

# A Turn of Curses

by

**Melanie Nilles**

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The faint light from the mark on Selina's neck confirmed the release of power. When it faded, she sat back and blinked away the dizziness from expending her energy. The room's sparse décor spotted before her, from the bare wood walls to the bed with its handmade quilt.

The boy lying beneath the quilt groaned.

"Toby!" The distraught mother kneeling on the opposite side of his bed bent over and pulled her son into her arms. She kissed his forehead and held him tight until he squirmed away. "Thank you, *Na'Y'dom*! Thank you!" Tears filled the woman's eyes.

"You're welcome." Healing the sick was Selina's calling, although she wished she could heal in other ways. To be chosen as a child of Y'dom was both a blessing and a curse.

The boy reached for Selina's hand and smiled. "Thank you, *Na'Y'dom*."

She gave a gentle squeeze of his hand, glad to know she could do some good. "Avoid the needles of the baru blossom. They don't care who touches them."

"I will."

"Good." She let go and stood, eager to leave the reminder of what she would never have.

The mother released the child and stood with her. She moved around the bed, a worried look on her face as Selina took the sheer, green scarf from her attendant, Beth, and covered her head. The mother spoke in a low voice. "Blessed *Na'Y'dom*. I have nothing to give in return."

"It's my place to serve. I saved your son's life but I won't see it fade because you can't feed and clothe him. I ask nothing but that." The lack of decorations in the small, one-room dwelling proved the family had nothing of material wealth. That didn't matter to Selina. She freely gave of her healing gift, whether the priests of the temple approved or not. All needed healing, rich and poor alike.

The woman's lips quivered, her eyes puffy and blurred with tears. "Thank you!"

Selina smiled and strode from the single room of the house, Beth a step behind. Her green robe over her pantsuit billowed behind her. The gold trim on the high collar highlighted the swirling and looping pattern of the mark around her neck, while allowing the top of the growing mark to show only from the front to hide its progress to completion. Her long brown tail of hair ended at her waist.

Outside in the chill of the night, Selina gazed down the quiet, darkening street splashed by the light of the lantern Beth held. While using her powers to save a life tired her, it also gave her a rush of satisfaction. This time had been different, though. She would never have children.

"Selina?"

"Go on ahead. I'm not tired." Beth knew better. It was late and had been a busy day. Of course Selina was tired, but she needed to get away. She rarely had time alone. Always in demand. Always surrounded by worshipers or servants. She often wished for a quiet, normal life.

"You're sure? You didn't look too well this time. It's been a long journey and we've far to go." Beth had joined her when the request came from the White Prince, Sorvin fay Renald, to make the journey to heal his father. They traveled a full cycle of

the first moon already. Selina vowed to make the most of what time remained to her and to experience what she could on the journey. It would be her only true adventure in her short life.

"I know. That's why I need a walk. I'll be sitting the rest of the journey. Some time alone to stretch my legs is what I need more than sitting in a room staring at four, boring walls."

Beth gave her a look of worry. "You shouldn't go off alone."

Selina pointed down the dusty street. Two armored men bearing poleaxes stood near the end. "I'll be fine. See, two of the soldiers patrol the area."

"But the reports of the feyquin, Faldon—"

"I thought you better than to trust rumors. Go on. I'll be at the inn shortly." Selina had heard a few stories—most of them conflicting about the nature of the intelligent, magical creatures. She saw no reason to avoid the feyquin, despite the warnings reported of recent, questionable activities by Faldon's band.

Beth hesitated but held the lantern out to Selina.

Selina waved the offer away. "Moonlight is enough for me."

"I don't like this. I should stay with you."

Exactly what Selina didn't want. "I need time alone, Beth. I don't get that in the carriage. I mean no offense."

"All right. You win." Beth shook her head but turned and walked away with the lantern dangling before her.

Selina took a deep breath and walked the opposite direction. A small walk before bed was what she needed, and she should be safe there. Safe enough for a little walk. She wouldn't wander far.

No one understood what it was like to know one's life would soon end. Such was the fate of any bearing the mark of their god. Selina had only been fifteen, younger than most, when it appeared with the healing power; betrothed but not married, nor did she marry. She would have no children, no family. Beth would. Seeing the mother's adoration for her child cut through her sharper than Selina cared to explain. She needed time alone. Time to think and forget. After four and a half years, the mark around her neck was nearly complete. She would die before her twentieth birthday.

Selina passed the soldiers in their armor and helmets, who acknowledged her with nods. She held a hand up to stop them from following. Always someone. Even alone she was never truly alone.

Cast in moonlight, the trees beyond the clearing at the edge of the small town took on a new life and bowed under the weight of their fruits, a fresh treat to savor and maybe a few for their journey. The people wouldn't mind. She was touched by a God. Any offering to her was as good as those to Y'dom for his favor. There was one benefit of being *Na'Y'dom*.

She reached for one of the largest of the yellow, oblong fruits, her mouth watering with anticipation for the freshness.

A movement among the shadows stopped her. She watched but saw nothing. *Only the wind*. She plucked several fruits. Beth would enjoy the sweet ponan, too.

Selina turned—

And gasped. The fruit tumbled to the ground.

"Go back." The strange man wore a scowl on a face shadowed by wild black and gray hair. She had seen no one approach, nor heard any sound. Where had he come from?

"What?"

"You're not safe here." He brushed his hair aside, giving her a clear view of his features. Shadows defined the strong lines of a face too young for gray hair.

"Who are you?" Untucked shirt and oversized pants... Who dressed him?

"Go back, *Na'Y'dom*. Do *not* set foot in Vastorn."

"Why? Who *are* you?"

He took a step towards the trees.

He wasn't getting away until she had an answer. Selina grabbed his arm. "Tell me why I should return. I've almost reached Vastorn."

"It's not your concern. Go back!" He yanked his arm away and turned to the trees.

She refused to let him go without answering her and hurried to step into his path. "Tell me, so I can understand. Otherwise, I'm going, as I promised the lord of this land." Who had sent the invitation to her specifically of many *Na'Y'dom* in Hallor, her home country.

Besides, the soldiers must have seen him. They should arrive soon. If she could delay him, the soldiers could take him into custody for answers.

"Don't argue! I know your purpose. Sorvin is a coward. You will *not* help him. If you go on—" He turned his head, his body rigid.

Selina peered past him at the faint clink of metal from the approaching guards. Finally!

Before they could arrive, the stranger rushed into the trees and vanished. No! He couldn't escape like that. It wasn't fair! She wanted to know why he didn't want her continuing her journey. Now she might never have that answer.

"*Na'Y'dom!*" The soldiers ran past her to the place where the stranger disappeared but stopped at the edge of the shadows. After a few seconds, they returned to her, their armor clinking with each movement.

"Did he threaten you?" the first asked.

"No...Yes, I suppose." She frowned. "Who was he?"

They looked at each other and shook their heads. "We've never seen him."

"I didn't recognize him, but it's too dark to be sure." The second soldier stretched his arm towards the town. "I think it best if you stay inside."

She glanced again at the trees where the stranger vanished. Who was the strange man? Where had he come from? Why didn't he want her to complete her mission of mercy?

How did he know about her journey?

He might have told her if the soldiers hadn't interfered.

What about her fruit?



The next day—the day she hoped to continue her journey—clouds moved in and dropped their rain. Selina watched from her room at the small inn with Beth. Where had the stranger disappeared?

"You're thinking about him again."

"Who?"

"The man from last night. What did he do?"

Selina shrugged and stepped away from the window. The encounter affected her more than she expected and far more than she admitted to Beth last night, or even to herself. "Nothing. He made it clear that I shouldn't go any further. He didn't put a hand on me, if that's what you wanted to know."

"Then forget it, and forget him. You're putting credit in his words, when you don't plan to heed them anyway."

Selina sat down on the bed, her mind on the evening before. She couldn't get the man's face out of her head. He ran before giving her an explanation. The lack of closure to the discussion left her needing to know more.

But if he wasn't from Breach's Pass, she might not see him again. The guards hadn't bothered to pursue him, but at least they acknowledged his presence. She wasn't crazy.

A knock on the door yanked her from her restlessness.

Beth crossed the room and opened the door. "Yes?"

A young boy a head shorter than Beth licked his lips, his hands wringing around something. "Ah...I—" His eyes widened when he met Selina's gaze. When her mark first appeared, such reactions startled her; now she ignored it. "I was sent to find you, *Na'Y'dom*. It's your driver."

Selina's blood ran cold. "Reen?"

"H—H—He's—"

Before the boy finished, Selina rushed past him. "Where is he?"

"The livery."

At least he could spit something out without trouble.

She hurried through the inn, pulling her scarf over her head as she ran. Her feet carried her out the door, across the wet stones and puddles in the street. Water soaked through her thin shoes, chilling her from the bottom up while the drenching rain soaked her head and shoulders. She ignored the cold, focusing instead on finding the old carriage driver and healing any number of fatal injuries she imagined.

The moment she flung the livery door open, she hesitated. The fragrance of freshly-cut hay helped mask the fouler odors of animals.

After the initial bang of the door, all fell quiet. Nothing appeared wrong. Cropes, the waist-high animals known for the best milk, chewed their hay in their pen. Her carriage was at the back of the livery among the straw bundles, unmarred from her view.

She stepped in and let the door slam shut behind her. Her heart raced. If the stranger hurt Reen—"Reen? Reen, where—"

"Here, Miss!" He stepped around a pile of hay into sight, his gray hair disheveled under the cap, but his shirt and vest bore a streak of mud.

She sighed, relieved to see him but confused by what she saw, or didn't see. "The boy; he made it sound urgent, that something happened to you."

Reen pulled off his hat and scratched the bare top of his head, a hint of a smile lifting his cheeks. "Bit a fear of a lashing, I s'pose," he mumbled. When he looked up and replaced his cap, his smile faded. "Not his fault though."

When he took a limping step towards her, Selina rushed to his side. That limp was new.

The door creaked and slammed behind her.

"Reen!" Beth hurried to his other side.

"Sit down and let me take care of that," Selina said to Reen.

He grunted but let them help him to a wooden chest to sit. Although a local medic could have done just as well with a splint and bandages, the least she could do was to take away his pain. Reen had been her driver without any complain from the beginning of her days as a healer.

She knelt and put a hand to his leg. With little effort, the power flowed from her and the mark around her neck glowed. After a few seconds, it faded, and she sat back against a post for balance from the dizziness. "How's that?"

He moved his leg and a broad smile stretched across his face. "Thanks, Miss."

Selina scanned the livery for anything out of place. "What happened?"

"Doxon."

"Doxon? I thought he looks out for you? Why would he attack you?"

Reen stood and walked without problems to the sleeping felipar chained near the carriage. At his approach, it lifted its angular head from its paws. He scratched the throat stretched out at his touch, eliciting a soft rumble from the felipar. "You were just defending me. Weren't you, Doxon?"

"Defending? From whom?" With Beth's help, Selina rose and dusted herself.

Still scratching the felipar's thick neck, Reen turned to her. "A stranger. Came in before dawn. I caught him trying to chase off Doxon, who knocked me down coming to my aid. Guess the man didn't realize how attached Doxon is."

"What did he look like—the man?" Selina joined him and scratched behind the felipar's dark ears. Felipar were difficult to tame and had to be hand-raised to form the kind of attachment between Doxon and Reen. Few were used as beasts of burden, but they were the most loyal of creatures when they bonded to a person. Such an intelligent creature at one's command was highly prized, and dangerous to others.

"About so tall." He held his hand at a level half a head higher than her. "Black hair with a touch of gray, about to his chest. Too young to be gray. Said if we wouldn't turn around, we'd go nowhere."

Anger flared. *Him!*

"Is that the same man?" Beth asked.

"Sounds right," Selina growled. "I don't know anyone else in this town who fits that description."

"What will we do?"

"Continue. I won't give in to harassment." Selina whirled away from them to hide her face and the display of dark emotions.

A child of Y'dom was supposed to be merciful, not vengeful. She didn't doubt the same man who demanded she turn back was the one who caused trouble for Reen. The thought filled her with hatred. How dare he force his will on her! Now, more than ever, she was determined to finish the journey and cure the king.

"When would you like to leave, Miss?"

"Tomorrow, if the rain stops." She took a deep breath to calm her anger before facing them. "We'll leave at dawn. I don't want to give this stranger any more chance to cause trouble, but I don't want you sitting in the rain if you don't have to." She directed the last part at Reen.

"Not the rain that bothers me, what with the canopy, but the cold."

"It's the same either way. I won't have you suffering if I can help it. Tonight we'll keep a watch for the stranger. If he causes any more trouble, we'll let the soldiers deal with him."

"Sounds good, Miss. Now, I have some work to do. If you'll excuse me." He took a brush to Doxon's cream-colored coat with the dark points.

Selina waved for Beth to join her and both left the livery to hurry through the rain back to the inn. They had a day to enjoy before the boredom of travel. She had no intention of letting it slip by and every intention of asking two guards to take duty at the livery.



With a dozen soldiers escorting them, they left Breach's Pass the next day, a perfect day, too. The sun emerged to dry out the land. Selina sat back in her carriage, disappointed but relieved. The stranger never returned. Too bad. She hoped to see him punished for harassing Reen and Doxon, but was glad he didn't cause any more trouble.

The beauty of the passage known as The Breach stole her attention from lingering questions about the stranger. This was the only gap through Sunders Mountains, the border between Hallor and Vastorn. The layers of color exploded in the brilliance of the sun, ranging from bright oranges to occasional stripes of black. Layer upon layer stretched high on either side of the valley, which crooked through the mountains, widening in places to allow stretches of grass.

A day later, they reached the end of the valley. After a couple nights in Corrivale, they continued without an escort. The Hallor soldiers who had accompanied her from the temple were allowed no further into Vastorn.

Barring any long stop, they would reach the Ivory Palace of the fay Renald family within a turn of the moon. Selina recalled stories of the brilliant white structure of marble stonework, which granted the palace its name, and couldn't wait to see it with her own eyes.

A few days passed without sight of any feyquin or other creatures, and Selina wondered if the feyquin posed any threat or if it had all been a way to scare her.

Five days out of Corrivale, they stopped for a midday meal between towns. Reen left Doxon hitched, since they hoped to push on and reach the next town by evening.

The interminable riding in the carriage filled Selina with a restlessness to stretch her legs and see more of the country with its rolling green hills and scattered trees. Her life grew shorter each day. She wanted to experience everything before reaching the Ivory Palace. If only she had more time! She would explore every rock and crevasse, every hill and valley. Everything. Most people didn't stop to realize how fortunate they were, nor to enjoy each day as if it was their last.

Having snacked in the carriage on bread and jam, she took the chance to wander while the other two ate.

"Stay close, Miss."

She turned back and waved for Beth to join her.

Beth shook her head. "I'll stay here."

Selina shrugged and turned away to a nearby hill topped by a tight copse of trees. *Your loss.*

Eager to see from the higher vantage and take in the landscape, she climbed the steep incline. While holding her covering robe out of the way with one hand, so it wouldn't tangle with her pants, and using the other to balance in some places, she reached the trees and crossed through to take in the scene beyond.

*Magnificent!* Many of the hillsides had eroded away to expose the same layers of color as the Breach. The gold, red, and black colors stood out against the thick of green vegetation.

"Selina!"

*Now what?* She had only reached the vantage, from which the land stretched out, dotted with farms and livestock and sliced by a meandering river. They wanted her back already?

Exasperated, she rolled her eyes, but she returned through the trees.

"Selina! Hurry!"

She frowned and caught the movement from the other side of the carriage. Reen struggled to keep Doxon calm. The felipar growled, its tail lashing and fangs bared.

The creatures reached the carriage. *By Y'dom!* She ducked back into the trees, her heart racing.

Five, all different colors and markings. But the dappled gray with its dark mane and tail caught her eyes and stopped.

A long face stared at her, topped by small ears curved to a point at the top. A thick, arched neck connected to a muscular body supported by four long, lean legs renewed in their pounding race to her.

She swallowed, wanting to join her companions but afraid of what this creature might do if she stepped into the open. Doxon slashed at the four surrounding the carriage, and Reen jumped into the driver's seat behind him. If only Reen could keep him under control long enough for her to reach them!

First, to escape the creature, which stopped outside the trees. It flattened its ears and reared. When its round hooves landed, the ground trembled.

Selina hid behind one of the larger trunks and peeked around for a chance to reach the others.

Dark eyes glared from beneath a heavy forelock of gray and black hair. The creature resembled descriptions she had heard of the feyquin.

"Why are you here?" The hard voice made her blink. The gray feyquin stepped towards her, his long face inches from hers and his ears flat against his neck.

"Why are you here? You were warned to go back."

"Who are you?"

"One who intends to stop you from reaching the Ivory Palace."

"Faldon!" She stared in awe of the rogue that several people in Breach's Pass and Corrivale warned about. It could only be him.

At a piercing growl from Doxon, Selina noticed the four other feyquin circling the carriage. A red-orange with white marks on its face and legs rose up on its hind legs and struck out with its forelegs at the felipar. Doxon pinned his ears and growled at his attacker, his tail lashing nonstop as he backed away.

"Selina!" Beth's worried voice carried to her from the door of the carriage.

A heavy thud drew her attention to the gray within biting reach. From the folds of skin around his nostrils and the lips pulled back slightly to bare his teeth, he intended to bite. With his ears flat to his neck, the way Doxon did when upset, she knew.

"Go back! Do not continue!" he said.

"No." The word escaped before Selina could think.

He reared up and slammed his forefeet down. "Don't argue, human!"

Human? Her fear faded at the insult. How dare this creature speak down to her and interfere with her plans!

"Go!" He snapped at her, and she jerked back. "Return to your lands and forget the White Prince."

"Selina!"

The clatter of the carriage froze her heart.

"Wait!" She took a step and halted. Faldon stood with his ears pinned, his head turned to the four others who chased the carriage.

Disbelief turned to anger at the feyquin.

"You—" Selina growled, a proper curse stuck in her throat. "You chased them away! If you want me to turn back, that won't help."

His nostrils pulled back into what she interpreted as a snarl. "It wasn't my fault. We're used to wild felipar, not your domesticated kits. They don't run. They fight." He tossed his head, his black and gray mane slapping along his neck.

"If you would've let me out, I could've joined them."

"I never forced you in there."

Unsure what he intended, Selina stayed behind the protection of the trees.

After some time, he pawed at the ground. "Are you coming out?"

She crossed her arms. "Why? So you can chase me?"

With his ears pinned flat, Faldon reared and slammed his forefeet down. The ground shook and split towards her, but the trees held. "Don't tempt me!"

The feyquin had more strength than she thought. The trees wouldn't last long if he was determined. What use was staying there? Trembling with rage, she stepped out from behind the trees. Faldon backed away, staying out of reach.

"Start walking," he said.

"I am *Na'Y'dom*. You will show more respect."

"I know what you are, and I would say the same about me." He stepped towards her and bared his teeth.

She jerked away with a scowl and turned to the road. Instead of backtracking, she started in the direction of her carriage.

Faldon stepped ahead of her, blocking her path. "Wrong way."

"My friends are that way."

"You're going back."

Her anger boiled up until she slapped his large, round cheek.

He stood stunned, staring at her with his ears up.

Tears blurred her vision. She marched past him, determined to find her friends. "You'll have to kill me to stop me. I'm not going back."

A steady pounding came from behind.

"Irrational human," Faldon muttered.

She lifted her head higher, pulled her green robe closed around her, and continued on the road. He wouldn't hurt her. By all rights, he could have reciprocated from her slap. He didn't, and he likely wouldn't. At least he had that much respect.

A regular beat followed her. She risked a peek over her shoulder. Faldon followed.

He pinned his ears flat and snapped his teeth at her. "Reach your friends and we'll chase all of you back to Hallor."

She huffed and turned away. One way or another, she would complete her journey. He could try all he wanted, but she would not be deterred.



With the sun sinking to the mountains in the west, Selina wished she would catch up with the others. Her stomach rumbled. She needed food and rest, and company, or at least better company than the gray feyquin a step behind.

She glanced back. Faldon walked with his head low and ears sideways. Her lips twisted into a snarl. *Leave me alone!* If he hated her as much as she did him, why did he bother to stay with her? Was it his way of keeping track of her to be sure she would turn around for home? He might as well quit. She refused to let him intimidate her.

The thunder of hooves interrupted her dark thoughts.

Two feyquin galloped to them. They stopped around her, breathing hard and covered in sweat.

"Where's my carriage?"

The red-orange stallion with white on his legs and a stripe down his face spoke. "We tried to chase them down, but the driver couldn't stop the felipar."

"He's never seen feyquin, and four to one would scare any creature." Everything from verbal stories or books described the feyquin as an intelligent species. Perhaps not. "I thought you were smarter."

"How were we to know?" He pinned his ears flat for a moment but only for a moment. An instant later, he lifted his head and his ears, his eyes on someone behind her.

"Where are they?" The calm voice she now hated came from behind her.

"Dewel—" The dark feyquin with the black mane and tail and a crooked oval of white on his forehead motioned with his head to the red-orange. Like his companion, his nostrils flared with his heavy breathing. "—tried to take the reins to stop the felipar, but the driver swerved. The carriage crashed and the felipar ran off."

Selina caught her breath. *Beth. Reen...*

"The humans were hurt. Bastien ran to the nearest town to find help. Grem stayed with them."

"How are Beth and Reen?"

Dewel fixed his eyes on her. "The female can't walk and the old man has only a few cuts and bruises. He's helping the female."

"Idiots!" Selina said.

A hard shove from behind sent her sprawling into the dirt at the hooves of the two sweaty feyquin. Selina landed on her shoulder and rolled over, her anger inflamed with a pain beyond reconciliation. "How dare—"

"NO!" Faldon stepped forward, his head low and ears back. He stayed out of her reach, like the others, who stepped back at his approach. "Never speak to us like that! You are no one here."

"I am *Na*—"

"I know what you are! But I am no follower of your 'god'. To me, you are another worthless human. Now, get up. If you want to help your friends, I suggest you walk."

Frustration boiled over into tears, which she wiped away with force. No one ever spoke to her with such disrespect. Because of her sacrifice and gifts, she should be honored.

She couldn't wait to reach Beth and Reen; they would welcome her.

Selina stood and dusted herself, her head high, and, despite her aching stomach, continued on the road. They would not break her spirit or see her weak.



By the time the sun reached the mountain peaks behind them, hunger pangs made Selina hold her middle. Her legs ached and she wanted only to sit. She hated it. "I'm starving, and tired."

"Good. Rest here."

She gave Faldon a dark look but found a place to sit on the grass along the wheel ruts of the road. The coolness soothed her, and bending her legs brought a relief that made her smile. Selina laid back and closed her eyes.

At the temple, no one would have dared anger her, lest they incur the wrath of their god Y'dom. The priests and her attendants served her every need. She had gardens to stroll through in moments of peace and the reverence of the people, especially those who came for healing.

By Y'dom! She missed home.

"Be glad none of the robbers have found you," Dewel said.

She opened her eyes but the feyquin moved off with the others, his muzzle in the grass to eat. Easy for them, but what about her hunger?

Faldon walked away.

Didn't they care about her needs? "Where are you going?"

He stopped and looked back. "To find food for you. You'll need your strength."

"Kind of you," she muttered and laid down again. About time he did something for her.

With the sun setting, the warm, late summer air would cool. She tried not to think about how cold she might get without the heavy blankets of her carriage and let her mind drift.

Exhaustion stole her away to strange dreams.

Selina awoke to a crunching sound. She stretched and shivered in the cold air. When she opened her eyes, the stranger from Breach's Pass looked down on her, a half-eaten green fruit in his hand.

"You!" She sat up. "Where'd you come from?"

"Nearby."

"Who *are* you? Did you know this would happen?"

"Yes and no."

Under the light of the waxing moon, she noticed the pile of fruits and edible roots on a cloth. Her mouth watered, and she snatched one of the clean roots away. The sweet crunch of it whet her appetite for more.

"Slow down, unless you want to choke."

She gave him a dirty look and ate hurriedly to satisfy her empty stomach, regardless of his warning. The man wore matching, fitting clothes this time. An improvement.

With food no longer a worry, Selina looked around. Only one feyquin grazed nearby. Another lay stretched out on his side. She saw no sign of the gray.

"Where's Faldon?"

"Close."

Suspicious, she studied the man, who wore a neutral expression. "Where?"

"Watching."

She shivered in the cool breeze and scanned the dark, strange land around her.

"Cold?" he asked and took another crunching bite.

"Yes, and uncomfortable."

"Why?"

"I can't stand the feyquin. They chased off my carriage and almost killed me."

The man's expression darkened. "The feyquin do not kill, not even a human!"

Why such vehemence? She hadn't insulted him. Better, what could she get out of him now that she hadn't that night at Breach's Pass? "Were you going to warn me about Faldon? Why didn't you stay?"

He swallowed and leaned back against the tree trunk behind him. "I don't like soldiers."

"Why didn't you meet us sooner on the road after we left Breach's Pass?"

"I had business elsewhere."

She stared at the half-eaten root in her hands, her patience worn thin. He made it a point to meet her and warn her about the feyquin, and tried to scare off Doxon to hold them back. Then he left? "But you decided to come back tonight. Why?"

He took another bite and said nothing.

"Damn you!"

"I am already damned."

"You're infuriating. You're no better than that Faldon."

"Good."

She growled and bit off another chunk. It gave her something better to do than argue with a man who wouldn't give her any answers.

After a few minutes of silence, she finished the root. "At least give me a name."

"Why?"

She snatched a fruit from the pile and stood. He set her temper flaring the same way the feyquin did. "You know something? Stay away from me. I don't need this. I have enough problems."

He looked up and bit into the apple.

Selina gave him the nastiest glare she could and stomped away to where she could be alone. Part of her wished he would follow and was disappointed when he didn't. She didn't expect him to with that attitude, however. Who did he think he was? For that matter, who was he? Why was he there?

"Don't stray far. There are creatures in the night you don't want to meet."

She hesitated several strides away and looked back, but he sat unconcerned. Was he serious or was this a joke? No, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of manipulating her into an angry outburst. If this was a game to him, she refused to play.

Instead, she sat on a cool patch of grass and ate the fruit, all the while glaring at him.

When he finished, he laid down on the grass, ignoring her.



Selina awoke to the sun shining on her face and the sweet scent of grass blowing warm on her cheek. A smile played across her face, until she opened her eyes.

She blinked at the black muzzle inches from her face and shoved it away. "Get away from me."

Faldon turned and walked away, his head down. He stopped when he found a patch of grass.

"Annoying pest," she muttered while rising and dusting strands of grass from her clothes. After a quick glance, she realized the man was gone. "Where is he?"

Faldon lifted his head a few inches. "Who?"

"The man. Whatever-his-name-is. Where'd he go?"

"He'll return later." Faldon dropped his head again without any show of concern.

"You sent him away?"

"Why does it matter? You didn't like him."

She opened her mouth to snap an answer but closed it again. The feyquin spoke the truth, but she wondered about it. "How would you know?"

"I was nearby."

Selina studied him, suspicions growing in her mind. "How convenient."

He pinned his ears flat and kicked out at her, his teeth tearing mercilessly at the grass.

"At least he..." Her cheeks warmed at the thought in her head wanting to escape. She tried to restrain it by picking out a fruit from the small pile left from the night before, avoiding Faldon's fixed stare and forward ears. "Never mind."

Faldon snorted. "Humans!"

She growled and threw a fruit at him, startling him into tucking his tail and jerking his head up. "Yes, I am! And you can't change that, so take me to where Beth and Reen are."

"You'll reach them today." He galloped a distance away before settling down to graze again.

She turned to study the land around her and to avoid seeing him while she ate. Upsetting herself more would only ruin her appetite.

Hopefully, her friends waited at an inn, where she could bathe and find some fresh clothes from the carriage, assuming someone retrieved any of her possessions from the wreckage. She also needed a long sleep on a soft bed.

But how would they continue without the carriage? What happened to Doxon? Would the felipar return home or to Reen, or would the poor creature seek the wild? Poor Reen. He would be lost without Doxon, but at least Beth was with him. She might be injured, but she would still provide the sympathy Reen needed.

Selina ate quickly and wrapped up what remained of the fruit the stranger brought to carry with her. Beth and Reen needed her. That reason motivated her more than any other at the moment.

The three feyquin lifted their heads and watched her. She continued her walk on the road. They could follow if they wanted. While she didn't want to travel alone, neither did she desire their company.

The soft thud of their steps followed, grating on her nerves. Nevertheless, she found some relief in their presence. They wouldn't hurt her at least, and after sleeping in the open, she felt vulnerable; to what she couldn't imagine. Not knowing the land of Vastorn, she didn't want to imagine what she might encounter.

Although she despised him, Faldon's presence gave her some reassurance, especially after the stranger's warning last night.

Who was the man? He warned her in Breach's Pass, tried to scare off their felipar, and disappeared until last night. The feyquin didn't seem bothered by him. What was the connection? It couldn't be what she suspected.

Despite her sore feet, she trod the worn path, her head full of questions and explorations of possibilities.

Around midday, she stopped to rest near a stream, her feet blistered from walking in thin-soled shoes. She sat on a rock near the stream, pulled off her shoes to soak her feet, and opened the bundle of fruit. The cool water revived her feet as the food did for her stomach. After a while, she scooped the water in her hands many times to sate her thirst. Who knew when she would find water again?

While she rested and ate another juicy fruit, the feyquin grazed. Faldon wandered near to drink from the stream.

"We won't reach Willowbrook today as I expected. At this pace, we'll be half a day more."

Selina gulped down a bite and grimaced. "What?"

"You're too slow." Without another word, he dipped his chin into the water and slurped several long swallows.

"So this is my fault? *You* chased off my ride. If you'd left us alone, none of this would've happened."

He lifted his head a few inches from the water, which dribbled down his chin when he opened his mouth. "You should never have come. You were warned."

"Some warning." She put on her best mocking voice and said, "'Go back, *Na'Y'dom*.' Your friend was real helpful."

Faldon walked away without a word.

"You could at least apologize for scaring Doxon into leaving me and smashing my carriage."

He stopped and turned his head. "We didn't intend that."

She waited for more, but he walked away. "Do you call that an apology?"

"Yes."

She scowled, realizing the futility of arguing. He was one of those types, the ones who never admitted their wrongs. Too many people she met wouldn't admit what they did to deserve their injuries, but she healed them despite her judgment. As one of the chosen of Y'dom, her job was to heal anyone, regardless of their crimes.

After what the feyquin did, the least Faldon could do was apologize properly. With an ego like his, she understood why the White Prince cursed him. Part of her wondered what that curse fully entailed. No one explained it, but she suspected part of it involved the strange man.

After a brief rest, they continued along the road, until the sun dipped to touch the Sunders Mountains in the west once more.

She stopped at the crest of a high hill, where she looked over the trees thick along the road. No sign of a town. Only more road and open country dotted with the high stone fences of farmsteads. "You're sure this Willowbrook is only a half day away?"

"At your pace, yes." Dewel stopped near her.

Selina glanced aside with a dirty look, but her eyes caught something more interesting—a familiar door a ways ahead, the door of her carriage. Her heart thumped in her chest. Poor Beth and Reen. What happened?

"We'll reach it *tomorrow*," Faldon said from behind.

"If we keep going, we can reach it tonight. They may have left something." Seeing even that small part of her carriage gave her hope that they were close.

"The others will find us here and relay any messages." The finality of his statement stopped her argument.

He galloped away before she could object.

"Where's he going now?"

"He has other affairs to tend. I suggest you rest, and stay close," Dewel said. "The night mares are loose."

Night. Selina shuddered. Night in this strange land spooked her. "What are night mares?" She found a place off the road near a boulder and a tree forming a suitable shelter.

The stallion stepped down the incline near her shelter, his eyes on the trees around them. "Horrible creatures. They were feyquin long ago. They made a pact with a demon for the power to trick humans and were transformed by their hatred. They're no longer feyquin but something vile." He paused and turned to her. "We may not like humans, but we respect those who respect us."

His last words stuck in her mind, along with his warning. She shivered at the chill tone of his voice and what she imagined about night mares. They heard few stories in Hallor, where such creatures didn't exist, except to scare children into behaving. "What will these night mares do?"

"Nothing...to us. But you're human, a target for their hatred. Guard your mind from deceptions."

"How?"

"Know what's real."

Whatever that meant. While she sat and ate, she searched the darkening landscape. Where did Faldon go? Where did he go the night before? Did he care about protecting her from these night mares, or would that simply end his troubles?

She shuddered to consider what he might intend for her. Perhaps he left on purpose, to leave her defenseless. Perhaps Dewel and Meris intended to sneak away after she fell asleep. She hated him if he planned to leave her.

After she finished and checked the nearby positions of the stallions, Selina laid down to rest. She knew what was real—the hard, cold ground, the two feyquin standing watch, and Faldon's disappearance at night.

She wished they could continue to Willowbrook that night. It couldn't be far. She would bet no night mares would cause trouble for people behind locked doors.

Sleep would be reluctant to come that night.



Selina awoke to a sound that irritated her. It shattered the odd dreams and continued with regularity until she opened her eyes and stretched.

On the ground nearby lay the man without a name, his hands behind his head. The sound came from him, a snoring loud enough to rouse her in the middle of a thunderstorm, but the night was calm—far worse.

She peered through the weak moonlight. On a nearby hilltop stood the shadow of one of the feyquin. The other stretched out on the ground, the dark mound of its body highlighted by the white of its leg and face markings—Dewel.

Once again Faldon was nowhere to be seen. Where was the feyquin leader?

The land fell quiet, except for the rustle of grass nearby.

Selina looked aside at the stranger-without-a-name. Seeing him with the scraggly gray and black hair reminded her of Faldon.

No. It couldn't be. Every fiber in her body hated Faldon's presence. This stranger intrigued her. She must be wrong. *Had to be. Impossible!*

He finished his stretch and sat up.

"Where'd you come from?" She tried to keep her voice hushed, but in the still of the night, her voice could have been a bugle.

He said nothing, but watched her with a neutral expression.

"Never mind. You're here. I suppose I'm stuck with you." Irritation grated in her voice almost as much as she intended.

What she thought was a smile flashed across his face and vanished a moment later.

Awkwardness warmed through her, despite the chill of the morning. "Who *are* you? Where were you yesterday? Why'd you come back?" Would he admit the truth she suspected?

"Does it matter?"

"Yes!" The sharpness of her reply rang out, and she slapped her hands to her mouth. Dewel lifted his head from the ground where he rested.

The man's smile returned, a sparkle of amusement in his dark eyes highlighted by the lightening hues in the sky. "I am no one of concern, but I can't stay while Faldon is near."

"Why do you help that brute?"

A shadow passed over his face. "I was helping you—" He clamped his mouth and stood up facing the lighter horizon.

"Helping?" She stood up with him, intending to pry answers out of him before he could leave again. Leave to transform. "Since you first appeared I've had nothing but trouble. How do I know it wasn't you that caused it?"

He scowled at the horizon.

"You don't even deny it. That proves it!" Proves that he was Faldon in disguise. Faldon, who caused all this trouble.

"It proves nothing!" His retort startled her into quiet. "You have no idea the mess you've stepped into and no right to interfere."

"I wasn't interfering! I didn't ask to step into any mess. I only came to heal the king of this land, who, as I understand, Faldon gave his support to." She crossed her arms with a self-righteous air. He couldn't deny the truth in her statement.

He strode away without a word.

"Where are you going?" She ran after him.

"I have better things to do."

"Like what? Why don't you answer my questions?"

Without looking back, he lifted a hand and waved, a clear dismissal of her questions.

Selina crossed her arms and glared at his receding back. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of chasing him down. Why couldn't he cooperate? She only demanded answers.

He'd be back soon.

Now, to eat. Her stomach rumbled, and she sat down. Her pile of fruit had grown. Selina looked up to catch the stranger, but he vanished into the woods. Maybe she had been too harsh.

No. If he was Faldon, he deserved it.

She ate quickly, glad for the juicy fruits, but needing something more to sustain her. She craved meat, but the stranger apparently didn't bother to hunt. Not surprising.

When Faldon reappeared, Selina watched him. She said nothing. What if she was wrong? She didn't want to know if what she suspected about his curse was the truth. The man showed some semblance of hospitality. This way she could still hate Faldon the feyquin.

Anxious to return to her friends and continue her journey, she started out on the road with the feyquin.

Before the sun reached its zenith, the first faint pillars of smoke rose into the sky. Excited by the prospects of civilization, she climbed to the top of the nearest hill.

From there, she spotted a town, if the couple dozen wood-shingled roofs and other structures within the low stone wall could be called a town. What luck! It had to be Willowbrook. It might take half a morning, but she would reach it.

She hurried towards it without consideration for her feyquin escort. In fact, she wished they would leave her alone.

However, their steps followed her not far behind.

Faldon made no attempt to stop her, but neither did he speak to her. His presence grated on her nerves, perhaps more because of his silence. Or was he afraid she'd confirm the truth?

After a short time, she stopped. "Leave me alone!"

"No."

"I don't need you. I won't go back. Why do you follow me?"

"To find the truth."

"What truth?" Now what did he want?

"The real reason he sent for you."

"Who? The White Prince? I don't know. If it's other than to cure the king, I've no idea." Was this the reason for his quiet all morning—to think about how to stop her from continuing to the Ivory Palace? She doubted any other reason, after all the ways he tried to stop her.

"He has the best medics in any land. Why would King Antorin need a *Na'Y'dom*?" Faldon lowered his head, his ears up, and looked her in the eyes. "Sorvin would sooner kill his father, as he did Prince Kemmon, to assure his inheritance of the throne. I would have endorsed Kemmon. He knew that. He sent his sisters to marry overseas. With his father gone and any other heirs out of the way, he would be assured succession.

"Curing Antorin is a ruse. His only other purpose is the curse. I suspect you're a key to a cure. If he's learned how, I *must* know."

"Me? How could I undo a demon's curse?"

"I don't know. But I'll learn. If one of us is cured, the other can never be. That is the nature of our curse. I bet he hopes to cure himself so I am damned the rest of my years."

Selina stared at the dark gray face, uncertain now of her purpose. Was this a trick to keep her back, a game to amuse the feyquin, or the truth? Sorvin was also cursed?

She didn't want to believe the feyquin, but something in her agreed with him. She answered the call of those in need of healing. But was curing either Faldon or the prince the right thing? Cure one and leave the other damned the rest of his life—how could she make that choice? Could the rumors of the White Prince's atrocities be believed?

She didn't know what to do. "Is Antorin sick?"

"According to servants' gossip, he is bedridden and frail from illness," Meris said.

"Then I'll go to him. I have a duty to heal the sick until my life is gone." None of them said a word. Her eyes fixed on Faldon in expectance of another argument.

Instead, his ears flattened and he turned away with his head down. The other two joined him and made sounds she guessed to be their own language.

She looked ahead to the town, where her friends most likely took rest. Her body ached for the same respite.

But she couldn't help wondering if Faldon spoke the truth. She had saved murderers before, but not anyone who would kill their own family. The thought of being used by someone that power-hungry sickened and angered her. She almost felt sorry for the feyquin.

Almost.

If she cured the king, Sorvin fay Renald would lose any power he claimed in his father's stead. Antorin could take the steps necessary to prevent his son from causing any other atrocities.

Selina sighed. Whether Sorvin called her to heal the king or himself was not her concern. Her reason for agreeing to come remained the same. She would heal the king, whether Faldon let her continue or not. Whether Sorvin intended it or not.

A sudden deep squeal startled her from her thoughts. Selina whirled.

Faldon's rear hooves thudded hard against Dewel's ribs. The red feyquin tucked his tail and raced out of reach, but Faldon stopped a couple strides from where he started, his ears flat back.

She stared, her pulse pounding in her ears. "Why did you kick him like that?"

"Our ways are not yours, human!" Despite his angry tone, Faldon held his ears forward.

Even in her few days with the feyquin, she knew it meant something. Their ways were certainly not like those of humans, but she learned.

What was she thinking? Why would she want to learn the ways of the feyquin? After healing the king, she would have little time left to live. And these creatures were brutes. Why waste it learning about them?

*Because Faldon is the stranger, and you're attracted to the human side.* The truth made her warm under her collar. She scowled at herself for considering such thoughts. Faldon didn't deserve her favor.

"No, we would never hurt our own kind." She mumbled the words with a sour tone, hoping he overheard.

He heard, and pinned his ears flat to his neck. "Do not mock me!" After a few seconds, he walked around her.

She followed him. "Why are you so angry?"

Faldon said nothing but stood with his head up, ears erect, staring away.

Steady steps came from behind. Dewel appeared on her left and Meris on her right. Both watched the gray.

Faldon glanced back once before walking away along the road. When the two others followed, Selina had no choice. She jogged up beside Dewel, who walked with his head low.

"Are you all right? Can I help?" She'd never done it, but she guessed she could heal the feyquin. Her powers had worked on felipar and a few other animals she practiced on.

"I'm fine."

"But he kicked you hard. I heard it. You didn't do anything to him to deserve that."

"You don't understand our ways." He let out a soft groan.

"Of course not. If no one tells me anything, how can I?"

He walked in silence for several steps. She waited for an answer, but none of them said anything. Selina let out her frustration in a huff. "If that's the way you want to be, then no one will ever understand."

"It hurts to breathe, to explain," Dewel said.

Anger melted from her, pulling her shoulders down in pity. "Why not let me help?"

"No...Thank you. Save your strength for your friend."

"I have plenty of strength for both." She reached out for the bump growing on his side, but he sidled away.

"No!"

She shook her head and huffed out her breath. "Have it your way. I won't touch you."

They walked in silence, until the thunder of hooves alerted her to another feyquin. Faldon stopped, like Dewel and Meris on each side of her. She stood tense like them. One of the others who had chased away her carriage met Faldon, his nostrils flared and sweat over his black neck and chest.

They spoke in their own language. She hated that.

"Your friends are safe," Meris said. "Grem stayed behind. He's waiting for us."

"Why?"

"It's a courtesy."

"Courtesy? *Now* you show some concern?"

"Faldon said it already—feyquin do *not* kill. Nor do we intend harm. When harm comes to another because of our actions, we will atone." Irritation rang in Meris's voice.

"How?" She hoped he said they would leave her alone once she reached her friends and let her continue her journey to the Ivory Palace.

Meris's ears flattened, but before he could act, Faldon jumped between them. He bared his teeth at Meris. "Enough!"

Faldon turned to Selina. "You'll be with your friends soon, but they have no carriage for you." Satisfaction lifted his tone at the last part.

Her eyes narrowed, but he turned away. She knew what he meant to imply, but she wouldn't give up.

"For one who approved Antorin, I'd think he would want the king healed." She followed Faldon and the black she ruled out as Bastien.

"It's not so simple."

She frowned at Dewel. "Why?"

"Faldon lost everything because of Sorvin's greed. If not for the curse, he would still have the herd. A human caused his suffering." Dewel took a deep breath, his eyes pinching shut for a moment. Selina winced at the groan escaping when he breathed.

"Long ago, he tried to bring the feyquin together with the human's domain, hoping we could live together in peace. For three generations, he gave his blessings to the new heir of Vastorn, after they proved their hearts. Sorvin failed in every way but demanded the blessing, for the strength of the feyquin's alliance and what that means to the people. As the leader of the feyquin, Faldon refused to endorse the White Prince. His choice was young Kemmon. Sorvin knew that."

"Faldon, a peacemaker?" They could kick her outright and she wouldn't have believed it. "Wait...*Three* generations, of the fay Renald family?"

Dewel looked ahead. "Feyquin don't age as humans."

"All right, so he's old." The thought left a bitter taste in her mouth in light of her situation. "He should have some wisdom in that thick head." She caught a nasty look from Faldon when he turned his head aside and his ears pinned flat. She didn't care; he deserved to hear what she thought of him.

"You do well not to insult him," Dewel said.

"He should consider the same. I don't know why his blessing would mean anything special." She raised her voice and added, "At least he's lived his life."

Faldon swished his tail, one ear pivoted back while the other remained forward. Without a word, he continued to the town with Bastien slightly behind his lead.

They were odd creatures, these feyquin. For all their intelligence and power and—she dared not admit for risk of bloating their egos—beauty, they could be intolerable. Strangest to her was that the nobles of this country sought their blessing as proof of their worth.

Selina reconsidered her earlier outburst in light of this news and felt a hint of pity for Faldon. Had he not shown such a temper towards her or led the band that chased off Doxon, she might have sided with him.

They reached the town of Willowbrook with its neat lines of houses and shops along dusty streets. She found the only inn without trouble.

When she entered, Beth's smile lit up from her chair at one of half a dozen rectangular wooden tables. "Selina!"

Selina bent over and hugged her friend, mindful of Beth's leg propped up on a chair.

"I'm so glad to see you!" Beth's voice trembled. "We were afraid, but the feyquin said they wouldn't hurt you."

"They didn't, but they aren't very friendly either, especially Faldon." The last part came out with less derision than she expected of herself. She grabbed a nearby chair, the wood clattering on the floor as she slid it next to Beth's leg and sat down. "I hear you've been injured, thanks to them. Let me have a look."

Beth pulled up the bottom of her brown and green dress to expose the leg resting across another chair.

Selina fought back a grimace. Blotches of purple and blue covered the swollen, lower leg. "Try to relax."

The power flowed from Selina's practiced hands to heal Beth's injury. The glow of the mark on her neck when she used her powers shone from beneath her chin.

When the glow faded, a healthy color returned to the leg. Selina ignored a few gasps from people around her as she recovered from a brief wave of dizziness.

With extra care, Beth slid her leg from the chair. She leaned on the table and stood. When she put her weight on the leg, a smile spread across her face. "I...Thank you!"

Selina gave her friend another hug, glad to see her happy, but mostly glad to see her again. "It's the least I could do. You came this far with me." She stood back and glanced around. Several faces turned away from her when her eyes passed them, but none of them familiar. "Where's Reen?"

Beth's smile disappeared. "That feyquin, Grem, went with him to search for Doxon. He couldn't wait. I'm sorry, Selina."

"It's not your fault." Now what would she do?

The answer hit before she could sink into depression. "Soldiers!"

"What?"

"I bet the king's soldiers would escort me."

"Willowbrook's too small. I haven't seen any soldiers."

"Faldon's sworn he won't let me continue." So much for that idea.

"Absurd!" Beth sat down again. "I've talked to the people. They said he gave his blessing to Antorin fay Renald. Now he won't let you heal the king? It makes no sense."

"Exactly my thoughts. That's why we have to get away from him."

"You're still determined to reach the Ivory Palace?"

"More than ever." Selina ground the words through her teeth and glanced to the window with its cross-hatched pattern of glass. Dewel stood in view. She still pitied him, but he was feyquin. She couldn't trust any of them, but she could trust Beth to help her.

Ideas sparked in her mind. Selina grinned and returned her attention to her friend. "I might have a plan."



Beth gave a nod of appraisal in the candlelight of her room. "You look like an old woman. Hunch down a bit more...There."

"Good. Now, as soon as that farmer's ready, I'll leave with him." Selina pulled the hood over her head and adjusted the cloak that one of the men traded for her robe as a gift for his wife. Though she would miss her fine dress robe, she couldn't risk the feyquin recognizing her.

"You're sure about this? We could return home and contact one of the others. There are plenty of men bearing the mark. They'd be stronger facing the feyquin. One of them could go to heal Antorin."

"It would take too long. Besides, I have to do it, Beth, to see it through. I won't let Faldon intimidate me. Just keep the feyquin distracted and believing I'm still here, long enough for me to escape."

Beth sighed. "All right. Good luck, Selina."

Selina reached out and embraced Beth. "I'll miss you." She didn't want to leave her friend behind, but she had to go on.

"Take care of yourself."

When they parted, Beth wiped her eyes and smiled. "The old farmer should be waiting. His name is Corin Neprol. Good luck."

Selina flashed her a smile and left the room. She hoped the feyquin didn't recognize her.

At the bar in the dining area sat a lone figure hunched over a steaming drink, gray hairs peeking from under a brown hat. She saw no one else fitting the description Beth had given her. *Take care of yourself, Beth.* With a last glance back at the dark doorway through which she entered, she sat down next to the man.

"Corin Neprol?"

His sagging cheeks jiggled when he looked up. After a moment, his eyes brightened. "Ah! Yeh must be the one called Selina."

"Sshh!" She glanced around, but no one jumped out of any hiding to catch her. A ridiculous notion; Faldon wouldn't dare enter a human establishment. Would he? "Not in the open."

"Fine. Fine. But what name d'ya prefer?"

"Anything else, if you'll get me out of here without the feyquin following."

He shrugged. "Can't guarantee no doing but I'll take yeh on. Don' much like leaving at sunset though. It's the missus. She's bound to be afrighted of what's happened to me."

"In the dark, Faldon's less likely to recognize me." And less likely to catch her, if she was right about his curse.

"Than we'll be off." He gulped down the last of whatever he drank and slid off the stool. When he wobbled, Selina caught him.

"Thanks, Miss."

Her heart caught in her throat for a moment, stuck on the grief of leaving her friends behind. She hoped Reen found his way back all right. He also always called her "Miss".

"Let's go." She ushered him out into the night, pulling her hood low over her face. A couple feyquin lifted their heads from down the street. Where did Faldon hide?

She ducked away from them to the wagon. The hooved creature pulling it reminded her, in an odd way, of the feyquin, but it had long ears and two backwards-curved horns on its head, which attached to a short neck topped by a stubby mane. The flat back ended in a narrow tail with a tuft of longer hairs at the end. A naskink, a creature commonly used as a beast of burden, because they were docile and easier to tame than felipar.

Corin stepped up to the seat and offered Selina a hand. She reached out and took it, holding the hood low over her face with her other hand.

"Up yeh go, Miss."

She sat down on the hard seat and fought off the urge to glance back at the feyquin.

"Ayup-yup!" Corin slapped the reins on the back of the naskink, which let out a low moan into the darkening land. The wagon lurched, and she let go of the cloak and grabbed the side of her seat to keep her balance. Once the creaking wagon moved steadily, she dared to let one hand off the seat to hang onto the cloak.

They rode in silence into the growing dusk. Stars lit in the heavens above, chasing the last of the sunlight fading behind them.

"How far will we get tonight?" She raised her voice over the creaking of the wagon.

"The missus expects me home. Yeh can rest there. We'll take yeh to Dorrinton in the mornin'. Yeh'll find soldiers there. Bigger town. Cap'n Samners'll help yeh along."

As the moon came up, a light not far from the road—the glow from a window—shone through the trees. So close! The feyquin would never find her, let alone catch her. Selina sighed and let go of her hood.

"Whoa!"

The jerk of the wagon stopping made her grip the seat again to keep from bouncing off. She wanted her carriage back.

"What is it?" She saw nothing in the moonlit gloom of night.

"Heydy, stranger!" Corin said.

Her heart skipped a beat and she pulled her hood low to hide her face.

A shadowy figure detached from the road and moved towards them, his black hair peppered with gray. No. It couldn't be!

"What's a man doing out this late?" The man came up on her side of the wagon, his eyes glinting in the moonlight with a hardness that chilled her.

*Faldon!*

"Your wife is waiting at home, old man."

Selina looked to Corin, but his eyes widened with fear.

"Thank you for bringing the lady to me." A hint of warning edged the man's otherwise welcoming tone.

"How did you know?" Corin asked.

Selina bit her lip and restrained herself from slapping the old man.

The stranger met her eyes with a smile as if she asked the question. "You don't think I didn't expect it? I would be disappointed if you hadn't tried...Selina."

She yanked the hood off. "I'm not going back! You can tell your friends."

"That's why I'm here."

"How—" She shook her head. "No. Leave me." She glanced aside. "Ignore him, Corin. Let's go."

"Can't, Miss. He's a hold o' Dandy."

She noticed then the cursed man's hand on the rein. "You!"

Faldon reached up and grabbed her waist.

"Let me go!" Selina kicked and pounded, but had no leverage on the narrow seat. "You heathen! You...bastard!"

He lost his grip and she fell hard to the ground. Tears of frustration welled up as she rolled to get her feet under her.

His weight tackled her to the ground, face down.

"Get home, old man!"

The slap of reins preceded the creak of the wagon into the night.

Selina struggled against the man's hold. Faldon's hold. She could hate him when she thought of him as the irritating feyquin. His arms tightened around her and she kicked and wiggled. The man either felt nothing or ignored her. "Get off me!"

When the creak of the wagon vanished into the night, her tears flowed, and she ceased her struggles. Frustration and hopelessness erupted into light sobs.

Somewhere amid her tears, his hold loosened and his weight shifted from her. She laid still, sniffing. "Why are you doing this? Why won't you let me go?"

"For Faldon."

"Selfish, arrogant bastard!" She ground the words through her teeth, wishing she could hurt the feyquin. While part of her liked him as a man, she wanted to hate him for who he really was.

The man shoved her aside. "Go then. See how far you get on foot."

Was he serious? After all this, he would let her go? She didn't care. Selina smoothed her hair and stood, her chin in the air. She brushed the dirt from her clothes and marched away.

After a few steps, she looked back, but the man sat on the ground where she left him. She continued a ways in the moonlit night, but he didn't follow.

Alone in a strange land, Selina followed the road. The light breeze rustled through the leaves of the trees around her. At one point, she thought she heard steps and looked back but saw no one. Part of her wished he would step out from the darkness, to calm her fears of the unknown. Nevertheless, she continued.

After a while, she winced from the blisters on her feet not fully healed. She had only rested a day from her last long walk, no thanks to Faldon and his gang. If she saw him again, she'd slap both cheeks this time, man or beast.

She soon found a place to sit near one of the trees and took it. The next day would be a long one, and she had no doubts the man followed her. He followed her every step since Breach's Pass, so she didn't expect him to stop then.

She didn't want this. She only wanted to heal the king before she died. Tired and frustrated beyond reason, she closed her eyes to shut out the world.

Selina pulled her cloak around her and curled up in the crook of the tree's protruding roots. With some reluctance from her empty stomach, sleep came.



Selina awoke to a soft tickle on her cheek.

She brushed it away, but it returned. "Go away."

"Wake up," a feminine voice whispered.

She opened her eyes to a moonlit night. A silvery feyquin stood out from the darkness. Selina blinked, uncertain whether she was dreaming.

"I came to help you escape Faldon."

"How? Why?" Selina rubbed the crust from her eyes and stretched. Her body ached from sleeping in the awkward position. She groaned and stood up with twinges of pain throughout her back. "Who are you?"

"A friend."

"I thought feyquin disliked humans." She stretched out most of the kinks.

"Most of us do. But I would rather oppose Faldon." The feyquin jerked her head up, her blue eyes shimmering in the moonlight and her silvery coat taking on an ethereal glow. The beauty stunned Selina. "Hurry! He's near. If you wish to escape him, follow me."

The feyquin took a few steps away, and looked back. "Hurry!"

Selina checked the shadows around her—no sign of Faldon, but that meant nothing—and made her way to the feyquin, who led her into a cluster of trees. The last thing she wanted was for Faldon to cause trouble. "What do I call you?" she whispered.

"I am Relia. Enough talk. He'll hear us. Hurry now. Follow me."

Selina hesitated a few steps into the trees, uncertain about going off the road. She didn't know the land of Vastorn. Getting lost was not an option she wanted to consider.

However, if Relia would help her reach the Ivory Palace, she wouldn't argue.

Selina continued after the silvery figure. This seemed almost too easy. A voice of caution whispered through her mind, but she pushed it aside with the desire to escape Faldon.

Inside the forest, a wave of dizziness passed over her. Selina blinked. When she looked up, the feyquin waited a few steps ahead. She forced her feet to continue, and her head cleared. The trees grew vibrant with hues from green to almost a transparent pink the further off the road they traveled, welcoming her despite the dark of night. Selina gazed at the surreal beauty sparkling by moonlight. She had never imagined such a place hidden there.

"What is this?"

"No questions. Come. We're almost there."

"Almost where?"

"This way."

Selina followed, afraid of being left in the forest. She stumbled on a thick root protruding from the ground but caught herself with a low branch. In that moment, a shudder passed through her, seizing her breath and chilling her heart.

The beauty melted away, replaced by ugly, twisted trees, dark and foreboding. The air closed in around her, humid and stale. She stopped and tried to see through the sudden gloom. Silence surrounded her, except for the feyquin's steps ahead. This couldn't be real.

Faldon would never find her, and she wouldn't find her way out without help.

The silvery feyquin merged into the darkness, but the thump of her steps remained.

"Faldon comes. You must hurry."

Selina shivered, but not from the cold. Nothing looked familiar. "Where are we?"

No one answered.

"Hello?" Selina backed against a cold trunk, alert to the stifling silence. Her heart pounded in her ears. "Relia?"

"I am here." The voice took on a taunting tone. "We are all here."

"Who are you?"

"My sisters and I."

Selina searched through the darkness, but little moonlight pierced it. Only faint outlines showed her where the trees stood. Her mouth went dry. "Wh—Where are you?"

"Here."

She jerked to the right. Something moved in the darkness.

"Where?" she asked.

A creature stepped into a clearing before her, a shadow in the wan moonlight. It resembled the feyquin in structure, but nothing else. Rather, this beast was skeletal, some sort of scaly hide over its bones, eyes sunken into black pits.

She gulped and pressed her eyes shut. It couldn't be real!

When she looked, three of the skeletal creatures stood before her, but she heard the thump of steps to the side. The warnings of the feyquin raced through her mind. "Night mares!" She had to escape, but they surrounded her.

"They told you."

Now she knew why they led her away from the feyquin. Faldon might have stopped them.

"What do you want?"

"You."

"M—Me? Why?"

"You're strong. Your life will feed us for many nights."

"No. No, I won't." She gasped and took a step to the left, but the outline of another stopped her. She wouldn't get far.

"Selina!"

The faint voice lifted her with hope.

"Here!" *Hurry!*

"Where? Keep talking!"

"Surrounded by awful beasts. I'm here! Hurry! I don't know—"

A hiss by the one she guessed was Relia interrupted. "Faldon!"

"He will be too late," another said. "Hurry, take her!"

"Hurry!" Selina called. "They're going to kill me!"

A blazing light burst from the darkness behind the tree, and she covered her eyes with her arm. The tramping of hooves and confusion expressed by the night mares gave her the chance she needed. She slipped around the tree with her eyes down and followed the source of the light. It filled her with warmth and strength.

"This way!"

At the dimming of the light, she dropped her arm. With his free hand, the man motioned for her to join him. From his other shone the light.

"What did you—"

"No time." He grabbed her hand. "This way." He closed his other hand, casting them into a black thicker than catacombs beneath the temple with the lanterns out. She had no choice but to let him lead her, but she was glad to do it.

"How can you see? How did you make light—"

"I can. That's enough for now. Hurry. If we don't reach the edge of their domain before sunrise, we'll be trapped in the Land of Shadows."

He didn't have to tell her again. Selina held tight to his hand and he held tight to hers. The security of his grip filled her with confidence. He guided her between trees without stumbling or running into them.

They reached the edge of the dismal forest as the sky lightened. Fresh air filled her lungs. Selina smiled, ready to rest, but the man pulled her forward.

"Keep moving. We're not out yet."

"We're not?"

"It's an illusion." He waved his hand and the trees surrounded them again, though sparser and faintly lit. Dawn arrived.

Selina ran on, afraid to let go of his hand, though he showed no inclination to release his grip. Maybe she was wrong about him.

They stepped out of the trees as the sky brightened to a light sapphire.

The sky continued to lighten in the east as they moved beyond the trees. When she thought her chest would explode from breathing hard, the man stopped and loosened his grip.

Selina squeezed his hand while catching her breath. He hesitated, bedraggled black and gray hair in his face. She had never seen him in any light in that form.

"Thank you," she said.

He stared in silence, but she caught the flash of his cheek.

"You're welcome?" she prompted.

He nodded and took a step away, but she held on. "Where are you going? Stay with me...I—I'm sorry I misjudged you." She let go of his hand in shock of what she said. A new warmth spread up through her.

His lips twitched with uncertainty, until he turned to the east and dropped his shoulders. "It's too late."

"Too late?"

"Too late for me."

"Why?"

He stepped away from her as the sun crested over the horizon. The moment it touched him, his body stretched and grew. Clothes tore off.

He groaned, a pitiable sound that made her wince in sympathy with the transformation.

Not long after she apologized to the man, a gray feyquin stallion stood before her, familiar in every detail.

"That *was* you. I thought—I suspected, but I never saw."

He stood before her, his head low, though the fire of his pride burned in his dark eyes. "Now you know. Such is the curse I bear. A more grievous crime could not be committed on one of my kind, but the curse of Sorvin fay Renald."

"How is becoming a man a curse? Why couldn't you tell me?"

His ears pinned flat and he reared up so his hooves rocked the ground when he landed. She jumped back. "It is! I lost everything, or weren't you listening to Dewel? Humans betrayed feyquin long ago, but I tried to end the hatred and fear. What thanks did I get? Betrayal!

"To be the enemy is the worst insult! No mares will have me like this; I'm no longer worthy as a leader if I cannot fulfill my duties to the herd. I'm not me when I'm a man."

She stood in silence, unsure what to say when his reasons made sense. Faldon stood facing her, the fire fading from his eyes.

The faint thunder of hoofbeats broke the awkward silence. Three feyquin came into view over a nearby hill.

"Faldon!" Bastien trotted to within a length of the gray.

Selina watched, seeing them through new eyes. She never learned the history of the feyquin. Her studies hadn't gone in depth into the history of the creatures across the Sunders Mountains, since none came beyond the boundary of the Shammel River on the Hallor side. Fewer historians took the time to speak with the creatures.

"You made it!" Bastien shifted his gaze to her as she stepped up beside Faldon. "We feared the worst."

Faldon's nearest ear flicked towards Selina, but he made no move to threaten her approach.

"Not a moment too soon," Dewel said, joining them with Meris.

Faldon turned his head to her. "My curse is revealed by sunrise."

The others looked at her, their ears forward. Selina crossed her arms. "Yes, I saw him change."

"What will we do now?" Meris asked.

Before he could answer, Selina spoke. "Take me to the king."

They all looked at her.

"Let me heal him. He'll put Sorvin in his place...Won't he?"

"Unless Sorvin has other intentions for summoning you. I can't let him lift his side of the curse."

"But if that's his purpose, wouldn't you want to know? Couldn't you use the same information to break the curse on yourself? And he may want only to cure his father of illness."

Faldon watched her for a long time in silent contemplation. She found it hard to accept him as the strange man who accompanied her, but she saw the change with her eyes, confirming what she had suspected. In either form, he alluded to his other form as another presence. She wanted him to be the man. That part of him had been more considerate. He was right in saying he wasn't himself as a man. He was better.

The others nickered in that strange language of theirs. Faldon's ear flicked towards them, but his head remained turned aside to her.

"What could it hurt?" Selina muttered. "My life will end in a couple months at the most."

At something from Meris, Faldon pinned his ears and lunged. Meris whirled, escaping bared teeth by inches.

Selina jumped back, startled by the sudden threat. However, Faldon never attacked her but stood between her and the others.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"He swore he would take you himself if I didn't." Faldon spoke in the calm voice she knew from his human form.

"Keep your promise, Faldon," Bastien said. "If you're cured, you can challenge Ballik. You promised us mares. We won't have it if you can't win."

Faldon pinned his ears and lunged at Bastien. The other stallion's ears flattened and he whirled. Hooves flew at his face, but Faldon swerved to avoid it. He bit a chunk of hide on Bastien's shoulder. When Bastien pulled away with a squeal, a bloody wound remained. Faldon spat out the hide in his mouth and turned to kick, but Bastien ducked.

The ordeal ended, but Bastien stayed away from the group.

Faldon stood with his head up on a proudly arched neck, watching the other. "You doubt me?"

Bastien shook his head, sending dark mane slapping into disarray across his long neck.

"Take her to Antorin," Dewel said. "If Sorvin has other intentions, we'll stop him."

"I won't cooperate with him." Selina hoped Faldon listened to reason. He saved her life from the night mares. If she could help him, she would, though she wished she could make him see the advantage of what he considered a curse. He could be the perfect ambassador to bring the peace he sought.

Faldon stared at her, a hint of humanity in those dark eyes.

"Isn't it worth the chance?" Meris said.

With his head low, Faldon walked to within arm's reach of Selina. "He'll try to force you to his way. Sorvin is not a patient man."

"You'll be there. I'm not afraid." She hoped he didn't see the flush that warmed her cheeks. Although he demonstrated his true behavior, she knew the humanity within him. He cared about his principles with more passion than anyone she knew. That realization intrigued her, and she wanted to learn more.

Faldon took several steps away. "Come. You'll need supplies in Dorrinton."

Selina took a deep breath and followed, relieved that he finally conceded. And after what she learned, she didn't want to walk into the Ivory Palace without the feyquin.

After a brief stop in Dorrinton for provisions and rest, Selina set off with the feyquin. Faldon rejoined her at night, after disappearing briefly and returning as a clothed man. She could only guess that he went off to transform where he could find clothes. He never explained himself and she wasn't inclined to ask.

He changed since their encounter with the night mares, arguing less and answering her questions. She learned about the stories passed down through generations of a time when men rode feyquin into battle as partners defending their lands against monstrous invaders.

"I don't believe it." She couldn't imagine any of the feyquin allowing humans on their backs.

"It was long ago, a time when demons and other monsters terrorized the lands." Faldon walked next to her, his head level with hers. "Men and feyquin fought together. After the wars subsided, men settled down and chased feyquin from the best grazing lands. Despite the betrayal, we continue to chase off horrors. Most humans fear us now, unaware of the truth."

"I can understand why, after what you did to me."

"It was not our intention to cause harm." He spoke in a gentle voice.

Selina bowed her head, sorry for her behavior, her eyes on the path before her. "I know."

"I'm tired, Selina. Tired of fighting with men for the right to live in peace. Tired of trying to keep my pact with Antorin's great-grandfather for grazing lands. I'm tired of being blamed for men's troubles. And I'm tired of Sorvin's treachery. My only consolation is that he shares my curse."

Selina straightened at what she now suspected. "How does he *share* your curse?"

"Demons delight in causing torment and trouble, and their favors always come with a price. In Sorvin's case, he takes the shape of a feyquin at night."

Selina let her breath out in a gust, which burst into a fit of laughter. It forced her to halt to catch her breath. Her sides ached and tears wet her cheeks. Sorvin, a feyquin. And Faldon, a man.

Faldon and the others stared at her in silence, but the sparkle in his eyes hinted of humor. "Now you see why he despairs to break his side of the curse. Yet he could only be so lucky to experience life as a feyquin."

After regaining her senses, Selina patted the long gray neck under the thick mane. "I doubt he sees it the same."

Faldon nudged her in the side. "Any human should see it as a blessing."

She ran her hand down the long bridge of his nose and gently pushed him away. He gave no reaction but followed her on the road.



After nine days of walking in new shoes and stays in a couple villages on the road, she followed Faldon off the road to avoid soldiers who might show loyalty to Sorvin rather than Antorin.

Near sunset of the ninth day since leaving Dorrinton, a distant shimmering palace of white rose high above a magnificent city spread upon the plains. The setting sun ignited the spires in its glow. A crescent shape at the highest peak could have been dual flames of a candle.

Selina stopped at the crest of the hill to gaze at the distant wonder. "It's beautiful!"

"We'll reach it tomorrow. Tonight we'll rest here." Faldon galloped away without another word, while the others settled to grazing.

Selina watched him go, eager for his return as a man.

With the bag of food from the last village, she sat down on a rocky hillside. Back in Dorrinton, Faldon suggested a sack for carrying water. She would not have thought of it. Reen had cared for their provisions.

She now looked at it in sorrow. What happened to her friends? She hoped Reen found Doxon and that Beth returned home safely.

She likely would never know since each day her life ebbed away a little more. When she left on this journey, she had fully expected to die in Vastorn.

From her vantage, Selina watched the sun disappear, anticipating when Faldon would join her. The other stallions grazed nearby. Bastien, who refused her help to heal him, stayed further away since Faldon's attack, while Faldon stayed closer to her. None of them talked about the fight. She didn't understand their behavior.

But she now understood their attitude towards humans, particularly Sorvin. Whatever he planned for her, she came to heal his father, the king, and she would do that. If he had other reasons for sending for a *Na'Y'dom*, she would refuse to cooperate.

Despite the hard, stale bread, she ate what her stomach demanded to fill it. Tomorrow she would enter the city. Food would be plentiful, if the palace was a demonstration of the richness of Vastorn.

With the stars twinkling in the sky, Faldon's steps crunched on the grass. Selina tossed him a red fruit, which he caught.

"Where'd you go—halfway back to Dorrinton?"

He sat down next to her and bit into the crispy fruit. "Too many guards around. I had to hide until they passed. They looked at the ground and mumbled about tracks. I think they expect us."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Likely bad." He stared at the fruit for a few seconds in a contemplative silence and threw it away.

"What's wrong?"

He said nothing but stood and took a few steps away, his eyes on the city.

"Faldon?" Worry tightened in her chest, especially since his news of the guards nearby. Selina stood up, ready to run if necessary.

"Curing Antorin may kill you."

Was that concern in his voice? "I have some time."

He turned to her, his emotions hidden by the dark night. "No, you don't. There's a sinister reason your life is cut short when the mark shows."

She touched the mark within a hair of completing the pattern around her neck.

"Every time you heal someone, you give them a part of your life. You sacrifice yourself for others. Y'dom was a demon, not a god. It cursed the Healers long ago, Selina, when they tried to destroy it. It's a part of this land's history. The mark glows as it grows. Yours is nearly complete."

"No. He was a god. He gave us the healing gifts. You're just trying to keep me from going. I thought we were past this." She choked on the lump in her throat, her eyes burning with the betrayal. How could he do this now, when they were so close to her completing her purpose...when she cared for him?

"It's the truth. Why do you think Dewel and Bastien refused to let you heal them? Feyquin do not kill. Taking a part of your life is as good as killing you."

Emotions tangled inside her. "You'd lie and speak blasphemies—anything—to get your way."

"I'm not lying...and you know it."

"Then why tell me now, after we've come this far?"

He turned to the others, who watched their argument, and back to her. "You deserve to know the truth. I thought you'd be ready to listen."

"I know the truth. You refuse to let me have anything to do with Sorvin!" She turned to leave, afraid he might be right and unwilling to hear any more blasphemy. Most painful, she didn't want to hear it from him. She would heal Antorin and help Faldon find a way out of this stupid curse of his. Then she would prove him wrong.

"Selina."

A strong grip on her shoulders stopped her. When she halted, his fingers softened into something that made her want to believe he cared. He had never touched her in any gentle manner, except for holding her hand to lead her through the Land of Shadows, the realm of the night mares. His hands were gentle now, like they were then, tempting her to believe him. She longed for his touch after all this time.

"Listen to me." His warm breath blew across her ear with his whisper. "It's not about Sorvin. If you do this, you will die. I can't let that happen."

"I've been prepared for my death for almost five years." Despite her words, doubts crept up with her tears. Why did he have to do this now, so near the end of her journey? She came with the conviction that she would cure the king. This journey was an adventure to live before she died. She would see it to the end, before he could change her mind. This was another of his tricks. He played on her emotions, and she let herself believe he might care for her.

Selina pulled away, prepared for him to hold her back and hoping he would, but he didn't. "Farewell, Faldon." Before she could change her mind, she ran down the hill for the plains and the city below. Tears threatened her vision. With luck, she would reach it before midnight and before she could change her mind.



Faldon stared after the woman, feeling a part of himself ripped away. None of this would have happened if not for Sorvin's curse.

"Won't you go after her?" Dewel said.

He turned to his friend. "Why? She won't listen to me."

"You care about her, and I think she cares about you."

"Does she? She cares about nothing but her mission to save Antorin. She doesn't care about the truth but will needlessly throw her life away. She's human."

"Yes, she is."

Faldon glared at his friend, wishing he wore his regular form. Dewel knew he posed no threat as a man, or he wouldn't dare to mock him.

The chestnut stallion walked away.

Faldon crossed his arms and gazed out on the shadow moving across the land, away from him. Why should he stop her? He tried to hold her and she didn't stay.

It meant he was human, more than he wanted to be. He wanted to end the curse and return to being feyquin. At least, he *had* wanted that. Now he wasn't so certain.

In his short time with the *Na'Y'dom*, the cursed of Y'dom—though the title had been perverted over generations in Hallor—he learned more about being human than the last year living with the curse. Had Selina been feyquin, she would have been the lead mare with her strong spirit. He would be proud to have her.

He was proud to have her with him for a short time. That much he wouldn't deny. She stood up to him from the first time they met. That fire intrigued him.

Yet she was determined to give her life away for a sense of duty. A duty caused by a curse she saw as a blessing.

Perhaps she was right. He could turn around his and use it for something positive. He could learn to understand humans and become the peacemaker between feyquin and humans he wanted to be and hope the others would listen to him.

Antorin would want that. But would the feyquin herds? If Selina cured him, the king could make the changes to bring peace, instead of the war Sorvin would cause. But she wouldn't live long after. Faldon would lose her.

Faldon cursed himself for being a fool. He had to be there.

He couldn't wait. Though Selina crossed half the distance in the time he took to contemplate the issue, he could reach the city before sunrise. He would reach her and tell her—He cared, about the future and deeply for her.

Through the night, he ran and walked, but Selina reached the city far ahead. A number of shapes—soldiers most likely—surrounded her at the outskirts. Among the guards, she made her way to the Ivory Palace.

He closed the gap, but a carriage appeared and rushed her away at a faster pace than he ran. Dewel and the others could easily have caught it, but they stayed with him. He needed them to hold back the guards. In his feyquin form, he would have caught up to her.

When they met soldiers, no one dared stop him with three feyquin. Nevertheless, they accompanied him to the palace gates.

After some trouble settled by a show of power by the feyquin, the guards let them enter. Faldon flew up grand staircases and through tall corridors past elaborate tapestries and sculptures, windows twice as tall as any guard standing alert, and ceilings of gold.

The others waited at the entrance, rather than climb the stairs. Faldon had done so once as a feyquin, before Antorin's illness, when he, Faldon—then the leader of the feyquin—declared his alliance to Kemmon as successor. Antorin had escorted him through the palace corridors as a guest, but climbing stairs was not easy as a feyquin.

Faldon rushed to the doors of Antorin's bedchamber, where two guards stood glaring at him. He tried to push his way past, but they seized him.

"Let me in." He reached for the door handles, but the doors opened before he touched them.

"Release him!"

Faldon caught his breath at the hoarse voice, and the guards stood back. He knew that voice anywhere. In deference to the man he respected, he bowed his head. "Antorin, my king."

The old man stood gaunt, his smile haunting.

Faldon looked up, praying in his heart that Antorin would help him. "Where is she? Where's Selina?"

"The woman is resting...old friend." Antorin stepped into the lamplight of the corridor, fully dressed in stately attire, including the purple sash across his chest and gold epaulets on his shoulders. "She will be honored for her services."

Faldon breathed a sigh of relief. "Then she lives."

"Yes."

Thank the gods!

Antorin paused and his smile vanished. "My son has wronged you. Can you ever forgive me?"

"He acted of his own jealousy. You did nothing."

The frail old man took a deep breath. "That's right. I did nothing to stop it. I should have expected it. I may not undo the curse, but I can punish him. He wronged us both."

Antorin stopped at the tall windows overlooking the city, his hands clasped behind his back. From down the corridor, a faint banging reached them in the silence.

"He's sealed in his room, where he hides at night. Ironic that he reinforced his door to keep others out. It's now his prison. He swore he found a way to break the curse on himself, by marrying another bearing a curse, one of the *Na'Y'dom*. He never intended to cure me."

So that was it! Faldon had the cure with him all along and didn't know it.

Antorin turned to the city sparkling with lights. "I longed to stand at this window, but while I could not move, he whispered his plans to me. Poison, he said. Poison administered as medicine that I should swallow. In that way, he kept me bedridden. The poor man he duped into giving it knew nothing, nor could I tell him."

He took a deep breath. "I woke to the woman at my bed. Before she fell asleep, she said Faldon was near. I hoped you would come, that I might ask your forgiveness."

"You owe me nothing. I came for peace."

"I'll gladly take the friendship of the feyquin over a war that would destroy this land."

When Antorin extended a hand, Faldon took it, aware of the human custom. "I'll speak to the others, but I no longer hold the authority I had."

"That is all I can ask." A wry grin crooked up Antorin's face. "You've caused trouble, I hear."

After a few seconds to absorb the reality of standing there with a new peace between their species, Faldon noticed the lighter blue at the far horizon. "If I may make one request, my king. The woman..."

Antorin's smile broadened. "This way."

Faldon followed the man, who stood proud and tall, every bit the leader of his people as when they first met long ago, when a young human man stood before him to accept his allegiance.

At one of the lesser rooms in that section of the palace, Antorin stopped. Faldon opened the door. A maid sitting near the bed looked up, a worried expression on her face by lamplight. Faldon ignored her and sat on the edge of the bed near the figure beneath the covers.

"Pardon my asking, sir—"

"Leave us," Faldon said.

The maid's steps faded out the door. Faldon glanced aside, but both the maid and the king were gone.

He returned his eyes to the soft features of Selina's sleeping face amid the plush pillows and smiled. She looked so calm and at peace, not the fiery tempered woman who had caused him trouble. Her chest rose and fell with each breath.

His worry returned when he saw the mark. She would be lucky to see the sun rise. As he expected, the task of reviving Antorin had expended the rest of her life. She might have only seconds left. Was the exchange of one human's life to bring peace among hundreds of thousands a fair trade for another more precious to him?

He could never have made the decision.

"Selina."

She inhaled sharply.

"Selina." He swallowed the emotions hardening in his throat and caressed her cheek. "Wake up."

Her eyes opened and she stretched. "Faldon?"

He took her hand in his and tried to smile.

"You came." She smiled but it faded quickly. She put her other hand to her forehead and groaned. "I feel terrible."

"You look terrible, but Antorin's healthy."

"Good." She closed her eyes and sighed. "Let me sleep."

"No." His eyes burned, the emotions in him tangling into something he had never experienced. He didn't want to lose her. If she fell asleep, he might not have this chance. "Stay awake, a little longer." He sniffed and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Are you crying?" she chided him softly. "Be careful, or someone'll think you're human."

He choked on a sob and rubbed her hand. "I'm sorry, for everything."

"As am I, but it's too late now." Her voice faded into a whisper.

"For what?"

"Me." Her breath blew away, leaving her for the last time.

The tears came unbidden, a well of grief he had never known. Not even losing the herd to a rival grieved him like this.

When the sun shone through the doorway, the pain started.

It ended when he stood on four legs.

When the maids came to check on her, Faldon followed them to where they carried her. His heart had never known grief, but if it meant understanding humans, he would take it as her lesson.

The curse would be a blessing, as she had seen her own inherited curse, to bring peace.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Nilles grew up on a western North Dakota cattle ranch and farm. Along with her interest in horses, she had a fascination with science fiction and fantasy. After high school, she continued her education and graduated from North Dakota State University with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, which includes her husband and kids, two cats, and her horse. Her published works include *Dragon Prophecy* (Mundania Press, LLC, 2008), the first of the *Legend of the White Dragon* series, of which the remainder is currently serialized on her website, [www.melaniennes.com/books/white\\_dragon/serial.htm](http://www.melaniennes.com/books/white_dragon/serial.htm). Watch for the upcoming release of *Starfire Angels*.