

dragonwitch

TALES OF GOLDSTONE WOOD



ANNE ELISABETH
STENGL



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*To Manda,
for all those long walks,
daydreams,
and endless stories.*

LEGEND OF TWO BROTHERS

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY.

In the days when the Near World was new and mortal men were young and frightened, Death-in-Life crept among the shadows and whispered darkness into their fears. So they hid themselves in caves and never dared to look above to the lights shining in the vaults of the sky; they could not hear the Songs of the Spheres.

The Lumil Eliasul, Giver of Songs, took pity on their helpless state. He sent his knights, the Brothers Ashiun. No one recalls their names before the Lumil Eliasul called them into his service. The elder he called *Akilun*, which is Wisdom; the younger, *Etanun*, which is Strength.

With these names, each brother was given a great gift. Into Akilun's hand, the Lumil Eliasul placed Asha, a lantern filled with the light of Hymlumé, the lady moon.

"Take this lantern, and with it disperse the shadows so that my children may see the Greater Lights. And when they see, they will hear the Songs I have sung for them and which the sun and the moon sing still. Thus they will have hope of life beyond the dust of mortality."

So spoke the Giver of Songs. Then he turned to Etanun, and into his fist he pressed the hilt of Halisa, a sword forged in the fires of Lumé, the lordly sun.

“With this sword,” said the Lumil Eliasul, “cut down the monsters that plague their fears. Drive out the fires of Death-in-Life and his brood with a fire more pure, more dreadful, more sure. Thus my children will know the truth of the life to which they have been called, and they will sing with Lumé and Hymlumé.”

At the behest of their Master, the Brothers Ashiun carried their gifts across the Final Water into the Near World. Etanun drove out the Faerie beasts that crawled along the mortal ground, devouring as they went, and even Death-in-Life drew back into his own dark kingdom, fearing the fire of Halisa. Akilun shone his lantern into the darkest reaches of the mortal realm, and people far and wide gathered to its light, marveling at the things they saw and heard of that they had never before dreamed. Together, the two brothers built the Houses of old, great halls with doors on either end that opened to the east and west. Akilun filled these Houses with the light of Asha so that even when the brothers passed on to distant realms, the mortals of every nation could still hear the Songs of the sun and the moon.

So Etanun and Akilun journeyed throughout the Near World, bringing truth and hope to the farthest countries, even to the distant isles across the wild sea. But Death-in-Life looked upon their work and gnashed his teeth. He hated the Songs of the Spheres almost as much as he hated their creator. When he had first seen the pitiable state of the mortals, he had thought to take them, to create a people after his own design who would serve and worship only him. But now, as the Houses stood tall and the mortals gathered to hear the Songs, Death-in-Life saw his nightmarish dreams begin to fade.

So he turned to another, an immortal queen of the Faerie folk, and he spoke his lies to her. Brokenhearted and filled with jealous anger, she heeded his words. And so he created his firstborn.

Hri Sora. The Flame at Night.

She set upon the Great Houses and burned them, scattering the poor mortals back into darkness. Heroes of old rose up to face this dragon, but none could match her flame. One by one, kings, queens, and chieftains of the Near World watched their holy places burn, sacrifices offered by Hri Sora to her Dark Father.

But Akilun and Etanun were not through with their work. Akilun shone Asha lantern, and mortals flocked to its light. And Etanun set out to slay Hri Sora. Armed with Halisa, he plunged into the darkest regions of the Near World. He found her at last on a cold mountain, and there he fought her. The fire of their battle melted the snow on the mountaintop, which ran like rivers down into the valleys below. Yet Hri Sora could not match the might of Halisa as wielded by the knight, and she fell beneath his blade.

But alas, Death-in-Life's firstborn could not be so easily destroyed.

Akilun the Elder, bearing his lantern, found his brother exhausted upon the barren slopes of the mountain. Etanun was near death, but under Akilun's gentle hand, he gradually stepped from the shadow back into the living world.

"I have killed her!" said Etanun then.

Akilun shook his head. "It is not so, brother. Hri Sora will return, I fear. You have only destroyed the first of her lives."

Etanun refused to hear his brother's words. His heart burned with a fire of his own, the fire of vengeance unsatisfied. "Halisa cannot be cheated out of such a victory!" he declared. Akilun could only wait in silence for Etanun to know the truth.

In time, the Great Houses were rebuilt. Kingdoms were established. Nations rose and fell and warred and made peace. But those mortals who heard and paid heed to the Sphere Songs prospered and gave thanks to the Song Giver. A hundred years spun across the face of the mortal realm.

And Hri Sora returned, even as Akilun had known she would.

In a rage of fire more terrible than before, she flamed into the Near World. All the rebuilt Great Houses she tore to pieces and then set upon those she had not touched during her first life. One by one she destroyed them, and though Etanun, incensed, pursued her with all the passion of his soul, he could not overtake her trail of fire.

At last there was but one House remaining in all the Near World. The people of that land knew of the destruction wrought by Hri Sora. Desperate, they did what no man had dared do in all the generations since the coming of the Brothers Ashiun. They shut the doors of the House, hiding the glow of Asha, damping the Songs of the Spheres. And their world plummeted into darkness.

Although Hri Sora searched far and wide, she could not discover the final House of Lights.

Thus thwarted in her goal, she flew to the wide green plain of Corrilond and set fire to its lushness, turning all from green to desert in moments. There at last Etanun found her, and there he fought her a second time. The fury of their battle was beyond all telling, and mortals fled from that land, not to return for generations. Once more Hri Sora's flame could not withstand the fire of Halisa. Etanun plunged the blade into the depths of the furnace within her breast.

For the second time, Hri Sora died and vanished from the Near World in a hurricane of ash.

Again Akilun sought out his brother, only to find him on the brink of death. Again Akilun nursed him back to life. But Hri Sora's claws had scored Etanun's body with deep wounds filled with dragon poison. Though Akilun ministered to his brother with great skill, when at last Etanun opened his eyes, they shimmered with the heat of remnant venom.

"I have killed her!" Etanun declared. "I have had my vengeance!"

But Akilun responded with great sorrow. "She will return more powerful than before."

Etanun surged to his feet then, ready to kill in his anger. "Where is your lantern?" he cried. "Where is the hope you spread to mortals? Will you profane it with this dooming prophecy? Or is it that you cannot bear the glory of my might, the gift our Lord bestowed upon me, as compared to your own paltry glimmerings?"

Akilun could not reason with his brother. They parted ways, Etanun declaring that he could no longer have dealings with Akilun, prophet of doom, who disgraced the light he bore. Etanun sheathed his sword, hiding its brilliance, and refused to fight as he once had. The bitterness of dragon poison filled his body; he lowered his gaze from the Spheres Above, and he stopped up his ears to the Songs in which he had once gloried.

It was then that he began to hear the voice of Death-in-Life for himself.

"You want power?" said that dreadful Father of dragons. "You want fire that cannot be quenched? Come to me. Receive my kiss."

Etanun plunged into the Netherworld, pursuing that voice and that false promise. "My Lord has betrayed me," he said to himself as he went.

“His gift, Halisa, has proven worthless. I will seek my own way now.” With these black thoughts, he progressed down and down, driven by poison as he pursued the Dark Water.

But Akilun followed him.

The elder brother, Asha in his hand, stepped into Death’s realm and chased Etanun down the long, dark Path. He caught him at last and pleaded with him to go no farther. “Turn your face away from this dire purpose!” he cried. “Turn back to the truth you know and humble yourself before your Lord.”

“I will not be humiliated before all the worlds again!” Etanun cried, and he spat in Akilun’s face, declaring that he would meet Death and take his kiss without fear.

So Akilun put his arms around his brother, clutching him fast. “I will not let you go another step.”

Etanun struggled; Akilun held true. Etanun’s strength was double that of his older brother, but Akilun’s love was greater still. They wrestled in the darkness of Death’s realm, Etanun resisting, Akilun restraining. All the light of Asha shone in Etanun’s eyes, brighter and brighter, chasing away the phantoms of the Netherworld and their grim whispers. “Look at it!” Akilun cried, forcing his brother to face that shining purity. “Look at it and see the truth you once knew!”

Etanun fought but the light filled him even so. The brightness and beauty of it washed Hri Sora’s poison from his veins, leaving him weak, trembling, but in the end . . . whole.

His muscles relaxed. Breathing with difficulty, he collapsed. Akilun let go his hold and fell beside him.

Generations had passed in the mortal world above as the brothers battled and then lay still. At last Etanun roused himself and turned to Akilun. “Brother, I have sinned,” he began, but the words vanished from his lips.

Akilun was dead.

His strength broken from his great struggle for his brother’s life, his spirit had flown across the Final Water to the Farthest Shore, where Hymlumé and Lumé sing before the throne of the Song Giver. But while his spirit flew free, his body lay in ruin beside Etanun.

Etanun wept. He wept at his folly, at the conceit that had led him and Akilun to this place. Even as he wept, the light of Asha rested upon him.

He dug a grave for Akilun on the Path to the Dark Water. He set a monument there, a stone carved with this legend:

*Beyond the Final Water falling,
The Songs of Spheres recalling.
Though you walk the Path to Death's own throne,
You will walk with me.*

He set Asha atop the stone and left it there, saying, "May you be a guiding light, a hope to those who find themselves drawn by Death-in-Life's foul work."

Then he turned and marched into the deep places of the Netherworld, and fiends and phantoms fled at his footsteps. He found a place where the Final Waters flowed, spreading from the realms beyond into the Near World and into the Far. In that place he built a chamber. Above the flowing water, he set an uncut stone.

"There rest, Halisa," he said, placing his sword atop that stone. "May you sleep a hundred years and more until Hri Sora returns to work her evil fire. Wake only when I or my heir comes at last to claim you."

So Etanun left Halisa waiting in darkness. He himself journeyed from the Netherworld into the realms above, passing out of all legends and tales and histories. Until the time of Hri Sora's return.

Until the time of her final death.



CHRONICLER

1

HAVE YOU EVER WATCHED AN IMMORTAL DIE?

You who have slain countless fey folk, tell me if you dare: Did you ever stand by and watch an immortal death? Did you see the blush of life fade to gray, the light of the spirit slowly wane? You have taken life, but have you seen it stolen from before your eyes?

I have.



Dawn in the North Country was beautiful, if chilly that spring, filled with birdsong and dew-shimmering flowers on the banks of River Hanna. The rising sun stretched out its rays to crown the high keep of Castle Gaheris. Tenant farmers, their tools over their bowed shoulders as they made their way to the fields, straightened momentarily, lifting their gazes to the sight. Their hearts swelled to see those austere stones glowing with morning glory, as though the sun itself bestowed a golden promise upon all who lived there.

The castle was home to Earl Ferox, who some said should be king.

The farmers smiled at this, their weathered faces cracking against the dawn chill, their breath wisping before their mouths. Honor though it was to be tenants of the most powerful earl in the North Country, how much greater would the honor be should they become tenants of the king himself?

So the sun rose and the farmers trudged on to their fields, and the servants inside Gaheris stoked fires in cold hearths and prepared for an important day, the day the envoy from Aiven should arrive. A day some might even call fateful.

And Alistair sat upright in his bed, screaming.

He realized what he was doing quickly enough, stuffed his fleece into his mouth, and bit down hard. He knew the servants had heard him, though. He could hear them in the chamber beyond . . . or rather couldn't hear them, for they had frozen in place, afraid to move. He heard instead their silence.

He coughed out the fleece and, though his heart trembled and his limbs shook, forced himself to utter a great, noisy yawn. It would fool no one. But the servants took it as a signal, and he heard them resume their tasks, setting his fire and filling his basin with fresh well water.

They knew better than to enter his private bedroom. He bolted it against them in any case.

Alistair waited until he heard them leave. Only then did he slip out of bed, wrapping the fleece around his shoulders as he made his way to the window. He looked out upon his uncle's lands: the fields, the hamlets, the groves, all of which he would inherit one day.

But he couldn't see them, nor the growing sunlight that bathed them.

He saw only a pale silver glow shining upon a child's face.

"Dragons blast it!" Alistair cursed and shook his head.



No more than an hour later, Alistair stumbled into Gaheris's library, startling the castle chronicler, who was at his desk, copying out some ledger or history. The Chronicler looked up in some surprise at the young man's entrance.

“You are early, my lord.”

Alistair shrugged. The library boasted only three windows, mere slits in the stone, all west and south facing and admitting none of the morning light. Thus the room was full of candles sitting in wooden, wax-filled bowls. Their glow cast Alistair’s face into ghoulish shadows, emphasizing the dark circles beneath his eyes.

The Chronicler frowned with measured concern as Alistair took a seat at the long table in the center of the room. “Another restless night?”

Alistair buried his face in his hands. Then he rubbed at the skin under his eyes, stretching his face into unnatural shapes, and ended by pulling at the roots of his hair. “You’re an intelligent, learned man, are you not, Chronicler?”

“So some would say,” the Chronicler acceded.

“Have you,” Alistair continued, still pulling at his hair and studying the grain of the wooden table before him with unprecedented concentration, “in all your readings, picked up a word or two concerning dreams?”

The Chronicler set aside his quill and pumice stone, then folded his arms as he turned on his stool to more fully look upon the young lord. “What manner of dreams?”

“Recurring,” said Alistair darkly. He stared at the table as though he should like to burn it with his gaze. The candlelight shone into the depths of his eyes, turning the pale blue irises to orange.

The Chronicler tipped his head to one side. “Are we speaking of a dream you have experienced, Lord Alistair?”

Alistair nodded.

“In this dream, did you see an ax, a sword, or any form of iron weaponry suspended above your head?”

“No.”

“Did you see the face of one long dead calling out to you from behind a shadowy veil?”

“No.”

“Did your last-night’s supper confront you in an antagonistic manner?”

“What?” Alistair looked up.

“Did it?”

“Why would I dream something like that?”

The Chronicler leaned back on his stool, reaching to a near bookshelf from which he selected a volume. The vellum pages were neatly copied in a flowing, if shaky script, and all was beautifully bound up in red-stained leather. The Chronicler flipped to a certain page illuminated with images more fantastic than accurate. He read:

“Ande it dide com about that Sir Balsius, moste Noble Earle of Gaheris, saw withyn the Eie of hyse Mynde a sertayn Mutton upon which he hade Et the night prevyus. And thyse Mutton did taxe Hym moste cruelly for having Gnawed upone its Joints. And it spake unto Hym thus, sayinge: ‘And surely You, most jowl-som Lorde, will die upon the Morrow, and the Wolfs will Gnaw upon Thy Joints.’ So it dide Transpyre that Sir Balsius betook Hymselfe to the Hunt, and—”

“Wait, wait!” said young Alistair, his brow puckering. “You’re telling me that this Earl Balsius—”

“Your great-great-grandfather, if I recall the chronology correctly,” said the Chronicler.

“—dreamt about an antagonistic mutton and died the next day?”

“According to my predecessor, yes.” The Chronicler shut the book and smiled a grim, mirthless sort of smile at the young lord. “But I give little credence to these so-called histories. Dreams are merely dreams, and stories are merely stories. They are subjects of curious interest but nothing upon which to base your life.”

He shoved the volume back into its place with perhaps a little more vehemence than was called for. Alistair, however, did not notice. He was trying to recall what he’d eaten the night before.

“What about,” he said, embarrassed but eager to know, “what about a pale-faced child?”

“Come again?” said the Chronicler.

“A pale-faced child. Paler than any child I ever saw. Like a ghost or a phantom. Running along the edge of a bottomless chasm, and . . .” Alistair stopped, his mouth suddenly dry, and stared into the flickering candle flame, unable to continue.

“Is this your recurring dream, my lord?”

“Perhaps. Some of it.”

“Well, no doubt about it, then,” said the Chronicler. “You’re going to die.”

“What?” Alistair nearly knocked the candle over as he spun to face the Chronicler. “Do you mean it?”

“You saw the pale-faced child beside the bottomless chasm?” The Chronicler selected another volume, slid down from his stool, and approached Alistair at the table. “Then there can be no doubt about it. You’re going to die. A slow, lingering death brought on by study and academic application.” He plunked the book down in front of Alistair. “As long as you’re here, you might as well start reading. Open to the tenth page, please.”

Scowling, Alistair watched the Chronicler climb back onto his stool, wishing he were clever enough this early in the morning to think of something nasty to say. But too many sleepless nights in a row, waking at dawn to frozen feet and nose, had sapped him of any cleverness with which he’d been born.

He should have known better than to confide in the Chronicler.

He opened the volume to the required page and stared at the words scribbled there. He pulled the candle closer, then reached for another. The added light did nothing to help.

“I can’t read this,” he said.

“Yes, you can,” said the Chronicler.

“I don’t know this piece.”

“You know all the letters, and you know the sounds they make.” The Chronicler, bowed over his work, did not bother to look around. His quill scritchd away at a flimsy parchment as he made a copy, using the pumice stone to hold the page in place rather than risk greasing the delicate fibers with his fingertips. “Sound it out.”

Alistair’s scowl deepened. He did not recognize the hand in which this unknown text had been written. Everything put down on paper within the walls of Gaheris was either in the Chronicler’s hand or that of his predecessor. But this hand, this wavering, watery script in faded ink, was not one he had seen before.

“I have time,” the Chronicler said. “I can wait all day if necessary.”

Alistair swallowed, trying to wet his dry throat, then took a hesitant stab at the first word. “Ta-hee.”

“What sound does a *th*’ make?”

Blood rushed to Alistair’s cheeks, turning their chalky pallor bright and blotchy. “*The!*” he read, as though he could kill the word with a single stroke.

“Go on,” said the Chronicler calmly.

Setting his shoulders and rolling his stiff neck, Alistair drew a deep breath. “*The kin-gee . . . No, king. The king will find his . . . his way to the—*”

He stopped suddenly. Within that short phrase he recognized what he was reading. His embarrassment tripled, and he clenched his fists, glaring round at the Chronicler again. “I’m not reading this,” he said.

The Chronicler continued writing without a pause.

“This is a nursery rhyme,” Alistair said. “I’m not a babe in my nursemaid’s arms!”

“Shall I bear word to your uncle that once again you have given up intellectual pursuits for a pack of sorry dogs and a still sorrier fox?”

“Intellectual pursuits? This?” Alistair threw up his hands, leaning back in his chair. “Anyway, Uncle Ferox doesn’t read. Neither does any other earl in the North Country. That’s why we keep men like you.”

The Chronicler said nothing. But he said it with such finality that Alistair sighed, knowing he’d lost the fight, and turned back to the book. He might as well ram his head against a brick wall as challenge the Chronicler.

Between them remained the unspoken truth: Earls may not read, but earls were not kings.

Well, neither was Alistair, but this argument would gain him no ground. Not with an entire nation’s expectations resting on his young shoulders. So he bent over the old book again and strained his eyes in the candlelight to make out the scribbling scrawl.

“*The king will find his way,*” he read slowly, like a blind man feeling out an unfamiliar path, “*to the sw—swar—sword?*”

“Yes,” said the Chronicler.

“*The sword beneath the floor. The nig-hit. The night. The night will flame again.*”

“Good,” said the Chronicler, though Alistair knew the effort hardly merited praise. Even the simplest words gave him difficulty. He’d started learning too late, he thought. It came easy for someone like the Chronicler, who’d been apprenticed to old Raguel from the time he could speak.

Alistair had always had more important matters to occupy his mind, and only the daft whim of his uncle could have driven him to letters so late in his education.

“Continue,” the Chronicler said.

Alistair ground his teeth. Then he began:

*“The night will flame again
When the Smallman finds the door.
The dark won’t hide the Path
When you near the House of—”*

“Do you really think I am so easily fooled?”

Alistair stopped. He did not raise his head, but his eyes flashed to the back of the Chronicler’s head. “I’m reading the rhyme,” he said.

“No,” said the Chronicler, still without looking around. “You are *reciting* the rhyme. You know it by heart. You’re not reading at all.”

With a curse, Alistair slammed the book shut and stood, nearly knocking the nearest candle over into its pooling wax. “If I already know the dragon-eaten thing, I see no reason why I should read it.”

“Neither do I,” the Chronicler replied, “so long as you are determined to be less of a man than you could be.” He shook his head and assumed a patronizing tone, one that Alistair knew all too well and hated for the familiarity. “Do you not realize, my lord, that you only limit yourself by this stubbornness? Can you understand the wealth of worlds and lives available to you through the written word, waiting to be discovered?”

“Unreal lives,” Alistair said. “Unreal, untrue, unlive. I have no interest in holing myself away in dark rooms, poring over pages of these fool letters. I have a life of my own to live.”

“Unless, of course, this pale-faced child of your dreams has its way,” said the Chronicler.

Alistair’s cheeks drained of color. He looked sickly in the candlelight. “Don’t mock me, Chronicler. Remember your place.”

But the Chronicler was one of those people unable to be intimidated by rank. He turned and fixed Alistair with a stare, and Alistair immediately wished he could take back his words.

“You mock yourself,” said the Chronicler, “wasting your energies worrying about dreams when there is work to be done. Or do you think the kingship will land upon you without merit? You, Earl Ferox’s illiterate nephew?”

Alistair wanted to rage. But rage didn’t come naturally to his nature. Besides, he was terribly, terribly tired. So he wilted beneath the Chronicler’s stare and managed only a muttered, “I don’t see how reading and writing will make me a better king. Will it strengthen my ability to lead earls, bind alliances, or battle Corrilond?”

“The Kings of Corrilond read,” said the Chronicler.

“Well, then I won’t be a King of Corrilond, will I?”

The Chronicler’s mouth opened, and Alistair braced himself as for the whip. The Chronicler may not have possessed anyone’s idea of manly prowess, but he did possess a tongue quicker and sharper than any cat-o’-nine-tails and a wit to match. Some of the tongue-lashings Alistair had received during library altercations left scars, and he did not relish taking another.

He was spared by a knock at the door and the entrance of his mother’s page. Alistair turned to the boy with relief. “What is it?”

“Her ladyship wishes to inform you of the arrival of the envoy from Aiven.” The page bowed quickly, his eyes darting from Alistair’s furious face to the Chronicler’s and back again. “Your bride, my lord.”

“Oh.” The heat drained from Alistair’s body, leaving him suddenly cold and a little clammy. “Of course. Thank you, and tell Mother that I will be down directly.”

The page left and Alistair, without a word to the Chronicler, went to one of the south-facing library windows and looked out. He heard the thump of his teacher sliding off his high stool, but he did not turn around. His gaze swept across the courtyards of Gaheris and down the path leading up from River Hanna. He saw the flag of Aiven, white with the crest of a griffin in red, and the retinue, some on foot, some on horseback. In the midst was a horse-borne litter in which he was certain rode Lord Aiven’s eldest daughter, Lady Leta.

The entourage entered the outer courtyard, and Alistair could see the curtains of the litter drawn back. The Chronicler climbed up on a low step beside him and also looked out the narrow window.

“Well,” said Alistair as the girl emerged. “There she is. My bride.” He frowned a little. “What do you think of her?”

The Chronicler’s eyebrows lifted, and his voice was as dry as it had ever been when he replied, “She looks a proper milk-faced lass. Just what you’d expect in an earl’s wife.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Alistair, and while he felt he should be angry with the Chronicler, he couldn’t work up the strength for it.

“You’d better get down and meet her,” the Chronicler said. “Your lesson this morning is through.”

“Maybe one more verse?” It was only almost a joke.

“Face it like a man,” the Chronicler said, and though they had just been at odds, he clapped the young lord on the back. “You can’t escape her now she’s here.”

“No. I suppose not.”



Lady Mintha, sister of Earl Ferox, wrapped her fur-edged robe tightly about herself as she waited to receive the Aiven envoy. The cold morning tipped her features a raw red but could do nothing to emphasize the chill in the gaze she turned upon her son.

“Alistair!” she cried, her smile freezing his blood as Alistair, still buckling his cloak, hastened to join her in the inner courtyard. “You’ve kept us waiting in the cold, my darling. I was beginning to think your uncle would be obliged to escort Lady Leta inside himself.”

“Forgive me, Mother,” Alistair said, dropping a kiss on his mother’s cheek . . . or rather, on the air just above. He feared his lips might ice over if he actually touched her. Then he offered a hasty bow to his uncle.

Earl Ferox, though he had been a magnificent man in his prime, trembled like a gutted old tree, still standing but only just clinging to life. His eyes, once bright with warrior’s fire, were filmed over with dullness. A few years younger than his sister, he was not an old man. But the wasting disease struck even the mightiest, and neither leech nor herbalist could prolong the span of his days.

He kept living, however. Long after many had thought he would

succumb, he continued his labored existence, day after dogged day. He had not yet seen the earls of the North Country offer the crown to Gaheris. He could not die. Not yet.

He nodded to his nephew and bade him rise. "This is a great day for Gaheris," he said, his voice quavering but determined. "Long have I wished to see the Houses of Aiven and Gaheris united in purpose. Today marks the beginning!"

Even as he spoke, he stepped aside. The hunched mass of his body moved to reveal the form of the maiden standing beyond. And Alistair had his first up-close look at his future bride.

Light of Lumé, she was much younger than he'd thought!

Or perhaps, he decided on second glance, she was merely small for her age. And the way she stood, head bowed and eyes downcast, gave her the look of a young girl rather than the woman he had expected. She wore a white barbet and veil that covered all her hair, decorated by a simple gold thread.

And the eyes she raised to meet his, though gray, reminded him of a fawn's timid gaze. The poor girl was at least as unhappy about this arrangement as Alistair, which was some consolation at least. Alistair offered her what he hoped was a friendly smile.

"Welcome to Gaheris," he said.

She opened her mouth. For a moment she said nothing, and he could see by the look in her eyes that she was trying to think of something clever, something charming. He braced himself. In the end, however, she managed only a weak, "I . . . I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Lord Alistair."

He felt his grin sliding away, so he stepped forward swiftly and offered his arm. "You must be cold," he said. "Allow me."

She slid her hand up onto his wrist and walked beside him, her head scarcely coming to his shoulder, and said not a word the rest of the day unless spoken to. There was no doubt in Alistair's mind.

He would never love Lady Leta of Aiven.



In the gloom of night, a shed door creaked.

By the light of the moon above, a wizened, dirty figure emerged, tot-

ing a broom, a mop, and a leaking bucket. He shut the door and latched it firmly, then turned with a sigh to survey the inner courtyard and what the moonlight might reveal. River muck tracked everywhere! And who to clean it up? Certainly not the great lords and their great guests.

This was the work of a scrubber.

So the scrubber swept and mopped and scraped mud and horse droppings from the stone. As he worked, he turned his eye up to the castle keep. He saw a light on in the library, of course. Lifting his gaze one story higher, he saw another flickering candle in a window. Lord Alistair's room, he knew, and the candle his one feeble defense against the terrors of the dark and his dreams.

The scrubber looked for a light in the guest quarters. But Lady Leta must have been sent to bed, obedient little creature that she was.

The scrubber scrubbed on. More muck would be driven into the crevices come morning, and he would be out here at this same chore yet again. But that did not mean a man shouldn't try. So on he worked at his lonely task.

But he wasn't alone. Oh no! He had the moon above and all the starry host watching him. One star in particular, bright blue and low to the horizon, winked with curious interest. The scrubber looked up at it and smiled.

"Starlight, star bright," he whispered.

Let us out!

Across the way stood a heavy door, the entrance to the Gaheris family crypt. As the scrubber drew near, driving mud before him, whispers reached out to him from beyond the door, whispers no one else heard, perhaps because, in reality, there was nothing to hear.

Let us out!

"Keep your helmets on," the scrubber said, his bare feet squelching in the mud trailing behind his mop. "It's not time yet."