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RENEE CARTER HALL

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*For Jeff,
who believed in this,
and in me,
when I could not*

1 -- Silverglen

1

Tiran knew he had only a few moments of freedom left, and as he approached Whitestone's gate, the unicorn prince was determined to savor every one. The early autumn sky was a pure and cloudless blue, and around Whitestone the forest of Silverglen had already deepened to shades of crimson, gold, and bronze. He was pleasantly tired from the afternoon's work, but the villagers' work-songs still livened his steps, and he found himself humming, "There was a maiden good and fair," as the castle keep came into view.

And then he saw Aldric, the royal steward, waiting for him at the gate. The old stag had a certain expression he always wore when he summoned Tiran to the king's chambers. It was a mixture of stern formality and kind sympathy, and Tiran had become all too familiar with it over the years.

"Your father's waiting," the old stag said. To his credit, he didn't ask why Tiran's clothing and normally white coat were streaked with dark, reeking mud.

Tiran sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face, then followed Aldric through the gate, into the courtyard, and then to the castle keep.

After the crisp air outside, the castle felt chilly and damp. They passed the corridor that led to Tiran's chambers, and he thought about stopping to wash but decided not to bother. What difference would it make?

"What is it this time?" he asked lightly, his voice echoing through the hall.

A slight smile quirked the edges of the stag's mouth. "You had plans this afternoon, I believe."

Tiran stopped and swore softly. "Sword practice."

Aldric nodded and led on, his hooves clicking on the stone. “Truthfully, your highness, I’d worry more about Sarid’s disapproval than your father’s. He said something about a double session next time.”

Tiran winced. His oryx tutor could still be as brutal about missed lessons as he had been when Tiran was just a foal.

He followed Aldric down the last corridor, glancing idly at the tapestries lining both walls. It seemed that even the long-dead kings of Asteria were glaring at him.

Aldric opened the door for him. “Your grace,” he said, “Tiran is here.”

Tiran heard his father sigh. “Send him in.”

He had lost count of how many times he had stood before his father like this. Small reasons, big reasons – it didn’t matter. Sevrin greeted them all the same way, with his signature disappointment. When he was younger, he’d always vowed to do better and meant it, but lately he’d stopped caring once he realized nothing was good enough.

Sevrin stood behind an ornate wooden desk given to his father’s father by the squirrel-clan, whose carving was unsurpassed in Asteria. The king’s white-and-gray dappled coat was dusted with powder to make it gleam whiter, and every strand of his silver mane was neatly tied back with a ribbon to match his deep blue tunic and cloak. Even his beard was combed to a fine, silky luster, and his hooves and nails had been buffed until they shone.

The king glanced at him, then turned his attention back to the desk, speaking, it seemed, to the swirling wood grain. “May I ask why you are perfuming my chambers with grenner dung?”

A few different answers presented themselves, but Tiran swallowed them and chose the most polite option, which also had the advantage of being the truth. “The villagers in Oakton were repairing their cottages today. I helped them mix the daub.”

“Ah.” The king rubbed his forehead just below the base of his spiraling horn. “Tiran, we’ve been through this. Many times. You have duties that are reserved for your station. The villagers have theirs.”

“They needed help, and I was there. Isn’t that what it means to serve your people?”

“You serve your people,” Sevrin replied, “by honoring your responsibilities and obligations.”

Tiran tried to stay calm. “I’ll apologize to Sarid. It was careless to keep him waiting. But I don’t think missing one afternoon of sword practice puts Asteria in mortal peril.”

“With your fighting skills, it might.”

Tiran bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. It would only have taken a warm smile, a chuckle, a hint of some jest in his father’s voice, and he would have been able to laugh.

But his father was, as always, serious. On the lips of any other man, such a statement would have earned a fight. Here, he could do nothing.

Sevrin glanced back up from the parchments neatly stacked on his desk.

"I've been hearing some other tales of your exploits. I thought I requested that you stay out of the taverns."

"You requested that, yes. And I refused."

Sevrin nodded. "I have, therefore, taken it upon myself to make arrangements with the taverns of Silverglen. By order of the king, they are no longer to serve you, and any who do will be subject to a fine."

This was ridiculous. Tiran could have understood it if he'd been in the habit of drinking to the point of being dumped into the street at closing time. But a brace of ales and a game of dice every once in a while hurt no one – except, perhaps, his opponents.

Sevrin looked as if he were expecting some reply, so Tiran gave him one. "I would say that you're being unreasonable, Father, if I thought it would make any difference."

"You're correct that it wouldn't." Sevrin rolled one parchment tightly and tied a silver ribbon around it. "We will be entertaining Roden and his nobles this evening. I suggest you go and wash, unless you care to have your evening meal in the grenner pen."

Roden.... Tiran searched his memory until he connected the name to an elk-lord from the eastern grasslands. "What's he doing here?"

"I believe he's bringing the tax collection from his holdings. A bit early this year, but I don't fault anyone for punctuality."

"Am I going to have to duel with his sons again?" Tiran knew he sounded like a petulant child, but at this point, he felt like one.

Sevrin raised an eyebrow. "You'll be spared that horrid indignity, I'm afraid. His sons were killed last spring. Wolf raiders from the Northern Reach.

"I'm glad you stay so informed," he added. "It gives me great confidence in my legacy." Sevrin turned his attention back to the parchments. "For Asteria's sake, Tiran, I hope I live a very long time."

• •

Tiran felt like slamming the oak door behind him but didn't give in. It was bad enough to be treated like a child when he had come of age three summers before. It was worse to feel that he deserved it.

He remembered, now, the eagle messenger arriving with the announcement about Roden's sons. He remembered sitting with his mother in her garden while she heard the news and sent a reply to Roden's wife expressing her sympathy.

But standing in that chamber, Tiran could never think straight, never say the right thing. Standing before his father, he was always ten years old and in trouble.

As he headed down to his chambers, his mother passed him on the stairs. The lady Elinor was already dressed for the banquet in a fine rose-colored gown of soft kurn wool. Her white mane was braided with matching ribbons, and her coat smelled of the rosewater and almond oil her ladies-in-waiting brushed into it every morning. "Shira's asking for you," she said.

“Well, she’ll have to wait.” His little sister wouldn’t go to sleep without hearing a story from him, but he didn’t feel like coming up with another fanciful tale tonight. The walls of Whitestone felt as if they were closing around him.

“What happened?” Elinor asked, though she looked as if she already knew.

“Father.” Nothing else was necessary.

She nodded slightly. Then her nostrils flared at the scent, and she smiled. “Helping in the village?”

Tiran wanted to smile back but couldn’t manage it. “There won’t be a draft in all Oakton come winter.” He stared off at nothing for a moment, then glanced back at his mother. “Don’t look for me in the great hall tonight.”

She frowned. “Tiran—”

“Let him make his apologies for me. He’d be apologizing for me even if I were there.”

She reached to lay a hand on his arm, but he stepped away. “Try to understand. He’s—”

“And you’re always apologizing for him.”

She drew back a bit, as if struck, and he hated himself for hurting her. Of course he was a child; who else would say such a thing? He wanted to take it back, but he was afraid that if he said anything, it would be something else he didn’t mean to say, something that would hurt her more. He had to get out, into the dark comfort of someplace where it wouldn’t matter who he was and what he was meant to be.

Tiran raced down the stairs and out of Whitestone, heading into the forest.

2

The Cup and Crown was two hours' walk by the trail, but to Tiran the journey passed in a haze of frustration. The air was cool in the evenings now, making him wish he'd taken a cloak before storming out, but it was too late to go back. Just another thing he didn't think of, another careless child's mistake. He would bear it.

The sun had set by the time he reached the inn. He figured his father had only bothered to ban him from the taverns in Oakton, so there'd be no danger in getting a drink and a meal here. Perhaps he would even stay the night. He had enough coin in his purse to cover it, and the thought made him feel free. He could pretend he was a traveler, a peasant, a pilgrim, coming from nowhere, with nowhere to go but where the trail led. In the morning, of course, he'd have to go back, but for now, the inn lay just ahead, nestled under a towering stand of oaks, its windows glowing warmly in the indigo dusk.

He paid for a room and a bath, and the hedgehog innkeeper even managed to find a change of clothes for him, though Tiran suspected this was more out of fear of complaints from other guests than true hospitality. He scrubbed his own tunic and breeches, hung them by the fire to dry, and headed down to the taproom.

He was nearing the bottom of a bowl of thick carrot-and-barley stew when he saw a familiar figure enter. The young buck stood for a moment, ears cupped forward, surveying the room, until he saw Tiran and came to sit at his table.

"I checked every tavern in Oakton. What are you doing all the way out here?"

Tiran pulled a chunk of dark bread off the loaf as his friend sat down. “The ones in Oakton aren’t allowed to serve me now. By order of the king.”

“Sounds like he’s the one who needs a good stiff drink,” Moki replied. “Or something else,” he added, winking at the rabbit serving-maid. Her ears reddened, and when she brought out another bowl of stew, Tiran noted with dim amusement that it was both larger and hotter than the serving he’d gotten.

Tiran sighed and soaked the bread in the remaining broth. “I don’t know what to do anymore.” He took another piece of bread, tearing it into smaller and smaller bits. “Tonight I wondered what it would be like to just keep walking. Out of Silverglen. To... wherever. Anywhere they wouldn’t know me, and I could make my own way.”

Moki took a long draught of ale and clunked his mug back onto the table. “You should have been a second son like me. No expectations, no worry—”

“Nothing to do but hang around in taverns and spend your father’s money?” Tiran smiled for the first time that evening.

“You’re one to talk. Whose coin do you gamble with, your highness?”

“The heir’s rightful due, same as you. Except I’m the heir.”

Moki drained his mug and ordered another. “See? If you’d been second, you’d have made a monk or a barrister, and made a good living out of pricking poor beggars’ consciences. Come on,” the buck said at last, shoving his empty bowl aside. “What you need is a good game, and there’s one starting in the back. Let’s hope my luck’s better than last time.”

The badger and gray rabbit were happy to let a couple of deep-pocketed nobles into their game, and Tiran eagerly lost himself in each roll of the dice, forgetting everything but the wagers, risks, and rewards that shifted with each new turn. At last, he felt himself relax.

And then it happened.

He had just taken up the dice when he felt it: a sudden, tingling shift in the *erys* around him. It felt as if someone had placed a warm, heavy cloak over his shoulders.

The mantle of the king. He had heard about this sensation from Sarid long ago. And it meant only one thing.

His father was dead.

Tiran stared blankly at the scarred table. He wanted to sweep the feeling aside, call it imagination or weariness from his long walk, but he knew in the heart of him that it was neither.

He thought of halting the game, but with the change in *erys* that marked him as king, there had also come another feeling, a sense of odd disquiet that tingled at the base of his horn and kept him silent. At last, he glanced back up, hoping the others hadn’t noticed any change in him.

“Three and seven,” he said. To his own ears, his voice sounded hollow and far away. He reached for his mug of ale and took a swallow.

The badger eyed him from across the table, then placed his bet. The rabbit shook his head and dropped his dice into the bowl at the center of the table. “Not all of us have royal purses,” he said lightly.

Tiran glanced at Moki. The buck had no way of sensing what had happened. Only the royal unicorns could perceive *erys*, bound as they were to the currents of it that shaped and flowed through Asteria. For his part, Moki seemed to be at the end of his purse, and Tiran watched him add his last silver coin to the table.

“Four and nine,” the badger said. “Your cast, prince.”

Tiran rolled the dice off his fingertips, not even bothering to watch as they tumbled to a stop. The badger laughed and swept the small pile of coins into his purse. “Always good t’see the nobility sharing their riches with us poor peasants.”

The badger drained the last of his ale, belched, and waddled away. The rabbit nodded respectfully to Tiran, then went to sit by the fire.

Tiran stood slowly. Though Sevrin’s coat had dulled grayer with age, he had been neither frail nor ill. And try as he might, Tiran could not dismiss the elk-lord’s arrival as coincidence.

The mantle of *erys* meant his father was dead, but it could speak nothing of his mother and sister. Did they still live? Were they captive? A wrenching image came to him of Shira, hugging her doll, afraid and calling for him, her blue eyes filled with tears.

There was only one way to know.

He paused long enough to untie a small velvet purse from his belt. He tested its weight in his palm, figuring there were enough coins inside to make up for what the rabbit had lost.

He crossed the room to the fire, where the rabbit sat soaking up the merry warmth. “It was a good game,” Tiran said softly, holding the purse out. He had done this countless times before, and suddenly he had no idea if he would ever do it again. The inn around him was unchanged, but everything felt wrong, felt slow and unreal, as if the air had become thick and syrupy as honey.

The rabbit took the purse, and though his eyes widened at the heft of it, he swallowed and nodded. “Your highness.”

Tiran went back to the table and bent his head to Moki’s. “Come with me.”

Moki looked up from his ale. “What is it?”

“To the room,” Tiran said. “We can’t talk here.”

Moki frowned but followed, and they made their way through the crowd to the narrow staircase. “He was cheating,” the buck grumbled as they climbed. “I know he was. *Nobody* wins like that.”

The badger might have been cheating for all Tiran knew – or cared. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter to you,” Moki continued as they reached Tiran’s room. “*Your* brother isn’t going to wonder what happened to all the money he gave you. If it had just been a five—”

“If you couldn’t lose it, you shouldn’t have bet it in the first place.” Tiran closed the door behind them and drew in a slow breath. “Moki.... My father is dead.”

Surprise flared in the buck's eyes. "Dead?"

"Ay."

"But.... How do you know?"

"I know." Tiran stripped off the borrowed breeches and pulled on his own. They were still damp, but he'd manage. "We have to get back to Whitestone."

He had just pulled off the tunic and was reaching for his own when he felt the knife-blade at his throat.

"There's no rush," Moki said quietly.

3

Tiran froze. Instinctively he understood that Moki must have some doubt about what he was doing – otherwise, Tiran would already be dead. There had been no need for Moki to speak, no need to do anything but draw the blade across his throat. The mere fact that Moki hadn't done so meant that Tiran had some hope of escape.

“Moki,” he said evenly, “what sort of game is this?”

“One I can win for once,” Moki replied. “I told you, I'm a second son. All my life I've begged my brother just to get a fair share. I'm tired of it. And I'm tired of you throwing your money around, and your title, and your honor, everywhere we go, while you whine about what a burden it is.”

Tiran was still holding the borrowed tunic, and as Moki spoke, he edged the cloth a little closer to the fire. The ragged sleeve smoldered, then caught.

The door creaked and opened. Moki's head turned slightly at the sound, and the knife dropped a hairsbreadth. Tiran yanked the blazing tunic from the fire, snapping it up toward Moki's face. The buck flinched back from the flames, and one hoof caught the edge of the bed, sending Moki backwards onto the straw mattress.

Tiran dared a glance to see who had come in, hoping it wasn't some ally of Moki's. His breath caught when he saw that a stag blocked the doorway, but then he recognized Aldric.

Still, if Moki could betray him....

Tiran drew his knife, wishing he had a sword or even a proper dagger. He'd left Whitestone with nothing but the knife he used at table.

Moki regained his footing and rushed toward him.

Tiran managed to block Moki by imitating a hold he'd seen in village

wrestling matches, but the deer's knife-point grazed his bare chest, and Tiran felt the stinging lash as the blade cut a thin line below his heart. He struggled to hold Moki back – Tiran was taller and heavier, but he knew from dozens of mock duels that Moki was swift and stronger than he looked.

The fire snapped and grew louder, and amid his concentration Tiran realized that the room was hazy with smoke. His eyes stung and watered, and his muscles began to ache. His life or death, he realized, might be decided by who tired first.

And then Moki made a sound between a grunt and a gurgle, and his hold on Tiran slackened. Tiran pulled away, seeing the sword-tip that protruded from the buck's chest.

Aldric drew his sword back in one swift motion, and Moki crumpled to the floor. As he fell, a purse at his belt loosened, spilling gold coins and a scattering of gems into the blood pooling around him.

Tiran squinted through the smoke. "What of you?" he demanded hoarsely. "Are you to finish his task yourself?"

Aldric looked down at Moki's body with disgust, then stooped to pick up one of the coins. "My allegiance isn't bought with trifles." He turned back to Tiran. "I swore to protect you with my life the day you were born. I have taken no other vows."

Almost at once, the fire's rush became a roar, and heat blazed against Tiran's skin. The straw mattress was burning, and Tiran realized the wall was alight now as well.

Calls of alarm came from downstairs. Coughing, Tiran managed to grab his tunic from the drying-rack – his only thought was that his mother had sewn it, and it suddenly seemed desperately precious – just as Aldric grabbed his arm and pulled him through the smoke and down the stairs.

• •

When they finally stopped, the blaze at the Cup and Crown was a distant spot of orange light through the black and silver trees. The night was clear, and the full moon's light flashed on the blood-smeared coin Aldric was inspecting. Tiran realized he didn't even recognize the design; it wasn't the rowan-tree minted in Silverglen.

Aldric closed his hand tightly around the piece as if he could crush it in his palm. "Roden."

Tiran had pulled on his tunic and was catching his breath from a seat on a storm-felled birch. Now, at the elk-lord's name, he felt his stomach tighten. Aldric didn't know what had happened at home.

"Aldric." Tiran swallowed. "Father's dead."

Aldric's eyes widened and his nostrils flared, but he said nothing, not even to question how Tiran had come by the knowledge. The stag stared down at the coin for a moment, then flung it into the trees.

"Why did you come here?" Tiran asked softly.

Aldric's gaze was focused on the ground, where moonlight edged the

ferns in cold silver. “Your mother sent me to find you,” he said at last. “She was worried.”

The stag closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them again, they shone like shards of dark glass. He unclasped his heavy gray cloak, draped it swiftly over Tiran’s shoulders, and fastened the clasp again. Tiran shivered. It was too close to the sensation he’d felt in the inn.

“I must find your mother and sister,” Aldric said. “He may be holding them prisoner.”

Tiran stood. “I’m coming with you.”

Aldric shook his head. “Your life has been bought once. There will be others eager for that bounty. Get as far away from Whitestone as you can, and stay hidden. I’ll get word to you.”

Blood roared in Tiran’s ears. “Mother,” he said. “Shira. I have to—”

Aldric placed his hands on Tiran’s shoulders. “If they live, your grace, I swear I will keep them safe.”

Tiran forced the words out. “And if they – do not?”

“Then we will avenge them,” the stag promised. “But not now. Not blindly. This is careful work, and we must be even more so in ours. You of all people must keep safe. Now go, Tiran. And Lady go with us both.”

Tiran stood, numbly watching the stag fade into the darkness.

Aldric turned and shouted back to him. “Go!”

The word broke through Tiran’s haze, and he turned and ran. He could still smell the acrid tang of smoke, of burnt wool and charred wood, though he couldn’t tell if these were carried on the wind or in his clothing.

He kept to the trails at first, his hooves thudding on the packed ground, but soon he moved off of them. It was slower going, dodging roots and underbrush, but it felt safer. He had no route in mind, only forward, away, and from somewhere at the edges of his thoughts came the bitter memory that this, after all, was what he had claimed to want.

• •

The sky was still dark when Tiran stopped to rest, collapsing into a bank of ferns and undergrowth. Against his will, he slept, and with sleep came dreams, disjointed images and scenes that faded and changed before he could fully grasp what he was seeing. He began to feel unsure whether he was asleep or awake.

His chamber at Whitestone, all warm wood and royal blue cloth, all of it covered in wet, bright blood. Knowing it was his own, although he could see no wound.

His sister, Shira, begging him to pick her up and toss her into the air, though he could not seem to touch her. His hands went through her every time, as if she were smoke or water.

His father’s voice from nowhere: “And even now, what do you do but run?”

He tried to answer – wanted to explain that Aldric had told him to get

away – but no matter how hard he tried, how he strained to make some sound, he could not speak, and his throat burned.

His mother, standing in the room at the Cup and Crown as it burned around her. She said nothing, which was even worse.

And then Elinor's form flickered and shifted. She was still a unicorn mare, but her horn was of rowan-wood and her mane of ivy and fern. She whispered something to him, clearly over the roar of the fire, in a voice lilting and sweet and strange, and though he could not understand her words, he knew he would always remember her voice. She seemed to be asking something of him, but again, he could not speak, could not even make a sound to show that he was trying.

The flames around her grew, licking at the ceiling, until there was nothing above or around or below but fire. He knew she should be burning, but she wasn't. The fire seemed to be part of her somehow, coming through her, or from her. The flames paled to white, then, so bright that he wanted to close his eyes against it but couldn't. The white fire glowed and pulsed under her skin but did not consume her, and the flames seared his skin with impossible cold—

—and he woke.

Before he was even fully awake, he was on his feet, searching the patches of sky to find the stars, the moon, checking the tree-trunks for moss as Sarid had taught him long ago, to find which way led home. He remembered only shadowy wisps of the dream – the scent of rose petals and the pain of fire, and something, some speech that soothed and shamed him at once – but he knew that whatever he had seen, it was meant to lead him back. He had to know, had to be sure, not from some message from Aldric or anyone else, but for himself. He had to know he had truly done everything he could.

To be able to speak if I see her again, he thought, and though he couldn't remember what that might mean, it seemed entirely, perfectly right.

He found a trail that would lead him back to Whitestone and followed it.

4

Vague memories of the dream swirled in Tiran's mind as he followed the winding trail through the forest. The way his mother had changed into... he couldn't recall who or what, but the way her form had shimmered and dissolved had reminded him of something, of a weapon he had forgotten he carried.

Near daybreak, he paused in a thick stand of trees with Whitestone gleaming faintly in the distance. Settling himself on the ground, he closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind as he had been taught so long ago.

In everything around him, in the earth and trees and stones, there was *erys*. It pulsed and flowed through all things as the energy, the very essence, of life. Most in Asteria were barely aware of it; a few had the gift to sense it. But only the royal-born could shape it to their own purpose.

They called it glamour, and he had learned it back when his white beard was only a foal's wish. It was the skill to mold *erys* as potters did clay, as carvers shaped wood. He could not change what things were, but he could change how they appeared to others.

Now he focused on his own body, mentally tracing its lines, feeling the eddies of *erys* coursing over and around him like warm water. Bit by bit, he took control of them, altering their course, turning here, smoothing there.

It was more difficult than he remembered, and despite the nighttime chill that still lingered in the air, he was soon sweating with the effort. Every time his concentration wavered, he felt the illusion collapse against the rigid wall of what was, and he had to fight his own frustration, take slow breaths, and begin again.

From his practice all those years ago, he knew that the easiest form to

take was a stag's; it was the closest to his own shape, and the antlers provided a simple disguise for his horn. But he had no idea what would await him at Whitestone, and if other deer had been as easily bought as Moki, that form might be too complicated – even dangerous – to wear.

At last, as the first songbirds began calling notes into the morning, he felt the glamour catch, falling into place as securely as the latching of a gate. A hint of cold tingled on his skin, an unavoidable sensation as long as the illusion held.

Now that his own form was complete, he searched the forest floor until he found a large, flat stone with a slight hollow near its center. Next, he hunted for a handful of acorns and spilled them into the depression, then held the stone in both hands and set about working the glamour again. It was trickier with objects than with his own body, but he finally twisted the currents into what felt like the right shapes.

There was no way, here alone, to be certain he was fully disguised. When he looked down, he saw his own clothes, his own hands holding the stone. He could fool others' eyes, but not his own.

Tiran carried the stone to the edge of the trees, mentally pulling the glamour tightly around him as he might have pulled a cloak against the wind. He hesitated, took one last slow breath, and emerged from the trees, praying with every pounding heartbeat that whoever looked on him would see him as he wished to be seen: a brown-furred rabbit dressed in servant's clothes, carrying a bushel basket of new potatoes.

He took the dirt path to Whitestone's postern gate, where the servants generally entered and goods were carried in. The day before, it had been kept by a stag a few summers older than Tiran, who was always eager for gossip and ribald jests from the taverns. Now a burly elk dressed in red guarded the gate, and his eyes were hard and wary.

Tiran paused again, gripped the stone securely to steady his hands, and walked to the gate.

The elk regarded him with little interest. "Your business, sirrah?"

Tiran bowed. "To the kitchens, milord."

The acorns rattled as he righted himself, and as Tiran watched, one acorn slipped from the hollow, rolled to the edge of the stone, and fell with a soft thunk into the dirt.

The elk picked the acorn up and eyed it curiously. He held it in his palm as if it were larger and heavier, but Tiran still held his breath.

The guard studied the acorn a moment longer, then tucked it deftly into a pouch at his sword-belt and pulled the gate aside.

Trying not to show his relief, Tiran bowed his thanks – more carefully this time – and passed through into Whitestone's courtyard. He was home, and yet it felt like a place he had never been.

He kept his gaze mostly focused on the well-packed ground, not wanting to take the chance of stumbling again. The air felt close and heavy, as if a storm were coming, even though the sky was clear.

He came first to the livestock pens, where kurns bleated and chewed

cut under thatched shelters. Nearby, two lanky rabbit lads were herding the grenners out of their muddy pen, leading them into the forest for the day's foraging. The squat brown-and-orange animals squealed eagerly as they pushed each other forward, desperate to escape the pen. One of the boys turned to glance at Tiran, then nodded hello as he would to any elder and went back to keeping the grenners in line. Tiran held fast to the glamour and went forward.

He reached the servants' quarters next, built of the same rare white stone as the rest of the castle, a detail that had always pleased him. The rooms were oddly quiet for this time of morning. He saw only a few headed to and from the keep, and they walked hurriedly, eyes on the ground, as if they were being watched. He could see fear in their every step, and he fought to keep his mind clear and calm enough to hold his disguise.

He glanced up at the keep. The tower looked even larger than usual in the first light, and the silver and blue standard that always flew over it had been replaced now with one of scarlet and black. He watched the keep for several moments, but except for a few servants, no one came out or went in. If his mother and sister were captive, it was likely they were being held inside. His best chance, he figured, was to get inside at the kitchen entrance. From there.... Well, one step at a time was all his mind could handle while keeping the glamour secure.

The path to the kitchens led past the midden, and he passed an old rabbit hauling a cart of garbage to the pile. It was a heavy load, and the rabbit struggled to push the creaking cart over a stretch of rocky ground.

Tiran set his "basket" carefully on the ground and put his weight against the cart. "Here, grandfather, let me help you."

Together they pushed the cart over the stones and into the midden, and Tiran helped him dump the reeking contents of the cart. The rabbit seemed especially uneasy now, and he kept his gaze strictly on his work, as if he were afraid to look anywhere else. Tiran was just about to ask why when he caught the gleam of white at the edge of his vision.

Three bodies lay in a crumpled heap amid the offal.

His father, his mother, and his sister.

The cry came from somewhere in his throat, a strangled sound of shock that he could not keep down. And then there was no air anymore, no breath, only one step following another, closer, slowly. To be sure, even though he was already sure.

His father, King Sevrin, dressed in finery for the night's banquet. He had been stabbed, and his deep blue tunic was dark and stiff with dried blood.

His mother, Elinor, in that rose-colored dress she had worn when he saw her last. He didn't want to see it, but he had no choice: her throat had been cut.

His sister, the princess Shira, whose throat had been slit as well. For a dizzying moment, everything went dark. Her white mane was braided just like her mother's, and she wore the same color dress as well. She must have begged her way to the banquet even though she should have been in

bed. She always hated to be left out, always wanted to do what Tiran was doing, and sometimes he had snapped at her, the way he'd snapped at his mother before he left, and now no matter what he said, they would never hear him again.

He couldn't think of it; he'd go mad. Perhaps he was mad already. He could hear nothing but a roaring in his ears like the fire at the inn, except that the flames were dark instead of bright, stealing the air from his lungs.

A hand on his shoulder brought him back. For an instant he feared that the glamour had faltered – he could not feel the distinctive cold, not when everything was cold – but the old rabbit was only regarding him with weary sorrow and sympathy.

“You hadn't seen them yet,” the rabbit said softly.

Tiran shook his head.

“We'd have buried them, but Roden's ordered that anyone who touches them will join them. Even so, if I had enough strength left in my back to dig.....” The rabbit shook his head, then turned Tiran gently away from the bodies, and the tenderness of the elder's touch nearly broke him.

“Don't linger here, lad,” the rabbit said. “They're in the Lady's keeping now. As we all are, even now.” He scrubbed at his eyes with the back of one hand, then took up the empty cart and went on his way.

Tiran swallowed and tried to think. The rabbit had been more right than he'd known; he couldn't stay here. He'd already risked too much to come alone. He wanted to wash the blood away, to bathe them and bury them as the royal family deserved – as *his* family deserved – but there was no time, and too many who might be watching.

He knew there were prayers to be said, but he couldn't remember the ones he'd once known. He mumbled the words that came to mind, figuring it would be enough. The One who brought Awakening would surely know what he meant by his few broken phrases.

His eyes were dry. There would be a time for grief later, and he feared its coming, but right now, there was so very much he had to do.

Tiran went back to them, just for a moment more. The sun had risen now, and the new light softened the harshness of the sight. He kissed Shira and his mother, bowed his head to his father, and said goodbye to everything his life had been only the day before.