

The Prisoner

by Cory Poulson

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1

The dungeon was dank and musty, and Rayin wrinkled her nose at the smell as she and several other women entered, escorted by the guards. The women bore baskets of bread and buckets of water for the prisoners there, enemy soldiers who had been captured in the war; several dozen new ones had arrived the day before.

The prison was massive, a huge underground complex that extended underneath the King's City. The king never allowed two prisoners to be kept together; each had to be assigned a different cell. He believed that would greatly reduce any chances of an organized escape attempt, and he was probably right—he was the king, after all. Though the dungeon now held several hundred prisoners, they were still not even halfway full.

Rayin hated this duty; she hated going down into this vast dungeon, taking food and water to those hard-faced, light-haired Quen soldiers. The people of Quen were not at all like the people of Corant, her own people, and it wasn't just that the Quen had blond hair while her people's was usually black; the Quen were a strange, hard people, verging on barbaric.

The war had been going on for some time now, and she had been pressed into service as an errand girl and nurse in the military section of the city. She had already taken food to the prisoners quite a few times, and her dislike of it grew each time she went.

She was directed to a row of cells, and the guard there smiled at her as she approached. "Rayin, how good to see you. Finally, a ray of beauty in this dismal place."

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Rayin smiled with a light blush. “That’s enough flattery for today, Tag.”

Taggery nodded with a grin. “Yes’m.”

Rayin was glad that Tag was the guard who escorted her into the cells; they had been friends since childhood, and she liked him a great deal. At times she wistfully wished for a more romantic relationship, but she well knew that Tag’s heart was already given to another girl. Oh, well. He was still a very good and trusted friend.

He escorted her into the various cells as she gave the food to the dirty, silent prisoners. They rarely even looked at her as they took the chunk of bread from her and drank the cup of water. As she entered the fifth cell, though, the prisoner in it looked directly at her. He was sitting in the corner, leaning back against the wall; it was immediately obvious that he was badly hurt. She hesitated for a moment as her eyes met his; he had deep, deep blue eyes, bluer than any she had ever seen in any of the Quen prisoners. Quickly glancing down, Rayin knelt, handing him the cup of water. He took it and raised it to his lips with obvious difficulty, and Rayin, fearing he would spill the water, steadied the cup for him. Then she gave him the bread, and stood to leave.

“Thank you,” he said suddenly, quite unexpectedly.

No prisoner had ever thanked her before. She looked into his remarkably blue eyes, hesitated again, and then said, “You’re welcome.” Another hesitation, and she quickly turned and left.

“Is something wrong?” Tag asked as he locked the door.

“No,” she said quickly. “No. I was just surprised. None of them have ever thanked me before.”

“Yeah, that’s not something I’d expect from a Quen.”

“He seemed badly injured.”

“Yes,” Tag agreed. “He did.”

“Has he been tended?”

Tag shrugged. “Well, the military doctors probably bandaged whatever was bleeding, but beyond that...” He shrugged again.

After finishing her duty, as she returned to her work above the ground tending Coranti warriors, she could not shake the injured Quen soldier’s blue-eyed gaze from her mind. He had seemed different from the others somehow.

That night, as she lay awake on her bed, she stared up at the ceiling, still thinking about him. Why couldn’t she get him out of her mind? Was it just because he had thanked her? Was it his clear, dignified gaze? She’d never seen blue eyes before seeing these Quen prisoners, and they had caught her interest from the start, but his... She’d never seen *anything* so blue!

And he was suffering, too, that was obvious. Yes, he was a Quen, and he was a prisoner of war, but her heart instinctively ached for anything, friend or foe, human or animal, that was suffering. She wondered how many other prisoners were also injured, their untended, dirty wounds festering while they sat alone and in pain.

The following morning she approached the head nurse at the military hospital, a kindly, gray-haired woman. “Madam Saira,” she said, “may I speak with you?”

“Certainly, dear. What is it?”

“I was down feeding the prisoners yesterday, and I saw—well, some of them were badly injured, Madam, and their injuries have not been looked after properly. I know they are our enemies, but I want your permission to go to them and tend their wounds—at least wash them

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and put clean bandages on them.”

Madam Saira smiled a little. “Dear, dear Rayin, you have a soft and generous heart. I would gladly let you, but I do not think the commander would allow it. But I will speak with him.”

Rayin nodded. “Thank you, Madam.”

The younger woman went about her tasks in the hospital as Madam Saira made her way to the prison commander’s quarters. He was a hard man, ruthless, even, and Saira doubted he would grant permission, but she would at least ask. When she was ushered before the commander, he stood. “Madam Saira. So good to see you.”

She bowed slightly. “Commander. I have a request.”

“Say on.”

“There are many injured prisoners, Commander. I was wondering if perhaps I could send one or two of my nurses to tend to them.”

Surprisingly, the Commander did not immediately refuse her request. He sat back, tapping his finger against his chin as he thought. “Hmm. Normally I would not allow it, but the Queen have also taken many prisoners, and the king wishes to arrange some sort of exchange, so we wish to keep as many prisoners as possible alive. Yes. Send a few nurses down there to at least ensure their survival.”

Madam Saira nodded. “Thank you, Commander.”

Rayin, her basket full of bandages rather than bread this time, quickly went to Tag’s section of the prison as the other few nurses with her began to work. Tag nodded to her as she came, looking at the bandages curiously.

“We’ve been sent to tend the prisoners’ injuries,” she

told him.

One eyebrow went up. “Really. Was this your idea?”

“No,” she lied. “Madam Saira asked the commander for permission.”

“Oh. Well, this is quite a different thing to do.”

“Which of the prisoners in this part are hurt?”

Tag nodded toward one of the cells. “That younger one you mentioned yesterday is probably the worst off.”

“Than we will go to him first.”

Tag opened the door, and Rayin went in. Again she met the prisoner’s gaze, and again she quickly looked away. “I’ve been sent to tend your wounds,” she said, setting the basket and the water bucket on the floor.

The young soldier was quiet as she worked. His shoulder had been badly mauled, and his chest was lacerated, as well as his other arm; Rayin grimaced at the wounds, wondering how he had managed to stay alive as a prisoner in such condition. She washed the wounds, and though she tried to be gentle he occasionally gasped in pain. He had gone too long without treatment, and it was obvious. The wounds were filthy; if he didn’t get a fever, or worse, it would be a miracle. It was a miracle he hadn’t already. The Quen were a tough, hardy people, that much was certain.

When she was finished, the battered soldier leaned back against the wall. “Thank you, my lady,” he said as she stood to go.

She looked into his eyes again, saw the genuine gratitude in them. “You’re welcome.” Then she slowly turned and left.

After tending to other Quen prisoners, Rayin returned to the military hospital, still deep in thought about the blue-eyed soldier. What *was* it about him that made her

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unable to stop thinking about him? There was something in his eyes that intrigued her, and it wasn't just the color. And his voice, too—very clear, very pleasant, not at all like she had imaged Quen warriors to sound like. In fact, he didn't seem much like a warrior at all. He seemed younger than the other prisoners; he was probably not much older than she was, if any older at all, and she was barely eighteen. He'd probably not been able to shave for days now, but there wasn't nearly as much stubble on his face as there was on the other Quen soldiers.

But his voice...His voice was not that of a boy. Nor was his bearing, nor his bold gaze. Was he a captain? No, he was too young for a captain. But the Quen probably did such matters differently than the Coranti; he *could* be a captain, or perhaps even a commander.

The following day she returned to the dungeon, and as she approached Tag he eyed her quizzically. "Back again?"

"He needs to be checked again," she told him. "I fear he may develop a fever."

Tag shrugged, opening the cell door. Rayin entered, going to the young soldier. "How do you feel?" she asked, for once not turning her gaze away from his.

"Much better than before, my lady," he said. "Thank you."

"I am a nurse. I am only doing my duty."

He just nodded.

"What is your name?"

"Iacilm, my lady."

"You took quite a beating, Iacilm."

"Yes, I did."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "I was struck down by a horseman with

a battle flail, and then the horse was shot and fell on me. I was unconscious when your soldiers took me.”

“Are you a captain?”

“No, my lady. Just a common soldier.”

She nodded, and then gave him a cup that she had brought with her. “Drink this. It’s an herb tea; it will help you heal.”

Nodding, he took the cup and drained it. When he handed it back, she stood. “I’ll return tomorrow to check on you, and replace the bandages.”

“Thank you, my lady. You’re very kind.”

“As I said, it is my duty.” She turned to leave, but then hesitated, looking back at him for a moment before leaving the cell.

As Tag locked the door, he had a frown on his face. “Rayin, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to keep coming back here. I know you’re only doing your duty, but other people might get suspicious.”

“Tag, he’s wounded.”

“I know, but you’ve got to remember, he’s an enemy!”

Frowning reprovingly, she said, “Enemy or not, he needs attention, or he could die.”

“He’s not going to die, Rayin. If he survived this long without attention, he’ll live now that he’s been properly seen to.”

“I want to be sure, Tag. Don’t worry so much.”

The following day she returned and changed Iacilm’s bandages. He looked considerably healthier than he had a few days ago. She gave him some more tea, and then asked, “Have you been a soldier long?”

“No, my lady,” he replied. “Only a year.”

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“Have you seen much battle?”

“No, only minor skirmishes. I was captured in my first real battle.”

“I see.” She filled the cup with water and gave it to him, and he drained it thirstily.

As he handed the cup back he asked, “And you? Have you been a nurse long?”

“Only a year, like you.”

“You’re very skilled, my lady.”

“Please, you needn’t call me ‘my lady,’ Iacilm. My name is Rayin.”

“As you wish.”

She stood to leave, and as she did she said, “I think you are past any real danger, Iacilm. I’ll check on you every now and then, though, when it’s my turn to bring food.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

She started to look away from him, but his gaze held her, and she couldn’t force her eyes away. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. I’m an enemy. Why do you watch over me so carefully?”

“I...” She started to say, ‘I am a nurse’ again, but the words caught in her throat, and she realized that she really didn’t know. Turning, she left, not answering his question.

But once out in the hallway, Tag asked her again. “Yes, why?” he said. “Why do you show so much concern for him?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, Tag,” she said quietly. She trusted him, and felt comfortable sharing her feelings with him, so she continued. “There’s something about him that draws me here. I can’t stop thinking about

him, Tag. His eyes, his voice, his bearing...I don't know. He's not like the other Quen soldiers. He has piqued my curiosity."

Tag nodded slowly. "I think I know what you mean. He certainly is different. But you must be careful, Rayin. Not just about others becoming suspicious—be careful of *him*. He may be different, but he is still a Quen, and we are at war with the Quen."

She nodded. "I know, Tag. I know." Absorbed in her own thoughts, she left the dungeon.

"Madam Saira?"

The head nurse lifted her eyes to see Rayin in the doorway. "Yes, child?"

"I wanted to ask you something."

"Go on."

"May I be allowed to take food to the prisoners more than once a week?"

"More?" She looked surprised.

Rayin nodded, looking very timid for some reason. "I would like to do it as often as I could, Madam."

Madam Saira studied the young woman in front of her. "I didn't think you liked that duty, Rayin."

"Well, I...It's not so bad."

"You have been behaving very strangely recently, young one. Why do you want to go to those awful dungeons so often?"

"I...well, I'm not really sure, Madam."

Saira placed her hands on the table in front of her. "Rayin, you don't need to hide it. I know why you're going."

Rayin looked stricken. "You do? Madam, I know it isn't...It's not the way it looks, Madam, it really isn't!

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I...”

“Rayin, you know that Taggery is already as good as betrothed.”

Rayin blinked, and then caught on—Madam Saira thought she was going to see *Tag!* “Oh—I know, Madam, but it’s not like that at all! He’s just a very good friend, Madam.”

Saira waved her hand. “No, Rayin, don’t try to explain it away.” She smiled a little. “He’s as good as betrothed, I said, but he isn’t yet. May the best girl win, I always say. You may take food to the prisoners every morning, if you wish, Rayin.”

Rayin nodded gratefully. “Thank you, Madam.”

2

The following morning, as she visited Iacilm's cell, she asked, "Iacilm, do you have any family?"

He nodded. "Yes. My mother and father, and two little sisters."

"You miss them, don't you?"

Again he nodded, a distant look in his eyes. "Yes. A great deal. I don't know if I'll ever see them again."

She was surprised at how sad she felt. "I'm sorry, Iacilm."

He shrugged. "Such is war."

"Do you have many friends also in the war?"

"A few. I have no idea where any of them are, or if they're still alive."

Rayin hesitated, and then said, "You seem different from the other Quen prisoners here."

He laughed. "I do? That's not surprising, I suppose. All of the men who were captured with me were battle-seasoned veterans, hard-bitten and experienced. My regiment was still wet behind the ears, and I'm the only one of them who was brought here. The rest must have either escaped or died."

"It must have been quite a battle."

"No. We were caught by surprise in an abandoned village. It was a complete rout."

She lowered her eyes briefly, uncomfortably, but then looked back up. "Were you pressed into service, or did you volunteer?"

"I volunteered."

"Really? Why?"

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Immediately a shadow seemed to fall upon his face, and he stared straight ahead, his mouth set in a grim line and his eyes tight with pain. Rayin sensed his discomfort, and hastily said, "If you would rather not say, I don't mind. I'm sorry."

He nodded slowly. "Thank you, my lady."

An uncomfortable silence settled, and even Tag began to look uneasy. Finally Rayin rose to leave. As she did, Iacilm continued to stare straight ahead, and he said nothing.

For the next week she delivered food every morning, always taking a few minutes for idle conversation with Iacilm. She did not mention his volunteering in the army again.

One day, as she left the cell, Iacilm bit into the bread she had given him, and then stopped with surprise as his teeth encountered something unusual. Looking closely at the chunk of bread, he saw that it was hollowed out, with a large lump of cheese hidden in the center.

He stared at the closed door for several moments before resuming his meal.

"I don't like this, Rayin," Tag said as he unlocked the door of Iacilm's cell several days later. "You've come here every day for two weeks. You talk with him a few minutes, and then go to the rest of them without saying a word."

"Tag," she said quietly, "there's something about him. I told you before. I have to find out what it is; why he's so different."

"I just don't like it, that's all." He opened the heavy door, admitting her.

Iacilm actually smiled as she entered. “Good morning, my lady.”

“Please, Iacilm, don’t call me that. My name is Rayin, as I’ve told you before.”

“Very well, Rayin.”

She knelt, placing the basket on the ground, and dipped the cup into the water bucket. “Here.”

He drank gratefully, and when he handed the cup back she filled it again. He looked mildly curious, but did not question her.

When she took the cup back again, he abruptly said, “I want to tell you why I joined the army.”

There was an odd quality to his voice that told Rayin that what he was going to tell her was very, very personal. “Are you sure?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yes. You have been more than kind to me, and I want you to know.” He sighed. “I joined for revenge, actually.”

“Revenge?” She was startled.

“Yes. At first.”

“Revenge on whom?”

“Your people.”

“Because of the war?”

“Partly.” His mouth twisted in a grimace. “This whole stupid war is pointless, Rayin. I’m not even sure what it’s about.”

“Neither am I.”

“But that’s not the whole reason. You see...” He paused, looking away. “I was in love. Deeply. She meant everything to me.”

Rayin felt a pit open up in her stomach. “What happened?”

“Our village was attacked by a regiment of Coranti.

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They leveled the village, destroyed everything. My family escaped, but...but hers did not. She was killed.”

Rayin saw the deep, bitter pain in his blue eyes, and her heart nearly broke. “Oh, Iacilm,” she whispered, suddenly not caring that he was Quen, that he was an enemy. “Oh, I’m so sorry.” She unconsciously put her hand over his clenched fist, and felt the trembling tension in his muscles.

“That’s why I joined,” he said. “I wanted revenge on the Coranti.” He forced himself to relax. “I soon realized that revenge was useless, that it would not bring her back—that I would only be creating more broken hearts by killing. But it was too late; I was already in the army, and could not back out.” He looked directly into her eyes, and they held her fast.

She stared right back into his eyes, those deep, incredibly blue eyes, and she saw things in them she hadn’t noticed before. Kindness, gentleness, sincerity; yes, he was different from the others. He was no warrior. He was tough, and probably very strong, but he was no warrior. He did not belong here, in a military prison; he did not belong in the army—he belonged at home.

“What was her name?” she asked quietly.

He blinked, looking away for a brief moment before replying. “Tellicea.”

“Rayin.” It was Tag. “Rayin, take your hand from him, please. Now.”

Rayin looked down at her hand, and slowly withdrew it. She numbly handed Iacilm his bread, and then rose and left the cell.

Iacilm broke the bread in half, finding what he had come to expect—cheese, and a little meat. He ate hungrily.

“Rayin, this has got to stop!” Tag whispered to her outside of the cell. “You’ve become far too friendly with him!”

Rayin shook her head sadly. “Tag, couldn’t you see the pain in his eyes? He’s lost the one he loved, Tag. I had to try to comfort him, if even just a little. Couldn’t you see it?”

Tag let out a long sigh. “Yes, Rayin, I saw it. But what is there to do? Hundreds of people have lost their loved ones in this war.” He touched her long black hair. “Rayin, this is dangerous. If anyone finds out what you’ve been doing, you could be imprisoned yourself.”

“Please, Tag,” she said, “please, don’t interfere. If your love was killed, how would you feel? What if you went to Dinial’s home and found her dead? How would you feel?”

Tag looked away. “You know how I’d feel.”

“Then imagine how Iacilm is feeling.”

“Yes, but what on earth can *you* do? Free him and bring her back from the dead?”

“I can be his friend.”

“No, you can’t! He’s a Quen, for heaven’s sake! We’re at *war!*”

“Tag, he needs a friend. He’s alone right now. Please, Tag.”

“He might hurt you, Rayin. He might try to use you to escape.”

She shook her head. “No, Tag. He wouldn’t hurt me.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“You know as well as I he wouldn’t; don’t try to deny it! He’s not a warrior, Tag. He’s a lonely, heartbroken young man who ought to be home with his family, not

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locked up in a dirty, cold military prison!” Her expression softened. “Tag, please, trust me. If I can do nothing more than make his day a little happier, just for a few minutes, than it is worth the risk.”

Tag stared at her for a long time, and then said, “Rayin, you’re too kind for your own good. I’ll help you.”

She hugged him. “Thank you, Tag. Thank you.”

“Just don’t make a habit of befriending prisoners, okay?”

She smiled. “I’ll try not to.”

That day, as she was running an errand farther into the city, Rayin heard the royal trumpets. The king was about in the city! Excited, she went toward the sound, hoping to catch sight of him.

She soon saw the royal procession; the king and queen, riding in their carriage, would pass right by where Rayin was standing. She backed against the wall of a nearby shop, smiling in excitement, as the royal carriage drew closer.

The queen had a small dog that she loved dearly and took everywhere she went. The dog had its front legs up in the window of the carriage, looking in curiosity at all of the people, and as the carriage drew close to Rayin it saw a large rat scurry down the gutter and disappear up an alley. Barking furiously, the dog leaped from the window of the carriage and sped after the rat, racing toward the startled Rayin. From inside the carriage the queen gave a worried cry, and the king’s head appeared in the window. “Stop that infernal cur!” he roared.

Rayin quickly dropped to her knees and snatched the small dog off its feet as it tried to dart past her. The dog

yelped and bit her hand, drawing blood, but she did not release it. “There, there,” she said gently, “don’t be alarmed, I won’t hurt you, dog.” The dog wriggled violently, but she continued to stroke it, speaking softly, and it soon calmed.

One of the guards was approaching her, and she stood, handing him the dog. “Thank you, miss,” the soldier said politely, taking the dog back to the carriage.

“Wait,” said the queen, looking out the carriage window. She motioned to Rayin. “Come here, young lady.”

Rayin obeyed, coming closer to the carriage. She was not afraid; everyone knew the queen was a kindly woman. The king was a little rougher around the edges, but was still not an unkind man.

“Dear, your hand is bleeding,” the queen said worriedly. “Did he bite you?”

“Yes, your Majesty, but it’s not serious,” Rayin replied.

“Oh, dear. I’m sorry; he’s never bitten anyone before.”

“I’m afraid I startled him.”

“Good thing you caught him,” the king grunted. “He was after a rat. A big one.”

“A rat!” the queen gasped. “Oh, my! Young woman, I’m very grateful to you.”

“Oh, please, no thanks is necessary, your Majesty,” Rayin said quickly.

The queen pursed her lips speculatively. “What is your name?”

“Rayin, your Majesty.”

“And how old are you?”

“Eighteen, your Majesty.”

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The queen nodded faintly as she spoke. “Do you live near here?”

“I live on the other side of the city, your Majesty. I was just running an errand.”

“Are you married, dear?”

“No, your Majesty,” she said, wondering why the queen was asking so many questions.

The queen turned to the king. “Dear, do you think she would do? She’s the right age, and seems to be a very nice young lady.”

The king grunted again. “Sure, honeypot. Whatever you think best.”

Looking back at Rayin, the queen said, “Our daughter’s handmaid just got married, and we’re looking for a new one for her. You’re the right age, and I think you and she would get along nicely; you’ll be well treated, and you’ll get room and board, plus clothing and money for your family. If you would like to come, we would love to have you.”

Rayin’s heart jumped into her throat. Here was a chance to live in the palace—to earn more money for her parents than she had ever dreamed of. She could lift them out of poverty. The princess’ handmaid!

But then she remembered Iacilm. She struggled with herself; this was a golden opportunity, but she would never see Iacilm again. She didn’t want to leave him alone again, not now that she knew why he was there. But...the princess’ handmaid!

“My dear,” said the queen, “you look troubled.”

“I...I would dearly love to accept your offer, my queen,” said Rayin. “But I work at the military hospital, you see. I’m a nurse, and I don’t want to leave my duties there.”

The queen nodded. “You’re a nurse? Why... that’s even better. Are you certain you wouldn’t like to come?”

Rayin felt her chance of becoming the princess’ handmaid dwindling rapidly. But she couldn’t bear the thought of never seeing Iacilm again. “I would, my queen, but...but...I can’t.”

“Why?”

What could she say? That she loved being a nurse in a dingy military hospital too much to be the princess’ handmaid? “There is a young man there, your Majesty—a soldier...” That had worked with Madam Saira; why not the queen? She didn’t have to mention that the soldier was a Quen prisoner.

The queen seemed to understand. “Ah. A very special young man, I take it?”

Rayin nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re planning to marry him soon?”

“Oh, no,” she said quickly. “That would be quite impossible. It’s not really a marriage kind of thing. He’s just a friend, and having a difficult time. He lost someone very dear to him, and was also badly injured in the war. I’m the only friend he has, and he very much needs my support, you see.”

The queen smiled kindly. “Oh, my dear child, I’m sure something can be arranged. The princess doesn’t need a handmaid every minute of the day, you know.”

Rayin’s hopes flared. “Could I perhaps visit the hospital in the mornings? I could be back at the palace before the morning meal.”

The queen nodded affirmatively. “Of course, my dear. Of course.”

Rayin, smiling broadly, whirled a bit, feeling the incredibly soft material of the dress as it brushed her legs. It was a lovely dress, a pastel purple color with ribbons and lace; she'd never worn a dress like this one before.

She was alone in a sitting room in the palace, waiting for the princess to arrive. She'd never seen the princess before—the royal daughter rarely went out into the city—but she'd heard many good things about her. She was excited to meet her.

She whirled again, and found herself face-to-face with a young girl, about her age, with a golden coronet in her hair. Rayin flushed, dropping into a curtsy. “Your Highness. I’m sorry, I didn’t see you enter.”

The princess smiled, her eyes twinkling. Her hair was a rich, dark brown, which was a very, very rare hair color for the Coranti. It was a little longer than Rayin’s, and fell in charming, graceful curls. The princess’ eyes were brown, as well, also very rare, and Rayin could see in them a great deal of warmth. “You’ve never worn a dress like that before, have you?”

“No, never.”

The princess grinned. “I’ve worn far too many. Sometimes I wish I could wear a plain old dress, without these frills and things, once in a while. Your name is Rayin?”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“Oh, bosh this ‘highness’ nonsense. Please, call me Lhaerica. I don’t like the whole servant business; I would prefer if we were simply friends.”

“That sounds wonderful, your H...Lhaerica.”

Lhaerica smiled broadly. “I like you already, Rayin. Come, let me show you the palace.”

The commander turned to his lieutenant, tapping his chin as he always did when he was thinking. “I would like to interrogate one of the new prisoners; perhaps we could glean some useful information from him.”

The lieutenant shook his head. “I doubt it, sir, I really do. None of them are officers; they’re just common soldiers.”

“Still, they may know something.”

“Well, if you insist, I know one who will probably work better than the others. He’s much younger, and obviously hasn’t been a soldier very long. He’ll break easily.”

Deep in the underground prison, Iacilm stared at the torchlight coming through the tiny, barred window in the door, thinking. His mind was on that girl—Rayin. Why was she being so kind to him? She came every day, slipping him extra food, better food than the bread, and sometimes even small sips of milk. And why had he opened up to her and told her something he had never told anyone else, not even his own family?

He wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was because she was the only person here who ever *had* treated him kindly—treated him as a person, not a prisoner of war. He remembered the concern he had seen in her raven-black eyes so many times; why was she doing this? That soldier—she called him Tag—was obviously very uneasy, fearful she would get caught and punished. Surely she knew the risk, so why was she doing it?

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His thoughts were interrupted by a rattling at the door, and it opened. Two men, soldiers, came in and dragged him to his feet, leading him out the door, as the guard—it was not Tag; he was only there in the mornings—stood nearby, closing the door after them.

He was taken to a small, stark room, devoid of furniture save for a single chair in the center of the floor. He was roughly sat in the chair, and immediately he knew what he was there for. Two more men—he recognized one of them as the commander of the prison—entered, and the door was securely shut. Iacilm was tied firmly to the chair, and the commander approached, a bleak smile on his lips. “I would like to ask you a few questions,” he said.

As Rayin, once again dressed in her plain gray dress, approached Iacilm’s cell, Tag met her. “Rayin,” he said.

There was a tightness around his eyes that immediately alerted her. “What’s wrong, Tag?” she asked.

He shook his head with a sigh. “It’s Iacilm. The Commander interrogated him last night. He doesn’t look good.”

Rayin felt herself go cold. “Take me to him.”

“Rayin...”

“Now!”

Nodding, he turned and led her to Iacilm’s cell. When the door opened, Rayin gasped; Iacilm was sitting propped up in his usual corner, and dried blood was smeared on his face and hands. One eye was swollen shut, but the other, blue and clear as ever, looked at her, and he smiled faintly.

Rayin turned to Tag. “Go fetch me a cloth and

another bucket of water,” she said. “And some wild ironroot oil.”

“But you can’t stay here alone with him!”

“Tag, just go, quickly.”

“But if you’re caught in there alone with him...”

“No one will catch us, Tag. Go!”

Tag, shaking his head and muttering, turned and left. Rayin entered the cell and pulled the door closed behind her, going quickly to Iacilm.

“Hi,” he said, grinning a bit. “Sorry about the mess.”

She carefully touched a bruise on his face, and he winced. “Those barbarians!” she spat. “What were they trying to get out of you?”

“The location and strength of our Second Army.”

“And did they get it?”

He tried to laugh, but it hurt too much, so he quit. “No. I don’t know where the Second Army is.”

“How badly are you hurt?”

“Oh, just bruised up. They didn’t break anything; I think they realized I wasn’t lying before they got that far.”

Gently brushing a lock of his hair away from a bruise, she said, “I’ve never liked the commander. He’s a hard and cruel man.”

“He’s a soldier, just like the rest of us. War can turn people into machines.”

“I never want that to happen to you, hear me? You’re too nice a man to let war turn you into someone like him.”

Iacilm grinned again. “You’re not supposed to call your enemies nice, you know.”

“Nonsense. You aren’t my enemy.” Looking him in the eye, she said, a little hesitantly, “I want to be your

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friend, Iacilm. I think you need one.”

He let out a long sigh. “You could get into a lot of trouble doing this, Rayin. A lot of trouble.”

“I don’t care. Now, can I be your friend, or not?”

He looked into her eyes. “You already are, Rayin. You know that. And I thank you.”

Presently Tag returned with the things Rayin had asked for. Taking them, she said, “Thank you, Tag. Now go feed the other prisoners.” She took Iacilm’s bread from the basket and handed the rest to Tag, with the bucket of water.

“Rayin...”

“Just do it, Tag.”

Tag nodded, took the basket, and left, locking the door behind him.

Rayin carefully washed the blood from Iacilm’s face and hands, and then gently rubbed the pungent ironroot oil onto the bruises. “This will help the bruises go away quickly,” she said as she worked.

When she was finished she set the water and remaining oil aside, and then, on a sudden impulse, moved, sitting close beside the young Quen soldier. She said nothing, only sat there, barely touching him, waiting for Tag to return. Iacilm, too, said nothing.

When at length she heard the key rattling in the lock, she briefly squeezed Iacilm’s hand. “I’m sorry they did this to you,” she said, and then let go, standing up.

“Yeah,” he said with another grin. “Me, too. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Iacilm.”

“So,” said Princess Lhaerica, lying on her stomach on her bed with her legs crossed in the air, “tell me about this soldier of yours.” She grinned mischievously.

It was night, and both girls were preparing for bed. Rayin, as the princess' handmaid, slept in the same room, albeit in a much smaller bed. Still, it was a better bed than she'd ever had in her entire life; large, incredibly soft, immaculately clean; it was even scented, a faint, pleasant rose smell. She was sitting on it cross-legged, her back against the wall, and she plucked absently at the silky nightgown she was wearing before saying, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Rayin. You know what I mean. The dashing young soldier you went to visit this morning."

Rayin did not smile. She wished desperately to be able to talk with someone about Iacilm, someone besides Tag—another woman, someone who would understand. She didn't know if the princess would understand, though. She might, but still...she didn't know her well enough yet.

Lhaerica noticed her expression, and her grin slipped away. "Rayin, what's the matter?"

Rayin shook her head. "Oh. It's nothing. I'm sorry."

The young princess left her bed, going to Rayin's and sitting on it, her face worried. "Rayin, if I've said something wrong, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"No, no," Rayin said. "It's not you. It's...It's him."

"Oh?"

"Yes. He, uh...he's not really a soldier."

"He's not?" One of the princess' eyebrows shot up.

"Well, he is, but he shouldn't be. He doesn't belong in an army, fighting a war; he...I don't know how to explain. I'm worried about him."

Lhaerica moved closer, also leaning back against the wall. "Tell me about him. If you don't mind."

Rayin, before she really thought about it, began to

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“He’s very thoughtful and polite, very kind-hearted, yet at the same time he’s very strong, very rugged—but it’s not because of soldiering; he was a farm boy before the war, and he and his father had to run their farm by themselves. He wants nothing more than to return home; he knows his father will be struggling without him, and he misses his family so.”

Lhaerica nodded. “Yes, he probably does. Well, he sounds like a very nice man. How did you meet him?”

“He was in the hospital, wounded. I took care of him.”

Lhaerica smiled again, her eyes shining. “How wonderfully romantic.”

“Oh, it’s not like that, Lhaerica. Not at all. We aren’t in love; it’s nothing like that.”

“Really? Then what is it?”

“He just needed a friend, you see. He...oh, I shouldn’t be telling you this, princess. Please, promise me you won’t breath a word of this to anyone.”

Lhaerica nodded gravely. “Of course I promise, Rayin.”

“Thank you. He joined the army because he wanted revenge, you see, because his fiancée was murdered by Co...enemy soldiers...in a raid on his village.”

Lhaerica’s eyes widened, and she put her hand to her mouth. “Murdered! Oh, my, that poor, poor man!”

Rayin blinked away a sudden tear. “Yes. He’s terribly lonely, Lhaerica, lonely and hurt and heartbroken. He has no friends here, none but me. He just wants to go home; he’s seen that revenge is pointless, but he can’t just leave the army.”

“Yes he could,” the princess declared. “Father could give him special leave.”

“No!” Rayin said quickly. “No, you don’t understand. Please, keep your promise and say nothing of this to anyone. Please, Lhaerica.”

“But...”

“Please!”

The princess was confused, and her big brown eyes were plainly showing her worry. “I don’t understand.”

“I know. Please trust me.”

“Of course. Of course.” She put her arm around Rayin’s shoulders. “This is our secret. I hope you know what you’re doing.” After a pause, she said, “What’s his name?”

“Um...I’d rather not say. I probably shouldn’t have told you any of this.”

“I won’t pry, Rayin. So you’re really not in love with him?”

“No, of course not. I couldn’t think of it.”

Lhaerica sighed. “I probably would be, if it was me. I do so wish something romantic would happen to me. But that’s out of the question. I’m a princess; the only young men around I can even think about seeing are those cocky noblemen’s sons. Ick.”

“Surely there’s a nice one somewhere out there.”

“I certainly hope so.” She smiled dreamily. “I want a handsome young man to come and sweep me off my feet; wouldn’t that be terribly fun? Perhaps a noble prince from the desert will come galloping in on his magnificent white horse—on a state visit, of course—and when he sees me he’ll not be able to look away, and the next thing you know, he’ll ask my father for permission to court me...And of course, he’ll be very handsome, and very kind and oh, so very gallant.”

Rayin laughed. “A prince from the desert? Would you

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really want to live as a nomad in that awful wasteland?”

“Well, perhaps not. All right, perhaps a prince from the mountain kingdom of Adilayan.”

“That would be much better.”

“Some Adilayans have the most gorgeous blue eyes, you know. I think maybe they and the Quen may have mixed long ago. I do so love blue eyes.”

Rayin took a deep breath, suddenly thinking of Iacilm’s deep, deep blue eyes, those eyes that had caught her attention from the beginning. Such wonderfully enchanting eyes...

She began to blush. What was she thinking? Well, really, it wasn’t that she was thinking even remotely romantically; he *did* have beautiful eyes, it was just a fact.

Lhaerica saw the blush, though, and said, “What are you thinking about?”

Blushing more deeply, Rayin hastily said, “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Right,” she drawled. “Right. Come on, tell me.”

“I...Nothing, really!”

“Come on, out with it! You can share these things with your sister, can’t you?”

Startled, Rayin looked at the broadly smiling princess. “Sister?”

The smile only widened. “Of course, Rayin. I like you. Already I like you more than any of my other handmaids. We can be sisters, can’t we?”

Rayin smiled hesitantly. She really did like Princess Lhaerica. A lot. “Certainly.”

“Good. So tell me—what were you thinking about?”

Rayin blushed again and, looking down at her gown, said in a small voice, “His eyes.”

Cory Poulson

“Ah. I thought it might be something like that. You know, I think you’re more in love than you’ll admit.”

“No, no, it’s not like that at all!”

Lhaerica patted the other girl’s hand. “Of course, dear. Whatever you say.” Her eyes were sparkling. “Just keep telling yourself that, because if you go and get married, I’ll lose my favorite handmaid *and* my new sister all in one fell swoop.”

4

Several more days went by without incident, but then, as she approached the hospital, Rayin saw someone—someone waiting for her, certainly—and she swallowed hard. It was Dinial, the girl Tag was all but engaged to, and she didn't look pleased.

“Rayin,” Dinial said coldly.

Rayin groaned inside. “Dinial, what's the matter?”

“The matter? Oh, nothing, Rayin.” Her voice was bitterly sarcastic. “Nothing serious. You're just trying to steal Tag from me, that's all!”

Great. This was not good. “No, Dinial, I'm not.”

“Don't lie to me, Rayin. Everyone knows about it. You've been going down there to see him every day for weeks!”

Rayin thought quickly. Dinial was a very dear friend, and she did not want to lose that friendship. “Dinial, I need to talk with you. Privately.”

“Don't think that I...”

“Please. Dinial, I need to explain.”

“I'll say you do!”

“Come with me.” She led Dinial to a secluded place away from the hospital, and then, speaking in a low voice, said, “Dinial, I know it looks terribly suspicious, but it's not the way it seems.”

“Yeah. Right.”

“Please listen, Dinial. I'm not after Tag, really, I'm not.”

“Well then why...”

“I'll explain. But first promise me you won't tell

anyone about this. No one!”

Dinial looked uncertain. “All right.”

Taking a deep breath, Rayin proceeded to tell her about Iacilm—how he had first caught her interest, and everything that had happened since then. Dinial’s eyes were wide by the time she finished.

“Rayin, you’re going to get yourself locked up, or even killed!” she hissed. “You’re crazy!”

“I know,” Rayin said. “But Tag has been my best protection so far. If people think I’m going there to see *him*, they won’t ever even think of Iacilm.”

“This is insane!”

“I need your help, Dinial. I need it badly. I need people to think I’m going there to see Tag, and you can help me.”

“How?”

“If anyone asks you about it, just confirm what they think. Tell them that I’m trying to steal Tag from you.”

“Rayin, you can’t keep this up for long.”

“Please, Dinial. I need your help.”

Dinial shook her head with a frown. “Forget this Quen soldier, Rayin. Just forget him.”

“I can’t, Dinial. I can’t.”

“Why not? You’re not in *love* with him, are you?”

“No, of course not. But he needs me. Can you even imagine what he’s going through?”

“Rayin, he’s a Quen!”

“And also a man. A very kind man, a... a special man.”

Dinial shook her head. “All right, all right. I’ll help you. But I don’t want Tag to get into trouble, too.”

“He won’t. Even if someone catches on to what I’m doing, I’ll just say that Tag knew nothing about it. All I

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did was sneak the prisoner extra food hidden in his bread.”

“Rayin, be careful. They’ll arrest your for treason if they find out.”

“I know. But I have to do it.”

Iacilm was obviously in a downcast mood; he smiled when Rayin entered the cell, but she immediately knew the smile was forced. It had been several days since his interrogation, and he was healing nicely; most of the bruises were gone, and his swollen eye was nearly back to normal, thanks to the ironroot oil.

“What’s bothering you, Iacilm?” she asked as she handed him the bread.

He shook his head. “I’d rather not talk about it. I’m sorry.”

Rayin hesitated, but, not daring to ask any further, quietly dipped a cup of water for him.

Before she could hand it to him, though, his fist clenched around the bread, squeezing it so tightly some of the cheese inside leaked between his fingers. “Blast it,” he muttered.

Rayin froze even as she was about to hand him the cup, and she studied him quietly for a moment before saying, “Iacilm?”

“Rayin, I...I need to talk to you.” His face was taut, his eyes hard and his jaw set, and he did not relax his grip on the bread and cheese.

Rayin could sense a raging storm inside of him, begging to be released. She put the cup down, moving closer to him and gently taking his clenched fist in her hands. “Certainly, Iacilm. Certainly.” Slowly his grip relaxed, and she took the mangled bread and cheese from

his hand, setting it aside. “What is it?”

“I never told anyone how she died,” he said, his voice thick and unsteady. “No one knows but me. No one. But I want to tell someone; I have to talk to someone. It was horrible, Rayin. Horrible.”

His hands were trembling, and Rayin, without really thinking about it, put hers over them, gripping them in silent support. After a moment he began speaking again, his voice carefully controlled. “My family and I were on our way home to the village from trading at the city when the raiders came. We saw them coming on the road and hid, and they passed us by and went on to the village. My father told us to stay put while he went to see what was happening, but I convinced him that I should go instead. I ran to the village, which by then was mostly destroyed.” Rayin could sense that his whole body was tense.

“They had set fire to most of the village, including Tellicea’s home. When I arrived I saw her run out of the house. She...she was on fire...her dress was burning, and she was screaming...” His voice faltered as his lower lip began to quiver, and a large tear rolled down his cheek. “By the time I reached her she was completely covered with flames from head to foot. I think...I think the soldiers had thrown pitch or something into the house, and she’d been hit with it. I tried to put out the fire, but she was in too much panic to hold still; she kept trying to run. Her home was near a stream, so I carried her to it. I was badly burned myself when I finally got her into the water.”

Now his whole body was shaking, and he spoke haltingly, his voice so choked he could barely speak. Rayin, her heart breaking, put her arms around him and held herself close to him as he struggled to finish the

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story; she also noticed that Tag had his back turned to them, his trembling hand covering his face.

“I could hardly recognize her,” Iacilm cried. “She couldn’t speak; she couldn’t even scream any more. I can’t get it out of my head, Rayin—her face, her body, that awful smell...she was so black and...and...she couldn’t see me; she couldn’t hear me...she...she...” A sob broke free, and he began to weep openly, as the horrible memories flashed through his mind. Rayin could only hold him, whispering quiet words of comfort, as tears dripped down her own cheeks.

After a long while, he managed to speak again. “She died only a few moments after I finally put out the flames. I guess the soldiers hadn’t seen me, because they didn’t come after me; they finished their destruction and left. I buried her before anyone could see what had happened to her.”

Rayin could not imagine how he had felt—racked with pain as he dug a grave for the one he loved the most, his hands, arms, and chest charred by the fire that had killed her...She pulled his head against her breast, holding him tightly, not knowing what else to do. He held her in return, his eyes tightly shut, taking long, deep breaths to help him stay calm.

Tag turned back toward them, his eyes full of sorrow and sympathy, and he didn’t seem to care that Rayin was holding an enemy soldier. He quietly picked up the food and water, leaving to go feed the other prisoners.

Rayin and Iacilm held each other for what seemed like a long, long time. He grew calm again, but did not let go of her, and she was glad he didn’t. She wished she could somehow reach back into the past and change what had happened, or at least take those awful memories from

his mind. She couldn't, of course, but she wanted to do everything she could.

At length he finally stirred, straightening. Rayin let go of him, but left her hands lying on his. She studied his face closely, looking into his eyes, trying to see if he was going to be all right. He must have sensed what she was looking for, and he smiled faintly. "Don't worry, Rayin. I'm all right. I just had to...to..."

"I know," she said softly. "I'm glad you did."

"Rayin," he said, "you don't know what you've meant to me. It's been so good to have a friend here; I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come along. I hope I haven't put you in any trouble."

"No," she assured him. "None. And even if you had I wouldn't care."

"Why did you do it, though? Why have you put yourself in danger to befriend an enemy prisoner? And why me?"

She looked down at her hands, trying to think of what to say. "I'm not sure," she said finally. "There was just something different about you. Special. From the first day I saw you, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I don't know what it means."

"Well," he said, "whatever the reason, I'm glad."

She smiled. "So am I." Then she startled him by leaning forward and softly kissing his cheek.

As she drew her head away she turned it slightly, and the corner of her mouth inadvertently brushed his lips. Instantly she froze, her heart beginning to pound, and a thousand thoughts raced through her mind—what was she doing? He was a prisoner of war; he was a Quen; this was dangerous; besides, she wasn't even in love with him!

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For a brief moment both of them were frozen, their lips a hair's breadth apart, and then Iacilm suddenly leaned forward a little and kissed her. She had two sudden impulses—the first was to pull away, to get out of there as quickly as she could, and the second was to remain. If she left, she could put this dangerous situation behind her forever; if she remained, she risked a broken heart and even death.

She remained.

He started to withdraw, but she threw her arms around him, pulling him back; he didn't resist, but tenderly cupped her cheek with his hand as the kiss lingered. She did the same to him, feeling all resistance she may have still felt crumble. Her doubtful thoughts tried to return, but they died even as they entered her mind. She didn't care that he was a prisoner of war. She didn't care that he was a Quen. She didn't care that it was dangerous. And she *was* in love with him; Princess Lhaerica had been right. The kiss ended, and Rayin tilted her head up, staring into Iacilm's wonderful blue eyes.

Abruptly he pulled away, hunching over with his knees against his chest and his arms wrapped around them, a haunted look in his eyes. "Rayin, I'm sorry—I don't know what came over me. Please forgive me, Rayin."

"Iacilm," she said, sitting closely against him, "don't be sorry. If I hadn't wanted you to kiss me, I wouldn't have let you."

He looked at her. "Really?"

Rayin nodded with a smile and a light blush, and she took his hand, pulling it away from his knees and interlacing her fingers in his. "Really."

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. "Oh, man.

Heaven help us now. Rayin, you can't come back. You're going to get caught, and they'll hang you as a traitor."

"They're not going to catch me."

"Yes they will, Rayin. You know that eventually someone will get suspicious, and you'll get caught."

She leaned her head on his shoulder, feeling helpless anger welling up inside. She knew he was right; she may have been getting away with it this long, but how much longer would it last? But what else could she do? "Iacilm, what am I going to do? I don't want to leave you down here alone. I love you, and I want to be with you."

"Please, Rayin," he said, the pain in his voice all too evident. "You must stop coming. I love you, too, and I don't want you to end up dead, like Tellicea."

"Perhaps I could still see you, but just not as often. Maybe just once a week. Surely no one's suspicions would be aroused if I only came once a week."

He hesitated, struggling between his desire to see her and his desire to keep her from harm. "Rayin, I'm a prisoner. At best I'll be traded for a Coranti prisoner, and at worst I'll be executed. Either way, we'll not likely see each other again."

"But if you're traded for a Coranti prisoner, you'll be free, and when the war is over..."

"Yes. There is a chance I would live through the war, but there is also a chance I will be killed in some battle somewhere. I don't want to hurt you, Rayin. Please. Forget about me."

She shook her head. "No. I can't do that."

"But..."

At that moment the door opened, and Tag reentered, the empty basket and water pail in his hand. "I took my time," he said.

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“Thank you, Tag,” Rayin said gratefully. Then she leaned over and kissed Iacilm again, full on the lips, not caring that Tag was watching. “I’ll be back next week,” she said as she stood.

“Rayin...”

“Hush.” She left, Tag following.

Once away from the cell, Tag said, “You kissed him.”

“I know.”

“You’re in love with him.” His face didn’t show what he was thinking.

“Yes.”

“Rayin, you’re going to get yourself killed.” He sighed. “But you already know that. Just be careful.”

“I will, Tag. I promise.”

She did not see the commander watching her as she walked out of the underground prison, his eyes narrowed and his finger tapping against his chin.

That day Princess Lhaerica noticed that her handmaid was unusually quiet. “Why don’t we go for a walk in the gardens?” she suggested brightly.

Rayin only nodded, and followed the princess out into the beautiful, lush palace gardens. It was a wonderful place; lovely green plants of all kinds grew everywhere, as well as thousands upon thousands of bright, colorful flowers, and the ground was covered with soft, rich grass that felt wonderfully pleasant to bare feet. The princess kicked off her shoes; she was sometimes scolded for the grass stains she got on her feet, but she didn’t care.

The two girls wandered slowly around the garden, gazing at the lovely flowers and the quaint little pools that were scattered about. As Lhaerica stopped to touch a huge, deep red rose, Rayin sat beside one of the pools, staring into the water at the tiny, multicolored fish. Lhaerica also settled beside the pool, carefully arranging her white dress. She wanted to ask Rayin what was wrong, why she was so quiet, but hesitated.

During her hesitation, Rayin spoke. Her voice betrayed a lot of things—fear, worry, pain... “Lhaerica,” she said, “can I trust you?”

Lhaerica shifted closer, putting her hand on Rayin’s knee. “Of course you can, Rayin.”

“I mean, *really* trust you. With things more important than childhood dreams or girlish infatuations. I mean... matters of life and death, even of treason.”

The princess’ eyes were filled with concern. “You worry me, Rayin. What’s the matter?”

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“Can I trust you with my life?”

Growing more and more concerned, Lhaerica nodded.

“Yes, Rayin. You are my sister.”

“I feel so helpless, Lhaerica.” Rayin’s eyes were moist. “I want to tell you this very badly, because you’ve become my closest friend—almost. There is one who is closer, and that is who I want to talk to you about. I need your advice.”

“The soldier?” Lhaerica guessed.

Rayin nodded. “Yes. But there’s a lot I haven’t told you.”

“Go on.”

Taking a deep breath, she began to speak. “This morning I was late coming to the castle, as you know. I was late because I took longer to visit him than usual. He told me how his beloved had died. It was awful; he was in so much pain... I stayed a long time to offer what comfort I could.”

“I’m glad you did, Rayin. How did she die?”

“She was burned to death. He tried to save her, but he was too late.”

Lhaerica’s brown eyes immediately brimmed with tears. “Oh, no,” she whispered. “I hate fire. Ever since I was a little girl my greatest fear was to be burned to death. How awful!”

“Yes. But before I left, I...well, he...well, we...we... Oh, Lhaerica, you were right; I *am* in love with him! I mean, one minute I was just holding him, just as a friend, and then before I knew it we were kissing—and it was the most wonderful feeling I’ve ever had.”

Lhaerica smiled. “Perhaps I’ll lose my new handmaid sooner than I’d thought.”

Rayin sadly shook her head. “No. That’s the worst

part. He...he's a..." Hesitating, she looked into Lhaerica's eyes. "Please, Lhaerica, don't think ill of me for this."

"I could never think less of you. Go on, please."

"He's not just a soldier. He's a prisoner. A Quen."

Lhaerica's eyes widened with shock, and Rayin almost winced. This may not have been a good idea...

But the princess surprised her. "Rayin, if he's a prisoner, you could be in great danger by visiting him. Especially if you're...you know, in love. What are you going to do?" There was no hint in her voice or expression of even the smallest degree of disapproval at the thought of a Coranti girl falling in love with a Quen prisoner.

"But Lhaerica," said Rayin in amazement, "aren't you even a little disturbed that I'm in love with a Quen?"

"Good heavens, no. Well, I am, but only because it puts you both in danger. But as for loving a Quen, no. I wholly approve. I've met Quen, you know, before the war started. I've even been to their king's castle. He has a daughter our age, a very pretty girl, very spirited and sweet; and also two sons, the Crown Prince and his brother—who is only a little older than I." Her eyes sparkled. "He is a very, *very* nice young man, very polite and considerate, pleasantly humorous—and oh *my*, so handsome! I've often daydreamed of him." She blushed. "I guess I've sort of been in love with a Quen, too. If it wasn't for this stupid war..."

"Lhaerica, what is this whole war even *about*?"

Shaking her head sadly, the princess replied, "Quen raiders were striking Coranti villages near the border, and Father was convinced that the Quen were trying to take over some of his land. He sent a threatening letter to the

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Quen king, who responded with a letter denying responsibility and also threatening to seize any armed parties of Coranti found within their borders—which I can fully understand, since Father threatened to invade if the raids didn't stop." She sighed. "Anyway, the letter set Father off, and he started mobilizing the Coranti armies—just in case the Quen attacked in force—and sent troops to the outlying villages to protect them. I'm not really sure what happened, but evidently the Quen somehow discovered our armies were mobilizing, and they mistook it as an intention to invade.

"As if that wasn't bad enough, Coranti soldiers ambushed a party of Quen entering Coranti and destroyed them. Our soldiers claimed the Quen attacked *them* first, but one of the Quen who was taken prisoner insisted that they were just a diplomatic party, not even heavily armed, just trying to speak with Father. I'm not sure who to believe. At any rate, the next thing we knew the Quen sent raiders to the border, who began attacking the troops sent to protect the villages. Father sent in more troops, and...there you have it."

Rayin was watching the princess closely. "You don't seem to think the Quen are entirely at fault."

"Oh, I don't know, Rayin. I don't know everything Father does. But I really don't think the king of the Quen is the kind of man to just attack our villages to get more land. I'm sure he's not. But back to what we were speaking of, Rayin—what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Lhaerica. I want your advice. He has urged me to forget about him; he doesn't want me to be in danger. But I can't, Lhaerica; I can't just forget about him. I've decided not to visit so often, perhaps once a week, to avoid arousing suspicion."

Lhaerica nodded gravely. “Yes, that will help, I think. Oh, Rayin, I don’t think you should forget him. He needs you. Look at what’s happened to him; I’m sure he’s a strong man, and would do well on his own, but it’s so much easier to bear your pain when you have someone you love to help you.”

“Yes, but I may be endangering *his* life, as well, you know. If we’re caught, we’ll *both* be killed.”

“No you won’t!” Lhaerica declared. “*No* one can kill *my* sister, *or* her love! No one!”

“Lhaerica,” Rayin said gently, “you’re very noble, but this is *treason* I’m committing. You *know* that. The judges won’t care that we were in love, that it was completely innocent and pure love—all they’ll see is that I was consorting with a prisoner of war.”

“Rayin, you must speak with Father.” Lhaerica gripped her shoulders, her eyes intent. “He can help you.”

“The king? No, Lhaerica, I couldn’t possibly...”

“Then I will.”

“No! No, Lhaerica, please, you can’t tell anyone. He’s the king; if he knew, he’d be duty-bound as the protector of Corant to destroy me.”

The princess took the other girl’s hands in hers. “No, Rayin, he’s not like that.”

“Then what *would* he do?”

“He...well, I’m not sure. I doubt he’d...well, he wouldn’t just let your soldier go free, I don’t think, and he might forbid you to see him any more, but I *know* he wouldn’t execute either of you. He’d do his best to make sure...what’s his name, anyway?”

“Iacilm.”

“Oh. Well, Father would do his best to arrange a trading of prisoners to get Iacilm back to his own

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people.”

“I’d never see him again.” Rayin felt a dull, weary hopelessness settle in her heart.

“No, no, Rayin! Don’t think that way!”

“Lhaerica, if he’s taken back to his own people, he’ll be sent back into battle. He could be killed. And if he stays here, your father would forbid me to see him, like you said.”

Lhaerica sighed, wrapping her arms around Rayin and resting her cheek against her shoulder. “Oh, Rayin, if only this war would end. Then you would both be free to do as you wished.”

Rayin felt a lump in her throat, and she drew a deep, ragged breath. “Yes. We would. We...” She stopped, too choked up to speak any more, and tears began to leak from her eyes despite all she could do. Why had this had to happen to *her*? Why was Fate so bent on making her miserable?

The princess raised her head, pulling Rayin’s down against her shoulder. “Go ahead and cry, Rayin,” she whispered. “It’s good to cry now and then.”

So Rayin did just that, and for a long time. When she finally cried herself dry, Lhaerica smiled. “Feel better?”

Rayin nodded, wiping at her eyes. “A little. Thank you.”

“Certainly. Here, let me help you clean up.” She took her handkerchief and dipped it in the pond, letting Rayin wash her tearstained face with it, drying it with her own. Then the princess carefully arranged the other girl’s hair. “Much better. You’re presentable now.”

Rayin couldn’t help but smile, her heart bursting with gratitude for such a good friend. “Thank you, Lhaerica.”

“I do hope you’ll consider speaking with Father.

He..." She stopped short as a young man suddenly appeared from around a bush, reading from an old book. Rayin knew him; he was Lhaerica's older brother, the Crown Prince. He glanced up from the book and saw them. "Ladies," he said with a bow. "Sorry to intrude."

"Quite all right, Redlim," replied the princess.

"What were you talking about?"

Lhaerica smiled sweetly. "Men."

He rolled his eyes. "Ah. I see. Well, then, let me remove my unwelcome presence from the vicinity. Pardon me, ladies."

Dinial jumped, startled, as someone pounded loudly on her door. Rising from where she had been sitting, she went to the door and opened it. Immediately three men swept in, and Dinial felt sick as she recognized them—the commander of the military prison and two of his lieutenants.

"Close the door, if you please," the commander said brusquely. "And have a seat. We wish to speak with you."

Dinial obeyed, gripping her dress tightly. "How may I help you?" she asked, trying to remain calm.

"I understand you have a friend named Rayin," said the commander, sitting in a chair opposite her.

Dinial felt her heart dropping down to her feet.

"Um...yes."

"She is a nurse at the hospital, is she not?"

"Uh...well, yes."

The commander's eyes were like ice. "I don't know if you all think I'm an idiot or what, but I want the truth—what's going on down in that prison?"

Her heart racing with fear, Dinial said, "You mean

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with Rayin and Tag? Sir, I hardly think..."

"Cut the nonsense, if you please. I've heard the rumors that Rayin was going down there to see Tag, but I am not stupid enough to believe them. I've had men watching her for some time, and whenever she goes down there she just takes food to the prisoners—but she stays in one cell longer than any of the others. And my men also saw Rayin take you aside and hold a very secretive conversation with you, after which you were apparently no longer angry with her. We don't know what she said, but we know something is going on down there. And I want you to tell us—now."

Terrified, Dinial said, "Sir, I don't know what you're talking about. She's been down there to see Tag; really, that's all I know."

The commander stood. "I'm not a patient man, girl. You have strong affections for Taggery, do you not?"

"Well, yes, sir, everyone knows I do."

"Yes. So here it is—if you do not tell me exactly what's going on down there, I'm going to take your friend Taggery and send him to the hottest battles—and ensure he never returns."

Dinial shot to her feet. "No, sir, please, you can't do that! That's murder!"

"Hmm...that's a rather strong word, don't you think?"

"You can't *do* that! The king..."

"The king will not find out, because I will not leave anyone to tell him. But this much I will grant you—if you will tell me what Rayin is doing down there, I promise I will not harm you or Taggery. If you don't tell me, Taggery will be sent to the front—and as for Rayin, and for you..." He drew his finger across his throat.

6

It had been several weeks since Rayin had discovered her love for Iacilm, and each week since then she had visited him. Most of the time they had simply held each other, talking quietly, every now and then kissing. Rayin could not believe what was happening to her; every waking moment she longed to be with Iacilm, to feel his arms around her; and the kisses... She'd never kissed a man before Iacilm, and she found that it was surprisingly addictive—and oh, so wonderful!

In those moments she was with him, she could almost forget the danger of their situation, even though Iacilm reminded her of it every time she visited. He was worried about her; worried sick. But she couldn't help but come.

As she prepared to go to him again, before the sun had risen, Lhaerica watched her. "I would like to meet Iacilm," she said quietly.

"I would like for you to meet him, too," replied Rayin. "But how? There's no good reason for the princess to visit the dungeons, and no good reason to bring Iacilm here."

"Speak with Father. Please, Rayin, I'm afraid for you."

Rayin sighed. "I might. Someday. But I don't think I'm ready yet."

The princess nodded, and watched as Rayin left. Then she laid her head back down on her pillow, staring worriedly at the dark ceiling.

Rayin made her way through the city to the prison, and there picked up the food and water and headed down

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into the dungeons. As usual, Tag met her there, and they went to the various cells together handing out food. When they entered Iacilm's cell Rayin put the basket and bucket down and caught Iacilm in a long, loving embrace.

"Hello, love," she said.

"Hello," he returned.

She raised her head for a kiss, and then both of them sat on the floor, Rayin leaning back against Iacilm's chest and he with his arms around her. "Oh, I've missed you," she said.

"And I've missed you. I feel so helpless, Rayin."

"So do I. So do I. We can only hope for the best."

They were silent for several moments, content just to be together. Tag, as usual, stood facing the door, peering out the tiny window.

This day, however, was not to end as peacefully as had the others. Tag suddenly stepped back, whirling.

"The commander!" he hissed.

Rayin scrambled from Iacilm's arms, hurriedly grabbing the basket of bread. Just as she did the door burst open, nearly knocking Tag down, to reveal the commander standing in the doorway. Behind him were eight soldiers with crossbows. "All right," the commander said, his voice hard and edged, "fun's over."

Rayin, fear pounding in her chest, rose to her feet.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Don't give me that!" he barked. "Do you take me for a fool?" He stepped aside, pulling another girl into view—Dinial. "Your friend here has graciously told me everything. Now, all of you come out here. And you, Taggery, leave your weapons in the cell."

Tag, Rayin, and Iacilm left the cell, and the soldiers quickly tied their hands behind their backs—as well as

Dinial's.

"You are all under arrest for high treason," the commander informed them. "I suspect you won't live much longer."

"Sir, you promised!" Dinial cried.

"Shut up, girl."

Tag spoke then, a note of panic in his voice. "You can't execute us without a trial."

"Oh, of course not," the commander replied with obvious mockery. "I've already got the trial set up; the judges are waiting for you."

"You can't do this to me!" Rayin cried, drawing herself up and trying to look unafraid. "I am the princess' handmaid!"

"I am aware of that. Now, are *you* aware that not even the princess *herself*, much less her handmaid, is exempt from the punishment for treason? Quit sniveling and come along."

Rayin felt a knot in the pit of her stomach as she and the others followed the commander out of the dungeon and into the prison headquarters. It had happened. Somehow she had thought it never would; to her it had always just been a vague possibility, one that would never materialize. But it had, and now she had gotten not only *herself* killed, but Tag, Dinial, and Iacilm as well. Tears came unbidden to her eyes; she was such a fool! Such a stupid fool! She should have listened to Lhaerica and spoken to the king! She should never have let herself fall in love in the first place! And what had Dinial done? Had she betrayed them? No, there had to be another explanation!

No one noticed one of the escorting soldiers slip away, running down an adjoining corridor.

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The four prisoners were roughly escorted into the trial room, a stern, cold stone room, devoid of furniture save for two imposing oak chairs in which sat the judges. The judges themselves were no more warm than the room; they were thin, austere men with expressionless faces and hard eyes. The cold knot in Rayin's stomach intensified; she knew that the judges' payrolls came from the commander, and she didn't doubt they would both be receiving a fat bonus at the end of this 'trial.'

"Your Excellencies," the commander began, "these are the miscreants you were informed of. These three are guilty of high treason, and the fourth," he indicated Iacilm, "of attempted escape."

"I *never* tried to escape!" Iacilm exclaimed.

The commander sneered. "Why else would you consort with a Coranti woman? Obviously you intended to use her to help you escape."

"That is a *lie!*"

"Silence!" the first judge commanded sharply. "You will be given a chance to defend yourselves. Do not speak unless you are told to do so." He nodded to Rayin. "You may speak."

Rayin stepped forward, all the while knowing it was useless. "Your Excellencies," she began, her voice soft and trembling, "it is true that I have been seeing the prisoner here, Iacilm, for some time. But it was never in an attempt to help him escape. We merely talked; the subject of escape was never even brought up. Please, sirs, it was entirely innocent."

"Innocent!" the second judge barked. "Innocent, consorting with enemy prisoners? I hardly think so, madam."

"It wasn't his fault," she cried desperately. "If you

must, execute me, but leave these others alone!”

“They aided you in your treason,” the first judge said. Looking at Tag and Dinial, he said, “Do you deny it?”

Tag slowly shook his head. “No.” Dinial also shook her head, her eyes on the floor.

“And you?” the judge asked, looking at Iacilm. “What have you to say?”

“It was entirely my fault,” Iacilm said. “I did not intend for this to happen; I encouraged her to continue coming because I was lonely. That’s all, sir. I just wanted someone to talk to.”

“Is that all you did?” asked the second judge. “Is all you did talk? On your honor, Quen, swear that all you did was talk!”

Iacilm hesitated, and then opened his mouth, but his hesitation told the judges everything. “So it was not all,” said the first judge. “What else, then?”

“I slipped him extra food,” Rayin said hastily. “That was all. A little extra bread.”

“Dinial,” said the commander, “tell the judges everything you told me.”

Dinial hesitated, looking at Rayin, fear written all over her face.

“Tell them, or I will!”

Dinial stared at the ground again. “Rayin was seeing Iacilm at first because he was lonely, like he said. But later they...they fell in love.”

Rayin was stricken. Dinial *had* betrayed them! She stared at her friend, hurt and confused, and Dinial refused to look at her.

“Aha!” the first judge said. “So that’s it; you were in *love* with this enemy soldier!”

Rayin blinked away a tear. “Yes,” she replied quietly.

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“Is it so evil a thing to fall in love?”

“It is when the other party is an enemy of Corant!” the second judge hissed.

She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly ablaze. “He is not an enemy of Corant! He is a kind, wonderful man who doesn’t belong in this stupid war!”

The judge smiled thinly. “I see. You must understand though, my dear, we cannot allow things like this to go unpunished. It sets a bad example.” He leaned back. “I think I’ve heard enough. You are all sentenced to hang immediately.”

“No!” Rayin cried. “Please, no!”

“Take them away!” the commander said sharply, and the soldiers led the captives from the room, the commander leading.

They were taken out into a small courtyard where the gallows stood; it was a private place, for the king disliked public executions. There were four ropes ready for hanging, and the prisoners were led up onto a wooden platform. As she stared at the noose before her Rayin felt terror unlike any she’d ever before felt. Dinial was weeping openly.

“I’m sorry,” Rayin whispered quietly to Iacilm as the executioners fastened the noose around his neck.

He only smiled a little, and then the executioner grabbed Rayin’s noose and shoved it over her head, tightening it painfully.

“As you are no doubt aware,” the commander said, strolling across the platform in front of the prisoners, “often a person’s neck is broken when they are dropped. Pray that happens to you, because it’s a much better death than slowly strangling. Any last words?”

“If I did have, I wouldn’t waste my breath telling

them to you,” Tag growled. “Go chew on a knife.”

The commander stared coldly at Tag. “Just for that, I’m going to let you down slowly so you’ll be sure to strangle.”

“Go ahead, porkbrain.” Tag’s eyes were hateful. “You know what? You’re a bad commander. I’ve always thought you were. You’re a petty, bloodthirsty, spineless goat!”

The commander, trembling with rage, struck Tag in the face. “You worm!” he sputtered.

“Oh, come on, can’t you do better than that?” Tag taunted. He was determined to get at the commander as much as he could before he died; he’d always hated the man, and now...well, he didn’t have to be discreet anymore. “You’re smelly, ugly, scrawny, and bloodthirsty!”

The commander stepped back. “I’ve had enough of this. Hang them!”

Rayin squeezed her eyes tightly shut as she almost sensed the executioner’s hand tightening on the lever that would drop all four of them to their deaths.

“HOLD!” a voice bellowed.

Rayin slowly opened her eyes. The executioner’s hand was still on the lever, but he was looking at someone who’d just entered the courtyard. He was a soldier, tall and imposing, and Rayin recognized him instantly—he was the Captain of the King’s Guard!

“What do you think you’re doing?” the Captain roared at the commander.

The commander’s face darkened. “You are interfering with justice, Captain,” he growled. “These four have been tried and found guilty of treason.”

“Are you aware, commander, that this girl is the

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princess' handmaid?"

"I am."

"And are you also aware, commander, that the princess' handmaid cannot be condemned to death without the consent of His Majesty?"

The commander's expression was growing more and more angry. "Captain, these people are traitors to the Crown!"

"Release them, commander!"

"I will not!"

The Captain's voice was low and cold. "Then you will lose your head, commander. The king commands that these prisoners be taken to him."

The commander, enraged, sputtered, but there was nothing he could do. Soldiers who had come with the Captain of the Guard loosed the four prisoners and began escorting them to the Palace.

"You, too, commander," the Captain said. "The king would like to have a word with you."

Rayin, trembling with relief, followed the guards through the city to the Palace. The commander was not so pleased; he wore a murderous scowl and glared with open hostility at the Captain of the Guard.

Once inside the Palace, Rayin was ushered by the Captain into a private chamber that the king used for meetings and such, while her friends and the commander remained outside. In the chamber was the king, the queen, Princess Lhaerica, and several soldiers. Lhaerica immediately rushed to Rayin, embracing her. "Oh, Rayin, thank heaven they weren't too late!" she cried. "Quickly, Captain, remove her bonds."

Nodding, the Captain removed the cords binding Rayin's hands. She hugged the princess back, the relief

almost bringing tears to her eyes.

“Rayin,” said the king, “you have an explanation to give.”

Rayin slowly let go of the princess, turning to face the king. His expression was not angry, but neither was it friendly; it was completely blank. Taking a deep breath, Rayin said, “Yes. I suppose I do, your Majesty.”

“Lhaerica has already told me of your affection for this Quen prisoner. I want to know how this whole mess came about.”

Rayin began her story, beginning at the first time she had seen Iacilm; she told everything, even what Iacilm had told her about Tellicea. The queen’s expression clearly told exactly what she was feeling—sympathy at their plight, horror at Tellicea’s terrible death, anger at the commander’s presumptuous execution order—but the king’s face remained blank, though his eyes were probing.

Finally, when she was finished, the king sat for a long, long time, thinking, and everyone else in the room remained quiet. At long last he said, “Interesting.”

That was it. Interesting. He offered nothing more, and simply continued to look at Rayin. Finally, growing very uneasy, she asked, “Sire, may I perhaps ask how you knew of the execution? The commander made it clear that you knew nothing of it.”

“Tell her, soldier,” the king said shortly.

One of the soldiers in the room stepped toward her, bowing a bit. “My Lady,” he said. “I was with the commander when he captured you in the Quen’s cell. I slipped away and ran to tell the king, because...well, my Lady, I know your Quen friend.”

“You *know* him?” Rayin asked, surprised.

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“Well, I recognized him. You told the story of when his village was attacked. I hate to admit this, my Lady, but I was there. I saw him try to save that girl—I saw everything. My commanding officer saw him enter the village and sent me to hunt him down, but I couldn’t bring myself to kill him when I saw her die like that. It made me sick. When I saw him down in that dungeon, I had to do something. I wanted to redeem myself, if such a thing is possible.”

Rayin just stared at him, not sure what to say. The king spoke then, though. “I want to meet this Quen. Bring him in, Captain.”

The Captain left the room and then reentered, Iacilm in tow. “The Quen prisoner, your Majesty.”

“Remove his bonds.”

The Captain hesitated. “But, your Majesty...”

“Do it, Captain.”

After another hesitation, the Captain took the bands from Iacilm’s wrists. The king studied Iacilm for a long while, silent. Then, his voice neutral, he said, “I’ve heard a lot about you, Iacilm.”

“I’m sure you have,” Iacilm replied carefully.

“Tell me about yourself, young man.”

“Myself? What would you like to know?”

“Tell me about where you were raised; your home, your family; how you were captured, and what you’ve been doing since you got here. Go on.”

As Iacilm began to speak, Rayin tried to control the butterflies in her stomach. She wished the king would give *some* hint as to what he was thinking, but his face was blank as stone.

Iacilm told the king about his home and family, but he avoided any mention of Tellicea. As he moved on to

how he had been captured, though, the king interrupted him. “Did you have a lady friend at home, Iacilm?”

Iacilm’s expression was guarded. “Well, yes.”

“Tell me about her.”

Rayin began to grow angry; the king already knew all this; why was he pressing Iacilm to tell it? Couldn’t he see the pain it caused him?

“I did have such a friend, your Majesty,” said Iacilm. “But she’s dead now.”

“How?”

“She was killed in a raid by soldiers from your army, your Majesty.”

“I see.” Abruptly changing the subject, he said, “Explain to me how Rayin fits into all of this. And I want *all* of it—don’t leave anything out to try to protect her, because it won’t work.”

Iacilm glanced briefly at Rayin, and then back at the king. “She showed me kindness I never expected to find as a prisoner of war. She slipped me extra food, gave me someone to talk to, and...I have grown to love her, your Majesty. But there was never talk of escape or any such thing, I swear.”

“I understand, Iacilm. You said you love her?”

He nodded. “Yes, your Majesty.”

The king was again silent for a long moment, looking back and forth between Iacilm and Rayin. Lhaerica moved closer to Rayin, putting an encouraging hand on her shoulder, and Rayin gave the princess a brief, thankful smile. That did not escape the king’s notice, and he regarded his daughter for a moment, as well. Then he said, “Captain, bring in the commander and the other two.”

In a moment Tag, Dinial, and the commander was

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ushered in, and the king turned his emotionless gaze on the commander. “Commander, an explanation, please. Tell me everything.”

The commander nodded. “Yes, your Majesty. That girl, Rayin, has been consorting with that Quen prisoner for some time. Undoubtedly they were hatching some plan to help him escape. These two,” he indicated Tag and Dinial, “were assisting them in their scheme. I caught on to it, though, and brought them to trial. They were found guilty.”

“You thought to execute my daughter’s handmaid without so much as a word to me?”

“I, uh, I’m sorry, my king. I did not think you would object.”

“Just how did you uncover this plot, commander?”

“I had observed suspicious activity for a while, sire, and when I confronted this girl here she confessed.”

The king looked at Dinial. “You confessed?”

Dinial nodded. “I had no choice. He threatened to kill Tag and Rayin and even me if I didn’t tell him everything. He promised Tag and I would not be punished, but he broke the promise and would have executed us, as well.”

“Commander?” the king asked mildly. “Is this true?”

The commander looked around, as if looking for a way to escape, and couldn’t seem to say a word.

“If I understand correctly, you threatened this girl with her life—and her friends’ lives—promised her safety if she confessed, and broke that oath when she did. Am I correct?”

The commander remained silent.

“But it was all in the name of duty, wasn’t it, commander? You were just doing what you had to in

order to uncover this plot.”

“Uh...well, yes, your Majesty. I had to do what I did, or I would not have been able to stop it. I was only looking out for the good of the kingdom!”

“I see. Very noble of you.” He waved his hand. “You are relieved of your command. Dismissed.”

The commander’s jaw dropped, and a surprised hiss escaped from his throat. He didn’t move; he stood rooted on the spot.

“Captain, have some men show the commander to his new post in the cesspools, please.”

Two soldiers escorted the shocked and dismayed ex-commander from the room. Lhaerica was grinning, her eyes bright with satisfaction.

The king turned his gaze back to Rayin. “You’re in quite a predicament, my dear,” he told her. “Quite a predicament indeed.” He slumped a little in his throne, suddenly looking very tired. “Rayin, just why did you go and fall in love with a Quen?” Before she could speak, though, he went on to answer his own question, shaking his head wryly. “I suppose for the same reason my own daughter is in love with one. Those accursed blue eyes of theirs...”

Lhaerica immediately turned bright red and clapped her hands over her mouth.

The king sighed. “This puts me in an awful mess, you know. If I let Iacilm go, it could very well cause an uproar. We’re at *war* here!”

The queen sniffed. “War. For heaven’s sake, Roal, just stop the war!”

“You think I can just wave my hand and stop the war?” the king exploded. “The Quen attacked Corant without provocation! I can’t just let that slide!”

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“Your Majesty,” Iacilm said cautiously, “if I may say so, it wasn’t *us* who attacked *you*. The Coranti attacked *us!*”

“So you say,” the king said. “But my men tell me it was otherwise, and I have no reason to believe they were lying.” He rested his elbow on the arm of his throne, putting his chin in his hand. “All right; I hate to do this, but I really have no choice. Iacilm, you will be sent back to the prison, but I will be sure you’re taken back to your own country during a prisoner trade. Rayin, you will remain here, and will be severely reprimanded.” He straightened, looking at Rayin and Iacilm sternly. “Make no mistake, you two, what you did was extremely—*extremely*—foolish. No matter how you might feel about someone, you are still perfectly capable of behaving rationally and responsibly, which you both failed miserably to do. You should never have put yourselves in this position, and you have endangered not only yourselves but your friends. Is that perfectly clear to you both?”

Iacilm and Rayin both nodded, looking miserably at the floor. “Yes, your Majesty,” they said.

“Good. Now, as long as Iacilm is still a prisoner here, you are absolutely forbidden from seeing each other again.” He sighed. “There. Consider yourselves severely reprimanded.” He glanced at Tag and Dinial. “And you two, as well.”

Rayin briefly closed her eyes to hold back tears; she was grateful that Iacilm would be allowed to live, but would she ever see him again? “Thank you, your Majesty, and...I am truly sorry.”

King Roal slumped back down again. “I’m sure, if you both try hard enough, you will be able to find each

other again someday. But I forbid you to try until *after* the war, is that clear? You'll both end up dead if you try any earlier."

Rayin dropped into a deep curtsy, and Iacilm bowed. "Thank you, your Majesty," they said in unison.

The king again remained silent for a long while, and then said, "Iacilm, would your king be willing to consider meeting with me and discussing the possibility of ending this mess?"

Iacilm looked startled. "Why, I'm sure he would, your Majesty. He would probably be very suspicious, but I'm sure he would be willing, indeed."

"Good. I want you to carry a message to him when you are returned to Quen. Tell him I wish to meet with him to discuss a settlement to the issue, and ask him to send a messenger with a reply."

Iacilm nodded. "I will, your Majesty."

"All right. Now, I'm going to take you back to prison, but first..." He looked around, and then pointed to a smaller door opposite of the one that led to the hallway. "There's a smaller conference room through that door. You and Rayin have five minutes to say goodbye. Go, quickly."

Not pausing to wonder or ask questions, Iacilm and Rayin quickly went into the smaller conference room and closed the door behind them. Lhaerica watched the closed door, tears brimming in her eyes, and the king stared moodily at the ceiling as he waited.

Finally, he nodded to his daughter. "Go fetch them, will you?"

Lhaerica nodded and walked very slowly to the door, and paused for a long moment before quietly rapping on it. Several moments passed, and the door opened. Rayin's

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face was streaked with tears, and Iacilm was also having an obviously difficult time controlling his emotions. Without another word the Quen prisoner was ushered out into the hallway by the Captain and his men and taken back toward the prison. When he was out of her sight, Rayin whirled and collapsed into the princess' arms, weeping openly.

"There, there," Lhaerica said gently, stroking the other girl's hair. "You'll see him again, Rayin. You'll see him again."

The king, standing to leave, briefly put a hand on Rayin's trembling shoulder. He wasn't sure what to say, though, and finally turned and left.

The next few weeks were agony for Rayin. She knew Iacilm was sitting in that horrid little cell, all alone again, but she dared not go to him. The king's orders were firm, and she would undoubtedly be caught if she were to go. The princess was the only thing that kept her sane.

At long last an exchange of prisoners was arranged, and Iacilm, with the other Quen prisoners, was taken back to Quen. It would only be a matter of time now before—hopefully—a messenger from the king of the Quen would come with his reply to King Roal's request. Rayin found herself desperately hoping that messenger would be Iacilm.

Several more weeks passed before the messenger arrived, escorted by Coranti soldiers. Rayin heard of his arrival and practically flew to the main hall, hope threatening to make her heart burst. But it was not to be; the messenger was not Iacilm, but a tall, stern-faced man she did not know at all. Bitterly disappointed, Rayin turned back the way she had come and slowly made her way to the gardens.

King Roal straightened in his throne as the herald announced a messenger from Quen. "Finally," he muttered under his breath, watching as the messenger was ushered into his presence.

The messenger bowed. "Your Majesty. You probably know why I'm here, so why don't we get to the point?"

"Yes," Roal replied. "What is your king's answer?"

"He has agreed to meet with you, but only on very

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specific terms. The meeting will take place in the center of Caelbrerid Valley, where the river forks, at noon three weeks from this day.”

Roal nodded. “Agreed. Is that all?”

“No. You are to take no more than twelve soldiers with you, and are to bring your son Redlim and your daughter Lhaerica. They may take one attendant, if they wish, but no more.”

“What?!” Roal burst out. “Take my son and daughter into a situation like that?!”

“The king trusts there will be no unpleasantness,” the messenger said evenly. “He, too, is bringing the Crown Prince Hiram, his second son, Nicram, and his daughter, Vaira. He hopes the presence of all of his and your children will ensure there will be no...stupidity.”

King Roal hunched a little in his throne, staring at the floor as he pondered the terms. For a long time he was silent, thinking, weighing the risk against the need. Finally, he looked back up at the messenger. “Very well. Tell your king I will meet him in the Caelbrerid Valley where the river forks, at noon exactly three weeks from this day. And warn him—if he tries to trick me, he will pay dearly.”

The messenger bowed. “I assure you, your Majesty, there will be trickery on *our* part.” Turning, he left.

King Roal immediately sent for the Captain of the Guard, who, upon his arrival, bowed. “You sent for me, my Liege?”

“Captain,” said the king, “I want you to pick out a dozen of your best men—and I mean the *best*. I want men who will fight like there’s no tomorrow; do you understand?”

The Captain nodded. “Yes, my Liege. Might I enquire

what for?”

The king explained the arrangement he had made with the Quen messenger, ending with, “In case there is a trick, I want to be able to get Redlim and Lhaerica safely away from the danger.”

Nodding, the Captain said, “I know just the man to attend Redlim, your Majesty. He’s not a soldier, but he’s loyal to the Crown and the deadliest man in a fight I’ve ever seen.”

“Good.”

“Perhaps we should have a soldier attend Lhaerica.”

Roal shook his head. “No, I’ve already thought of that, but I fear it would look highly suspicious. The princess will take her handmaid; I don’t want to risk spooking the Quen.”

“As you wish, my king. The men will be ready when the time comes.”

Lhaerica was pacing back and forth in her room, biting her lower lip. “Oh, Rayin, I’m so nervous!” she said.

Rayin, who was sitting on her bed, glanced up at the princess. “Are you afraid the Quen are tricking us?”

“No, no, it’s not that! Nicram will be there!”

Then Rayin understood. “You really *do* like this Quen prince, don’t you?” she said.

Lhaerica’s eyes literally glowed. “Oh, Rayin, he’s the most wonderful man! He’s not at all like the other noblemen I’ve met my own age; he’s very gentle and polite.”

“And handsome.”

“Oh, yes! Very handsome.” She knelt on the floor beside Rayin. “Rayin, perhaps Iacilm will also be there.”

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Rayin shook her head sadly. “I can’t bear to hope for that, Lhaerica. What chance would there be? He’s no one important; just a soldier. There would be no reason for him to be there.”

Lhaerica sighed. “Well, perhaps not, but... Oh, I hope they make peace arrangements. I hope Father doesn’t lose his temper.”

Rayin nodded, just as a knock came at the door. “Hey, Lhaerica!” a voice called. It was Redlim. “We’re waiting for you!”

Lhaerica quickly stood and, taking Rayin’s hand and pulling her up, went to the door.

It was an uncomfortable journey to the Caelbrerid Valley, a long, barren stretch of land that marked much of the boundary between Quen and Corant. The River Caelbrerid, which meandered down the center of the valley, was a small river, no more than a hundred feet across and only waist-deep in most places. Toward the fork where the Caelbrerid branched into the smaller River Quen’cialin rode the little procession.

Rayin glanced around at the company as they rode, very conscious that each of the soldiers there were Corant’s most elite, not ordinary soldiers but members of a special strike team. Should there be the slightest sign of a trick, these men stood ready to attack the Quen. And the man who was attending Prince Redlim frightened Rayin; though he looked like any ordinary man, Rayin knew he was a born warrior, perhaps the deadliest in all the land. They were all very conscious of the delicate nature of this meeting; it could easily turn into a bloodbath.

The Quen were waiting for them when they arrived. The Quen king, a large, imposing man with a silver beard

and black armor, was waiting underneath a pavilion at a table, on the opposite side of which was an empty chair. The Quen king's children were also there, the two sons standing on either side of their father and the daughter behind him. There were also Quen soldiers there, lined up behind their king, and each of the royal children had an attendant. The three attendants, unlike the other Quen, wore heavy robes with the cowls drawn up to cover their faces, a Quen custom Rayin found peculiar. She was glad *she* didn't have to wear one of those robes.

No words were spoken as King Roal seated himself across the table from the Quen king. Lhaerica stood beside her father, and Redlim stood on the other side, and the soldiers lined up behind them. Lhaerica unconsciously held tightly to Rayin's hand; she was a little afraid, though she didn't distrust the Quen like her father did. She looked almost longingly at Nicram, and smiled with a faint blush when he looked at her. He smiled a little, as well, and Rayin immediately saw that the feelings Lhaerica had for Nicram were mutual. Nicram was, indeed, a very handsome man, as Lhaerica had said.

Rayin looked at Nicram's sister, Vaira. She had beautiful golden hair that reached nearly to her knees, and pale blue eyes that seemed almost to sparkle, much like Lhaerica's. She, too, looked a trifle nervous, though she tried to hide it.

The two kings sat silently for a moment, just staring at each other, obviously distrustful of the others' intentions. Finally Roal broke the silence. "Well, Cahrl?" he said stiffly.

Cahrl scowled a little. "I, too, want to put an end to this foolishness," he growled. "We've always lived in

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peace, until that ruffraff of yours began ambushing our people. But I'm willing to forgive that, if we can..."

"Ruffraff!" Roal sputtered. "Ambushing *your* people! It was *your* marauders who began attacking our villages! Don't lay the blame for this at *my* feet!"

Lhaerica felt her heart dropping; this was not starting well. She briefly felt like kicking her father in the shin.

The scowl on Cahrl's face deepened. "If the shoe fits, wear it!" he snapped. "You don't honestly think *I* started this fiasco, do you?"

Roal was gripping the edge of the table, and Lhaerica almost groaned. "Listen, Cahrl," Roal said evenly, "I don't know what all of this is about, or what you're after, but I don't believe for one second that it was *my* men who started this! Why on earth would I want to invade your miserable kingdom?"

The Quen ruler leaned forward. "Roal, you're being ridiculous!"

As the two men continued to argue, Lhaerica grew increasingly worried. Both King Cahrl and her father were stubborn men, and this whole incident had them both on edge—neither was about to consider that the other might be right. The soldiers, both Coranti and Quen, were gripping their weapons, watching their kings and the enemy soldiers with apprehension. Only Redlim's bodyguard was at ease; he stared steadily at King Cahrl, one hand inside his cloak.

Lhaerica almost gasped as she realized that the man was poised to kill Cahrl should anything happen, though she doubted her father had ordered him to do anything of the kind. She had to do something, but what?

Looking toward Cahrl, her eyes met those of Princess Vaira. She looked worried, as well. Lhaerica moved her

head slightly, indicating the end of the table, and Vaira seemed to understand. Both girls moved, coming around the table toward each other.

“Vaira, dear, it’s so good to see you again,” Lhaerica said brightly as she and the other princess met with a light embrace. Both kings fell silent, looking at their daughters.

“Yes, Lhaerica,” Vaira agreed. “You’re looking well.”

“Thank you, Vaira.”

“Lhaerica,” Vaira said seriously, “this war is foolishness, don’t you agree?”

Nodding, Lhaerica replied, “I do. I certainly do. I don’t know who really started it, but I think we should try to end it instead of blaming each other.”

“You’re quite right. Whoever *did* start it, it obviously wasn’t by either king’s command.”

“Perhaps just common robbers?”

“It’s possible. Anyway, what does it matter?”

“Vaira,” said Cahrl, “Vaira, if you please, we’re in the middle of a discussion here.”

Vaira sniffed. “I’d hardly call it a discussion, Father.” She brightened. “Nicram, come here. I’m sure you remember Lhaerica?”

Nicram glanced once at his father, and then walked to Lhaerica, extending his hand. “Certainly; how could I forget?” Lhaerica gave him her hand, and he kissed it. She tried earnestly to keep her composure, but couldn’t help but giggle a little. Nicram grinned. “You’re as beautiful as I remember, Lhaerica. No, even more beautiful.”

Now Lhaerica was blushing to the roots of her hair. “Oh. Oh, you’re too kind, Nicram. I mean, thank you.”

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“Lhaerica,” Roal said sternly, “may I remind you that the Quen are still our enemies? Come back here at once!”

She feigned a convincingly crestfallen look. “But Father!”

Cahrl glanced at Roal, and then at Vaira, and then at Nicram and Lhaerica, and then back at Roal, and abruptly he started to laugh. Roal looked at him sharply, almost angrily, but only a few moments later his expression turned a little sheepish. “I...uh...goodness, Cahrl, we’ve been behaving like children, haven’t we?”

Cahrl’s laughter roared over the empty valley, and his big hand slapped the table so hard it quivered dangerously. “Hah! Our children are better behaved than *we* are!” Wiping a tear of mirth from his eyes, he waved at Nicram. “That boy’s been infatuated with your daughter ever since they first met, you know.”

“I know; she’s equally infatuated with *him*.”

“It’s not right for bitter enemies to get married,” Cahrl said, a serious look suddenly replacing his laughter.

“No, no; you’re absolutely right,” Roal agreed.

“Roal...I know we haven’t always been on the best of terms, but I think we can both agree we’ve let this go too far. I’ve been a fool.”

“No more than I. Let us both forgive and forget, and put this behind us.”

“Done!” Cahrl roared, slapping the table again.

Lhaerica squealed with delight, whirling to Nicram and throwing herself into his arms. Roal blinked, as did Cahrl; they glanced at each other again, and then both burst out laughing.

Vaira took Rayin’s arm. “Are you Rayin, Lhaerica’s handmaid?” she asked quietly.

Rayin nodded. “Yes.”

“I have someone I would like you to meet.” She motioned to Nicram’s attendant.

The cloaked and hooded man approached, and when he drew close he lifted the hood from his face. He was grinning widely, and Rayin immediately felt her heart threaten to burst. “Iacilm!” she cried, holding her arms out to him. He embraced her, and she began crying, holding him as tightly as she could. “Oh, Iacilm, I’ve missed you so!”

Tears were glistening in his eyes, too. He kissed a tear from her cheek, and then kissed her lips, gently touching her face. “Princess Vaira sensed something when I delivered the message,” he said. “She made me tell her everything; that’s why she brought me here.”

Rayin looked over at the broadly smiling Quen princess, and she released Iacilm, embracing Vaira. “Oh, thank you so much,” she said, her voice choked. “Thank you so very much.”

“Of course, Rayin, of course,” Vaira replied, hugging Rayin back. “I hate gloomy love stories, anyway.”

Rayin laughed helplessly, and then went to Iacilm again, pressing her face to his chest as she began crying again; she didn’t know what else to do.

Roal, who was watching the two of them, abruptly wiped a tear from his eye and looked away. “How did you know to bring him?” he asked Cahrl.

Cahrl shrugged. “Vaira insisted. I didn’t know why, until now. What’s the skinny?”

“Oh, it’s a long story. I’ll tell you sometime.”

The End