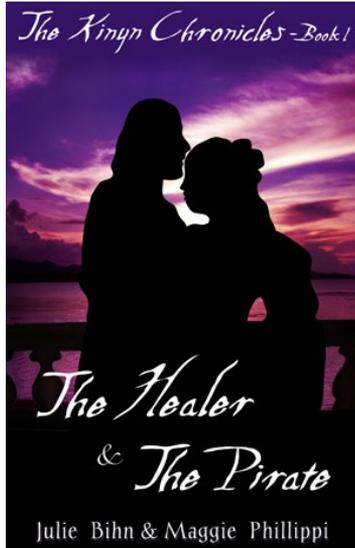


EXCERPT



The Kinyn Chronicles: The Healer and the Pirate

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Chapter 1

Calloused hands, white as the clouds in the sky, grasped Nessa's smaller ones firmly. "You can do this," Nicoli urged. "Flying to Tilos will only take a few hours. And it's a lot safer than two weeks on the road."

Nessa shook her head, refusing to listen to her grandfather's reasoning. She knew she was acting like a child and nothing like the young woman she should be, but she couldn't help it. Her hands were like ice despite the warm autumn day. Bandits would find her; she knew it.

He smiled and squeezed her hands before releasing her. To her dismay, he turned and headed out into the newly-harvested field. Bits of barley straw crunched under his boots.

"Nicoli?" The sound of his given name lodged in her throat and she swallowed hard. Only two seasons had passed since she'd found him and her grandmother, and Nicoli had no more wrinkles than she did. "Grandpa" didn't sound right.

Flying to Tilos didn't feel right, either--it terrified her.

Nicoli came back to her, eyebrows drawn together. "I promise, little one. I'm not going to let any more harm come to you." He pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head. The

gesture did little to appease the shaking inside her. It had been years since she'd taken to the skies.

He tugged her from the shelter of the trees and into the field. "I will be doing the changing. No one will see you until we land." She stayed silent. He crouched, his eyes meeting hers. "We need to get there quickly. It took Sali's letter weeks to get here. Who knows how long the poor boy has?"

Nessa tensed, guilt twisting in her chest. "That's not fair."

He cracked a small smile, his youthful eyes sparkling. "But it's the truth, and if we fly, we'll get there in time." He squeezed her hand, then released and returned to the center of the clearing.

When he bowed his head and closed his eyes, the sun caught the silver highlights in his blue hair. Moments later the light glinting off Nicoli's head covered his body, distorting his figure. The light faded and a beautiful gray winged horse, much slimmer than the ones on the farm, stood where her grandfather had been. His silver mane shone in contrast with his black muzzle and dark, knowing eyes. He spread his glossy feathered wings wide and whinnied to her.

Resigned, Nessa reached into her skirt pocket and took out a band her grandmother had woven. With practiced motions she tied her silver-blue braid into a secure bun. "I'd still rather walk," she murmured. She knew he was right. They might not have the time to waste. She took a deep breath,

approached the flying horse and swung up onto his back. She would have felt a little better if she could have at least brought her staff. But she couldn't hold on to Nicoli and the heavy weapon at the same time.

Nessa held tight as the gray horse took off across the field. With one powerful leap Nicoli took to the air. His feathered wings spread out on either side of her, pushing against the air, propelling them high above the treetops. The surge of energy thrilled her, overwhelming her fears. Finally, the wing beats grew slower and the flight smoothed. The wind whistled through her pointed ears. It felt nothing like riding a horse, not even like sailing, but pure speed, pure freedom. Nessa breathed in the crisp, pure air and took in the expanse of bright blue sky and clouds overhead. The world beneath her and its troubles melted away.

Too soon, the landscape beneath them changed. She couldn't make out the town of Tilos, but they neared the dense trees that marked the wide river that separated the town from Tranin. They'd be over it in an hour and in Tilos not long after.

Would they be too late to save the boy? Or would a band of bandits be waiting for them, ready to steal her away?

Aridin flipped the tail of his long red coat and slowly crouched behind a tree, careful to keep the leaves from crunching under his feet. He rubbed his three-day beard, scowling. He'd rather fight a dozen men than sit here waiting for his prey. Above him, bare branches partly obscured the broad blue sky. He had to move his head to make out the tiny green glow of the star Celestra.

*When Celestra shines bright in broad daylight,
You'll find the lady you seek.
Nearer than Tranin, her home she'll abandon,
To Tilos, to rescue the weak.*

Aridin hoped to catch her on the path, just out of sight of the gates and their guards. The only direct route to Tilos lay before him, with nothing but forest between him and the city. The old hag would have to pass by.

The sound of distant hoof beats caught his ear and his pulse quickened with the prospect of gaining the greatest treasure in the world. He stood and unbuttoned his pocket, making sure the smooth artifact was still there. Soon, he'd have the means to heal his father. The *Night Hawk* needed its captain.

Aridin caught a glimpse of a horse through the trees. He leaned out to get a better view. The human rider had dark skin, and the broad shoulders and the doublet proved him to be a man. He hoped for a moment that it might be an escort--the hag's grandson, perhaps--but the rider also carried the square saddlebags of a messenger. No one followed. Aridin bit back a curse as he slid down the tree, crouching out of sight again. The messenger's horse clopped on by.

The sun tracked across the sky, Celestra following close behind. He worried he was wasting time, something his father couldn't afford. Still, he had no other leads. So he planted his feet, shoved his hands in his pockets, and fixed his eyes on the path.

With every passing minute, the annoyance and worry built into rage. He'd paid three gold--two months' wages to a common man--and the Seer had only given him a few lines of poetry. A smirk lifted the corner of Aridin's lips as he recalled the fear on the Seer's face when he'd leaned over the table, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

*If your words are a lie, then you'd best say goodbye,
As I'll kill you within the week.*

Who said sailors can't be poets? Aridin grunted. If the hag didn't show, he'd find a way to take his revenge, something the Seer wouldn't see coming.

A shadow glided over the path before him, quicker than a cloud. Above he caught a flash of gray through the trees. *Biggest pigeon I've ever seen.* He forced his mind back to the matter at hand. The path remained clear, nothing moving but the rustling leaves carried by the wind.

Scowling, Aridin waited.

Nessa held on tight as her grandfather circled, then started to descend. She took a deep breath to tamp down her panic. The large town was still only a smudge; she couldn't make out the people yet. Below them, the wide road that led to Tilos lay deserted. At least there wasn't a party rushing out to the farmland to greet the flying horse.

Her gaze wandered to the trees outlining the fallow fields below. Were bandits already waiting for her? She gritted her teeth, hating this fear that controlled her. It hadn't always been this way. Before the bandits destroyed her town, her brother Nic couldn't keep her and Kara out of the skies. Tears stung her eyes. She'd gladly let the bandits have her, if it would bring her siblings back.

The ground grew ever-nearer. Nicoli's wings leveled and he gently glided until he flew twenty feet above the field, then ten, then one. His hooves struck the grass and she lurched forward. Holding tight with her legs, she managed to stay on. When he came to a stop at the field's edge she dismounted. In a shimmer of light the winged horse melted into the white-skinned grandfather she loved.

"You look grey as dishwater," Nicoli teased, squeezing her shoulder.

Nessa swallowed, not wanting to admit how terrified she was.

"No one saw us, little one," he added with a smile. "Now come on. If we hurry, we might even make it home for supper." He licked his lips and winked, and she bit back a smile.

She let him guide her up the wheel-rutted path that the farmers used to take their animals and crops to town. Try as she might, she couldn't keep her eyes from straying to the trees once more.

They passed several fields littered with broken wheat-straw. A small herd of goats nibbled on grass, penned in by a wooden fence. Nessa caught a small, tan figure staring at her and her grandfather, and she felt herself go grayer. The young goatherd's mouth hung open and he appeared unaware of the thin goat nibbling his pant leg.

Nicoli smiled and waved to the red-headed boy. He couldn't be any older than eight. Judging by his patched pants and soiled shirt, he'd been sent to the fields to help his family stay fed.

The lad kept staring. Her skin tingled and she rubbed at her arms. She knew he was only a child, curious about the odd-looking strangers heading into his town, but she couldn't shake the feeling of unease.

Nicoli and Nessa followed the path along the town walls and up toward the gate. Two men with sword belts waited at the entrance. Thick leather breastplates stamped with a wheat stalk design shielded their broad chests. Brilliant red sleeves poked out from beneath the armor. Nessa felt embarrassed for Tranin's volunteer guards, who wore whatever their wives made them. The men stood straighter as Nicoli and Nessa approached.

The nearer one, probably Nessa's age, reached for his sword, a nasty smirk on his face. "Look at that, Alef. We've got a couple ghosts trying to come in."

Nessa stared at the dirt at her feet. After all the teasing she'd endured as a child, she should be used to the comparison, yet it still stung.

Nicoli bristled. "You can see we're flesh and blood, same as you are."

The taller, older guard, Alef, eyed them. "Not much need for laborers, ten days past harvest. What's your business?"

The shorter guard folded his arms. "And why were you poking around in our farmland? The main route's faster anyway--or do you enjoy trudging through fallow fields?" He nodded at the wider path that came from the forest. They would have taken that path from Tranin if Nessa had gotten her way.

"We flew," Nicoli muttered.

How could he admit that? The guards exchanged glances. Nessa tensed, sure the men would realize who she was.

Instead, the guards laughed. "That's some pretty fine liquor you're drinking," Alef said. His expression softened. "Have any to share?"

Nessa flushed. "We haven't been drinking!"

Nicoli put a hand on her arm. "We're not drunk. We're simple farmers from Tranin."

Nessa stuck her elbow in his side, glaring. Now these men knew where they lived!

Her grandfather gave her a small smile and shrugged. "We're here to see Sali Adrit."

Alef scratched his beard and nodded. "I should've guessed." He stepped away from the entry to allow them in.

"Go straight down this road, past Red's Tavern. You'll know the place by the pole-flowers around the doorway."

"And the smell!" The shorter one nudged his partner, who rolled his eyes.

In their first minute of walking through Tilos, Nessa counted more people than she'd see in a week in Tranin. Most were humans, but she spied a dwarf and several creatures she took to be trolls.

Wooden buildings, some two stories tall, lined both sides of the street. Painted signs hung over each door. A livery, a blacksmith and even a fine bakery. The sweet citrus tang of orange flower scones tingled her nose.

Nicoli guided her through the crowd. Quite a few shopkeepers watched them pass. Nessa kept her eyes straight ahead.

Most of the people on the streets wore finer clothes than any bandit she'd ever seen. Still, she feared someone might get ideas of selling her.

Nicoli patted her arm then leaned closer to her ear. "No one knows why we're here. And I am sure Sali will keep it quiet. For all they'll know we're bringing some medicine."

She lifted her chin, smiling a little. "I know it's silly to be frightened."

Her grandfather visibly swallowed. "No. No, it's not."

They found the doorway edged with thin red pole-flowers. Nicoli knocked and the door opened. The tactless guard hadn't been lying--a smell like a stable wafted out. Sali stood in the doorway. Her mussed blonde hair and ill-fitting bodice were the same as Nessa remembered, before Sali left Tranin. The lines of worry beneath her eyes were new. But when the young woman grinned at Nessa the concern vanished. "You came!"

"Of course I came," Nessa said, her fears melting away as she remembered the sick child she'd come to heal. "Where is he?"

Sali took Nessa by the arm and tugged her in. Nessa stumbled over dirty clothes and dodged an overturned milking stool. She'd seen stables kept cleaner than this. Fabrics, papers and empty bowls spilled across every surface. A basket filled with hay stood beside the bed like a tiny manger. Sali's large husband, Victor, sat at the edge of a mass of quilts on the bed. Sali sat down beside him, taking his hand.

A stab of jealousy surprised Nessa. Victor had come to Tranin to buy goats but upon seeing Sali, he hadn't thought of much else but her. Nessa moved to the head of the bed. There would never be a chance like that for her. Men didn't like scrawny women with silver in their light-blue hair and skin pale as a corpse's.

"Can she really help?" Victor frowned.

Sali rested her head on her husband's shoulder. "You know she can."

Nessa pulled the blanket back. She jumped, gasping. Beneath the blanket lay the hairiest little "kid" she'd ever seen. Its gray ears, longer than her own, twitched, and it turned its head to focus a glazed eye on Nessa.

"You brought us out here for your goat?" Nicoli glared at the couple. "You said your kid was sick!"

"Hadwin *is* sick," Sali said, sniffing.

Victor cleared his throat and dabbed his eyes with the corner of the sheet. "The kid is only a month old. He was our first-born after we married."

"Do you remember his first bleat?" Sali reached over to scratch the baby goat between the ears.

Victor smiled at his wife, squeezing her free hand.

"We love him, Nessa," the woman whispered. "Please say you'll help him."

Nicoli kept staring daggers at the couple.

She shrugged and offered them a small smile. "A life is a life," she whispered, putting her hand on the goat's soft fur.

Blue light radiated from Nessa's hand, moving over the sick goat. The kid's glassy eyes grew bright. Bleating, he struggled to get up. The blue light faded. The goat blinked, then kicked the blankets away. He leapt from the bed and

pranced about the room. His hooves clattered on the floorboards before he came to a stop at Nessa's feet. He bleated at her, as if to thank her, then clopped over to Victor.

The man's eyes were rounder than the goat's. "Amazing."

Sali hugged Nessa, hard. "Oh, I knew you could do it. Thank you!"

Nessa groaned and tried to extricate herself from Sali's arms. "You're welcome."

The kid chewed on the corner of the blanket as Victor looked on proudly.

Nessa smiled at Nicoli. Her grandfather's arms were folded, but a hint of a smile twitched on his lips.

Sali grinned. "You're welcome to stay the night,"

"Thank you," Nicoli said, "but we'd best be getting home."

"Oh." Sali's shoulders sagged. "Can you at least stay for supper?"

Nessa didn't want to hurt their feelings, but the house smelled like more than just one goat.

Even Nicoli didn't jump at the prospect of a free meal. "Thanks all the same, but we have some shopping to do. And my Greta will be worrying if we aren't home tonight."

Sali nodded, scratching the goat around the base of his horns. "Well, Hadwin will always remember you."

The goat poked his head through a ragged hole in the blanket. At least he had his appetite back.

"And we'll name our next girl after you," Victor added.

Nessa couldn't keep the flush off her cheeks. "It...will be an honor."

Eight hours of waiting and not a single woman had passed, let alone the healer Aridin sought. Curses filled his mind as he stalked to the gates of Tilos. The Seer had clearly lied. Had the hag come from Tranin to Tilos he would have seen her. Not only had he wasted the day waiting, but he faced another two weeks' ride to Tranin, through rough terrain and across a river.

He clenched his fists, calling himself every kind of fool. After all, a Seer worth his salt wouldn't have found himself on the business end of Aridin's blade to begin with. He doubted the woman was in the city, but it was too late to start out for Tranin tonight, so he might as well check.

Before he got within sight of the gates, he shimmied up a tree and tucked his cutlass up among the branches. He didn't want to raise the guards' suspicions. His red coat might be a bit showy, but with his shoulder-length brown hair and tan skin he hoped he'd fit in well with the farmers. And if the old hag was here, the artifact would help him steal her without a

fight. If not, his daggers, his dust, and his fists would serve well enough.

As he neared the iron gates of Tilos the two guards stopped chatting and stood at attention.

"Can we help you?" The taller guard appeared to be quite a few years older than Aridin. He had a hard look in his eyes with the build to back it up--perhaps a retired soldier.

Aridin flashed a grin, glad to have his daggers, just in case. "I need a horse. Know where I can buy one?"

The younger man--a shrimp he could fell with a hard slap--grinned. "You've come to the right town, sir! Wilton has the best breed of horses in the province!" His partner rolled his eyes.

Aridin focused on the small man. "Excellent. If you would be so kind as to point me in the direction of this Wilton I will be on my way." He bowed slightly to the older man, hoping the show of deference would curb his suspicions.

The old soldier frowned, looking him up and down, as if he could see the knives hidden in his boot and beneath his coat. Aridin kept up his jaunty smile as the small man rattled off directions to the stable.

Scowling, the older guard finally moved aside. The man's eyes bored through him as he passed.

He moved through the crowded street with practiced ease. Ramshackle shops crowded either side of the dirt path. He'd seen driftwood rafts lashed together with more skill. Apparently what passed for carpentry in Tilos was reserved for the few two-floor buildings that towered over the shacks. Their shadows stretched across the road--almost enough to convince him that Tilos was a city.

Unfortunately, Tilos was only a large town, with few of the delights he'd find in port. He couldn't even smell any rum, and from the women's modest clothes, he doubted a night with a sailor would interest them. At least the place smelled better than a port town--not the faintest scent of fish.

He spotted a large barn in the distance with the name *Wilton's Stable* painted in red above the door. He turned in that direction, weaving his way through the villagers, but keeping a weather eye out. Maybe he'd find the hag in an orphanage or a hospital, "rescuing the weak."

A flash of blue and white caught Aridin's eye, bringing his gaze to a small booth to the right of the main town road. Two unearthly people, a male and a female, browsed a rack of scarves. Their skin shone white as the moon and their hair sparkled like the sea. The shapely shopkeep beside them seemed dull by comparison.

The pale lady wrapped her beautiful ocean hair into a green scarf, then secured it around her head. He frowned--

why would she want to hide such beauty? The lady peered into a small looking glass, then shook her head and untied the scarf. The radiant silver-blue strands cascaded out, free of their prison. His heart skipped as the rest of the Seer's words came rushing back.

*With silver hair and skin so fair
The whitest wool is put to shame.
Keep her close--though she may oppose--
And two lives she'll live to reclaim.*

He'd imagined the healer as an old woman with gray hair, dull eyes, and a sickly pale complexion. But the girl in front of him couldn't be any older than eighteen, and she wasn't merely pale, but *white*. Her green dress clung to her slim frame.

He kept his distance as she continued to browse through the knitted scarves. She smiled at the woman and moved away from the shop, and her companion. He saw his chance.

Aridin slipped across the street, stopping between an armor shop and a cobbler's stand. He pulled the lamp from his pocket and focused his full attention on his target. With a

deep breath, he rubbed the cold bronze surface. It warmed in his hands, gleaming like gold.

Keeping his focus on the lady proved easy enough, as she was beautiful from every angle. As he concentrated, a thin stream of smoke poured from the lamp and rolled along the road, mingling with the dust kicked up by people and horses. It paused when it reached his victim, circling the girl's ankles. She scratched one leg with the other, continuing to browse at a produce stand. He kept rubbing, and her shoes melted away, leaving her floating on footless legs. No one in the crowd noticed, and she didn't even wince.

As her hemline melted into smoke she turned to move on, then happened to look down. Her eyes went wide and her scream split his heart. *Easy*, he told himself. *She's not hurt; only scared. And Father needs her.*

The white-skinned man shoved his way to the girl's side. "Nessa!"

Several of the townspeople clustered around. *Grab her all you want. She's coming with me all the same.*

The healer screamed again. "Nicoli! What's happening?" Her terrified gaze swept the crowd.

Her companion clasped her to him. "Stay with me." He stared at her vanishing legs, then barked, "Who's doing this?"

The white man searched the dusty road for the source. But the man's furious gaze swept right past him. Knowing

running would draw attention, Aridin ducked from his hiding place and fell into step beside a rickety donkey cart, following it away from the crowd. The dust brought up by the wheels and the hooves further obscured the lamp's smoke. He tucked the artifact in his pocket.

The commotion of the market faded as the last of the smoke returned to the lamp. He eyed the cluster of villagers--now a blur--and smiled. They'd never guess he held her safely inside a simple bronze lamp.

As the cart came to a stop, he turned to slip down a side street. A shout interrupted him. "Hey!"

Aridin stopped to scan the street, not wanting to walk into danger. No one to the right paid him any mind as they filtered back to their shops.

"Watch where you're steppin', human!" The growl came too close for comfort and Aridin whipped to his left. The back of his hand smacked against flesh and bone.

"Ow! You blind, or just clumsy?"

Aridin gulped and looked down. Beside him a dwarf scowled and rubbed his cheek. He winced. "Oh, terribly sorry. I didn't see you."

"Get off my beard!" The dwarf shook his fist.

Aridin looked at his feet. His boot held down a thick bundle of hair. "Sorry about--" He lifted his foot, revealing a

human-sized black boot print on the dwarf's otherwise impressively white beard.

He bit his tongue to restrain a smile. "My apologies, but I'm sure some village girl would be happy to wash that and braid that into the latest style, if you'd like to keep it out of the dirt."

The dwarf's beady eyes glinted under bushy eyebrows. "And I'm sure the town guard will be interested to hear of a stranger loitering by my cart."

Aridin belatedly noticed the sun-rocks it carried. When tapped, a lump would give the light and warmth of a fire, without the flame or smoke. But add a pinch of precious pixie dust and the rocks would explode. No wonder the dwarf was so suspicious.

"Loitering?" Aridin shook his head. "I was merely admiring the fine workmanship." Eyes on the dwarf, he made a show of running his hand over the cracked wood. He forced a smile when a splinter embedded itself in his hand. "Magnificent."

The dwarf grunted. "I know a troublemaker when I see one."

"My good dwarf, I assure you, I would never cause anything resembling trouble." Aridin pulled a silver piece from his pocket. "But as a show of good faith, perhaps this will make up for the accident?"

The dwarf grabbed the coin and tucked it in his robes.
"Fine. But watch your feet, human."

"Certainly." Aridin bowed with a flourish.

The dwarf's eyes narrowed as he took his donkey's bridle.
"Humans. Strut around like giants." He scowled at Aridin.
"Braided indeed. Get your *own* beard braided! If you can ever manage to grow one long enough."

Aridin chuckled, then slipped into the crowd. *Not a bad price to avoid the guard.* The lump of sun-rock he'd managed to slip into his sleeve was worth a silver, after all. He patted his pocket, checking for the lamp. Satisfied, he headed to Wilton's Stable.

Chapter 2

Aridin drew back the curtain to peek out at the town below. He'd ridden a night and a day without stopping before he found a room in the human village of Raen, two towns west of Tilos. His quarry's white-skinned companion couldn't possibly have tracked him. Still, his eyes roved the narrow streets and the town's central plaza, searching for a flash of blue-silver or white. *Stop worrying*, he told himself. *He doesn't even know about the lamp*. He let the curtain fall back into place and returned to his meal.

The small table had a wobbly wooden chair and a tall candlestick with a weak flame. For being the finest room in Raen, it had only the necessities. A wooden dresser that had seen better days stood off in one corner, lit by another candle. His travel bag and cutlass leaned against it. The bed took up another corner, its quilt finer than the blankets he was used to.

His gaze returned to the tabletop. Delicious smells wafted up from the plates--sliced meat, potatoes, carrots, some sort of soup, and even a pastry. More than enough for two.

The lamp shone beside his fork, drawing more attention than the meal. He wondered about the girl trapped inside. Was she frightened? Her scream still rang in his ears.

He reached for his fork and couldn't help but wonder-- was she hungry?

The memory of his mother's voice broke into his thoughts. *Keep the healer in the lamp. The lamp's slave needs no food, no water, and no harm can come to him. We can't afford to lose the healer, so don't you dare rub the lamp again, once you've captured him.* His mother had been very specific. She'd be fine in the lamp.

He breathed in the strong scent of the steaming roast lamb. Shoulders slumped, he set his fork down. The fear in her face still haunted him, and she'd been thin as an eel, after all.

His mother hadn't even guessed the healer would be a lady. He doubted she knew everything about a lamp they'd stolen a few months ago, and she couldn't know how it would affect every race, after all. Elves were darker than his prisoner, and their hair wasn't blue-silver. Fairies were much smaller than his prize, of course, and even when the Sespin forsook the water for land, they kept their glassy round eyes.

The Laita clan of fairies had to eat every two days or they would fade away. Perhaps the healer had some of their blood.

She did have pointed ears, after all. For his father's sake, he couldn't risk losing her.

Before he could reconsider, he picked up the lamp and rubbed it. It went warm in his hand and gray smoke poured out, pooling on the floorboards. He tucked the lamp back into his pocket as the vapors swirled up into a humanoid form a few feet from him. Her blue eyes stared at him, looking as frightened as she'd been when the lamp took her. Never moving her head, she glanced around the room, lips slightly parted. She returned her attention to him, eyes narrowed, anger replacing the fear.

He'd hoped he'd just been imagining her beauty, but the lass was at least ten times prettier up close. His eyes traveled the length of her dark green dress, short enough to expose a tantalizing few inches of ivory-white skin above the top of her boots. With an effort, he pulled his gaze from her legs. He stood, pulling back his chair for her. "I'm sorry if I frightened you, but I assure you, I mean you no harm--"

He cursed as a dainty, lady-sized boot connected with his thigh. The force knocked him back against the wall. He gritted his teeth against the throbbing pain and looked up, only to see the lady lunging for the door. He pushed away from the wall and crossed the room in three quick strides. Not that he'd needed to hurry--the terrified woman yanked

on the handle four times before she paused and looked up at the latch.

He came up behind her, put his hand against the door and leaned his weight on it. She slid the bolt out then tugged on the handle once, twice, and a third time to be sure. Aridin grinned and cocked his head to the side, his eyes roaming down her profile, admiring the soft curves under her bodice.

The tugging stopped and he heard a soft gasp. He looked up to find a pair of crystal blue eyes scowling at him. He leaned forward and her pretty eyes went wide. She edged away but he reached around her with his free hand and put his left arm on her other side, sliding the latch back into place. Leaning down until he was mere inches from her pale face, he smiled at her. To his delight, a blush colored her white cheeks.

"Pretty lady," he said, "I know you'd prefer to be elsewhere, but you can't find me that repulsive? I've been told on numerous occasions that I'm quite comely." He lifted his eyebrows, not meaning the invitation to be serious, but if by chance she wanted to take it--

The lady ducked under his arm before he could catch her. He turned to see her reaching for his cutlass. "Hey!" He reached out to grab her but at the last second she turned, brandishing his sheathed cutlass with one hand on the hilt and the other beside it, holding the sheath. She clearly had no idea how to use it. His shoulders sagged in relief as he

retreated, putting his back against the door. "I hate to tell you, lady, but the pointy part is *inside* the scabbard."

Her fear melted into a scowl. In one smooth motion she stepped forward and swung the scabbard. He ducked to avoid the blow but a jarring pain raced down his arm, knocking him off balance. His eyes widened. She held his sheathed weapon like a staff and judging by the way his arm stung, she possessed a bit of skill. The thought had no sooner left his brain when the scabbard hit the back of his legs, knocking his feet right out from under him. He fell back against the door, cursing.

From the corner of his eye he caught a streak of white and green. A latch clicked and the lady pulled--not on the door, but the window.

He slowly pushed away from the door, favoring his right leg. "You realize we're on the second floor, right?"

The woman struggled with the window one-handed, then tossed his cutlass, freeing her other hand. "I'd rather take my chances breaking my neck than staying with you!"

He glanced at the cutlass in the middle of the floor. When he looked up, she had the window open and one foot on the sill.

She couldn't be serious.

She brought the other foot up, leaning out.

She was serious.

Aridin limped across the room and grabbed her waist with both hands. For a moment he stared at his thumbs--the very tips of his fingers would likely touch if he squeezed. Her struggles jerked him back to the danger at hand, and he pried her from the window. She flailed like an unruly foresail luffing in the wind, though she weighed considerably less.

"Get your hands off of me!" she screamed. "You...hooligan!"

Hooligan? Aridin laughed. "You don't get many chances to insult men, do you?" He pulled her tighter and wrapped a strong arm around her waist, pinning her back to him. The smell of lavender soap tingled his nose, making him suddenly aware of how delicately feminine she was. Not at all like the women at sea ports who liked a good chase just as much as he did. For a terrifying moment he considered that he may be as bad as the brutes on the ship.

She continued to flail in his arms. "And you do not spend much time in the company of fine women, sir, or you would have better manners!"

"Well, I am not about to ravish you." He brought his head over her shoulder to rest beside hers and grinned. "At least, not without your permission."

In a streak of white, the back of her hand struck his face. He bit back the urge to release her and rub his stinging cheek. "What was that for? I already told you I wouldn't ravish you!"

"That, sir, was for the leer and the insinuation I'd ever give the likes of you permission!" She huffed. "Now unhand me!"

Despite her bravado, he felt a shiver run through her and the last bit of fun drained out of the game. He took her wrists, careful not to bruise her, and slowly turned her to face him. Her blue eyes sparkled with anger, but the passion added to her beauty. "Just calm down, lady. There's no point in fighting."

She frowned at him. "I think you're forgetting how I knocked you down!"

He winced inwardly, glad the crew hadn't seen that. "Even so, I can put you back in the lamp anytime I want."

"What lamp?"

He placed his body between the lady and the sword on the floor, then slowly released her. Keeping his eyes on her, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the lamp.

The lady grimaced. "I won't pretend to know how you got me here, but that looks like an ordinary lamp to me."

"We'll see." He gently ran a finger across the shining surface of the lamp. Smoke poured from the spout and the lady gasped.

Chapter 3

Nessa screamed as the thin smoke swirled around her ankles, raising goosebumps. She shuffled back until she hit the wall. "Don't!"

She turned her face away and closed her eyes, waiting for the awful floating sensation. Soon she'd be sucked into the tiny space once more.

A warm hand on her shoulder made her gasp.

"Don't worry. You're still solid."

Her eyes sprang open and she jumped back. "You--"

"Just wanted to make sure you understood you can't get away."

She looked closer at the lamp in his hand, swallowing hard. The smoke was gone. She remembered the thin smoke consuming her at the market but she could hardly believe something so small and plain could hold such magic. Feeling his gaze on her, she looked up. He appeared several years older than her, and a thin beard covered most of his face. His skin had been bronzed by the sun, which was odd since the bandits she'd encountered slept most of the day and did their

thieving at night. His long red jacket, too, spoke of a man unaccustomed to hiding in the shadows.

Nessa shuddered, clenching her fists. "What have you done with Nicoli?" She sucked in a deep breath, fearing the worst. If this bandit had this much power, her grandfather might be no more than a pile of ash.

Intense hazel eyes held hers for the span of several breaths. "Why do you want to know? Who is he? Your beau?"

She gasped. Nicoli only looked a bit older than she was, and she didn't even *call* him grandfather. She knew the the Savior hated lies, but she wasn't strong enough to hold it back. "My husband."

His expression fell and he glanced down at her hands. She quickly shoved them behind her back.

The bandit's frown rose into a smirk. "Your *husband* is fine."

Nessa lifted her chin. "He won't stop looking for me."

"That's fine. Let him look." The man took her arm firmly. "There's food over here if you're hungry. It's probably a bit cold by now."

Nessa planted her feet. "You haven't even told me who you are."

The cad released her arm and bowed. "Aridin Nightstar, at your service."

She took a deep breath. "And what do you want from me?"

He straightened, his eyes roving her body again. She hugged herself, wanting to hide from his gaze. He stopped at her face, and he looked serious, maybe even sad. "My father is ill. Once you've healed him, you're free to go."

Healed him. The words echoed through her head. *Savior, no,* she prayed. *Please don't ask this of me.* She didn't want to be forced away from the grandparents she'd found and the new life she'd begun to build in Tranin. This man was like the others--he'd use her again, or sell her. She focused on the door, trying to stop her trembling. She knew if she tried to leave he'd likely suck her back into the lamp, and perhaps keep her there. But if she ran quick enough and fast enough, perhaps she could get out of range after all.

He followed her gaze. "Let me make this easier for you, lady." He walked to the door, pulling a small, sparkling stone from his pocket. He held it up to the doorframe and traced all the way around, whispering a chant. As he moved the stone, a shining line trailed its path. When he finished, he pulled the latch and tried the door again. It stayed shut.

Mr. Nightstar must have seen her staring, because he said, "Just another artifact." He strode to the window, slammed it closed, and repeated the process. "Don't want you breaking your neck, either."

She shivered. She was trapped with this man. *Savior*, she prayed again. *Please protect me*. She looked up at the bandit, her heart sinking. "Find someone else to help."

He sat down at the table. "I can't. We've tried every kind of herb and doctor imaginable. Even magic spells. The power in your veins--it's our last hope."

Nessa's fists clenched. "What do you plan to do to me afterward?"

"Do to you? What would I do to you?"

She tried to force away the thoughts of being chained in a cold stall, moonbeams and oats serving as her only "food."

"Don't look at me like that," he muttered. "I told you I'd return you. As soon as Father is well, I'll deliver you home safe. I give you my word."

"What good is the word of a bandit?" Nessa snapped.

He glared. "I'm not a bandit. And things will go a lot easier if you trust me!"

"Trust you!" Her face flushed with anger. "You didn't even ask!" She shivered, haunted by the sensation of his rough hands on her arms. "I might have come, if you'd asked. But I'm not a treasure to be stolen and used for whatever you like. I'm a person."

Frowning, he looked down at the food on the table. "Even if I had asked, I didn't think you'd say 'yes.'"

She shook her head. "I don't know. At least I could have asked...someone...to come along."

The bandit smiled. "But you have company. Me."

Nessa edged toward the window, tamping down the urge to slap him. She prayed he wouldn't see her shaking. She knew she had the Savior with her, but she wished she had a *person* to protect her from the bandit's whims. "It's not proper for us to be alone unchaperoned." She swallowed hard.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm not concerned with propriety." He smirked, sending a chill down her spine. "Don't worry. We're not likely to meet anyone you know."

Nessa's face tingled as the blood left her face. "Then where are you taking me?"

The man's jaw clenched. "You really should eat something."

Nessa hesitated, looking around the room. Her gaze landed on the table but the way her stomach fluttered, she doubted she'd be able to eat a bite. "I'm not hungry."

"I could have them make something fresh for you, if you're worried this is cold."

She swallowed, then glanced at the door again. The lines he had drawn on it still sparkled. "No."

He looked at the food, as if debating, then shook his head. "Fine. We make an early start tomorrow. You'd better

get some rest." He licked his fingers and put out the candle on the table. He moved to the bed and her heart stopped, waiting for him to ask--or tell--her to join him. Instead, he grabbed the extra pillow and turned away, brushing against her as he passed by. He put out the candle on the dresser. Only moonlight lit the room.

She watched, rooted to the spot. He pulled the lamp out of his pocket, untied the pillowcase, and shoved the lamp deep inside. He shrugged out of his jacket and pulled it over himself as a blanket, then laid his head on the pillow. "Good night, pretty lady." He curled up a little, closing his eyes. A minute later he opened them a hair. "The bed's over in the corner," he mumbled. "Unless you'd like me to join you?"

Her heart pounded, but the cur chuckled. "Or we can stay up late, telling ghost stories, if you'd like."

Did he think he was funny? Shivering, she went over to the bed. "If you want me well-rested, I suggest you stay on the floor."

"Sure thing."

She tried to still her trembling as she sat down on the edge of the bed. She wasn't scared of him. She wasn't. She could take care of herself. The bandit had the bruises to prove that. Nessa tugged her boots off, letting them hit the floor. It was that lamp she couldn't escape. She crawled up into the

very corner of the bed and under the covers. Closing her eyes, she prayed for her safety, and for peace.

But sleep wouldn't be easy for her. Not with a strange man less than five feet away and only a thin quilt protecting her from his gaze--or worse. He didn't look like the bandits who had taken her, and his laugh was different--warmer. But it was only a matter of time before he would decide she was too valuable to give up--perhaps too valuable to keep free from the lamp. Or worse, he might give in to the urges she saw in his eyes.

Soon the bandit's breaths became deep and regular. She peeked out at him. With him caught in the peace of sleep, she could almost believe some ladies had called him "comely."

Hours passed yet Nessa couldn't sleep. The sky grew lighter, until faint rays of light danced on the windowsill. They'd be on the road soon. Sighing, she put one leg over the side of the bed, touching the floorboards with one toe. The man didn't stir and she crept out of bed, toward the window.

The small town lay before her, little more than a few dozen thatched rooftops. A large empty area stretched out in the middle of town, covered in dull brown grass. A humanoid sculpture, shining in the light of dawn and larger than life, stood there with outstretched arms and flowing robes. She shuddered--likely a shrine to one of the false gods many of the people of Kinyn followed.

Forest surrounded the entire town, save where either a large stream or a small river ran alongside. She had hoped to see something familiar, to at least get an idea of where she was, but the bandit had taken her too far. Still, as long as she could convince him to keep her out of the lamp, she might eventually find some clues. Savior willing, she might even manage to steal the lamp and flee--

Her vision blurred and she gasped, reaching for what little she could still see of the window. But it completely disappeared, replaced by a sparkling body of water. A pure white figure with shining blue-silver hair stared back at her from the water's reflection. His forehead was creased with worry lines. Her grandfather mouthed her name, reaching for her. She put her hand toward the water but her fingertips connected with the cold surface of the windowpane. She lowered her hand in disappointment. Nicoli was seeing through her eyes, using his gift to check up on her. He'd done the same thing earlier today, when he'd lost sight of her at the market.

She was still in the tiny room but he couldn't be too far away. Her grandfather must be somewhere near the same river running outside this town.

She leaned forward, resting her forehead against the windowpane. Since she could only see her grandfather, she had no idea what he could see from her eyes. Recalling what

she'd seen through the window, she moved her gaze to where she remembered each building, statue and tree to be. She hoped he got a good view of the town so that he could recognize it from the sky. Her heart pounded in her chest with the hope that he'd come for her that very night, that she'd be free again.

The view of the lake shifted. She gasped, gripping the window frame as her world turned to a blur of green needles and purple sky. No matter how she turned her head, she couldn't make it match with the motion in her vision. Her stomach fluttered and she released the window frame, trying to look around the way Nicoli wanted her to. Nothing helped and she felt herself falling, falling into something warm and solid.

Her vision cleared, her head ached, and she found herself staring into a pair of worried hazel eyes.

"Are you all right, lady?"

The lady was cross-eyed, as if looking right past him. She blinked and a tremor went through her.

"It's all right." Aridin enjoyed the feel of her small body in his arms as she lay against him, but he hated to scare her. "Come on, now." He put his arm around her waist and

helped her back to the bed. She continued to shake, even after he'd set her down and pulled up a chair across from her.

She rubbed her eyes and focused on him. Two tears tracked down her pure white cheeks.

A jolt of guilt shot through Aridin, his heart aching to know that he'd put those tears on her pretty face. All he wanted to do was fix it. "Don't cry, lady. I've told you, I'm not going to hurt you."

She sniffed and pulled her knees to her chest.

"Then what is it? We have a long way to go and I don't want you crying the whole way." He leaned in, watching her. A sensible man would put her back in the lamp and be done with it. Even if she'd been one of the women in the shore towns, he'd have given up by this point and moved on to the next. Something drew him to her, though. He didn't just want to stop her crying--he wanted to see her smile at him.

The lady looked back at the window. "My grand--husband--is worried about me. He has no idea where I am or if I'm safe."

Aridin grunted. *Her grand-husband?* "Oh, yes...your husband." He nodded, amused she was still trying to keep the charade. "Well what if I let you write a letter to your 'husband'?"

The girl sat up. She didn't reply, but he'd caught her interest.

He cleared his throat. "I'd have to read it, of course. Can't have you telling anything that will make him do something silly like trying to rescue you. But you can tell him that you're fine and that you'll be back safe and sound."

"W--when?" the lady whispered.

"Tomorrow morning."

The lady narrowed her eyes, a bit of that spunk coming back. Aridin resisted the urge to check that the window was still locked. "No," she said. "When will I be home?"

"As soon as you've healed my father, I'll escort you back myself." He shrugged. "Should only be a week to get back to my ship, and another week or two to my parents'. With luck...a month?"

That perfect white face turned gray again.

"Maybe less," he said.

He heard her take in a few deep breaths. "But you'd really let me send a message?"

He nodded, offering his most charming smile. "If it would make you feel better."

"It would. Thank you." The lady's mouth twitched and finally lifted into a small smile. She sniffed again, wiping at her eyes.

He was pretty sure captives weren't meant to thank their abductors. But her words--and her smile--warmed his blood. He bowed his head to her. "Anything for a pretty lady."

The smile vanished and she huffed. "I have a name, you know."

"Yes; I heard your *grand-husband* call your name at the market. And it's a nice name. Although, I think 'pretty lady' suits you more." Her cheeks reddened and he grinned. When she wrapped her arms around herself again, his smile faded. He wasn't accustomed to taking things slowly. The shore town girls only took a few minutes to woo, and certainly wouldn't find a smirk to be too forward. He exhaled, scooting his chair back a bit. "Start thinking about your letter. I'll send for a quill and paper."

She nodded. Nessa's gaze raked over him and he fidgeted. She thought him to be a bandit, but she seemed to be searching for something more. Could she tell he had dreamed of sharing a bed with her last night?

He coughed, bringing her attention back to his face. "What now, lady? If you're hungry, they should be bringing breakfast soon."

She wrinkled her nose, glancing at the cold supper still on the table, none too appetizing. He glanced out the window--the deep pink sky showed the sun would rise soon.

"Nessa. My name is Nessa."

He grinned. "Whatever you say. Pretty lady."

A pillow flew through the air. He chuckled as he dodged it.

Chapter 4

Aridin's hands tightened on the reins. A cold breeze whipped through the forest path, stirring up dead leaves and chilling his fingers. The brown mare, Asha, trotted at a good clip toward Wrandon. In the distance, thunder rumbled. The lady shivered and leaned back against his chest.

He grinned at the contact, then drew his arms together so they touched hers.

The lady straightened and turned to scowl at him.

Aridin raised an eyebrow. "Might be wise to stay close, for warmth."

Her face went gray, and she fixed her eyes back on the path. "I will not allow you to manhandle me, Mr. Nightstar." She rubbed her arms, shivering. What he wouldn't trade if she'd give him a few minutes to warm her up.

Asha went down a small incline and Aridin clenched his legs to avoid falling forward into Nessa. The lady rode astride yet the sudden dip didn't rattle her at all. Her riding put Aridin's to shame. Not that it was his own fault that he wasn't graceful. Besides the lack of horses at sea, the beautiful woman sitting in the saddle before him fascinated him so

much he hardly noticed the horse. Her hair had him mesmerized--a twining braid, lighter than the sky yet sparkling like the stars. If only the ribbon weren't holding the strands hostage, he imagined they would shimmer like the sea after sunrise.

Without warning Asha's hoofbeats slowed, jarring him so he bit his tongue. He didn't dare loosen his knees' grip to kick the horse and of course Nessa was in no hurry to get moving, so Asha came to a stop.

"Something's wrong." Nessa glanced back at him, eyebrows drawn together. He took his eyes off her to look at the path beyond. A great tree blocked the path, its trunk resting on the forest floor, its branches pointing in all directions.

Aridin straightened, shifting his weight on the horse. "It's only a fallen tree. Stop worrying. Asha's not afraid to get her hooves a little muddy stepping off the path." There was plenty of room to go around the tree, into the forest, and rejoin the path ten paces later. He pulled on the left rein with a gentle hand.

Asha stood still.

"Come on!" He pulled a touch harder, but the horse didn't obey.

"Let me try." Nessa reached for the reins, glancing his hand with fingers much softer than his, but still accustomed to a day's work. She stiffened at the contact, pulling back.

"Take them." He pressed the reins into her hand. "She might move at a woman's touch."

Nessa bit her lip, then wound her thin fingers around the reins. She faced the path, pulled on the reins and kicked her heel into the horse's belly. Asha didn't move.

"Something's definitely wrong." Nessa tugged on the reins. The horse danced to the left before turning around. Aridin felt his weight tip to the right, and he grabbed for Nessa's waist. She slapped his hand back. His eyes lighted on the tree trunk and he stilled.

The trunk was cleanly cut. Someone had felled the tree on purpose.

The sound of slow applause drew his attention.

A man walked out from behind a nearby bush, his curls bobbing as he tossed his head. He continued to clap as he drew near, then stopped to dust something off his brocade coat. He bowed his head to Nessa. "Good work, Madam; it seems you were quite right. This is a trap indeed. George?"

Another man with the same curly hair as the first one stepped around the trunk of a large oak tree. He leaned against it, looking too smug for a man wearing twenty yards of lace.

"Now," George said, "if you'd be so kind as to dismount your horse and hand over the reins along with any valuables, Edward and I shall leave you perfectly capable of walking back to Raen, and with all of your digits intact." The bandit folded his arms, so at ease he didn't even reach for his weapon.

It wouldn't take much to scare the smirks off their ugly powdered faces. He dismounted and drew his cutlass. "I'm not about to let a couple prigs order me around. You will let us pass!"

George narrowed his eyes, reaching for his own sword. "We'd be saving you the humiliation of riding into town with a woman who's better on a horse than her man."

The saddle groaned under Nessa as she shifted to get off. Watching his foes, Aridin reached back, placing a hand on her thigh. "Stay on the horse, lady." He felt her go stiff, but she didn't move. His lips curled up in a smirk as he tensed for the fight. "I'll deal with them."

A shrill whistle pierced the air. A dozen men crowded in around them and Aridin bit back a curse. The newcomers looked as useful as a herd of preening peacocks, but even a monkey with a sword can draw blood. And there sure were a lot of monkeys.

"Your horse and your valuables, sir," Edward said with a smirk. "And your cutlass."

Aridin's thoughts drifted to the lamp in his coat pocket. He wasn't going to let a bunch of fops get the better of him, but most of all, he needed to protect the lamp. If he turned over the horse and his gold, maybe--

"The girl looks valuable too, boss." A man with a curly white wig leered at Nessa. The lady's skin turned gray as the clouds above and she turned her face away, trembling.

She was the treasure he could never give up. Aridin raised his cutlass. "What good is she to you? You wouldn't know what to do with her!"

The man licked his lips. "Oh, I can think of a dozen things."

Aridin's stomach knotted at the thought. He rushed the bandit, hoping to stain that fancy coat with the man's blood.

Nessa looked down at the reins in her gray hands. She didn't want to see the spray of blood when Mr. Nightstar's sword connected with his target. A scream made her shudder, though she found herself looking up. The bandit slid to the ground, his beady eyes now wide with shock. To her horror, she felt only relief. His gaze had unnerved her; she knew well what these men had planned for her.

Mr. Nightstar rounded on the leader even as more bandits crowded around him. Swords clanged as he blocked

three blows in as many seconds. She shifted in the saddle, eager to help. But she didn't have her staff, and shivered at the thought of taking a dead man's sword.

Bony fingers dug into her waist and pulled.

She screamed as the pain radiated into her backbone. "Let me go, you--ruffian!" She clenched her knees, determined to stay on the horse. Asha trotted ahead but the bandit tightened his grip. Nessa groaned and let go of the reins. Asha stilled as Nessa tried to peel the bandit's fingers off her waist.

Her captor, a dark-haired man with flushed cheeks, smiled up at her. "I'll ride with you, then. They get the mess; I get the treasure."

Nessa pulled her foot from the stirrup, kicking at him. "I'm no treasure."

The man released her waist but his bony fingers circled her ankle. "Ah, but Asri are always valuable treasures."

She paused at the word. There weren't many who knew of the Asri, according to her grandfather. And she was sure those who did lived farther north.

The man pushed her foot aside and tried to climb behind her.

Her heart pounded. Clenching her lower legs just behind Asha's girth, she leaned forward in the saddle to get the horse to move. The man yelled, latching on to her shoulder. She shrieked as he fell, dragging her with him. Hard flesh and

sharp bones broke her fall, though her left hip still scraped against the packed dirt. The man under her grunted, grabbing her wrist.

Nessa squirmed and twisted her wrist in his grasp. Her gaze locked on to his darker, colder one and she froze. If not for the moon-shaped scar on his right temple she wouldn't have recognized him under all the powder. He'd once been a part of the Wormwood bandits. She couldn't suppress the memories of the flames engulfing her village, the feel of the bandits' rough hands grabbing her and the sound of the cold shackle snapping closed around her ankle. The two years the bandits had held her, this man hadn't let her forget the scar she gave him during her attempt to escape. All the face powder in the world couldn't hide the hoofprint next to his eye.

What if he realized who she was? Fear sliced through her. "Get your hands off of me!" She slapped him with her free hand, and her wrist slipped free from his grip. The bandit swore and lunged for her but she rolled out of the way and ran toward a thicket.

The hope of escape died as another pair of rough hands snatched her, pulling her up against a muscled chest. She screamed and fought, the anguish tearing her soul. They'd taken her once; it couldn't happen again.

"Planning to take her for yourself, Marve?" the man growled.

Nessa shuddered at the name and she squirmed, twisting her body.

Her new captor cursed. "Stop that!" His hold tightened as he hauled Nessa to the horse. Someone had tied her reins to a branch; though Asha's ears were back and she tossed her head, she couldn't get free. They were both trapped.

Marve strode over. "Careful, she's an Asri. Who knows what kind of bewitching powers she has."

Nessa stiffened. Once he knew she could heal, he'd know--

A harsh sound like hammers beating against iron rattled her skull. She covered her ears but couldn't stop them from ringing.

The man holding her yelled and released her waist. Nessa spun, eyes wide. The stranger lay at her feet, blood pooling beneath him. Tiny glass shards littered the grass by his body. Nessa's gut twisted. Had Mr. Nightstar killed him somehow? She couldn't even see him in the crowd of bandits. Marve stood and stared.

A shout sounded on the other side of Asha. Twenty feet down the path, a glowing orange wall flared up. Screaming, Nessa hid her head in her hands. Orange spots danced behind her closed eyelids as air hot as a baker's oven washed over her.

She stumbled back against Asha, trying to avoid the heat. The horse jerked her head. The branch that held her reins cracked but didn't break.

Marve shook himself out of his stupor. He leapt over his fallen comrade to reach her. Heart pounding, Nessa grabbed Asha's reins, trying to untangle them. The horse raised her head, ears perked toward Marve. When the knot held, Nessa put Asha between herself and the bandit. "You can't have me," she muttered.

Marve grinned and moved around Asha. The horse snorted and kicked the bandit square in the chest. Marve hit the ground hard.

Nessa eyed the man, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. When she was sure Marve wasn't getting up she turned her full attention to the horse. Asha's ears lay flat against her head. Nessa cooed to her, wishing she could really speak to the horse, like her brother Nic had. "It's all right," she whispered. "Good girl. It's going to be all--"

Swords clanged close behind her and a familiar voice cried, "Nessa!"

She sprinted past Asha and came to a dead stop in front of Mr. Nightstar. Two bandits--the two in the fine coats--were fighting him together. Around him, several men lay sprawled on the ground. Soot covered their clothes and the scent of burnt flesh assailed her. Nessa shuddered, wondering

what had the power to do that. She looked back at the man who had stolen her from Tilos, scanning the length of him for any magic items he may have used.

Sweat dripped down Mr. Nightstar's face as he thrust his sword at the two bandits. Their clothes were singed but they came at him relentlessly.

The man in the red jacket lunged at Mr. Nightstar. He parried the hit but the other man's sword struck the cutlass' hilt. The sword flew out of Mr. Nightstar's hands, skidded across the path, and stopped inches from her toes.

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