

"Let's sit."

We did. She gave me spiced rum, and it took the edge off.

I said, "I have wheat options to sell. It's a single contract for ten cargoes. Strike price, date, all that is fixed." I showed her the paper. "Can you find a buyer?"

"Maybe. May I read it?"

I gave her the paper.

She read slowly, carefully, and silently. I don't think she missed anything.

After that, Esmerelda said, "I can move your trade, but it will be tricky. It's winter wheat, and winter is coming soon. In the north it's already here. Most merchants who can move this much grain will already have buyers for some, if not all, of their harvest, and the ones who can pay top dollar certainly will."

"But possible," I said.

"Certainly. I'd like to manage your expectations, though. I can reasonably get you a mark per contract, maybe a mark and a half. Fifteen total marks would be on the high-side, and it will take several weeks of searching. They're valuable to the right buyer, but there aren't a lot of buyers." She shrugged. Esmerelda had wispy white hair and dangly earrings. "My commission is the greater of one mark or five percent, and that includes surety. Would you like me to go ahead?"

She looked at me with a polite smile with a whole lot of little stuff in it. She was eager for the job, with high-eyebrows and a slight forward lean. She was closed to negotiations, with hands folded, palms toward herself. She did well, with careful makeup and diamonds. She wore them subtly. Her dangly earrings had silver teardrops that caught my attention, but studs on the ear-posts had big rocks. Her wedding ring, white gold and more white diamonds, was almost hidden under her lace cuffs. She wore one simple necklace, the only obvious piece that wasn't somewhat hidden, but it was just a chain of small silver links.

Nothing, nothing on her was yellow, not even gold.

My mouth spoke of its own volition. "Please do. Would you check Citi Kageran? There's a merchant there, Trui, who might be interested."

"My pleasure. I'll walk you to the clerk, and he can start surety while I run your order to the callers. We should be able to call your order before you leave."

We got up and walked out the double doors. The main hall was moderately busy with rich people in riches and rich people in deceptively poor clothing, and possibly a few poor people in both too. I didn't know where I fit in.

The rum had been a little strong. I looked at Esmerelda. "How is the water?"

"Solange Sweetwater," she said as she walked me to the clerks. "Tastes like Elvenhome."

#

Esmerelda talked Hyrma Trui of Kageran into offering me double the strike price.

I don't know if Aeher's family had one hundred twenty six marks. If they did, they would bleed for it. But they could move wheat while Trui was in the market. No one got bankrupted, my prince's ransom was perfectly reasonable, and if Aeher's family needed some help, I could do that again too.

My scheme hadn't hurt anyone. I'd kept it secret to protect myself, but I hadn't done anything wrong. There was no reason to feel bad about this at all, and the sweetwater tasted like Elvenhome.

But the contract was a bearer document, so I had to take it to Kageran for delivery. I left Aeher explaining to his people that yes, Othrak, a goblin, was going to live with them. He explained that Othrak was now a hero to the Star-Drinking People. He told them of rescues in the dark, the Well of Memory, and Laptra's bizarre, psychotically-personal evil. He even sang my praises for the fight on the thunderhead. He'd promised to do so, but I'd expected him to dodge. Instead he stood before the kings and queens of elvenhome, come together to rejoice in his return, and sang of me and him in a voice like nightingales. For an infinite moment, I was the most important person on Pallas. I started getting feelings outside my heart; tingles in my fingers and face, and I had to leave before I did something stupid.

Arguably, a human interested in an elf at all was stupid, being interested an elvish prince was definitely stupid, and me, a non-mythically beautiful woman more adept at sneaking around goblins and occasionally stabbing one than court niceties, chasing an elvish prince was no doubt more foolish than any of the above.

I'm the sort of girl who breaks into goblin prisons and swears too much. I am that fool.

Want to know an expectedly weird thing about elves? They don't swear. They don't curse. They don't invoke their gods in vain. I swear like a fucking sailor, and they ignore it. They're not offended, but swearing isn't elvish so to them, it doesn't happen. Just talking to elves made me realize how human I am, how not they are, and how absurd I was being, thinking too long of Prince Aeher of Elvenhome.

But that didn't matter, because I wasn't really thinking of Aehr, because if I did, I'd have to stop swearing.

I left in a hurry because those options had a hard settlement date and soon. Phillius scared me, but he sailed quickly. I sailed for Kageran on the *Dream in Emerald*.

#

On the western edge of the Arsae, the black of the Hyades falls over cliffs. No human has seen the bottom of the Three Sisters waterfall and lived. There the ghosthearts of the Arsae grow thick and tall, taller than the cliffs that bound the deep Karas, and tall as mountains beyond the lake itself. They form a green rise like a wooden wave, eternally breaking against the cliff. The foam is their leaves, branches, the little sticks that fall from higher bows, and the tiny monoleaf thyf that grows in the highest canopies. The whole copse sways with the wind as a wave slowed down in the moment of breaking.

A gallows overlooks the edge. It's on a long, flat platform that juts past the rock with carved channels so the waterfall roars underneath. The gallows tree faces the breaking wave of the Arsae: a straight trunk with one crossbar branch. The end of the crossbar hangs over falling water. No one occupied it when Phillius sailed the *Dream in Emerald* to the edge and tied off to the hanging post. It worked fine as a pier.

Kageran resides further up the lakeshore, maybe a mile and a half walk. The water didn't seem to move until it passed over the cliffs, and then it roared. It was winter now, but in the summer the lake surface is green with waterfern and lilies.

Phillius walked to the edge of the hanging platform, looked down the black chasm, and nodded at whatever he thought. I stepped off the boat and walked gingerly across the gallows platform. It was bitterly cold, far colder than the air over the Arsae. Tiny icebergs, little frozen bits of lake scum, and snow-covered logs floated by under the platform and fell. The old wood creaked

underfoot, and I was carrying a heavy duffel. Once on stone, I looked back at Phillius.

He looked at the empty gallows arm, the falls, and the bare rock nearby. The arm had seen use, and there were no gravesites. Then he nodded to me.

We parted silently. I would have felt odd saying goodbye knowing he wouldn't reply.

An hour later I climbed into Citi Kageran.