

## THE SEARCH BEGINS

*Stunned, I watched Raine wink out of existence.*

staggered, unable to feel my feet under me. He left me. Just like that. He left me. Cold settled into my bones, deepened into an ache in my heart. *He left me.* I couldn't stop the numbing refrain inside my head. He left. He left us all. *He left me.* Without a backward glance he left me.

My anger drained away, leaving behind a hollow gourd where my heart used to be. I felt no fear, no hate, nor love. I felt nothing but the pain that centered itself in my chest and spread its evil fingers through my body. *He left me.*

Rygel's bitter cursing broke through my mental tail-chasing at last. Tuatha's anguished screams overrode the hurt and angry growls of the wolves, the confused mutters of my boys. In a daze, I turned around, still trying to find my balance. Arianne slumped to the ground, sobbing, clutching the howling pup to her thin chest. Her midnight hair concealed them both. Her wolf, Darkhan, hovered close, his anxiety clear in his slack ears and lowered tail.

Wolves prowled about the dead camp, hackles raised, while no few snarled at one another. Silverruff growled continually, his ears flat to his head. I had no idea what they were saying and Rygel was too busy cursing and Arianne too busy crying to translate.

"That stupid fool," Rygel snarled. "I'll kill him when I find him."

Numb, I lifted my eyes from the distraught Arianne and Tuatha. "What?"

"I'm going to kick his furry black ass," Tashira snorted, his ears also flat, his thick tail sweeping from side to side.

"Good luck with that," Shardon said. "He still has very big teeth."

Whirling, Tashira lashed out with his hind leg, kicking his silver brother on the shoulder with one very large hoof.

"What the hell?" Shardon exclaimed, leaping sideways, away from Tashira's wrath.

"Just shut up!" Tashira commanded. "I'm sick of your stupid comments about his teeth. When I find him, he'll be one sorry wolf."

"I'm just –"

"Shut your bloody mouth."

Turning his back, Tashira stalked away. No one, wolf or human, dared remain in his path. Snorting his fury, Tashira stormed up and down at the clearing's edge, venting his anger on the hapless earth with his hooves.

"That's if he hasn't already killed himself," Rygel added through his curses,

running his hands through his wheaten locks and blowing out his breath in a sharp gust.

His words melted away some of the numbness from my soul. “What do you mean?”

He ceased swearing, and turned toward me, his blood-shot eyes bleak. His hands rose to run through his hair, but dropped to hook his thumbs through his sword belt. “Wizards don’t transport themselves to a place they’ve never been before. How can you know where you’re going?”

Horror dawned inside my thick skull. “Oh, gods – ”

“He could have transported himself into the air a few feet beyond a cliff,” Rygel continued grimly, imitating Tashira and pacing up and down. “Or into solid rock. He took off, blind, literally.”

Grief erased the remaining shock from my brain and soul. What have I done? He knew he went to his death and I hurled my hatred into his face. *Raine, Raine, forgive me.* Oh, Lady what have I done –

“What about your bond?” Corwyn asked, striding forward, his blue eyes under lowered brows filled not with anger, but fear. “Can you feel him? Is he alive?”

Rygel stopped pacing and frowned. Shutting his eyes, he concentrated. I ceased to breathe, watching him. The wolves ceased their snarls at one another. Tashira paused mid-step to gaze at Rygel, his huge brown eyes dark red with anger. I think we all stared at him with hope, with grief, with desperation.

At last, Rygel fetched a deep breath and nodded. “He’s alive, but very far away. He’s at least several days ride to the north.”

Tashira continued his furious pacing. Arianne’s sobs subsided into coughs and hiccups, but Tuatha’s grief did not. He no longer screamed, but his whimpering cries echoed the grief and guilt I felt.

Silverruff growled at Rygel. Rygel nodded in response. “Yes, I will.”

My head rose. Something in his firm tone warned me. “You will? You will what? What did he say?”

“He asked if I was going after him. I am.”

“Despite your oath?”

Rygel smiled grimly. “I am already condemned, cursed. What’s a broken word in the face of that?”

Thunder growled in the distance. The breeze picked up, lowering the warm temperature of the sunny morning. I paid little attention, though, as I stalked around the clearing, my hand on my sword hilt. New will forged like iron in my heart, expelling the grief, as I gazed into the eyes of my warriors.

“You all,” I began slowly, choosing my words carefully, “have sworn your oaths to me.”

Around me, all activity halted. Witraz ceased stroking his piebald’s face, the laughing wolf, who no longer laughed, at his feet. Alun, caught amid the

necessary packing of his saddlebags, dropped them to the ground beside his saddle. Rannon, Left and Right wandered closer to me, as though instinctively knowing what I was about to say, their hands on their hilts. Kel'Ratan scowled, smoothing his mustache with his fingers.

While I did not look at the wolves, or Bar, or the Tarbane, I felt their eyes on me. My boys, as one man in strict military formation, stepped forward in a line without glancing at one another. At disciplined attention, they stood stiff and expressionless, backs ramrod straight, their eyes blank. Tor stood between Yuri and Yuras, his head not even reaching their burly shoulders, imitating their stance. Like them, he stood as though he'd had the disciplined preparation the others did, his brown eyes staring, not at me, but past. Like any well-trained soldier, he awaited his marching orders.

Corwyn, his hand on his sword hilt, stood protectively over Arianne, yet his fierce blue eyes watched me with approval. Something sank into Kel'Ratan's head, for his scowl deepened, and he ceased his rhythmic stroking. I heard him step closer to my back, sensed his rising suspicion, but I ignored him.

"You all know I'm not good with speeches," I continued on, slowly pacing back and forth before them. "So I'll say this straight and simply. I free you from your bonds of loyalty. You no longer owe me your allegiance."

Kel'Ratan choked, strangling. "What – "

I paid him no heed. "You know where I'm going and why. You're all free to go home, swear your loyalty to my father. I'd not ask any of you to accompany me. Though if you do, I'd welcome you with open arms. I go with Rygel."

I glanced around at the dozen or so wolves. "And with them, should they so choose."

Barks, growls and snarls greeted my words. Ears perked as tails wagged, the huge pack ringed me round. I glanced from one to another, stepping around to view those at my back, lowering my hands so they might sniff, lick and wag over them. Had I not previously understood their intelligence, loyalty and sweet natures, I might have feared for my safety. Any one of them might kill me with little effort, yet I felt no fear. They loved Raine and I was Raine's mate.

Rygel smiled slightly as he translated. "They're going."

Thunder cracked again, closer this time. The freshening breeze whipped my hair into my eyes. Impatiently, I swept it back, glancing up at the tree branches tossing about, their leaves whipped by the wind. A bank of dark grey clouds darkened the blue skyline just over the treetops. A bloody storm coming. *Just what we need*, I thought sourly.

Arianne rose awkwardly to her feet, the now silent Tuatha in her arms.

"I'm coming, too," announced Tashira, trotting back to the group.

"Where Rygel goes," Shardon said. "I go."

Kel'Ratan freed his voice and his anger. "Ly'Tana! You will *not*. He made it quite clear he doesn't want us, nor does he need us. We – you, the warriors

and me, are going home.”

I faced him calmly. “You don’t have a say in this.”

He leaned toward me, threatening, his finger raised to point into my face. “Don’t I?”

“You don’t.”

“You’ve a choice,” he ground out, spittle slicking his teeth. “Come home with me now –”

While his blue eyes glared down into mine, his finger left me and pointed to my boys. He smiled grimly, his words now soft. “–or don’t. If you choose not to come willingly, I’ll have them tie you to your horse and take you back to Kel’Halla in chains.”

I smiled at my furious cousin. “No. They won’t.”

He straightened, a tiny, evil smile playing about his mustache. “That’s how you want to play, then, eh? Witraz, get some rope. Rannon and Alun, take her.”

In the heavy silence, no one spoke, shuffled their feet, coughed, sniffed, nor scratched an itch. The wolves tensed, hackles raised along spines, as they stood quiet, waiting. Waiting for a leader to emerge whom they’d follow. Only the growling thunder, closer yet, echoed through the clearing.

Kel’Ratan glanced up, away from my face. He looked around at the warriors who neglected to obey his orders.

“Did you hear what I said?” he demanded.

Witraz nodded. “We heard you, m’lord Duke.”

“Well?”

Now Witraz glanced at his companions, his fellow warriors, taking courage from their unspoken support. He took a deep breath and met Kel’Ratan’s glower fully. “We don’t answer to you. M’lord.”

“What?!” Kel’Ratan all but screamed.

“Had Her Highness not released us from our vows,” Witraz went on quietly, “we still would go where she goes. Our oaths were to her, m’lord, begging your pardon, not you.”

“Released or not,” said Alun. “I go with her. The Prince saved her life, her honor, kept her out of Brutal’s vicious hands.”

Alun paused, glancing around the camp, his brother warriors, before finally looking back at my furious cousin. “In saving Her Highness, he saved Kel’Halla from certain ruin. Had she released me and chosen to go home with you, I’d still follow after him. He’s deserving of my loyalty and my life.”

Rannon stepped forward and bowed low. “I don’t wish your enmity, m’lord Duke,” he said quietly. “I pray for your understanding and forgiveness. I’m not released from my bonds of fealty despite her words. I’ll go with her. And follow him.”

I knew what Left and Right would do. Only death would part them from going wherever I went. As one, they snapped identical salutes to Kel’Ratan and, at stiff

attention, stalked to stand at my back.

That left Yuri and Yuras. While they didn't act in unison like Left and Right, they both nodded slowly, blue eyes both sad and grim at the same time. "Alun spoke the words of my heart," Yuri said quietly. "I refuse her release. I'm still sworn to her and I will ride with her. Even unto hell."

"Prince Raine needs us," said Yuras. "He just doesn't know it."

Kel'Ratan swung back around to me. "What about your oath?" he sneered. "You swore your fealty, your obedience, to him. Will you damn yourself by foreswearing?"

I smiled. "I will, if it saves his life."

Kel'Ratan straightened slowly and grinned, an evil, sardonic grin that told me he held an ace up his sleeve. "We'll see about that."

He raised his eyes and looked beyond my head. "Bar. You at least have some brains. You'll help me keep her alive."

I stiffened. His calling on Bar caught me by surprise. I refused to let that show in my face, however. I didn't turn to see Bar's reaction, but stood facing my cousin, my smile still frozen in place. Of anyone present, Bar alone could force me home to Kel'Halla. I mentally bit my knuckle. If Bar sided with Kel'Ratan....

Feathers ruffled as Bar shook his mane. He chirped in a good-humored way.

Dull red, the color of old bricks, suffused Kel'Ratan face. He needed no translation. My huge bodyguard, who, under any circumstances, never permitted me to act rashly. In this, at least, Bar trusted me. I didn't let any triumph show, for I felt none. Raine was right: we most probably rode to our deaths. But I'll be damned before I let him die alone.

"Damn you," Kel'Ratan growled, humiliated, his face suffused with hot blood. "You'll come with me now."

He seized my arm.

Beside me, Silverruff growled low in his chest.

"He's warning you not to touch her," Rygel translated.

Kel'Ratan glared down at the huge wolf. "I'll not have some beast tell me what I will or will not do. She rides home with me. The rest of you can go to hell."

"We intend to," Rygel replied amiably, thumbs hooked in his belt. "While I love you, Kel'Ratan, as I would my brother, you'll release her. Or by all I hold holy there will be blood."

Kel'Ratan sensibly had grabbed me with his left hand. With his right, he drew steel. His teeth bared in a demented grin. "Are you threatening me, bastard?"

"Too bloody right, I'm threatening you."

"Hold, all of you. This is ridiculous."

Corwyn's voice, all but drowned out by an explosion of thunder, froze both

Kel'Ratan and Rygel in their tracks. Not far away, deep in the forest, the barking crack of lightning striking a tree echoed crazily. Instinctively, I spun around, as Kel'Ratan released my arm. *Crikey, that was close.* I swept my hair from my face, sizing up the still-blue sky and melding it with the oncoming storm. *Too early in the morning for this type of weather,* I thought, biting my fingernail.

"Come with me," said Corwyn, seizing Kel'Ratan by the collar.

"What?" Kel'Ratan asked, confused. "Where?"

"Over here. Come on."

Whatever Corwyn said to Kel'Ratan, it worked. The tension left his body. He shoved his sword back into its sheath and he combed his mustache with his free hand. Kel'Ratan-talk for: 'I'm listening'.

"The gods must have an interesting sense of humor," Witraz muttered, offering me a half-salute as he returned to his piebald. He tripped over the big silver wolf, who laughed as Witraz cursed under his breath. Still shaking his head and muttering, he finished his task of tying his saddlebags to his stallion's saddle.

"What do you mean?"

He jerked his thumb at the oncoming storm. "Effing last thing we need."

"A storm that blew up awful bloody fast," Rygel said, his amber eyes narrowed as he watched the sky.

"We were due." Alun shrugged. "Our incredible luck with the fair weather had to end sooner or later."

I followed Rygel's intent stare. Huge white and dark grey thunderheads billowed up over the top of the forest, growing larger by the minute. Lightning stabbed down, its resulting explosion of thunder almost instantaneous. The storm was closer than it looked.

"We may want to consider finding some shelter," Witraz advised.

Tor stumbled to my side, a shy grin revealing his even white teeth. "I have no sword to pledge to you, Your Highness," he said, his brown eyes bright. "But I'm still your man. I will follow you, too. For *his* sake."

I smiled. Damn it, did his voice sound deeper? Resisting the temptation to tousle his curly hair, for that would demean his new-found manhood in his own eyes, I gripped his shoulder. The new muscles under my hand surprised me. Tor would someday be a warrior to be reckoned with.

"So shall you be," I replied, kissing him on the brow. "Keep up with your archery. Somehow we'll find you a sword."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

His grin endearing, he bent swiftly to take my hand and kiss it. Like Witraz, Yuri, Yuras and the twins, Tor returned to his grey horse to finish saddling her.

"That might not have been such a good idea, Princess," Rygel said.

“Why?”

He grimaced, glancing at a forlorn Arianne, Tuatha still overflowing her arms. In the confrontation with Kel'Ratan, I'd almost forgotten them both. “I'm thinking Tor should stay here with Arianne. With one or two of your warriors.”

He jerked his head toward the distant mountains. “That's no place for the young nor the weak.”

“No!” Arianne shrieked, spilling Tuatha into a disorganized heap on the ground. “You'll never leave me behind!”

“Arianne –”

“You can't stop me from going.”

Rygel glanced helplessly to me.

I shrugged. “It'll kill her to stay behind. Tor, also.”

I smiled wryly. “Besides, I just freed them from their vows of fealty,” I said. “My boys are under no oath to obey me now, so how can I command any to stay? Tor, Arianne and Tuatha come along.”

Rygel sighed, looked down into the furious, yet glorious eyes of his tiny beloved. “By your command, Princess.”

Blinding lightning struck the forest, not far from the clearing. Thunder cracked sharply overhead. I couldn't stop the reflexive duck I made, nor did Rygel and Witraz. No few wolves yelped, leaping to the side. Tor's mare spooked, knocking Tor to the ground.

“That was close,” Rygel muttered.

“Too close,” muttered Witraz. “I think we should ride like hell.”

Corwyn and Kel'Ratan walked back toward us. Corwyn had his arm companionably around my cousin's shoulders, his mouth half-smiling. Kel'Ratan's eyes rested on me, though his face remained red. With an embarrassed flush this time, not fury.

Sheet lightning filled the blue sky. Under its accompanying sharp crack of thunder, I and no few others yelped in fear. I swear I felt the impact tremor through the ground, but knew that was impossible. Bar screeched, his wings half furred, his raptor eyes on the rapidly approaching storm. I rubbed my arms, my fingers tripping over my armbands, gooseflesh rising along my skin.

“That storm isn't natural,” Rygel said slowly.

Silverruff growled.

“I don't know,” Rygel answered absently.

Suddenly, his yellow eyes widened in horror. “Gods above and below,” he muttered, using Raine's favorite epithet. “Oh, shit. *Shit. Shiiiiit!*”

“Rygel, what –” I began.

Like a steel vise, his grip on my arm clamped down painfully. Dragging me with him, he bolted toward the Tarbane brothers. I ran alongside him, keeping up with his long legs as best I could.

“Quick,” he demanded. “Which one of you is the fastest?”

“I am,” said Shardon.

“He is,” said Tashira in the same breath.

Seizing me about the waist, Rygel threw me onto Shardon’s bare back. Such was the force Rygel used, I grabbed Shardon’s thick silver mane to prevent myself from sliding down his other side. Scooting back where I belonged, behind his withers, I swept my hair from my face. Astonished by Rygel’s mad behavior, all I could do was gape down at him.

“Run, my friend,” Rygel said, taking Shardon by the jaw. “Keep her safe, for all our sakes.”

“Rygel – “ Shardon began.

“Outrun the lightning,” Rygel gasped, smacking him on the rump. “Run like hell.”

Shardon wheeled, half-rearing, shaking his head. Breaking into a fast gallop, he headed north, away from the approaching storm. Having no reins, I pulled back on his mane, begging him to stop. “Shardon, no, wait.”

Plunging to a halt, he reared again.

I looked back. “What about you?” I cried. “Come with us.”

“Go!” Rygel screamed, running after us and punching his fist into the air. “It’s not after us. Shardon, run!”

“Hang on,” Shardon ordered tersely. “Let Shardon show you the real meaning of speed.”

I clamped down with my legs a split second before his lunging gallop all but tossed me over his rump. Like a limpet, I clung desperately to his mane. His body being so much larger than Mikk’s, my legs could hardly reach far enough around his barrel to hold me in place. Rather than pursue that course, I leaned forward, keeping my body closer to his massive neck. I wrapped not just my hands into his flying mane, but my arms as well. His speed blew that very life-saving mane into my face, whipping tears into my eyes. By ducking my head, I sent it past my shoulder.

My eyes cleared. Not that it did me much good, however. The terrain flew past so quickly it blurred. Or was it the wind whipping tears into my eyes? I blinked them away. If I thought Tashira had run fast when we escaped Brutal’s magical trap, Shardon outstripped him by a wide margin. Bar at his fastest speed hadn’t a hope of catching up. An arrow in flight? Oh, please.

The hills rose steeply, grew ever rockier with sparse shrubs and scrub oak thickets dotting the hillside in patches. We startled a small herd of deer that had no time to leap out of his path before Shardon cleared an antlered buck in an effortless jump.

“Check behind us,” he said.

I risked a glance over my shoulder. My jaw dropped. I swallowed hard, trying to drum up something sensible to say.

“Lady have mercy,” I whispered.

“I suspect we’ll need her mercy before long,” Shardon replied, his tone dry.

Keeping an eye on the storm, I shot glances over my shoulder. The dark clouds kept pace. A huge bank of near black fog enveloped the hills behind us. Lightning stabbed down in an almost continual rain of blinding flashes. Given Shardon’s great speed and the wind in my ears, I hadn’t heard the thunder. Like a hand, the swirling cloud bank reached out, a mere thirty rods behind us, and cast its lightning. The bolt struck the ground just behind Shardon’s massive hind legs.

“Got a good grip?” Shardon asked.

“I jolly hope so.”

“Me, too.”

He jumped and dodged. He leaped left, right, up, down, sliding like a serpent before leaping like a nimble cat up and out, then lunging sideways. No horse on earth could ever match his athletic prowess. As his front hooves left the ground in an incredible leap, his hind legs twisted, bucking, driving him to either the right or the left. Glad to have his mane wrapped securely around my arms, I hugged tight to his neck, still shooting rapid-fire glances behind us.

“It’s getting closer.”

“Bah.” He snorted. “I’m just getting warmed up.”

As though reading the evil mind behind the clouds, the lightning, Shardon leaped and twisted, jumping safely out of the way. Each bolt struck the ground where he should have been, not where he was. As sinuous as a snake, as light on his feet as a dancer, Shardon evaded the strikes as easily as I might stroll through a rose garden and avoid the thorns.

“What wants you dead?” he asked, as casually as though we stood around the campfire talking, all the while taking yet another snaking leap that outsmarted the lightning. “Or perhaps it’s truly a ‘who’.”

“I’ve no idea,” I gasped, shutting my eyes. *I’m dead*, I thought, haphazard.

“Odd. I’d think you’d have some idea.”

“If I knew, I’d tell you.” *Lady, make him jump aside. Please.*

I peeked again at the death that awaited us, a dangerously short distance ahead.

“I can keep a secret.”

I shut my eyes. “I know.”

*Turn aside, you silver fool.*

I soooo did not want to watch as we descended into the arms of death.

Shardon leaped and dodged the lightning, yet maintained his steady course. He ran straight ahead carrying me into Tarbane suicide. I opened an eye and peeped past his perked ears. *Surely he sees it? Did he have a set of wings hidden somewhere he can pull out and use to fly? Why doesn’t he veer aside?* “Uh, Shardon?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Do you see that, er –“

“Ravine?”

“I think they call those that size canyons.”

He snorted. “Ravine, canyon, what’s the diff?”

I shut my eyes. *The boy has a death wish. Of course. Sentenced to spend the next three years with Rygel who wouldn’t? Why did he have to take me with him?*

“Ly’Tana?” Shardon asked. “You still with me, girl?”

“Yes,” I squeaked through numb lips.

Now, had he even wanted to, his speed far too great, Shardon had no time to stop. Nor with the surrounding sharp rocks strewn about at close quarters could he dodge safely among them. We’re both dead. *Lady, lady, receive my soul...*

Lightning struck the earth and rocks behind his heels the instant his heels left the ground. He leapt into the sky, airborne. He leaped out into empty space.