the guards." One of the fine hands closed around her wrist like a vise.

"You won't do any such thing," Roanna warned. "You now know who I am and I won't let you go. You are in my power now, Alisande. But think of the prize that is waiting for your subordination -- the healing of the Lady. Wouldn't you want that?" The golden head nodded slowly, against her will.

"Very well, then you *will* serve me!"

"No, I won't." Again she tried to squirm away from the iron grip of the sorceress, but she merely grabbed the younger woman's other hand, her eyes boring into the fearful gray ones. There was a pause and suddenly Alisande relaxed.

"You will serve me." Her voice was quiet and seductive. The other woman's lips quivered.

"I will serve you," she finally answered.

"Good child," Roanna laughed, letting go of her arms and taking her head into her hands. She gently placed a kiss on Alisande's forehead. For an instant it seemed to the younger woman that she was in a tunnel, everything around her was darkening and something was getting into her -- it was like Roanna was in there, under her skin. She struggled weakly against the overpowering force, but to no avail. Suddenly all was black.

When she came to she was sitting on the bench. Deep night had fallen already. She stood up and slowly walked toward the entrance to the living quarters. Her wrists ached and she felt like her forehead was burning, but she couldn't tell why. Slowly, mechanically she climbed the steps to her room. What had happened to her? Her last memory was leaving the supper table to take a walk in the inner courtyard. That was shortly after sunset. Now the stars were clear and bright and the moon had reached its zenith. What had happened between now and then? She could not remember... It was an uncomfortable feeling. She slowly opened the door to her room. Stev was sitting in a chair by the fire, calmly waiting. The instant he saw her, he rose.

"Alisande, are you all right?" he asked, noticing that her face was pale. She came closer to him, her lower lip quivering.

"I don't know, love," she sobbed. *Something is wrong with her eyes*, he thought. They were strangely glassy and cloudy and there was something like a red mark on her forehead. It reminded him of a bee sting. He brushed at it, but it was just a coloration of the skin. He gently gathered her in his arms.

"I've been waiting for you, dear wife," he told her. "I've wondered where you've been. I was about to come look for you."

"I'm here now," her voice sounded content and yet fearful.

"What's wrong?" She shook in his arms, pressing her head against his chest like a frightened child.

"I don't know, I'm just so scared, Stev. Something happened, but I can't remember what it was. I'm so scared."

"Don't worry," he whispered, "you're safe now. Nothing can happen to you while I'm here." She looked into his grave face. She could see his love for her in his eyes and gladly acknowledged it. He would protect her from whatever it was that scared her so much.



FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS, Dylan decided to venture down to Will's tavern. He knew that he was always welcome there, for the people loved him dearly. Usually he'd take Tabea along, but her sickness kept him from doing so tonight. Three nights ago Stev and Alisande had arrived. Now his foster sister was acting strangely, he'd noticed, peering around dark corners, looking for someone. That red mark on her forehead had faded slightly, but the more it did, the more uneasy she became. He thought about talking with his wife about it, but, no, it would just worry her and she would get even more sick. He remembered his talk with Stev the night before...

...The lord slowly ran one hand through his thick, reddish beard, staring at the large map over the fireplace. He was wondering about Roanna again. Where was she? Sometimes he thought he could sense the presence of a dark force in his castle, especially near Alick's room. He'd seen an old hag hobble across the front courtyard the day that Stev returned. He hadn't thought of it at that moment, but now he realized that he'd never seen her here before. Who was she and what did she want here? A quiet knocking cut through his reverie.

"Come in!" he called quietly. The door opened to reveal a very worried Stev Pulleny.

"Good evening, ambassador," the lord greeted him warmly.

"Good evening, m'lord," the sandy-haired man returned. He paused for a moment to close the door and then walked up to the fire-place.

"Dylan, I'm worried about Alisande." The tone of his voice made his friend realize that this was very important indeed.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked, his brow furrowing.

"She's been so detached, ever since the first evening we arrived. She came back to our room near midnight, confused and scared. She said she couldn't remember what had happened to her that evening." The lord's face became even more pensive. "I comforted her and she seemed okay the next morning, but I'm still very worried. I haven't let her out of my sight since then. Right now she's with Tabea and the children. I told her to wait there until I came to get her. It seems to me that she's very mixed up, Dylan, perhaps enchanted."

"There's too much of that going on around here for comfort," the lord snapped, turning back to the map. "I'll talk with her tomorrow"...

...And that he had, coming away just as puzzled and worried about it as Stev was. There had been a slight stirring inside him, like a warning, when he'd first entered the room, but she seemed all right, just confused and scared. She'd clung to him like a child would to her father or older brother and confessed that she didn't know what happened. *And I promised to help her*, he remembered. *The only way to do that now is to get an inside scoop on the gossip at Will's*. Yes, that was still the place to find out what the people were really thinking and that was why he had been there so often since he took the throne of Carrock again. There it was in front of him now. It had been repaired and enlarged in the last ten years, some of the money from subventions by the grateful lord himself. For that reason his first mug of ale or goblet of wine of the evening was always "on the house."

The warm air of the communal room washed over him as he opened the great doors. He took a deep breath of the smell of tobacco, ale, and food, just glad to be here again. Will was behind the long bar and now squinted in his direction. Suddenly he recognized the tall, powerful figure.

"M'lord Dylan!" he cried joyfully, waddling out from behind the counter. "It's a pleasure to have you here again!" He came and bowed low before his ruler. Dylan raised him up and took his meaty hand.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Will?" he returned with a bit of melancholy. The round face of the bartender glowed with joy and satisfaction at seeing the lord of Carrock.

"Yes, m'lord, but now you're here again." He turned and escorted Dylan to the long bar, where several men reverently made room for him. More than half the people there hadn't noticed his arrival, which was fine with him. After all, he'd been sequestered away in his castle for the last eight months, caring for his sick wife. He'd grown his beard during that time and few recognized their lord in his plain clothing. The pudgy bartender placed a big mug of frothy ale in front of Dylan and smiled away, his bald head fairly shining with delight.

"How's m'lady?" he inquired.

"Not much better, Will, but I've seen some strange things at the castle and heard some even stranger. I wanted to know what the people are saying." His old friend nodded gravely.

"There's not much good being said, m'lord," one of the men sitting next to him explained sadly. "Word has it that the lady is sick because of sorcery." Will leaned on the bar.

"Word even has it that a sorceress is abroad." Dylan raised his eyebrows. The innkeeper nodded solemnly and began his tale.

"Michael Dubris, the one who married Prisca Pulleny, told me about it just this morning. Four days ago an old woman came to his farm, looking for Alisande Pulleny. She said she was a far-off aunt or something like that and had something to give the girl before she died. Prisca believed it all right, you know how she is -- hardly out of her teens and ready to believe anything anyone says, but Michael tried to probe deeper, asking the old woman's name.

"What's that to you?" she snapped at him and gave him a very queer look. She then said something very wierd.

"The lady won't get well until the children have returned to their rightful guardian.' And then she just vanished into thin air -- poof! She must have been some kind of witch or something. Say, are you all right, m'lord?" Dylan had gone quite pale throughout the story.

"There must be more, Will, more about the old hag."

"There is indeed, sir," his neighbor agreed. "Two nights ago an old woman came and asked for lodging in my barn. I granted it to her gladly, but found that I'd forgotten to give her a blanket. I went back with one after she'd gone in and laid wanted to knock on the door. For some reason I didn't. I just opened a small hole that I'd made as a child and looked into the barn. As I did I saw the old woman straighten up and become a tall and beautiful lady." The lord grabbed the farmer's arm.

"Describe her!" he ordered urgently.

"Well, she was about as tall as I am and had long, gray hair that looked a bit white in places. Her face was very young, but her eyes were quite sunken in her face. She was dressed in wide black robes."

"And then?"

"Well, I straightened up, afraid to go in, but decided I'd bring her the blanket anyway. So I knocked on the door and a few moments later the old hag opened it and rudely took the blanket from me. This morning she was gone and one of my sheep was dead, missing part of a side. It was like someone had carved himself a good chunk from it while it was still alive." He shook his head. "Poor beast."

"I'll say," Dylan returned. "I think we are about to solve this mystery. I have a bad hunch that I know that beautiful woman you described." He gazed at the men around him for a long moment.

"I also have a story to tell you, my friends, and I want to know what you think about it." With that he quickly recounted what had happened to Alisande three nights before. There was quiet muttering from the four men listening before the farmer ventured to speak again.

"Did you see an old woman around the castle at all, m'lord?" he asked.

"Why, yes, that same day, in the early afternoon, before I went out with my kids."

"Perhaps she's behind this. Could she be the sorceress?" The lord rubbed one hand through his heavy beard.

"It might well be." He drained the rest of his ale and looked around at the men. "Very well, my friends, I would like to ask you to keep a watch out for this woman. Tell Will as soon as you see her and he'll contact me. I've got to return to the castle."

"But not alone, I hope," one of the men said, his dark eyes sparkling.

"Well, I don't think I'll be in any danger," the lord returned truthfully.

"Would you mind if I go along, Lord Dylan?" There was something in his voice, a soft intonation that the nobleman had missed for such a long time, then it came back to him, the brown face and black hair, the small moustache and goatee -- Savoy. He nodded in recognition.

"By all means, sir," he answered with a laugh. The Scholar rose from his place and tapped a slender young woman sitting beside him on the shoulder.

"Come, Lora, we're going with his highness." Dylan took one moment to admire the beautiful being that the little girl had become. He remembered carrying her back to Wiston through the darkness as a five or six-year-old.

"You really have grown, fair maiden," he remarked with a laugh. She smiled, her bronze face shining and full lips revealing a set of even teeth. Her eyes were hazle and long hair, dark as the night, was pinned up. She wore pants and a tunic and held a light cloak in one hand. The only jewelry she had were two silver earrings that nearly touched her shoulders. To Dylan she was the epitome of the beauty of the southern lands.

"Shall we go?" her father asked and the lord nodded. Now some of his problems would be over -- hopefully.



DYLAN AND SAVOY HAD BEEN UP MUCH OF THE NIGHT, pondering over Tabea's sickness and the old woman's words. For that reason he found himself being wakened by a gentle kiss. He opened his eyes and noticed his wife sitting on the edge of his bed, fully dressed, her face a healthy color. Only the blue eyes revealed the fact that she was still not completely well.

"Tabea, you're up!" he exclaimed.

"Good morning, sleepy-head," she laughed. "Kyle has been asking for you since shortly after sunrise and I couldn't stay in bed any longer. Why are you still sleeping?"

"I had a very late night," he admitted, getting out of bed and going over to the low wash-basin by the window.

"Not worrying about me, I hope?" she asked, coming over to stand behind him.

"That was some of it," he answered after splashing himself with the water. He dried off his face and upper body, before taking his wife into his arms.

"Savoy is here," he whispered into her ear.

"Well, why are you keeping it so quiet?" she demanded.

"Because I think Roanna is also somewhere around." She stepped back, blue eyes wide with shock.

"She's not dead?"

"No." He began dressing in some of his better clothing. "One of the farmers saw her and so did Michael Dubris, for that matter."

"And you were at Will's without me again," she pouted.

"Yes, but I needed some information badly, lady love. You won't be mad at me for that." He gathered her into his arms again. "It had to do with healing you and Alisande."

"Oh, I don't think I'll ever be able to be angry with you," she sighed and then kissed him. He laughed to himself.

"Very well, Lady Tabea, now for breakfast." He let go of her and clapped his hands together.

"Dylan, it's only an hour till lunch," she reminded him.

"Oh? I didn't know that it was that late." He picked up an apple from a bowl of fruit by the window. "Shall we take a walk together?"

"Hm, maybe..." She smiled at him secretively.

"Maybe not. You have something else in mind, don't you?" She nodded, still smiling.

"We should take some time for just you and me, right here. We haven't been alone for more than a few minutes for nearly half a year." He laughed quietly. She took his hand and slowly led him back towards the bed.



The hag sat on the edge of the old well in the middle courtyard watching the bustle of the many people who had work to do there. It was surprising to her that his lordship hadn't shown up yet. He'd been regular as clockwork until now. Something must have happened.

She turned and watched those rushing by her and suddenly spied a very graceful form in a white dress walking across the yard. This girl certainly wasn't from here. The sorceress licked her lips as she watched the girl turn and glance in her direction. The light brown complexion revealed her southern origins. She must be the daughter of an ambassador who came to visit Dylan. Perhaps she could be useful in a ploy to get the lord out of the way. A slight grin washed across the old woman's face. It would be too easy. Suddenly the girl turned and ran towards someone. Her lover?

"Lora, dear," the man said in a happy tone, "it's almost time for lunch. We'd better not keep Dylan waiting."

"I'm sorry, Dad," she answered taking his hand. They turned and walked right by the woman on the well. She glanced up at the man. Yes, his appearance was also southerly, but there was something about him that instantly told her who he was.

"Savoy," she whispered to herself. The Scholar was already here. It was time to act fast. She waited until they were out of sight and reached into her cloak to retrieve a small mirror. She breathed on it lightly and quietly called out a name.

Alisande suddenly paused on her way to the great hall. She thought she heard someone call her. She stared around and saw no one.

"Who's there?" she asked in a shrill voice. Suddenly she heard it again, distant, seductive. It was her name. Slowly the mark on her forehead started burning and she felt like she was entering that dark tunnel again. Reality was beginning to fade from her and suddenly all was dark.

Kyle and Asha raced down the corridors to the great hall. This would be great, getting to eat with all the adults for once.

"I'll beat you there," the boy cried for a second time.

"No you won't," his sister laughed. They shot around the corner and came to a sliding halt in front of Alisande.

"Hello, children," she said with a strange smile on her face.

"Hi, Aunt Alisande, aren't you coming to lunch?" the little lord asked.

"Of course I am. As a matter of fact I'm supposed to take you there. Come along." She held out a slender hand to each of them and they obediently took them and walked along beside her. They went down several more stairs until Kyle was certain they weren't heading towards the great hall.

"Where are we going?" he demanded. The woman laughed lightly.

"I'm not supposed to tell. It's a surprise."

"Oh, please, please tell me, Aunt Alisande," Asha pleaded as only little girls can. Her aunt paused, pretending to decide.

"All right, honey. We're going to have a picnic instead of lunch. Your father wanted it to be a secret. It's a special one for you two." The children's eyes widened at the prospect.

"Really?" the boy asked in awe.

"Yes, but don't let anyone notice that I've told you, all right?" They both nodded.

"Now let's hurry along," the woman coaxed. And hurry they did.

Almost everyone was in the great hall now. Only the royal family and Lady Alisande were missing. Savoy nervously shifted his position several times as he waited. He just couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Suddenly the great doors opened and the lord and lady of Carrock entered, arm in arm. As they approached the table the Scholar could see a very bright sparkle in their eyes and a slightly dreamy look on Tabea's face. Dylan accompanied her to her seat and then went to his.

"Well," he remarked, "it looks like we aren't the last after all." He gazed around the table. "Hm, were are Alisande and the kids?"

"I thought I saw them all on the way to the great hall a few minutes ago," Poul answered. His lord nodded.

"M'lord!" A guard raced through the doors. His face was red and his eyes full of worry.

“Yes, what is it?” The apprehensive mood jumped to Dylan.

“I just saw the Lady Alisande rush out of the castle and towards the woods with your children. I called after her that m’lord and m’lady were waiting for them at the high table, but she didn’t slow down or turn. I only saw his young highness look over his shoulder in shock. I -- I thought I should report it to you immediately.” The lord glanced at Stev who shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, bewildered.

“That was Roanna’s doing, m’lord,” came Savoy’s collected voice.

“Oh, my,” Tabea breathed, sinking into her chair, face like chalk. She started shivering violently, wrapped her arms around herself and began rocking back and forth.

“My children, my children,” she chanted quietly.

“Let’s go,” Dylan ordered. “She can’t be far yet.” He rushed from behind the table, Stev following behind him.

“Lora, take care of the lady,” the Scholar ordered, rushing after the angered lord. Immediately the girl went to the incoherent woman and assisted her to return to her room.

“What did he say?” Kyle demanded as they ran across the grass.

“Shut up!” Alisande snapped. Her fingers were like links of steel, enclosing the children’s hands in an unbreakable grasp. She rushed them forward so fast that they didn’t have time to think or feel. Suddenly they entered the wood and came to a halt. There stood a black carriage with two large horses of the same color in front of it. The old woman was standing beside them.

“So you’re here at last,” she snapped. “Give them to me.”

“Aunt Alisande, I don’t want to go to her,” Asha sobbed, clinging to the enchanted woman’s dress with her free hand. That snapped her out of her trance.

“No, Roanna, I won’t,” she growled back, her pupils dialating and the gray eyes spitting fire. “These children belong to Dylan and Tabea. They belong to Carrock. You can’t have them.”

“Silence!” the sorceress ordered, suddenly straightening and taking on her real form. “You will do as I tell you. Give them to me, *now!*”

“Over my dead body,” she hissed.

“If you wish,” Roanna returned coldly. “I can do even more.” She reached out and slapped the woman across the face and she instantly crumpled to the ground. The children were too stunned to run.

“Come, children, let’s go home,” the lady invited them, holding out her long, fine hands. Hesitantly they took them and allowed themselves to be led into the coach. The door closed and the driver cracked his whip over the horses’ heads and they sped away through the forest.

“There she is!” Dylan leaned down over the crumpled form of Alisande.

“Is she alive?” Stev asked, gathering her into his arms. The Scholar bent and took her pulse.

“At the moment she is, my friend,” he answered. “We must get her back to the castle where I can revive her. I must also tend to the lady.”

“And meanwhile that witch has my children,” the lord moaned. His right hand closed into a fist. “I will get them back -- but first I must help my wife. I can’t do it without her.” The other two nodded and then they slowly headed back towards the castle, Stev Pulleny carrying his broken wife as gently as possible. Oh, she was such a precious burden for him. His tears ran down his cheeks and fell on her soiled dress. Would she ever wake up again?



OUT OF THE FOREST, following the rough road, rolled the dark carriage of Roanna. The children were asleep, Asha’s head on the sorceress’ lap and Kyle curled up in the corner of the seat opposite her. The woman smiled to herself as she stroked the girl’s dark hair. Children were always so easy to capture. Best of all, they were so easy to mold. Soon they would forget Dylan and Tabea. Soon they would not know about Carrock or about the soft meadows where they played with their friends and parents. Soon their minds would belong to the sorceress herself. There would be no way that these tender children could escape her grasp. She smiled to herself and let her fine fingers rush through Asha’s hair again. She could feel the hour coming when she would face Dylan á Carrock and his children would deny they ever knew him. Not even his meagre amount of power would help him then. The smile

turned to a quiet giggling and slowly grew into an insane laughter. The children stirred uneasily, but the witch laughed on. Her plans *could not* be shaken!

Tabea was finally asleep again. Savoy gently pressed his hands against her at specific points, drew back her eyelids to look at the eyes, took her temperature. Finally he rose and turned to an anxious Dylan.

"She's made it past the first shock, m'lord," he whispered, "but this inaction is what is killing her. The doctors would tell her to remain in bed and at this moment that is the last thing she should do."

"So what's she got?" the lord asked impatiently.

"It *is* a spell of sorts, along with a weakening of her body. She isn't well and yet she isn't sick either. Let's say that this sickness is one of lethargy. It weakens her just enough that she doesn't think she has the strength to get up, but if she would fight it -- well, she might just get better." Her husband nodded quietly.

"We need to go and find our children," he decided. "That's what will get her back on her feet. She has more spunk than most of my soldiers. I'll talk to her when she wakes up." The Scholar nodded and the two of them left the room to where Alisande was lying. Savoy examined her also, his face betraying that he was even more concerned by her condition.

"This very definitely involves a spell, ambassador," he told Stev. "It is one that renders her incoherent to the world. The only way I know to break it is the same way Alick's hold on Dylan and Tabea was broken -- by destroying Roanna's source of power. However, she will come around once a month -- on full moon and someone very familiar with her *must* be here when it happens. She is not nearly as strong as his highness or the lady." The younger man turned to his lord.

"Dylan, I want to come with you when you fight Roanna," he requested.

"No, Stev," the lord answered, "you have to stay with Alisande until she gets better. She'll need you when she wakes up, my dear brother. It's your duty as her husband." The sandy head sank down sadly.

"I'll stay here with her until you get back," he finally agreed. Dylan smiled sadly and patted him on the shoulder.

"I also have a wife to tend to, along with the lands of Carrock." He nodded his head pensively. "Phillip, the high marshal, will be in charge until I return. He will need someone who is wise to help him. Too bad old Roche died in the Battle of the Wolf. We would need him now. But, Stev," he placed one hand on his friend's shoulder and looked him square in the eye, "I know that you are a man to be trusted and have a good head. You will be able to help Phillip. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, m'lord," the ambassador answered quietly. Dylan gripped his right hand tightly.

"Very well, then I'll notify the high marshal, that he is in charge of the affairs of state as of tomorrow morning." With that he turned and left the room. Stev sighed to himself.

"I'm afraid that Dylan is in danger, sir," he confessed to Savoy.

"That he is, ambassador," the Scholar answered, thoughtfully regarding the door. He passed one dark hand through his beard. "I believe that not only he is in danger, but we all are -- as long as the Lady Roanna is on the loose. We will have to confront her sooner or later and the sooner the better. Each of us will have a part to play and I'm afraid that his highness's is the hardest of all. And besides there are rumors about war..."

She was running through dark corridors, chasing after her beloved. Behind her she could hear the voices of unseen enemies, stalking her. She could see him in front of her, each of his hands clasped around that of a child. She screamed his name, but he couldn't hear her. He charged on, their children running with him. Suddenly a great hole opened beneath their feet and they disappeared. She slid to a halt and looked down into the inky blackness. She called their names, panic setting in. She could feel something behind her and turned around. It was the sorceress. She was grabbing for her. She took one step back and fell into the pit, screaming ... and woke up, drenched in sweat, the sheets clinging to her. Strong, gentle arms wrapped themselves around her.

"It's all right, lady love," came a quiet voice. "You're safe here." She blinked and glanced over her shoulder. Dylan was holding her against his chest, gently fondling her forehead and hair.

"I -- I had a bad dream," she stammered.

"I know, dear."

"It was about you and the children. You fell down a hole and then I went right after you." It ended in a fearful sob. She clung to his arm, panicky. "Asha and Kyle -- where are they? I want to see them!"

"You can't, dear Tabea," he said in a cracking voice. "Roanna kidnapped them."

"Then *that* wasn't a dream," she moaned.

"No, it wasn't." She pressed one hand to her moist face, not attempting to stifle the tears.

"Oh, I wish I could just wake up and find it was all a bad dream -- this blasted weakness and beastly sickness. I've had enough of it. I want to find my children!"

"So do I, lady love." He let go of her and came around to face her, taking her hands in his own and staring into the overflowing lakes her eyes had become. "I want you to come with me to find them. I need you to help me there. Only together can we save them."

"But the doctors -- I'm too weak!" she protested.

"That's a lie, Tabea," he returned firmly. "It was just a suggestion planted in your mind by that witch. You never were too weak to get up, except when you chose to believe that lie. You have to fight against it with the truth. Remember, the Word will help you -- and I will, too, as well as I can." The resolve in his green eyes spurred her on and she let go of him, threw the covers aside and clapped her hands. Instantly two ladies-in-waiting scurried into the room.

"Get the bath ready," she ordered, "and then my travelling clothes -- the simple farm dress and the brown cloak. No hat."

"Yes, m'lady," they answered together.

"Good, now go." Dylan gently laid her robe around her shoulders.

"I'm happy to see you're back, lady love." She turned to him and smiled. It was a sad, but determined smile.

"As long as that witch has her hands on our kids, I'm going to be on her tail, no matter *how* sick I get. Even if I have to crawl there on my hands and knees."

"Come hell or high water," her husband laughed. "It looks like the iron couple is back." She laughed with him and then kissed his lips before rushing off to her bath.

Only few people had gathered in Dylan's study to discuss the next step. The lord and lady were there, dressed in simple clothing and looking quite like peasants. Phillip the high marshal and Stev Pulleny the royal ambassador were there along with Savoy the Scholar and Galbin and Enfer. Lora sat off to one side, watching the leaping flames in the fire-place.

"Now that you all know what happened," Dylan concluded his description of the events of the last day, "I believe you will understand that we must act immediately." The others nodded silently. "The lady and I will go after the sorceress in the morning," he continued.

"Lora and I will go with you, m'lord," the Scholar added. The lord regarded him thoughtfully.

"Very well, sir, I believe that will be all right."

"And I, sir?" Enfer asked. "I would like to join you."

"I believe that you would and I know that everyone else here would, too, but our strength is in stealth and small numbers. There is only one other person that I would consider taking along."

"And who is that, m'lord?" the high marshal inquired.

"Alick the wizard." The whole room gasped, with the exception of Tabea and Savoy, with whom Dylan had discussed this before.

"But, m'lord, he isn't to be trusted," Phillip argued. "He'd kill you on sight."

"I know that, high marshal, but he is also the *only* one alive who knows Damrok -- that is other than the Lady Roanna. There is no other choice."

"Couldn't he revive his powers there?" Lora asked timidly, entering the conversation for the first time.

"Perhaps, but that would take a very long time, much longer than we would give him," the Scholar answered.

"Anyway," the lord continued, "he's right on the way to that place and he *still* owes me a favor for not killing him or exiling him completely. After all, he is a servant of the house of Carrock and will remain that to his death." There was general agreement on that point and the meeting was finally closed down with the Scholar asking the Word's blessing on this enterprise.



The lord and lady of Carrock had been wandering the moon-lit fields for some time now and she'd decided to take a rest, sitting down on a large rock. She stared towards the massive black mountain, where she'd been so often during her enchantment. It was not a pleasant memory, but it at least encouraged her to look for and find her children.

"I just wish I could be that Cat one more time," she told her husband, "and sink my claws into that witch." She held up her hands, fingers curved, lips curled in a snarl.

"I don't want to *ever* be an animal again, Tabea," he answered. "Not even if it would help me kill that beastly woman. It was the worst event in my life, even counting this one." He smiled at her sadly. "I'm so thankful that you and I could get together again and that we had children at all."

"What if she kills them?" his wife interjected.

"Then she'll be judged, found guilty, and sentenced to death, and we'll have more kids -- with the Word's help." She laughed, just a bit playfully, as he sat down next to her.

"Since when are *you* getting so religious, Dylan?" His face remained straight and his voice grave.

"For a long time, lady love -- ever since Alick was overthrown in the Battle of the Wolf. It should have been called the 'Battle of the *Word*.' It was *he* who really won it. I wouldn't admit it to anyone but you, but I know that I would never have been able to keep my mind that long or go through that horrible door to Alick's room if he hadn't been with me and if that hadn't happened -- well, then some wolf-maid would be bearing my pups out there." He shuddered. "I don't even want to think about that."

"Neither do I," she returned in monotone.

"Then let's just try to get through this -- on the Word's help."

"Yes." She sighed and leaned into him. He gently laid one arm around her shoulders.

"I'm so happy that Savoy is coming with us, dear," she whispered. "At least now I feel a bit safer."

"For some reason I feel all the more vulnerable," he confessed. "I don't know why, but I'm afraid."

"So'm I." She snuggled even closer and silence closed in on them.

"Comfort me," she finally pleaded with him.

"I will, but let's go home first, lady love. We'll need to be home before dawn." She nodded and they quickly returned to their room in the castle, where the lord of Carrock comforted his wife.



DAWN CAME, BRINGING A NEW DAY OF BONDAGE FOR ALICK. Here he was, exiled to this small house in one of the villages of Carrock. Most people gave him a wide berth, knowing why he was here. Onri had long ago taken Dylan's "gracious" offer and left the lands altogether, going who knows where. It was probably somewhere where he could have all the women and wine he wanted.

The ex-wizard chuckled to himself at the news he'd gotten from some "friends" that day. Roanna was said to have kidnapped the two royal children and driven them to Damrok. It was almost too good to be true.

"And to make the story perfect Lord Dylan shows up and asks *me* to guide him into Damrok. How insane!" He nearly screamed in laughter. It was just too funny, but he didn't know yet that the joke was on him.

A small company of seven horses left the castle. Only four were mounted, one had only a saddle and the last two were loaded with supplies. The leading was a dappled gelding mounted by the lord of Carrock himself, silently staring into the late fall mist. Behind him the lady and Lora rode on a white mare and a black one respectively. The Scholar followed, holding the reins of the two bays and another dappled horse. His own had the color of soot, except for a large white blaze on its forehead. It was the only stallion of the lot, usually quite wild, but now submissive under the southern man's gentle hands.

They traveled on in silence, stopping for a quick rest and lunch around noon. Tabea complained to Dylan of being sore, but said she would ride on. Now he and Savoy switched places and continued on until late afternoon with two or three short rests to accomodate the still not so well lady. As dusk was settling they drew up their first camp in the shelter of some large trees.

"I have to do something," the lord announced after haveing finished their supper, rose and disappeared into the woods. A few minutes later the howl of a wolf chilled their blood. It was answered far off. Tabea knew that her

husband was calling the leader of the Gray Pack, which he had headed for nearly two years. She was right. Only a half-hour after calling, a noble wolf broke from the thickets to stand in front of Dylan. He was large, having grown a bit since the days when the lord had been enchanted and his leader. He was also old and the golden eyes displayed wisdom and cunning. They were also full of joyful submission. A brown spot on his head gave him his name -- one that was feared by all of the Royal Wolves and by men who happened to have crossed paths with him at one time or another. He let his tongue hang out and laid his head to the side, sitting back on his haunches. Then he gave a series of howls and yips -- the wolf-tongue that his lord had learned to speak in the days of his enchantment.

"I'm so happy to see you again, Dylan," he yipped.

"And it's good to see you, Brownie. It has been a long time." The wolf scraped the ground with one paw.

"You and your mate have been locked in the stone walls for very long."

"Yes, our pups have grown and are now quite rambunctious. But Tabea has not been well for nearly four seasons."

"Wolf-Tongue told us," Brownie answered, alluding to Stev Pulleny.

"So you saw him?"

"Only briefly as he traveled back to your stone walls." The man nodded to himself.

"I have something that is very difficult to tell you, my friend," he sighed. The wolf closed his mouth, but not before running his long tongue over his muzzle. The eyes were now curious.

"The sorceress has come and taken my pups, Brownie. I don't know why, but I will have to find them. Tell me, has anything unusual happened in the last days?"

"There has," the beast growled in return. "One of my older pups told me of a black thing with horses riding through the forest at a high speed. It was going towards the sunset. Swift said she could smell humans in it and she heard a mad laughter from it. It sounded like a woman." The lord put one hand to his forehead and ground his teeth in disgust.

"So she got away after all," he groaned. It took him a few minutes to compose himself.

"I have a favor to ask my friend," he finally continued.

"Ask it," the wolf barked in return.

"I want you and yours to watch the lands *very* carefully, because I'm going after the sorceress. The high marshall and Wolf-Tongue will be leading the people. They will need help -- a lot of it. Will you be there for them?"

"With all of the Gray Pack and the other Royal Wolves of Carrock, Dylan." He looked at the man very wisely. "After all, I did pledge my life to you -- and don't worry. Tomorrow morning you will have an invisible escort with you to protect you." He rose, his tail whipping around his flanks. "Until we meet again," he howled throwing his head back. Then he was off through the thickets.

"Until we meet again," the lord answered quietly in the tongue of man.

The next days went by in a similar fashion -- long rides and short nights and rests. Tabea was clearly weakening again, and if it hadn't been for Swift bringing Dylan some special herbs, she would probably not be able to ride at all. She smiled wanly at her husband the fourth night out.

"I might not be up to this after all," she whispered.

"You are, dear, you *have to* be. You have to break that sickness and it will only work if you fight it." She nodded and sipped at the tea he'd made from the herbs. In that moment The Red, Swift's mate, broke from among the high bushes and came to the lord. He inclined his shaggy head in submission.

"My lord, my mate and I wish to travel openly with you," he yipped quietly. "It is also her father's request." The man glanced to where the Scholar and his daughter were sitting. Savoy nodded, while Lora just stared at the large beast in fear.

"I believe it would be all right, The Red," Dylan finally answered. The wolf bowed his head again and gave a short bark. A few moments later a slightly smaller wolf, this one flecked with white and gray, came into the light of the fire. She gazed around the small group before going to the lady and giving her an affectionate lick on the hand. Tabea placed her fingers between the pointed ears. Then Swift turned and slowly went towards Lora. She covered back against her tree, hazle eyes growing wide.

“She won’t hurt you, Lora,” Dylan said with a smile. Slowly the southern girl held out one hand. The wolf-maid eyed her for a moment and then her long tongue whipped out, gently running across the girl’s brown fingers. The head tilted to the side, awaiting the return greeting. Timidly, the Scholar’s daughter placed her hand where Tabea had. Swift sat back on her haunches and yipped happily.

“She’s saying she’s happy to meet you, Lora,” the lord interpreted. The Red settled down next to Tabea to keep her company, while Swift decided she would rather stay with Lora, much to the surprise of the girl.

“I’m not so sure about this,” she whispered as the large beast lay down next to her, head erect, staring towards the forest.

“She won’t hurt you, Lora, I promise,” Dylan answered. “Her name is Swift and I’m quite certain she likes you.”

“And by the way, wolves make great warm water bottles,” Tabea added with a secret smile to her husband.

“But not so good as my wife,” he answered, wrapping his arms around her. They settled down for a quiet night with Swift and The Red keeping watch.

Alick’s village had come into view. It was about ten days since they’d left the castle and the horses had gotten used to the wolves’ presence. Lora was also much more at ease with her new friend. The Red had been nicknamed TR by now and he seemed to like it quite a bit. There had been some debating the night before as to who should go and see the wizard.

“I believe that you, Dylan, are the only one who can do that,” Savoy had finally told him. “You and TR ought to be the ones to visit him.”

“No, he’s deathly afraid of wolves,” Tabea reminded them.

“Then he’ll have to get used to them and we’ll start him off early,” her husband answered, liking the Scholar’s idea. “Alick hates my guts and the only way that he’ll back off is if I have some *very* striking arguments with me. I think TR is the right one to take along.” That had stopped all argument, but now Dylan wasn’t so sure that this was a good idea, after all the ex-wizard was his arch enemy. It would be *rather* strange to drop in on him and ask him for help. *But I’ve come this far*, he reasoned, *there’s no turning back now*. And along with that thought he fired a prayer to the Word. He would help the lord for sure.

Alick’s house was a very comfortable one located at the other end of the village. The small company stopped at the inn, while the “committee” went on to “enlist” the ex-wizard’s aid. The lord paused before knocking on the massive wooden door. There was a faint shuffling sound and then it swung open to reveal a drawn face framed by white hair and bushy white eyebrows. The cheeks, chin, and upper lip were still smooth though, clean shaven that morning. The dark eyes burned at the lord of Carrock in hostility.

“Dylan á Carrock!” The old man’s voice was hard and dry. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Alick. I’ve come to ask for your help in a very important matter.” The dark eyes scrutinized him for a long moment before the door opened to admit him. TR nosed his way in first. The ex-wizard leaped back from the large gray form as if burned.

“Get that thing out of here!” he screamed.

“That is The Red and he is my witness. He’ll stay.” There was a finality to the lord of Carrock’s words that the wizard did not dare to object to. He reluctantly let the beast take a comfortable place beside the fire and the younger man a seat next to the window.

“I see that your house is quite comfortable, Alick,” Dylan remarked.

“Yes it is, but that is beside the point.” The old man sat down across from him and again studied him. “What do you want from me?”

“You have probably already heard about what happened to my children.”

“Yes, and you want me to take you into Damrok, right?” The dark eyes twinkled with a twisted delight as the ex-wizard chuckled to himself. “This is too good to be true, Dylan á Carrock. You coming to seek help from your old enemy -- from the very wizard who enchanted you. This is just too good to be true!” And he roared with laughter.

“I know that, Alick,” the lord returned quietly. “I need your help to get into the sorcerers’ castle to rescue my children and take on your sister.”

“Ah, so you are going to get rid of *all* the wizards and witches in Carrock, aren’t you, young lord?” the old man mocked.

“No, only those who are stupid enough to attack me personally.” There was a slight growl to the tone that instantly took all of the mirth out of the old man. Dylan relaxed just slightly, staring into the depths of those dark eyes full of hatred.

“I am *asking* you to do something for me and I won’t command you to do anything, Alick,” he said evenly. “I know I have the authority to order you to obey me, but I won’t. It’s too much to ask of anyone, even my arch-enemy.” The ex-wizard could no longer hide the fact that he was impressed by what the lord of Carrock had just told him. Still, some part of him wanted something out of the deal.

“What will be my reward if I go along?” he wheedled.

“I will give you full freedom,” the younger man sighed. “You will be able to come and go in Carrock as you please. You will be a true citizen again and -- if you wish -- you could even live in the castle again.”

“This really means a lot to you, doesn’t it, Dylan á Carrock?” There was a strangely gentle tone in his voice.

“Yes, Alick, they are my children and I must get them back before that sorceress does anything to them.” The old man lowered his head thoughtfully for a long time, making the other think that he’d gone to sleep.

“The odds aren’t bad, Dylan á Carrock,” he finally answered. “I’m impressed that you would trust your *arch-enemy* so much, perhaps too much?” He chuckled softly. “I will help you, m’lord, in exchange for my freedom.”

“Then it’s a deal,” the lord answered, extending his right hand. The ex-wizard took it.

“Deal.”

“Good, we’ll be leaving the village tomorrow at sunrise.”

“I will meet you at the inn.” They rose and went to the door. TR went out first, followed by a silent Dylan.

“I will see you tomorrow, then.” The other just nodded and they parted company. Alick stood for a long time, staring after the receding form of Dylan á Carrock. He was impressed, very impressed. And, yes, the joke had been on him. Slowly he was beginning to respect the young lord that he hated so much.

“He has a very big heart,” the old man muttered, finally closing the door. “That is very good, but it can be very dangerous.”



KYLE SAT UP, BLINKING IN THE DARKNESS OF THE BIG ROOM. He stared at a point in front of him, wondering if he was still dreaming. Where was he? And what was that dream? He tried to remember, but everything was fuzzy. Slowly he sank back into the fluffy pillows. Maybe Auntie Roanna would have an answer for him. He glanced over beside him, where Asha was curled up. *Funny*, he thought, *I can’t remember going to bed last night*. As a matter of fact he couldn’t remember *anything*, except for Asha and Auntie Roanna. But maybe his aunt would have the answers. Maybe... Heavy vapors of sleep drifted over him and after a while he’d dropped off again.

The door to the room cracked open just slightly, letting a shaft of pale light lay itself across the bed and illuminate the boy. A pair of curious gray eyes peered at him and a smoky form slowly passed through the doorway. It resembled a young woman with golden hair. She looked fuzzy around the edges as she sat down on the bed next to him.

“Kyle!” He stirred uneasily. The wispy hand closed around his cold wrist.

“Kyle!” she called again. His green eyes blinked open slowly. They were foggy and he just barely registered the shade sitting next to him. Then slowly his eyes widened.

“Don’t be afraid, Kyle, I won’t hurt you,” the strange apparition told him gently.

“Who -- who *are* you?” he stammered, pushing himself up and back from it. The see-throughish face became very sad.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” she asked.

“No.”

“I don’t remember who I am either,” she sighed.

“But how do you know *me*?”

“I don’t know.” One hand passed over the white forehead. “All I know is that I’ve seen you somewhere before and that I know your name. I am a prisoner here, just like you.”

"But I'm *not* a prisoner!" he cried. "Auntie Roanna brought me here." The strange girl's brow wrinkled in a frown.

"Roanna ... Roanna," she repeated to herself. Slowly she stood up.

"Are you -- a ghost?" he finally whispered.

"Something like that. I think I'm enchanted." His eyes grew wide.

"A princess?" he asked, remembering many fairy tales he'd heard. She let her head sink down for a moment, trying to remember.

"I don't think so, but my big brother is ... is ..." Suddenly the head snapped up and for an instant she became almost solid, the memory returning. "He's your father, Kyle. Yours and Asha's."

"You mean you're my *aunt*?" he demanded, unbelieving.

"I think that would be true," she answered, slowly fading again. "Maybe you'll help me remember my name, too." He shook his head.

"I can't even remember my Dad," he said glumly. "I wish I could."

"Then let's try to do that together, but not now. My captor is coming." She smiled sadly. "Good-bye, Kyle. I'll be back. But you must keep me secret!" With that she turned and walked through the wall beside the bed. The boy was too shaken to scream. What was that? Who was that? Keep her secret -- his aunt -- his father's sister. From Asha, too? He nodded to himself. From Asha, too. It was *his* secret! No one would know. Maybe they'd find her name. And maybe his Dad, too? He smiled to himself and snuggled under the covers. Yes, maybe that find his Dad. That would be nice.

"Dad," he whispered into the dark. "Come and find me, Dad!"

Stev walked back and forth in the room where his wife lay. It was too much for him to bear, seeing her lying on the bed, seemingly asleep. He remembered a fairy tale where a prince had woken a princess with the kiss of true love. He'd tried it on Alisande, but she was still asleep. She sometimes moved, mumbling things. It was clear that she was dreaming *something*.

"I just wish she'd wake up," he told himself and walked to one of the windows with the heavy drapes on it. He pulled them aside a bit and stared out into the night. The moon was past three quarters. Soon it would be full. Soon she'd be awake and they would be able to talk for a night. But it was only one night out of thirty. Slowly he began to understand what Dylan and Tabea must have felt during their enchantment. He also wondered about something Savoy the Scholar had told him the evening before they'd left.

"The Word will guard and protect you, ambassador. Pray to him. He'll help you make it through this time."

"So please do," he prayed quietly. "Please do."

This castle was a fun place to be! The two children of Carrock were allowed free run of their floor of it and the one above, too. They explored the rooms, finding many strange things there. In one there were many suits of armor, each of them with a weapon in its hand and a strange emblem on the chest -- a claw with five fingers. This scared Asha a bit and she urged her brother to get out of there. He complied and a few minutes later they peeped into another room. Three walls were covered from floor to ceiling with mirrors. They walked in and stared around at the many reflections of themselves. Asha went and made faces at herself in one of them. They looked sadly like little beggar children now, their clothes tattered and their faces pale. The little girl had a light red spot on her forehead from where the sorceress had kissed her. Kyle's had already vanished and with it the memory of that strange ghost he'd seen two nights before. Neither of them noticed the raven that was sitting on the window sill.

In her room Roanna smiled to herself. They were slipping ever more under her spell. She'd noticed that the boy had acted a bit strangely the day before and wondered about it. Could it be that cursed spirit of Alisande that was floating around the place, captive? She must *not* be allowed to get close to the children again. Most of all she must *never* find out what her name is, otherwise the enchantment would be broken. The sorceress got up from her table and stared out into the late afternoon light. If only she could tie that ghost up in chains, but no, that was something that she couldn't do, even *if* she broke the laws. It was impossible! She would just have to live with the risk. And soon it wouldn't *be* a risk anymore. Soon she'd have the place that she deserved and then she wouldn't have to face the problem of Alisande being disenchanting, because she would have them *all* under her spell. She giggled to herself. It was too good to be true. In a few days it would be time.



If the sorceress had looked out of the southern windows of her castle she would have seen a small company of riders and two wolves quietly set up camp in the shadow of the black walls. It had been a surprisingly short journey from Alick's village, only four days. And yet it was more than a fortnight that Roanna had kidnapped the children. A strange uneasiness was overcoming Dylan, making him ever more watchful. For the last four days he'd slept little -- too little according to the Scholar. Even the ex-wizard seemed touched by the lord's worry for his children. He approached Dylan as night was settling.

"I would like to help you, Dylan á Carrock," he began haltingly, pulling a small black pouch from his belt. "Here are some herbs that will help you relax and sleep well tonight." The lord just waved one hand, too tired to say anything. Alick turned to the lady.

"Tabea á Carrock, perhaps you would give your husband a broth of this. He needs sleep badly." The lady raised one eyebrow suspiciously.

"I understand that you don't trust me, lady of Carrock," he said sadly, "but I would hardly poison the only man who could give me my freedom, would I?" She looked into the dark eyes, scrutinizing them. They seemed clear and honest enough, but she still couldn't be sure. Yet if he was being honest, Dylan would really need the sleep badly.

"All right, Alick," she sighed. "I'll give him your medicine." And she went about getting a cup of warm tea ready. The ex-wizard watched her quick movements and pale face thoughtfully. He'd seen the marks of the sickness in her blue eyes. *So Roanna is behind this again*, he thought. Something tugged at him silently. He could lead them into the castle and then abandon them in the labyrinth. Then he could join Roanna again and let his powers revive. It was so tantalizingly close, but he remembered the talks he'd had with the Scholar and his hate of that man had vanished as he saw the great wisdom.

"You were spared for a reason unknown to us, Alick," he'd explained. "Usually the Word destroys any wizard who steps over the line, but you are alive. Shouldn't that make you grateful enough to follow him and perhaps become a Scholar rather than a wizard?" *Perhaps*, the ex-wizard now thought. It was true about the wizards that stood against the Word were destroyed completely. Why was he spared? Could it be because of his knowledge of Damrok? No, there were enough people who could lead the young lord and his friends into the black walls. Something else that Savoy had said came to his mind.

"The main reason that the Word gives *anyone* a second chance is because he loves each and every one of us. Sometimes it even seems that he loves those who run away from him even more than those that come to him without so much resistance. He chases them down and when he gets his hands on them, they usually are glad to surrender their lives to him."

"So you have been chasing me, have you, Word?" the ex-wizard whispered. He bowed his head in heavy thought. "Very well, I will try to trust you. But..."

No buts, Alick, he heard a quiet Voice answer.

"What?" He stared around, looking for the source.

No buts. I want you unconditionally. The Voice wasn't really audible, it was just in his head, but he knew it was real.

"Very well," the ex-wizard muttered. "Unconditionally." He smiled to himself. "I think you have just won one of your most recalcitrant fugitives, haven't you?" The Voice didn't answer, but he felt as if the whole universe was suddenly laughing. The Word had won once again, but it was the sweetest defeat Alick had ever experienced. It was freedom. Slowly a smile spread across the old, wrinkled face and his eyes began to shine. It truly was freedom.

It took some time for Tabea to convince Dylan to drink the sweet-smelling liquid, but he finally did and as soon as he was done, his head drifted down into his wife's lap and he fell asleep.

"Yes, that will do him some good," the ex-wizard said quietly, leaning over the lord. "This way he'll be strong enough for the hardest part of the journey in the morning."

"He will be," Tabea sighed, "but I don't think I will." The bushy eyebrows went up.

"Are you not feeling well?" She shook her head.

"Let me see your eyes." It was not a request. Slowly she raised her head and let him stare into the blue depths. He grunted to himself, squinting at her for a long moment.

“Hm, hm. I know this sickness. Roanna is the only one who can induce it.”

“You mean *she* was the one who enchanted Dylan’s mother?” the woman asked a bit shocked.

“Yes, but at my request.” It sounded heavy, almost sad. “It was my lust for power that caused it. And it was that same lust that led Roanna on her way.” He looked up at the full moon above the castle. “It is a painful thing, Lady of Carrock, having a past as I do. Thank the Word that you don’t have or understand it. And now sleep well and deeply.” He turned back to her and breathed on her lightly. Slowly the golden-brown head sank down and the blue eyes closed. The ex-wizard rose and looked at the castle once more. He looked to where Savoy was sitting beside the fire, Lora asleep across from him. In an instant he rushed into the darkness silently. There was one more thing he must do before they could enter those ancient walls of evil. How good that it was full moon. It would make things so much easier.



STEV HAD BEEN WAITING IMPATIENTLY FOR THE FULL MOON TO RISE. As it did and its rays poured through the windows, Alisande began to stir. Slowly her eyes opened, empty and glassy. Her husband was already by her side, holding her hand.

“Welcome back, Alisande,” he said with a sad smile.

“Where am I?” the girl asked.

“At the castle in Carrock.” She nodded, but he could tell that she had no idea where that was.

“I had a dream,” she began in an almost childish voice. “I saw a little boy in a big bed in a dark room. He was a prisoner and so was I. He didn’t know my name.”

“But I do,” Stev whispered. “I know your name, Alisande.”

“No, no, that’s not it.” Her voice was uneven. Suddenly she screamed, writhing in the bed, as if some pain assailed her. Her husband tried to comfort her. As quickly as it came, the pain was gone and she stared at him angrily.

“How dare you touch me!” she snapped. “Who are you anyway?” His jaw dropped open and he staggered back. Slowly the enchanted girl rose out of the bed.

“It’s me, Alisande, Stev, your husband...” She cocked her head to one side, as if thinking.

“I don’t have a husband,” she finally snapped. “Get out before I call the guards.”

“No, Savoy said you musn’t be left alone for even an instant,” he fired back, his worry slowly letting his temper go. “Get back into bed.”

“I’m up and I’m staying up.” She crossed her arms and stared at him angrily. “You don’t even know who I am.”

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I -- “ her face suddenly fell and she gaped at him. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t know.” Tears began to form themselves in her eyes. “My God, I don’t know who I am,” she whispered and sank onto the ground, sobbing. “Who am I?” it was a cry for help. Stev Pulleny stood there, unable to think and unable to move, watching his mad wife silently. When would the spell break?

Roanna had carefully drugged the children that evening before sending them to bed. It was important that they didn’t wake before dawn, when the spell was gone. At least the one over Alisande was strong enough to keep her from remembering and it was a good thing that the pesky shade was not in the castle walls at the moment. But for that matter there would be many more wandering the lone halls. She had come to know and fear some of them. They were dangerous. That was why she stayed in her small room during this time. They could not touch her here. This was the only safe place. The children would be left alone, uninteresting to those beings of the mist that once had been human. She could already hear the sad sighs and cries from the corners of the dark building. The last months she’d taken a dream voyage on the night of the full moon, escaping these walls. Now she was cut off from the great hall, where the one place was where she could separate her spirit from her body and go riding the wind, away from Damrok’s night of ghosts.

Suddenly she sat up straight. One of the cries had been very close to her door. She shuddered. There was little that could scare her, but those shades, those spirits of old could. In the same instant an unearthly light began to glow

in the room in front of her and a man in full armor was standing there. A five-fingered claw was on his chest. His visor was shut and he held a bloody sword in his hand, the point touching the ground.

“Roanna of Dell Cairn,” came a deep and ominous voice from inside the armor, “I have come to warn you. It is the last I may do. You are near destruction. If you do not heed my word and free the children in this night, you will fall under the hands of the Watchcarer.” That remark drew a grin from the sorceress.

“The *Watchcarer*?” she snickered, trying to cover her uneasiness. “The Watchcarer is dead. I defeated her and killed her myself. You must be joking, shade.”

“The Watchcarer can and will return, Roanna of Dell Cairn. And when she does, you will die.”

“Who are you, shade?” the sorceress demanded slowly rising, her fear was slowly giving way to anger. One hand went up and opened the visor.

“Sean Welling,” she gasped. The man who’d been her first teacher and who’d taken her virginity. “You!”

“Yes,” the shade answered, closing his helmet again. “I was destroyed many years ago by a Scholar. It now is your turn, Roanna of Dell Cairn, and you will experience the pain and solitude of these halls. You will be banned to the room of mirrors, where you will die. Until we meet again among the shadows, Roanna of Dell Cairn...” And suddenly she woke, sitting up, noticing light from beneath her shutters. Slowly her chest heaved up and down. *It was only a dream, only a dream*, she whispered to herself. The night was over. The children would be waking soon. She rose and looked at her shaking hands. No, she must control herself, she would win. No shade would destroy her and much less the Watchcarer. *She* would destroy them all and take the throne of Carrock. With that she rose and brushed a hand through her hair, not noticing that it was now completely white.



DYLAN STOOD LOOKING AT THE CASTLE, a bit angry at waking to find that Alick was gone. TR had disappeared also and neither Savoy nor Swift had noticed the ex-wizard leave.

“So what will we do now?” Dylan growled, more to himself.

“We’ll wait,” the Scholar answered, calmly tending the fire. The lord sat down by the fire, scowling into the woods and it wasn’t long until a cheerful and smiling Alick walked out from among the trees with TR on his heels.

“Good morning, m’lord,” he laughed. “I’m sorry if I gave you a shock, but I had to get something, so that we can enter Damrok unharmed.”

“I wish you’d told me beforehand,” Dylan snapped.

“You still don’t trust me, Lord of Carrock,” the ex-wizard said quietly. “I don’t blame you. But here...” He opened his hands to reveal a many-colored gemstone. “This is my key to Damrok. It was given me when I took on the cloak of a wizard and it is the last vestige of my power. I will use it to open the gates and guide you to Roanna, Dylan á Carrock, but for that you must trust me, otherwise you will not be able to enter the castle.” These were hard words, the lord knew. He had already taken Alick along, but he still didn’t trust him. Now was a time of choice. He knew he must rescue his children from Roanna, but he could only do that, *if* he trusted this man. Finally he drew a breath. He knew what he must do.

“Very well, Alick. I will trust you.” The old man smiled and nodded his head.

“Then come, all of you. We will enter the castle. We must do it within the hour, or else my key will be useless.” They broke camp quickly and stealthily made their way toward the high walls. For once Dylan was wearing a pistol and a hunting-knife, something unusual, for the Lord of Carrock rarely carried weapons. Now the great doors loomed before them. With a shudder, Dylan realized that the portal was shaped like a giant mouth. Above it was a hideous caricature of a nose and slanted, vacant eyes. He glanced at Tabea, noticing that her grip on his hand had tightened. She was quite pale, but seemed determined. Alick held the tiny gem aloft and it sparkled in the light. Slowly the great doors swung forward.

“Come quickly!” the ex-wizard urged them. After a moment’s hesitation the humans followed their guide in. Only Swift and TR stood there, undecided. Dylan turned back.

“Come on, you two,” he called. Swift trotted forward and passed through the gates. Slowly the giant doors began to swing shut. Alick grasped the lord’s shoulder.

“TR must not attempt to enter now, or else he will be killed. It is part of the magic of this place.”

“Stay where you are,” Dylan ordered the wolf, but it seemed he hadn’t heard. He slowly rose and went forward, nosing towards the closing portal. He paused for another moment and placed one paw on the doorstep. Suddenly there was a loud whining as his fur began to sparkle with bright blue arcs. He tried to shake it off, and step back. He howled in agony. Now there were flames on his back as he shook and tried to pull away, but he couldn’t move. And then in a instant the fire had covered The Red as the great doors closed. The whining and howling could still be heard. Slowly Swift raised her head and howled long and mournfully. Her mate was dead.

From her chamber Roanna heard the howl of the wolf. What was happening? The Hall of Mirrors, there she could see what was happening in the whole castle. She rushed from her room, wide black cloak billowing like wings around her thin body. In an instant she was up the stairs and in the great room. There she glanced at the mirrors. Her lips moved silently. Suddenly one of them stopped reflecting her. It seemed that it had become a window or a doorway, no longer a mirror. She looked into it and saw six figures rushing up a stairway. The one in front was wearing the blue-black of the wizards. Behind him a girl with the beauty of the southern lands, beside her a small, gray and white wolf. After her came another woman, her long golden-brown hair pulled back, dressed in a green and brown tunic and trousers with a cloak the color of rich earth around her shoulders. Next was a tall man in peasant’s clothing, a holster with a pistol and a hunting knife at his side. His red-brown head was bare and his face covered with a beard of a bit lighter color. Following him was a shorter figure, all in white. That made his dark skin and hair stand out all the more. Roanna cursed silently. They were already here -- the Scholar’s daughter, the Lord and Lady of Carrock and the Scholar himself. Who the guide was she could not guess. There was almost no time to prepare.

She muttered another incantation and the mirror became normal again. The children must be woken. She rushed from the room to theirs. Kyle was already awake, rubbing his eyes. He was only in his shirt.

“Come, little lord, get your clothes on,” the sorceress ordered. Dylan’s son complied slowly, still sleepy, while his captor shook Asha awake. She didn’t even take the time to put the girl’s dress on over her night-shirt. Kyle had his breeches and jacket on by now and was fumbling with his boots.

“No time, no time!” Roanna cried, yanking him to his feet. And with that she rushed them out of the small room and down the hall.

Dylan felt very uneasy as Alick led him and his friends up the narrow staircase. He glanced around, having the acute feeling that someone was watching him. He didn’t know it, but every one of them felt that way. Savoy was mumbling and grunting to himself just a step behind and Tabea was just barely able to keep to her feet. The ex-wizard still led them forward down long, winding corridors up many flights of stairs, down some more until they were before a pair of doors covered with gold.

“The throne room,” Alick whispered. “This is the one place where we can be safe, for enchantment cannot pass these gates.” He raised the gemstone and the doors swung inward to reveal a room of utter beauty. Tapestries hung along the walls and on both sides were many windows, letting in the sunlight. At the end of the room was a great golden throne, covered with plush red cushions. The floor was of mosaics, depicting kings and queens of old.

“This is the one room that the claw never was able to open and it is the first time that I am allowed to see it,” the ex-wizard continued. “This is where we will return to if anything separates us. All paths lead to these doors. Rap on them three times and they will open for you.” They closed again and Alick quickly led them on, down many stairs into the heart of the castle.

“Where are we going?” Lora asked, her breath coming in short gasps.

“To the altar room. That is the only place that Roanna would dare confront us. It is the heart of the castle, where the claw took up its residence. There lies the secret power and also the entrance to the Labyrinth of Death, that few have escaped alive.” Dylan shivered at these words. Now slowly he began to feel that Damrok was a lot more dangerous than he had ever imagined.

The giant doors loomed above them now, similar to those of the front gate. Alick held his gem aloft again and they swung out towards them. The room must have been huge, but only four torches around a stone altar shed light and in front of the stone block stood the sorceress, the two children by her side, the girl at her right and the boy at her left hand.



ROANNA GRINNED MALICIOUSLY as she appraised the small band of travelers that had ventured into her domain. “Welcome to Damrok, Dylan á Carrock,” she sneered. “I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon.”

“And I was hoping sooner, Lady Roanna,” the lord answered stiffly, trying to keep his temper under control. “I have come for my children.”

“Ah, *your* children?” The sorceress laughed. “I would say they are much less *your* children than mine, Dylan á Carrock.”

“Liar!” Tabea screamed and tried to launch herself at the other woman. She came to a halt against her husband’s outstretched arm.

“That may be at this moment. However it is an unnatural bond, one that cannot hold.”

“What do you know about sorcery and its powers, Dylan á Carrock?” Roanna mocked. “You don’t even have the courage to enlarge your own power.”

“Perhaps it’s because he’s realized that it’s not *his* power,” came a voice from just behind the lord.

“*You?!?*” the sorceress mocked, her eyes growing wide. Alick slowly took a step forward.

“Yes, sister. I came and I guided Dylan á Carrock, his wife, and his friends into this castle and I will guide them out again. You, however, will never leave these walls.” There was a strangely sad quality to his voice. “It’s because you haven’t realized that ‘your’ power isn’t yours at all. It is stolen from the Word and he will take it back all too soon.”

“So the wizard has become a Scholar,” she sneered back.

“No, I am neither wizard nor Scholar,” the old man answered, shaking his head. “I was a wizard and I may become a Scholar some day, but now I am just the servant of the Lord of Carrock.” It was said humbly, without a hint of mockery and for the first time Dylan realized that this old man had changed. Slowly Alick rose to his full height and stared at his sister.

“Roanna, you claim he has no power over these children. You claim that they are yours. Would you be willing to *test* that claim?” The sorceress bit her lower lip, rage smouldering in her eyes.

“Prove to Dylan á Carrock, that these children aren’t his.” The dark eyes now bored into hers.

“Very well, Dylan á Carrock,” she finally said haughtily. “You may have one chance to show your weakness.”

“He who is weak is strongest in the Word,” Savoy whispered in Dylan’s ear. The lord just barely nodded and took two steps forward. Lora followed him closely, wanting to watch everything. Slowly Dylan went down on one knee in front of his son.

“Do you know who you are, child?” he asked. The brown head nodded timidly.

“Tell me, who are you?”

“I am Kyle.” The words were halting.

“Do you know who I am?” his father asked, reaching out and taking one clammy hand.

“Dylan á Carrock,” the boy whispered. It was like a heavy blanket was a round his head. He knew this man with the gentle eyes and soft voice. He slowly closed his eyes. Suddenly he saw himself on the meadow, romping with that man and with the lady with the golden-brown hair. He remembered being tucked into bed. That man was sitting beside him.

“When I’m big I want to be just like you, Dad,” Kyle whispered. The man smiled.

“Then learn to live like the Word wants you to, Kyle,” he answered. Suddenly the boy’s mind was back at the present. A smile spread across his face.

“Dad!” he laughed and hugged him around the neck.

“That’s my boy,” Dylan answered. Kyle just loosened his embrace enough to call to his sister.

“Look, Asha, it’s Dad and Mom!” The little girl took two steps forward, a fearful look on her face. Roanna grabbed at her pulling her back.

“Let me go!” Asha screamed. “I want my Daddy!”

“No, not her, too, fool!” she hissed.

“Yes, Roanna, her, too.” Alick’s voice came from the background. The little girl’s fists and feet were swinging like crazy. One small foot hit the sorceress’ shin and she let go of the girl, face in agony. Asha fled to her father and clung to him. Lora was just a half-step behind them, a smile on her brown face. Dylan straightened up.

“I have what I came for, Lady Roanna. I will go now and you will stay alive.”

“No, Dylan á Carrock, you will never leave this place as long as I live,” the witch snapped and suddenly the floor dropped away from under Dylan’s feet and he felt himself falling with his two children and Lora.

“Lora, no!” came the cry from above and an instant later, Savoy and Swift came flying down after them. They were on a rough stone trough, that was slicked down with something, hurtling towards the end. Suddenly it ended, sending them head over heels on a rough earthen floor. Dylan’s head hit a stone wall and all went black.

Tabea was too breathless to scream as she watched her husband, children and friends disappear down the dark hole. It was like in her dream.

“Now, Lady of Carrock,” Roanna said with a grin, “I have you to myself.” The hole closed and she slowly walked forward, heading towards the girl. Fine fingers suddenly curled around Tabea’s upper arms and she felt someone pull her to himself. Dark blue robes covered her as Alick wrapped his arms around her protectively.

“No, Roanna. You will never touch this girl or take her innocence. I will protect her until I die.” With that his right hand flew forward, and the gemstone went flying like a drop of pure light. It hit the floor, shattered and suddenly she was standing in the throne room. The ex-wizard let go of her and took a step back.

“I am sorry about the way I had to do this, Lady Tabea,” he said with a bow. “It was necessary to protect you from Roanna.”

“Where are we?” she asked.

“We are safe.”

“And where are Dylan and the others?” she whispered, tears choking her voice. Alick’s face became very sad.

“They are in the Labyrinth, Lady Tabea. And if they ever come out of there, it will be a miracle.”

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