

# The Wolf Knight and the Hellcat

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# 1 The Wolf Knight and the Hellcat

The towers were all burning, their thick walls of stone. Burning and crumbling. Strong and proud battlements, subtle and delicate spires, they were all perishing. Below them the city of Maurur was dying as well in smoke and fire. The dwellings of the people those towers had been erected to protect.

I admit there were tears in my eyes as everything I had thought so powerful, so eternal, so beyond the reach of others, was reduced to nothing more than a huge bonfire obscuring the morning sun with its smoke of destruction. My tears fell, and I mouthed words of rage and defiance that were utterly impotent. The great city of Maurur was no more. My parents, my brothers, and sisters were no more. My friends, my lover Monah, all gone.

The Knights of the Wolf were no more. We had all been obliterated as the soldiers of the Iron Hammer had overwhelmed us. All of us, that is, except me. I had been stationed at the Crooked Bridge, which separated the great Keep from the city proper. The Crooked Bridge, with its old wooden, creaky planks, and the finely wrought cast-iron railings. On the city side there had been a park where beautiful girls had used to go walking or they would sit in the grass eat, and we had smiled at them and straightened our backs and put out our chests.

That was all history now. When the fire had begun to rain from the sky, and the mighty Gate had been blown open by sorcery, I had unsheathed my sword. Together we had waited, me and my five Brother Knights. Six tall men, clad in the colors of the Wolf: Black cloaks, gray pants, and white shirts, partly hidden by our leather armor. The guardians of the last Bridge of the last Keep of the last stronghold of the Knights of the Wolf.

After some dreadful minutes of waiting, while we had listened to and watched the slaughter of the city, anxiously praying that the call to arms in the Keep would be heeded in time. Six pairs of hands

that, despite years of training, had been shaking with fear as they had tried to hold their long pikes steady. Now and then a hand would go to the hilt of their long sword, as if to check that it was still there. Waiting.

Then they had come howling out of the ruin of the city, the hideous creatures I had only heard of in tales. First and foremost the massive frames of filthy, mindless giants of different shapes and hues, but all huge and all had wielded clubs or enormous war axes. There had been blood-crazed men, there had been the ominous, hateful Gray Champions, there had been small, vicious hellcats, the terror of the deep forests, and many more.

Something had seemed to happen to time as they had rushed at us. First the enemy had seemed to run so slowly as if they were wading through deep water. Then they had moved faster, past normal speed, and then like lightning they had been upon us!

I had barely been able to register what happened. I had seen three giants, more than ten feet tall, thunder onto the Bridge, their dark, hairy feet cracking the wooden planks. Then my pike had been wrenched from my hands. How, I do not know. I had failed to pull my sword from its scabbard, and then a blow had caught me on my right shoulder, a blow with a force beyond that of any mortal man.

And now I was here, fallen into the river. Watching the city and Order of the Wolf die, clinging onto a piece of wood as the stream took me. Out of danger maybe, but into shame and disgrace.

Later, not much later in terms of time, but an age of effort, I reached the river bank. It consisted of mud, was filled with sharp branches, and hid slippery patches, but reaching it meant I was saved. Gasping I crawled out of the water, deduced that I had arrived somewhere where there was thick grass growing, and let my body go limp with relief.

I had all but forgotten about the rapids south of the River Gate,

but all the blows to my head, arms, body, and legs made sure I would remember the experience for the rest of my life. My entire body ached more than after the most intense sparring session I had ever taken part in. Correction, it ached worse than it would have after first taking part in the most intense sparring session ever, and then being disciplined for having a dreadful hangover from some drinking binge the night before. Not that that had ever happened to me. Not often, at least.

For what must have been an hour I lay and tried to regain strength while thinking over my situation. I was on the east bank of the river, alone outside a city that had been taken by an enemy sworn to eradicate the Knights of the Wolf. The tales of the trouble they went through to kill every last one of us because of the words of the Prophecy were gruesome and probably true. It was death to remain here. I had to flee, fast and far.

Down the river was the great metropolis of Andomin, also under the rule of the Iron Hammer. The Merron Pass upriver was guarded by the Merron Fort, that too under enemy control. To the West I would reach the desert before I left the domination of the Iron Hammer.

But to the East... The forest of Lignes. Two weeks hard walking straight east, or a month if I should flag or lose my way, and I would be in Carosia. The Merchant Cities of Carosia. Their people scoffed at and ridiculed in Maurur as weak, mean, dishonest gold-hoarders. But we had still bought their goods and spices. And we had listened, and laughed, when they had informed us that a man skilled with arms could become a citizen, and a rich one at that, if he traveled East. I remembered how we had waited in excitement, counting the coins in our purses when their barges were reported as being unloaded south of the rapids...

I opened my eyes and stumbled to my feet. The harbor! Of course! If I could get on a barge before the conquerors had started searching for any survivors, maybe I could get down to Andomin

and get on a ship bound East...

But my hope fell as I looked about me. To the north was the city walls in the distance, smoke still welling up and clouding my heart. But as I turned to face the south I saw smoke there as well, not five hundred yards away behind a bend of the river. It was the smoke of barges and piers and storehouses burning. The Iron Hammer had smitten the harbor as well.

There was forest all around me, the fields of Maurur were to the north. Only hunters, trappers, and loggers went into the forest. And now, who knew? Maybe the Iron Hammer would let a warlord of theirs settle in the city? Or a tribe of giants? Or maybe the hellcats could frolic in the ancient streets as they let the forest in?

I looked at the mighty trees: Firs, pines, oaks, birches, and the all the lesser bushes, and I sighed. I had some woodcraft, but a trek through a forest this thick might very well be my first, and last, adventure. As my hand went to my sword I wished I had a bow, for hunting. Then I swore as I realized I did not have a sword either. Somehow, during my struggles in the rapids, I had lost it to the river.

I had a knife, I had wet clothes, and I had sloshing boots. I had no food, no map, no flint, and no arms. With an oath I stepped into the forest.

The next morning I was sure of quite a few things. Walking for ten hours in wet boots rewards you with blisters. Berries, especially in springtime, are not enough to fill your belly. Sleeping outside during spring under a slightly damp cloak is not warm, and neither are tree-roots good pillows. And most importantly: Forests are not parks, they are dark places with thick undergrowth, wide brooks, mires, steep cliffs, and hills upon hills upon hills that all hamper your progress. The only thing I felt unsure of was where I was. I knew I moved eastwards in a fashion, but how far I had come, or whether I was veering north or south I had not idea.

As such I was in no state of being happy about not being eaten by some predator, and not being caught by the pursuer I had to be prepared to meet. I navigated after the sun, chasing it from hill to hill, even climbing trees now and then when I got lost. Thankfully I had not become sick despite my wet clothes, and I was able to walk fast this second day as well.

It was not until in the early afternoon when I reached a hill so tall that I was able to have a proper look out over the forest. I left the dense, dark forest behind, and in ten minutes had reached the open top of the hill, where only a few gnarled, old pines and low shrubs grew. The wind was fresh and fragrant, and I ignored the hunger I felt as I climbed a huge, mossy rock to get the clearest view of my surroundings.

I had to be at least five hundred feet above the level of the Armon River and the city of Maurur, as I could see the smoking towers far away in the distance. There, somewhere, was the room I had lived in for the last two years, and the barracks that had been my home for five more. There were the corpses of the last Knights of the Wolf, the last but for me. There was my family, and I might never know if they lived or died. I turned east.

The forest of Lignes stretched out for leagues upon leagues, and I could see nothing but hills in the far distance. Here and there there were valleys, and even a small lake or two. I noticed that if, when I climbed down, I followed a certain ditch in the terrain, I would end up a valley that slowly wound itself eastwards and a little south until it ran into a larger, elliptical lake. I decided to try that path, as I might save time if I didn't have to check my position so often as I did now.

I had walked all day, and was tired and hungry, but despite that I felt fine. My legs were free from cramps and my head was clear. I was so grateful that I had paid attention to the instructor who had taught me how to survive in the wild. I had eaten lots of berries, and also found some other edible plants, without which I would surely

have starved. Even so I had looked at all the squirrel and birds I had seen today with murderous intent. I had even seen a deer of some sort, but without a bow I would never be able to hunt its kin.

It so happens that it is chance that will decide if you live or die. It was chance that put me on the edge of the fighting formation on the Crooked Bridge when the monsters of the Iron Hammer had charged us, so that I fell into the River and was saved. It was also chance that made me take my knife out of its sheath before I pulled my boots off. I was going to open up my blisters, and I could have left the knife until my feet were bled. But I didn't, and it saved my life.

The hellcat must have tracked me to the foot of the hill, and sneaked around it to avoid being seen. As native of the forest, they are expert trackers and hunters, and their skills in blending into the scenery are unprecedented.

Because of that I was completely unprepared when the attack came, even though I had anticipated that the Iron Hammer had sent their agents after me. I was pulling at the last boot to get my foot out when I heard a wild shriek of triumph. My training kicked in and made me move at the last moment, so that while the hellcat's claws found their marks on my back the vicious fangs missed my throat and bit my shoulder instead.

The pain made my cry out, but I could consider myself lucky that I was able to: Hellcats are, despite their small stature, considered very dangerous opponents. The Knights of the Wolf were explicitly warned not to underestimate them.

I fumbled for a split second, got hold of my knife, bent my head (and throat!) forward, and struck as hard as I could at my spine with an over-the-shoulder stab. As I heard a shriek, one of pain this time, and could not feel anything myself, I knew I had wounded my assailant.

But despite its hurt the hellcat was not beaten and I got bitten

twice on my left arm and hand as I protected my throat from the deadly jaws. Unlike the attack on the bridge I was clearly aware of what was happening, guessing the nature of my unseen assailant, feeling pain, and I was scared out of my mind. Nothing in my training had prepared me for this. Nothing!

In the end was the pure chance, again!, that I had sat down on a rock that ultimately saved me. I lost balance, and tumbled off the rock with my enemy still clinging on to my back with its claws. I somehow managed to turn in the air and landed on my back, my foe beneath me.

This stunned the creature, and I managed to wrench it off me. My knife was in my hand, but my killer-instinct was not yet fully developed. Instead of stabbing the hellcat dead, I punched it in the face. Once, twice, thrice, and then it lay still.

I have heard horror stories of what hellcats looked like, what vile monsters they were with their fangs and claw-sharp nails and vicious tempers. I had seen the remarkable hellcat-eyes that hunters would bring to the city, the eyes that would change colors, and wondered what kind of beasts they were.

I had not been prepared for this: Beneath me, bleeding and unconscious, lay the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

She was not human, of course. The color of her skin alone gave her away: An olive skin that possessed an inner glow, smooth as silk and tough as hide. Her straight hair, jet black, was cut irregularly short, and looked thick and healthy. It had a dull shine to it beyond what any human woman could hope to achieve even with the most delicate care and finest oils.

The small, pointed nose, full lips, expressive eyebrows, and rosy cheeks all gave the impression of a person capable of a myriad of moods, all intense.



Her mouth, of course, was full of pointed, sharp teeth. No the rapid dog snarl that I had hitherto believed her race to possess, but smaller, yet deadly-looking, incisors. But it was her fangs that caught my attention: White, long, and vicious, like giant, slender thorns with a sting that was truly deadly.

I rubbed my neck where she had bitten it. Truly deadly they were. But now there were only three fangs left in her mouth. I had punched out the upper left one and the incisor beside it, during our fight. Her upper lip was large and blue, and her nose had bled.

Somehow now, the morning after, I felt less inclined to hate her for the attack and the pain she had caused me. She had remained unconscious during the night, and I had sat beside her with my back to the rock we had fought on, not sleeping much due to fear and hunger. In her comatose state she looked strangely peaceful, lovely, like a sleeping princess awaiting a kiss from her prince. Except for all the blood, that is.

She was a tiny thing, if she was five foot then I was seven, and looked not older than a young woman of twenty or so. Her body was slender but, despite the gray, woolen shirt and pants, I could see she had been blessed with truly female curves: Large, firm breasts and a backside that could summon the eyes of every man in the vicinity, if a hellcat should ever take it into her head to think of men other than as enemies, or food. She wore no boots, her feet looked tough and well used to running in the wild.

Was this innocent, young maiden truly a vicious monster? I had to feel my wounds again and again to reassure myself that tying her up had been sensible and not merely brutish. Her arms, which hands had tough, tough nails but no claws, were tied behind her back, and her ankles a foot and a half apart from each other so that she could walk. True, I had ruined my leather armor to make bindings, but I felt safer now.

I cast my mind back to the time when I, eighteen years old, had just been made a full Knight. The maid Monah had been assigned to me, to clean my room and my equipment, perks the Knights of the Wolf enjoyed in their decadent, late autumn.

Monah had been at least ten years older than me, and with female curves to overflowing: Breasts and buttocks as huge as anyone could wish for in their wildest dream. And when she had been introduced to me she had smiled at me, and I at her.

Two week later Monah's legs had been tied a foot and a half apart, and she had walked clumsily around my room, trying to clean it with her hands tied together and attached to a rope around her neck. I had been sitting naked, on the window sill, looking bored out at the city, and casting stolen glances at her as she struggled, stroking my stiff member all the while.

I had let Monah beg for a week before she was allowed to touch my manhood after she had finished with my room. On her knees, wrists tied to ankles, her lips had drawn low moans of pleasure from me.

The hook in the ceiling had been her idea, and I had enjoyed the sight of her naked body as the short rope leading from her hands to the hook forced her to almost stand on tip toes. Just cupping those big, juicy breasts in my hand while she had ground her ass against my rod had made me come.

I had told her I loved her big body, and she had said she worshiped my big member, and our early morning ritual had brought us both so much pleasure for the three brief months it had lasted. Then, somehow, we had been found out. She had been let go in disgrace, and I had been whipped in public. I had stolen away to meet her as she was packing her things, offering her some money to help her in the dire times ahead. She had refused with a smile, and settled for a final, lingering kiss.

I had not seen Monah since then, and now she might very well lie dead somewhere in Maurur. I was left with nothing but memories,

memories and the skill of how to tie up a woman.

The hellcat was far smaller, lighter, more agile than her, and with teeth and claws that could cut through leather like my nails through a leaf. And the price to pay if she should break free was more severe than the love-making I used to offer Monah as a reward when we played that game.

I sat still and pondered my situation: I could not leave her tied up to die, and I could not leave her free. She would probably follow me, if the stories of the hellcats' thirst for revenge was anything to go by. I just sat and watched her perfect body, until when the sun rose and touched her face, she woke from her slumber.

She went from sleeping beauty to furious feline in an instant. I jumped as the still form suddenly began thrashing and fighting, growling and hissing. I must admit I even held my knife out in front of me in case she should break free and leap at me.

But she didn't. I had spent hours upon hours learning how to tie the proper knots, and the leather was just tight enough to keep her from loosening it by wriggling and struggling. In the end she calmed down, lying on her side, breathing hard, and glaring at me with her hellcat eyes.

They burned. The eyes were nothing but pools of fiery hot flames glowing with pure, malevolent dark blood red. The eyes of a hellcat were said to be able to light up a room for years after they had been cut from the sockets of its owner. By submerging them into different potions one could make them change shape: irritating the eye with an acidic liquid made it red with fury, pleasing it with sugar water turned it blue, and so on.

I had seen a hellcat eye once before, in my Captain's office. I had been fascinated with the red, glowing orb in its glass jar. The light of that one was nothing to the clear-burning flames of the pair now before me: So dark red with hate, so intense in their fury that I was reminded of a smith's forge more than any puny candle or oil-lamp.

"Filth!" she suddenly snarled at me. She had a high-pitched voice and spoke with a raw, hard accent. I had never known whether hellcats could talk, but she spoke precisely like I would have imagined them to: Full of emotion, and without any of the restraint that civilization and tradition will put on you.

"Filth! What will it be? Cut me up and then kill me? Rape me first? Let the beasts have me?"

I had jumped when she had first growled, and now I tried to regain my composure. Yes, she could speak, and she truly hated me. What would it be? Kill her? Leave her like this?

"What will it be? Get on with it!"

"Do think death is too harsh for you, hellcat?" I said in my best official voice. "After your attempt on my life?"

"A quick, clean death is all I ask for and deserve, Wolf Knight" Some of the fire in her eyes died away as we began talking, thought her voice was almost bursting with constrained fury.

"I am indeed a Knight of the Wolf," I was aware my speech was a bit stilted, but that is how one copes with a difficult situation, I guess, "and we do not slay captures enemies."

"You just cut," she spat the word out, "their eyes and leave them to it."

"We do not!"

"I have seen them," she hissed. "Those of my people you catch. Eyeless, dying."

"I will not kill you," I murmured. I had never thought of how hellcat eyes were procured, and she might just be telling the truth. "Even though you tried to kill me."

"I did!"

"Why did you do that? Hungry?" One of the tales concerning hellcats was that they would eat the humans they caught deep in their forests.

"Oh no," she smiled sarcastically, and there was a flicker of blue in the pools of fire. "Eating you would imply I respected you. I

am ready to respect ducks and rats, but not you. Oh no, for you it would have been the crows, or even your dear wolves.”

”Then why?”

”The hunters that took our people tended to come from your city did they not? If not satisfied with their eyes, then took the men to fight wild beasts, or the women to boast about their prowess in bed. Oh, I have lost so many from my tribe that when asked to search for any survivors...” She grinned while dirty brown and blue specks danced in her blood red eyes. Then she gasped with pain. ”I failed, but I managed to bite you good! Almost as good as you got me.”

”Are you hurting?” I asked then, suddenly a bit worried.

”What’s that you know, Wolf Knight?”

”Nothing you would understand,” I said and moved closer to her. When I touched her right shoulder she snapped at me with her jaws like a frightened dog would.

”Nothing I would...” She growled and the light shone stronger again. ”Filth! You think I know nothing of compassion? Or concern?”

”Show me,” I replied. The wound was deep, but not infected. I had tried to bandage it with leather and some cloth from her shirt, but having her hands tied to her back did not help her.

”Let me see your little scratch-marks so I can feel sorry for you.”

Scratch-marks? They sure hurt as hell, and she had bitten me. I pulled off my shirt awkwardly.

”Wipe that grimace off your face! I can hardly see them. By the Lords of the Wild, I must have failed in everything yesterday!”

She was right. The wounds she had given me were almost gone. Yesterday there had been large gashes almost everywhere the leather armor had not protected me. Even the bite on the side of my neck had healed as if I had laid in a sickbed for many days.

”No,” I said, taken aback. ”They have... healed?”

Her eyes narrowed as she peered more intently at me, and more colors seemed to appear in the pools, no longer blazing. ”I thought

you humans were utterly fragile?"

"This is, I don't know..." My voice faltered.

"Lucky you," she snorted. "I will have to wait about a month for my teeth to grow back, if I live that long. Did you cut them out? Or did you punch me in the face? I seem to remember..."

"Well," I felt a bit embarrassed, "I did."

"You throw a good punch, human. What is your name, Wolf Knight?"

I hesitated. If she should escape, and I had given her my name, then the Iron Hammer would better know how to search me out. Because they would, if they knew I lived. The Prophecy would ensure that. "My name is... Wolf."

She laughed, then her face contracted in pain. "Good! Now, Wolf. Cut me, rape me, kill me. But in what order?"

"I think," I mused after a while, not knowing what to say, "I shall call you Rainbow."

"What!?" Her eyes burned bright red.

"Because I like how your eyes change color," I smiled. "I will not kill you."

"Fine. Then what? Let me go?"

"I assume you try to kill me again if I did? Or tell the Iron Hammer where I am?"

Blue flecks flew across the pools as she grinned evilly. I figured lying might be very hard for a hellcat. "Naturally."

"Then you come with me. Now."

When I had said this she started fighting against the leather that bound her legs. I guessed her right shoulder hurt too much for her to try anything with her arms.

"What's the matter?" I asked as I gingerly lifted her to her legs, keeping well away from her snapping fangs. "Thought you could keep me here until more agents of the Iron Hammer could find me?"

The blaze of light that followed this almost certainly meant that I was right. She called me vile things and tried to kick out at me.

I was glad I had practiced the foot-and-a-half binding with Monah, as she was unable to do anything more damaging than prod at my feet.

Slowly we made our way down the hill. She was extremely agile, and her wounds and bound extremities hampered her far less than they would have me. Still, she could not move very fast.

I cut myself a study walking-stick of birch, which I used both to steady myself, and to let her grab with her left hand when she needed to hold onto something. She stumbled as she climbed up and down slopes, over tree roots, over brooks, and now and again she would fall.

I kept her marching, urged on now and again by a prod in the back from the birch rod. Eating the berries I found on the way I was somehow able to still a little of my hunger, but she refused.

"I eat nothing but meat," she snarled.

Why did I make her walk as fast and hard as I did? One reason was that I was anxious to escape any more attempts and pursuit. Another... Well, I remembered my time with Monah. She had loathed for me to see her big body, and getting her to undress in front of me had been a battle of our wills. For days I had done nothing to her but talking, refusing to play with her until I got what I wanted.

This had to be the same thing. I found myself curiously attracted to Rainbow's, as I kept calling her, spirit of defiance, as well as burning to break it. To master her. To make her beg.

It took two days. All the while she snarled at me that she was hungry, that she should be allowed to go free. She insisted she be released to go hunting, and made false promises of returning afterward. Her words describing fat birds and juicy deer meat tempted me, but I knew better.

I kept her walking, using the birch rod whenever I caught her slacking off. We followed the ditch I had singled out as the route to the lake I wanted to head for, and it soon turned into a valley.

Slowly, slowly, on the second day, Rainbow began stumbling more and more. It must be incredibly hard walking with her feet and hands tied like that, and she had been really brave. Now and then she even shrieked something unintelligible, probably a call to her tribe or any other allies that might be nearby. Since she only did this now out of desperation, I guessed there was not much danger in the plea being answered. They were all in Maurur, I guessed, finishing sacking the city.

It was afternoon when she finally gave up. We had to cross a brook, and she lost her footing climbing down from the bank. Falling, she plunged head-first into the mud on the far side, burying one flaming white eye, the other looking in my direction.

"Get up!" I commanded, giving her a push with the rod in her back.

"No!" She yelled desperately.

"Up!"

"Filth! I am dying of hunger, I am dying of pain! I cannot go on!"

I reached down and took hold of her short, shining black hair. "You will get up and keep walking. When it gets dark, we will rest like last night. If you are polite then, and ask me nicely, I might ease your pain."

"Might!?" She spat and spluttered. "Killing me would ease my pain!"

"Up!" I pulled at her hair, drawing a gasp of pain from her lovely face as she followed me. It was strange. Two days ago her beauty had made me want to go easier on her, despite her trying to murder me. Now I had somehow got a, well, rush of power, of wanting to rule. Now her beauty made my determination even stronger.

She yelled and threatened me for the next half hour or so, as my rod kept her walking. Twice she slumped to the ground, and twice I had to pull her up by her hair. She was so small and slender that I could easily do this. All my scars had somehow mysteriously healed



in the short time since she gave them to me. Also, my hunger had strangely enough not made me weaker, even though my insides cried out for food.

In the end she walked until nightfall in silence, and tears were running down her face. Going was slow, and she fell often over, but then pulled herself to her feet with her amazing athletic abilities.

We made our camp under a large fir tree with thick branches that provided us with shelter. The brook in valley we were in was now large enough to be a proper river, and I was convinced that we were not far from the lake that was my first goal.

I sat down with my folded up cloak between me and the rough tree trunk, while Rainbow collapsed on the dry floor of pine needles. She sobbed and sobbed, and I felt horrible. More horrible so because I was unable to stop thinking of this as a kind of game. I no longer cared to recall the reason I was dragging her alone, to avoid killing her and yet keep myself safe. I no longer used the pursuit of another agent of the Iron Hammer as an argument for keeping such a terrible pace. No, it was just a game: My will against hers.

Rainbow opened her eyes and looked at me. The fire in her eyes was white with a touch of red. White, I assumed, was associated with passivity, submission, like the color of the flag used for surrendering. If that was true, then I appreciated that. But more importantly, the fire was low, barely illuminating her face as we lay under our tent of branches. She was tired, the fight had for the moment gone out of her.

I am ashamed to said that made me feel very manly, very much the conqueror. My chest puffed, and my member filled up with blood.

"Wolf?" she said.

"Yes, Rainbow?"

"Why do you do this to me?"

"You don't need to know," I heard a voice high on power, my

own!, reply to her. "You only need to find your place."

"And what place is that?" The red glow now filling her pools lit the camp as she got angry again. What a spirit this woman had!

"That we will find out. We have a long way to go together."

Red gave way to the white of fear. I sat down beside her and checked the wound in her side. It was healing, hellcats were amazing creatures. But it made me wonder why I had suddenly achieved the ability to get well so quickly as I had.

Then I pulled out a further leather rope, and tied it around her neck. Last night she had tried to bite my hands while I did this, but not now. I fastened the rope to the one around her hands at her back, then to the one binding her feet, forcing them backwards. She was completely helpless in this position, which had been a favorite of Monah's.

"Wolf..." she whispered.

"Yes?" I replied, not unkindly.

"Please, Wolf, be good to me. I cannot take another day like today. I need food. My body hurts from being bound. Please." White eyes, with strong red flashes. It had to hurt her pride to beg like this.

I moved to lie down beside her. For a while I did not speak, but my hand went to her hair, softly brushing it. Her plea had made me feel all tender and mushy inside. Why did I have to punish this beautiful creature? Her eyes were closed, and her face contorted in a grimace as I caressed her.

"Please be gentle," she whispered as tears fell down her cheeks.

"What?"

"You are going to rape me now, are you not?"

"No. No! No, I am not."

She opened her eyes. "Why do you touch me, then?"

"You are beautiful."

"Me? A human finds me beautiful? With these?" She opened her mouth and bared her teeth.

"Yes, even with those."

Then she smiled, and blue light came into her eyes. But along with the blue came another color, and I found the specks of green to be the most appealing part of the rainbow yet.

"I wish we didn't have to be enemies," she said then.

"We don't," I said quickly. Then our eyes met, and there was more of the lovely green color in them now. Slowly, slowly I moved my head towards her hers, our lips closing in on each other...

"If you kiss me I will bite your tongue and lips off!" she snarled, and red light filled the tree-tent.

I jerked my head back, rolled over, and sat up. She was staring angrily at me. I felt fooled and rejected. Monah had never been like this! But, she had warned me before she bit. That was something at least. She had to be afraid of what I would have done to her had she bitten me. Even now there were flickers of white in the fire.

"I hate you, Wolf, I really, really do," she said then with constrained fury. "You are very handsome, but I know humans and your Knights in particular. You must be exterminated, and the Lords of the Iron Hammer will do just that. When you are dead, Wolf, by my own fangs, then my tribe will get this forest for their own. The Lord Axar has promised us this, just like he promised to bring an end to Maurur."

"Promised?" I snorted. I was furious! "The treacherous bastards of the Iron Hammer believe in one law, and one law only: Might is right! And, right now, so do I. Whether you get to eat, get to sleep, get to speak gibberish, get to walk until you drop, get to be raped, get to live, or get to be kissed, it is all up to me!"

"Spoken like a true Wolf Knight," she spat.

"Good night," I said as icily as I could, and sat down with my back against the tree trunk again, closing my eyes. This conversation was, to me, over, and now I intended to sleep.

"Wolf?" her voice came to me after a few minutes.

"Wolf," she repeated after a moment's pause when I did not reply.

"I asked nicely. I even begged. Please, Wolf?"

Without replying I fell asleep. Tomorrow I might be in a better mood, tomorrow I might treat her right.

Tomorrow came, and I woke to find the hellcat that I had named Rainbow lying tied up at my feet. The leather encircled her throat, it bound her hands behind her back, and it forced her to bend her legs. She stared dully at me, a dim light, red glow in her eyes. Angry, yet for the moment defeated. I liked what I saw, liked how powerful it made me feel.

"Good morning, Rainbow," I said, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"I am hungry. I have cramps."

"Yes, by my choice. For your insolence last night."

"You are cruel, hard man, truly a human." It stated as a cold fact, not as an angry accusation.

"You tried to kill me. This is your reward. Ready to start walking again? We have far to go."

I grabbed my birch rod. It felt rough and heavy in my hand. She stared at it in fear.

"No," she whispered.

"No? Then I have to make you walk."

"No, Wolf. I cannot. Not with my hands bound behind my back and this damned rope between my ankles. Not after a night in this position. Not without having eaten for more than two days."

"Then you know what to do."

She fell silent, sighed, and closed her eyes. "Please, Wolf. Be good to me. I beg you."

"Will you be good, Rainbow? Will you be polite and do as you are told?"

No reaction. I repeated the question. Slowly, she nodded.

"Say it!" I felt elated. I owned this hellcat! I would make her crawl for me!

"I will be good. I will be polite. I will do as I am told." The words came slowly, but clearly. Then: "As long as you can enforce those rules, human."

"Did you hate it? Having to say what you just did?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry. It will get easier every time." I went over to her, and untied the leather rope that bound her throat to her feet, fastening it to her bound hands instead.

With a great sigh of relief she stretched her legs. Grabbing them with my hands, I began rubbing them. She tried to pull them out of my grasp, but I would not let her.

"I know it hurts, but this will help you walk more easily," I said gently.

"It doesn't hurt, I just don't want your hands on me," she replied harshly.

"Again, it is up to me. Now the hands." I untied her right arm, the left one now only fastened to her throat. "If you try to bite the rope off, you will regret it," I said simply.

As she glared at me, I looked at her wound. It had almost healed, something I was happy for. Then I rubbed her arm. Her eyes glared red, but there was not enough true revulsion in her voice to make me believe she loathed it. I, on the other hand, found that her skin was soft and sleek. Many a high-born Lady with kill to get skin like that. Many men would kill to get their hands on such skin.

"Your shoulder will be fine," I told her as I retied the right arm and freed the left one.

"No thanks to you."

"I apologize for defending myself," I smiled as I started rubbing the last arm.

"You should apologize for dragging me along like this!" she hissed. "Kill me, Wolf! Put me out of my misery!"

"Oh no," I grinned at her. I loved her fiery temper! In fact, I was beginning to love everything about this hellcat. She was like... like

an irresistible challenge and a legendary price all in one. If I could tame her. If I could! "This is not misery, this is mercy."

"Bastard!"

"Do you want to eat, or walk?"

"I want to eat, Wolf! You bloody well know that!"

"Then, you should apologize for calling me a bastard."

"Are you serious?" Burning eyes widened.

I nodded.

"I," she gritted her teeth, "apologize."

"Was it any easier this time?"

"Up y... No, human, it wasn't."

"Be patient," I smiled. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Meat, of any kind. What are you able to hunt?" Blue specks came into her eyes now. She had to be really hungry.

"Nothing..." I admitted.

"Nothing? Nothing?" She seemed almost desperate. "But..."

"I don't have a bow," I explained.

"I can hunt! Release me, and I promise to return to you!"

I shook my head.

"Damn you! I need food!"

"Well, it will have to be me."

She groaned, and her lips moved, probably cursing me silently. Her body was shaking from hunger. Then she looked at me again. "Have you ever used a sling?"

I shook my head. Now I actually felt stupid.

"Then," she groaned, "what are you doing out here in the forest!? Can you climb then, Wolf-who-cannot-hunt?"

"What I am doing out here in the forest? I am fleeing to Carosia." I felt slightly queasy, something you are bound to do after having eaten about fifty raw eggs from the various birds nests that Rainbow had pointed out to me. I did not know there was so many of them in the forest!

"Are you really? I was told you would flee in here to found a new Order of the Wolf, and to enslave and hunt down my people."

"Does it look that way? Apart from that I am fleeing, and enslaving you. Well... But you hunted me, not the other way around." I got a bit lost trying to explain, I felt. "No, I am not planning to do anything in here except pass through, no matter what!"

"Why?" the hellcat asked me. She was sitting on a log in the sunshine, looking full and pleased, her eyes almost completely blue now. She was beautiful with her brown, sleek body and black, shiny hair.

We had walked slowly for a few hours, raiding nests as we went along. Every time I had to climb a tree I had tied Rainbow to a trunk, and she had stood there waiting and giggling every time I fell, or almost fell, down.

"Because of the Iron Hammer. You know how badly they want to eradicate the Knights of the Wolf."

"I do..." she hesitated, probably not wanting to add anything offensive. Then, with a sudden burst of fire. "They have their reasons!"

"Yes," I replied somberly. "The Prophecy."

"Which is?"

"Have you heard about the Oracle of Eromi Isle?"

"I have heard not," she replied in a challenging voice, daring me to suggest she was unlearned.

"Well, you know Andomin which lies where the Armon river flows into the sea?"

"I have heard of that city, bigger than your Maurur. Luckily the Iron Hammer captured it three years ago and destroyed the Wolf Knights there. The Armon river? Named by you people after a long gone Knight of yours? We have another, better name for it."

The sun shone down upon us where we sat not twenty paces from the swift river that made its way down to the lake that could not be very far now. Rainbow's hair glinted liver black gold, and her fiery

eyes were fixed upon me. I had to resist an urge both to chastise her for her words, and to kiss her for her beauty. I also had to resist an urge not to throw up from gorging myself on the raw bird's eggs, but that was something completely different.

"South of Andomin you have the Shield Islands, but to the south again there is nothing. That is, unless you sail directly southwards from the Last Reef for three weeks. There some say you can find Eromi Isle, and the Oracle who lives at that place. And if you bring an offering the Oracle finds worthy, why, he will tell you what you want to know."

"Sail?" Rainbow furrowed her brow prettily.

"A sailing ship."

"I did not understand that. No matter. What did he tell you?"

"Who?"

"The Oracle!"

"He didn't tell me anything. I never went there. I am just a lowly Knight. No, he told an agent of the Black Circle."

"The What?"

"The Black Circle is a sinister Brotherhood of undead, necromancers, demonologists, shadow dragons, vile creatures one and all. They live like parasites from Andomin all the way East along the coast to Carosia. Long ago they came into conflict with the Knights of the Wolf and other defenders of freedom."

Rainbow opened her mouth, but this time it was I who flared into anger.

"Don't you dare say anything! Don't you dare!"

"Or what? Are you going to release me, o Defender of Freedom?"

"No, I will gag you. I will tighten the gag so hard you will not be able to bite through it."

Blue flames danced in her eyes as she smirked a little. She had scored a point, and she knew it. "Tell me more about this Black Circle, instead then."

"All right," I grumbled. "Apparently they sent a ship south to



the Oracle of Eromi, bearing lavish gifts. They came back, without the gifts, but with a Prophecy of six words.”

”I know those words! I have heard them before: ’The Hammer will break the Wolf.’”

”Oh no,” I replied, shaking my head. ”The Prophecy said: ’The Wolf will break the Circle.’”

”It did not!” she rebutted angrily. ”I have heard the six words many times! The soldiers of the Iron Hammer chant them as they march!”

”Let’s start walking,” I said. She got off the log she had been sitting on, moving gracefully despite the leather binding her.

Looking up at me, she gave me a thoughtful stare. ”You are a very demanding man, Wolf.”

”If I have to be.”

”You have to be.” She smiled, baring her fangs. More than a head shorter than me and weighing half of what I did, she was still dangerous. Still... Was there a touch of green in her eyes?

”Then I will be.”

With an enigmatic smile and a flash of all the rainbow’s colors, she turned around and started walking down the river valley. Today I had gallantly offered to carry her across the many obstacles we encountered, but she would have nothing of it. She was strong, she was proud, and she was free.

”What about the six words?” she asked after a while. I had been walking about in my own thoughts, trying to make sense of what I was doing. I should not be traveling around with an enemy who hated me. I should not be telling her my destination. I should not be wanting to kiss her, and to do all those other things I dreamed about.

”I told you. ’The Wolf will break the Circle.’ Can you imagine all those evil monsters, when they heard that my Order was destined to destroy them? Some of them had been weaving their black magic for centuries, conducting their dark rites, bringing terror in the hearts

of the poor people of cities and unfortunate farms of the remote countryside. They were happy living as parasites, but now their hand was forced. They had to answer that threat."

"Yes? Go on?" Whenever she turned her face to look at me her expression was eager, hungry.

"For the first time since they began their candid, careful collaboration they came out into the open and declared themselves. They recruited the best men among the worst of all men: Cruel warlords, selfish politicians, merciless pirates, and every skilled criminal in the known lands. Their leader, whether a member of the Circle himself or just a figurehead, calls himself the Iron Prince."

"Him!? Are you insane?" The eagerness was all gone as she stopped to face me, red eyes burning. "You are a liar! The Iron Prince will break your back with his Hammer for telling such evil tales!"

"I don't tell lies," I replied calmly. Though on the inside my wrath was rising.

"The Iron Hammer are all honorable warriors! We have formed an alliance with them to rid us of the Wolf Knights, the cruelest fiends of the world! Soon Maurur will be no more, and these woods will belong to our people!"

"Cruel!?" I replied taking a step closer. She was just a foot away from me, her red pools of fire locked with my blue eyes. She did not take a step back. She was not afraid of me, not right now.

"Come on!" She shrieked. "Let the birch rod of mercy show me your worthiness! Or maybe the pangs of hunger will demonstrate the kindness of your damn Order. You are filth, Wolf! Bloody filth!"

We reached the lake in the early afternoon. It was shaped like an eye. The river we had been following had slowly widened into the outward-facing, or longer, corner of the eye. At the other end, a mile or so ahead, a disturbance on the surface of the water led me to believe that there was a waterfall there.

The shore was rather steep on each side of the lake, giving the impression the we had sunk deep into the lush, green forest. Along the water's edge was a narrow strip of weathered and polished mountainside. Apart from a few islets where the river ran into the main body of water there were no islands. The lake looked deep with pale, dark, blue waters.

I wouldn't mind live somewhere like this. And, despite her rancor, I wouldn't mind living here with someone like Rainbow. For hours, while I had made her walk in front of me, I had considered her words and how to react to them. At first I had been so angry it was all I could do not to... I don't know, but my thoughts been very unpleasant.

I had to remember that she hated me and everything I stood for. I had to remember that I really had no right do anything but treat her as a prisoner. I had to remember that she was not Monah, that she was not with me willingly. And, above all, I had to remember how disillusioned I had been with certain aspects of the Knights of the Wolf. Their arrogance with others, their lives of decadence, their blindness and refusal to change their ways despite the Iron Hammer beating them at every turn. And now Rainbow's version of events which had touched me, like it or not. I now felt revolted at the fascination I had felt earlier when shown a hellcat eye submerged in an acidic solution.

"You are clever," I said when she stopped at the water's edge, looking out over the lake. Her back was straight, angry, proud, the fists tied together were clenched. "If I now punish you, they you will feel justified for denouncing me as evil. If I don't, then you can feel free to behave any way you like."

She neither moved nor spoke.

"It will have to be the gag. There is no reason for you to speak if you have nothing to say that I want to hear. You will have to point out birds' nests from now on."

"Are you serious!? You won't let me talk?" She spun around,

furious. "Are you going to treat me like a beast, like humans are wont to do?"

"What is the alternative?"

"Treat me like a fellow warrior!"

"No," I shook my head. "I cannot do that. You are a woman."

"Women are warriors!" She spat.

"Evidently," I replied. "But to me a woman like you will never be just that."

"Like me? What do you mean, you prat!?"

"Rainbow," I said slowly. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met. No princess or noble maiden in their rich dresses, no water-girl or maid running lightly down the streets did ever come close to you."

"And because of that you can't see me as a warrior!?"

"I can. But because of that I see you as mine. My woman, my prize, my possession, my slave."

"Wolf," her eyes were swirling with a multitude of colors. "Is that really how you see women?"

I shrugged. "No, but that is how I see my women."

"Then I feel truly sorry for your women."

"I have made at least one woman truly happy, though."

"Tied her up!? Punished her!? Told her what to do!?"

"Yes."

"That is sick!" Rainbow snarled at me. But in her eyes I could see...

"Then why is there green fire in your eyes?"

"Liar! There is no such thing! You lie!" The green specks that had just been there faded, or maybe they were replaced by intense, dark red hate. She looked truly like a Feline demon out of the deepest bowels of Hell, and I was tempted to take a few steps backwards as she hobbled towards me with her foot-and-a-half apart feet.

"What does that color signify?" I asked calmly, though I was almost sure I knew the answer.

Instead of answering me she shrieked, a vicious howl that made me fall over backwards. Then she actually attacked me, trussed up as she was. She fell on top of me and bit my shoulder before I could push her aside. I stumbled to my feet, grasped my wound, and gasped as I looked down her. She hissed at me and struggled wildly, a fury beyond anything a human was capable of.

For a few thundering seconds of silence on my part I felt fear and anger strive for mastery. Anger won and, grabbing her by the hair, I pulled her after me. Into the shall waters at the river's outlet did I take her, and over to one of the larger islets some thirty feet away from the shore. Dropping her onto the grassy turf, I drew my knife.

There was no fear in her eyes, only hate.

With a few quick cuts I had removed all the leather from her body. She was free.

"Come on," I said, sheathing my knife. "Come on, warrior. If battle is what you want, then you are going to get it. If you win, then you can cut me or rape or kill me as you bloody well wish. If not, then I bring you bound and gagged to Carosia. I am tired of you!"

She rose slowly, massaging her now free hands and feet. The fire in her eyes was smoldering, and other colors fought the dark red for dominance of her eyes. I had no idea of what she was feeling. And I did not care.

She looked at me, and I looked at her. Time passed. Then, suddenly, I heard a noise behind me, and felt a terrible pain in my left thigh.

I toppled over, using my left hand to steady myself. Then another noise came, that one also that of an arrow being fired, and I was hit in my right side. I cried out in pain, and fell down on the soft, damp grass of the small islet.

There, onto the shore from her hiding place in the forest, came another hellcat. She was female like Rainbow, but she was taller and

her hair fairer, a light brown. Dressed the same way, she carried a short bow and a small sack over her shoulder.

"Wolf," she said shortly.

"Yes," I gasped between my sobs.

"Yes," Rainbow said. "What took you so long. Damn it! You were always too slow, Lynx."

"But I, unlike you, succeeded. And I, unlike you, am armed. But I will let you kill him, if you want. I am not unreasonable, Wolf."

"All right," Rainbow said. Now I understood why she had laughed when I had told her my name.

Then Rainbow, or Wolf, knelt down over me. I stared up at the sky, preparing to die like a man. Or at least to try. She grabbed hold of the arrow that had entered my side and pulled. Hard. I squealed like a pig. She did likewise to the other arrow, and I made sounds like those of a litter of piglets.

In agony I placed one hand on each wound as Rainbow rose and crossed over to the shore. The other hellcat, Lynx, made an angry exclamation.

"Wolf! You were supposed to kill him! He is a Knight of the Wolf, a brave warrior. He deserves to be eaten."

"He deserves no such thing," Rainbow replied angrily in her turn. "He bound me, he starved me, he mistreated me. Humans heal far more slowly than we do, Lynx. So soon he will be weak, and then the carrion beasts will come. Having his eyes pecked out by the ravens is what he deserves."

"Excellent," Lynx laughed. "Are you sure your anger does not stem from him not using you? You did not list that as a grievance, and I noticed the lust in your eyes for him as I observed you not so long ago."

"Shut up!" Rainbow growled. Then she calmed down. "He's not worth eating. Let's go. There are lots of fish in the river, and we can snatch them out of the water if we are quick enough. There's even flint around here so that we can build a cooking fire."

"Fish and fires? Are you out of your mind, Wolf?" Lynx snorted. "Or have you spent too much time with this human. I prefer to hunt meat and eat it raw. Do what you please. Kiss your love goodbye now."

The two hellcats disappeared without anyone placing their lips upon mine or doing anything else. I was left dying on the small islet. Then, after a few minutes, I realized the bleeding had stopped. Of course! I remembered that somehow the wounds Rainbow had given me had healed extraordinarily fast. I also recalled that Rainbow knew this. She had saved my life. She knew her Lords in the Iron Hammer wanted to eradicate all the Knights of the Wolf, and she had saved my life.

When it was completely dark was able to sit up. I could not keep myself from laughing, even though it was painful as hell. Rainbow had not only saved me, she had told me how to catch fish, and how to cook it! If I ever met her again I would kiss her, even if she should try to rip my tongue out of my mouth with her fangs.

Much later, when the morning came, I found that I was neither eaten nor pecked on by anything. My wounds pained me a great deal, and I had not slept a minute, but I could stand up.

I thought about Rainbow. What a strange woman she was! Her mercy was worthy, no it surpassed!, that of a Knight of the Wolf.

I found myself missing her as I limped upstream to try out her fishing suggestion. As the sun rose high in the sky I found myself cursing her. There were a lot of fishes in the river, trout, bass, and many other kinds I did not know. But whenever I tried my best by thrusting my hand into the clear water and grab one, it was gone. Once or twice I had felt the cool, muscular skin of my prey against my palm, but my fist had always closed in on water.

My temper did not improve when a large, old, brown bear came down to the river some distance upstream. Apart from birds it had been first animal I had seen close up after coming into the forest.

The bear had given me a lazy glance, decided I was neither eatable, nor an enemy, and then proceeded to land, and eat, three fat trouts in about one hour. When it was satisfied it looked at me again and ran off.

But that arrogant fisherman was my salvation. I went up to where he had been, stood like he had, and tried to make the same sweeping motions he had used. After half an hour I had landed a nice, pale blueish fish, weighing almost a pound. Sending a silent thanks to both Rainbow and the bear, I broke its neck with my thumb and continued my work. Two hours later I had caught three more fishes, where the last was a big trout, two pounds if I was any judge.

I found a nice place to make a fire, a few flint stones, and some dry bark. Thankfully it had not been raining since I set out on my journey. Even so, I nearly gave up. Twice I managed strike up embers that died before I could nurture them. But third time is the charm, so in the end I could add logs to a blazing warm fire.

I fixed two y-shaped branches on each side of the fire, and cooked the fish whole on a third branch that rested on these two, removing only the guts from the fish. It was now a day since I had eaten the eggs, and I was starving again. Compared to those raw eggs and the berries I had eaten before I met Rainbow, this meal was pure heaven.

I wished Rainbow was there with me. She had been so... alive, so full of emotion, so different from all other women I had met. Still, she was gone, and I had to continue towards my goal.

Not wanting to remain by the ashes of my fire at night should the smell of the fish attract any predators, I set out after having eaten. The pains in my body slowed me somewhat, but I soon managed to reach the waterfall at the end of the lake.

The waterfall was impressive, a more than fifty feet tall curtain of foam and roaring water. From there I had a vision of endless acres of forest stretching out on each side of the slower-flowing river into



which many small side-valleys seemed to run. I decided to follow that river on its course southeastwards. I might end up somewhere south of the Merchant Cities of Carosia in the territory of the Iron Hammer, but I did not want to go back to climbing every hill to check my location, and I certainly did not want to go back to living on just berries.

Climbing down the cliff the waterfall fell over really strained my wounds, but going was easier after then. The valley was broader down here, and I walked quickly on fairly level ground for a while, until it became dark. The next day continued much as the last had ended. Until noon, that is.

"Good morning, Wolf," she said.

"Good morning, Wolf," I replied.

She was basking in the sun on a patch of green grass next to a well-trodden animal track that I had been following all morning. The light made her skin glow with that wonderful olive color, and her jet hair shone like black gold. Like a true cat she was stretched out on the lush grass, looking lazily at me, a bow and quiver at her side, a sling in her belt. She appeared very calm, but her eyes shone with all the colors of the spectrum.

"I have been wearing that name longer than you, Sir Knight," she said after a short period of silence during which we merely looked at each other. I had never, never!, expected to see her again. Why was she here now?

"I've had to earn the name 'Wolf'. It is given to one who has great stamina, and who is good at hunting with a pack. The wolf is a very worthy totem."

"I just couldn't think of anything else to call myself," I smiled. "But now I find it appropriate. The Knights of the Wolf are the Order of Ulv, the Great Wolf. He is said to grant us great endurance, to inspire leadership, and to act honorable. And now I am the last Knight of the Wolf. But you I think I will keep calling Rainbow."

"I don't approve," she said, eyes flashing red.

"I don't care," I smiled even more. "But I am glad to see you again, Rainbow."

"Why?" she asked.

"I like you, and you are very beautiful."

"All right."

Silence fell. We looked at each other, but none of us spoke. Finally I began to feel a bit uncomfortable.

"So, Rainbow... Why have you come back?"

"Never you mind!" she growled.

"Or did you just happen to be strolling by?"

"Shut up!"

"What is it?" I said, sitting down on the grass in front of her. She sat up straight, pulling her feet to her and hugging her knees close to her chest.

"Nothing."

"What happened to the other hellcat? Lynx?"

"She's an idiot. I stole her bow and pretended to run on ahead to receive all the praise and reward for killing you. Stupid bitch followed me head over heels. When she finally stopped following my tracks and choose a better path westwards I doubled back here. If she wasn't so dim she would know that coming back without your head might very well earn her death."

"Clever." I was impressed. "By the way, Rainbow, I thank you for saving my life."

"You are welcome."

"I bet you enjoyed pulling the arrows out of my body, though, after all I have done to you!" I chuckled at her again. "I still feel the wounds ever so slightly."

"It was necessary so that you could heal properly, you idiot. And there was no way you could have pulled them out yourself!"

"I know," I nodded.

"Do you? Well, you did take my hint about fishing. Maybe you are brighter than Lynx?"

"Maybe. By the way, Rainbow, I am so grateful that I have sworn to kiss you, fangs or no fangs! But I am not sure if you approve."

"I don't want you to kiss me, Wolf," she said, her eyes flailing with emotion.

"All right," I said slowly. It had been an idiotic thing to say, though. I guess I had just been happy to see her again.

"I want you to use me," she said, so quietly that I could hardly hear her.

"What!?"

"Nothing."

"All right." Had I heard wrong?

"Wolf!" she growled. "I want you to use me! Be hard, be rough! Use your leather, use your birch rod! You are the most bloody damn cruel human I have met, and I want you so bad I have made myself a filthy traitor for you! I want to be used like... Yeah, like the wild, untamed animal I am!"

Minutes later the sight of her body made me lose my breath, made my heart beat wildly, made my manhood stand up like a spear of steel. I goggled, I looked, I scrutinized, I leered, and my mouth was wide open like I was bereft of my senses.

"Get on with it!" she snarled, putting her fine hands on her wide hips. Her body was very slender, on the verge of thinness, but her shirt and pants had obscured her femininity. The olive skin was so smooth and sleek, and I yearned to touch her soft flesh, to both grab it forcefully and to stroke it tenderly.

Her breasts were that of a larger woman, big and firm. They were almost too much for this tiny, five-foot tall hellcat, and her nipples were big and well-formed. The thighs were flawless and slim except at her hips, looking as if they were made to encircle a man's body or yield to his determined hands. The feline grace I

had noticed when dressed had turned into a unconsciously sensual dance, teasing me with every movement.

"Get on with what?" I croaked hoarsely.

"With using me! I want you inside me, damn you!"

"Your teeth are growing back," I said as I managed to move my eyes up above her delicate neck. A white point could be seen where her fourth fang, the one I had knocked out, had been.

"Yeah, they tend to do that. Teeth, nails, hair, everything grows faster than with you humans. Bloody annoying." She spoke quickly, and there was an urgency in her voice.

"I like long hair on a woman," I smiled. "In particular if it is so lovely as the one you sport."

"Ridiculous! How will I hunt with long hair? It will get tangled in every tree and bush in the entire forest. Idiotic!" Bright green light and angry red flares filled her eyes.

"You can braid it?" I suggested, mischievously postponing what she so desired. "Keep it under your shirt."

"Maybe so! But short hair more sensible! Your hair is short!"

"But I am a man," I said slowly.

"As a true man you should be using me right now! Damn it, Wolf! I need it!"

"Brush," I said.

"What!?" The light in her eyes was slowly intensifying.

"If you had long hair you would have to brush it every day. I hate unkempt hair on my women."

"Shut up about the hair, Wolf!" She was growling, but there was also a pleading buried in her voice. Taking three steps towards me she stood not a foot apart, looking up at me with those wonderful flaming eyes, her hands still on her hips.

"Well, I happen to like-" I began, trying to appear completely oblivious.

"And I like this!" Her hand grabbed my manhood which, of course, was rock hard. Her grip was firm, but very pleasant. Well,

more than pleasant in fact. If I had her eyes they would have filled up with green right now.

But still more enticing than the hand of a beautiful woman rubbing my member was having complete control over said woman. As I pulled her hand away I consoled my frustrated private parts that they would get their share soon enough.

"What!?" she snarled. "I thought you were going to use me? Come on!"

"I thought you wanted me to be cruel."

"I didn't mean like this!" Her hand returned to my manhood.

"But I do." I loosened her grip and took her wrists in my hands. "Either you get dressed and go away, or you bend down to touch your toes."

"What game will you play now? For how long shall I do that!?"

"Oh," I smiled, "at least until have cut another length of rope from my leather armor. It did not stop your fellow hellcat's arrow, so it will be of more use like this."

"Then what? Will you drag me with you again?"

"No," I replied. "I know you won't kill me, and I know you won't turn me in. There is no need."

For a long, long minute she scrutinized my face. Could she trust me? Or what about the thrill of placing herself in my power... Infinitely slowly she bowed her head. Moments later she stood bent over with her agile body, her legs straight, not looking in discomfort at all. But her face I could not see.

I chose to sit on the grass just behind her as I made the leather bindings. That way I had a clear view of her backside, and her sex. Her soft legs were spread invitingly, I and could study her two large, inviting lips, partly covered with curly black hair.

I touched the tip of my manhood through my pants. Still rock hard, so eager to plunge into that warm, sacred tunnel between those lips. Patience!

She looked clean, like she very recently had taken a bath in the

river. Perhaps she had. I hadn't, though. I had as a matter of fact not even thought about doing so for a long time. It would sure be demeaning to be used by a dirty human, stinking of sweat. On the other hand, it would also be demeaning to...

"Is this absolutely necessary, human?" she hissed when I tied the leather around her wrists and ankles.

"Not really, Rainbow, but it is how I want it to be." Now she would have to stand like this until released. I liked that. I liked that so much my fingers shook as I tied the final knot.

"You want only cruel, evil things, Wolf!"

"Maybe, but that is precisely the reason you came back to me, is it not?"

She made no reply.

"No matter. Just you wait here while I take a bath. I wouldn't want to offend you with my stink. I won't be long. Don't go anywhere!"

"Curse you, Wolf! Come back! Release me! You filth, you treacherous dog! I hate you! I will kill you and let the crows have you!"

She varied her frustration by yelling at me, roaring unintelligibly, groaning, and moaning. I listened to her as I took my bath in a bend of the river some forty paces or so away. The water was icy cold, but now I felt that no matter what I could not caught dirty when making love to this woman. No! This goddess of the woods!

To sooth my vanity I did not go directly back from the river to Rainbow. Instead I stood looking at her for a few minutes, how her lovely body was shaking with anger, how she almost toppled over during the worst rages. Slowly, slowly my manhood grew again after the cold, and then it finally was as hard as ever before.

"You are back, you filth!" she swore as she heard me approaching, craning her neck to see me. "Come here and... Oh. Oh, oh! Wolf, I want that one. What a monster. Put it inside me! Come on! Do it!"

I pranced happily around her, smirking and showing off myself like peacock that has just been praised lavishly. Which was what I was, of course.

"Do it!

"Do what?"

"Put that damn big rod of yours inside me! I want it, bad!"

"This one?" I let the tip trace across her buttocks, like the caress of a tender lover.

"Yes!" she sobbed now. I caught her eyes as she strained to look at me. There was no space there for any color but the pure, dark green of intense lust. Its light was clear as the sun shining through trees, and with her brown skin and black hair she looked so beautiful that I wanted to weep just from the sight of her.

"Inside here?" My finger brushed against the lips of her sex. It was swollen with desire. Wet. Ready. So was I.

"Yes! Yes! I need it! Please, Wolf! Please, you cruel, hard man! I will be your animal! Your pet! I want this more badly than I have ever wanted anything! Do me! Do me! Do me! Damn you! Bloody human! Come on!"

I let her rant on for a little longer. I was the master of this situation, of her. I controlled her. Her body was bound, by me. Her needs so far denied her, by me. By me! Closing my eyes I just felt her body quiver and shake, listening to her pleas and threats, relishing the sensation of dominance.

Then, slowly and deliberately, I pushed her butt-cheeks apart and put the head of my member against the wet, hot sex. "Yes!" Rainbow screamed in delight. I waited, poised at the entrance, until she started pleading again.

With an excruciatingly slow thrust I entered her. She was tight and hot and.. Oh gods! I felt like bursting right there and then! Firm muscles enveloped my head and shaft and stimulated every lustful fiber of my being. A moan escaped my lips, and my heart beat as if I had been fleeing for my life for hours.

Rainbow groaned and begged for me to do her, to thrust mercilessly into her, again and again. Her body moved, trying to enforce a rhythm that would have brought her to her peak had I not stayed her with my hand.

It was not my desire to torture her that made me hold still, it was merely to prevent myself from coming far too early. My ears felt full of searing hot blood, and I could not hear what she was yelling about. Then: Slowly out, slowly in again, trying to breathe calmly, trying to last a bit longer.

It was no use. Rainbow's dim sounds of desire. Her goddess-like body. Her eyes aflame with green fire. The moist cavern of pleasure-muscles. Ecstasy flowed over me, and I changed my pace. With an unnatural frenzy I began thrusting hard into her, disregarding her bound, slender body: Each thrust of my thighs would have toppled her over if not for my arms.

Then she screamed, a long, wailing declaration of utter satisfaction. At the same time I was filling her up with my seed, colors swirling before my eyes.

"Wolf," she said.

"Rainbow," I replied.

"Wolf."

"Rainbow."

That was all we said. It was enough. The hellcat, now calm and looking very small, lay unbound in my arms on the green grass. The day was growing older, but right now we had all the time in the world.

Rainbow was a fierce warrior and skilled hunter, but when I held her close like this I could not help but think of her as a frail, tender, young woman. I was her Knight, her protector, her master. I wanted to own her, true, but I also wanted to be good to her.

One of my hands went to her black, shiny hair, and I patted it affectionately. We were still naked, and my member was being lazily



semi-hard, acknowledging her charms while not being intrusive. She purred like true cat, a sound that made her whole body vibrate ever so slightly.

Then it all fell apart. We had been sharing kisses, like lovers do. Passionate and sincere kisses intermingled with playful and teasing ones. Rainbow would catch my tongue between her needle-sharp teeth and nibble it softly.

But during one of those most intense kisses I suddenly become hungry for her. I wanted to break the sense of equality, to put her below me, to show her I was the master. I did nothing else than change how I kissed by, how shall I put it, insist that it be performed my way.

For many, many delicious seconds she yielded to me and acknowledged my superiority. Then, suddenly, she pulled away. With a snarl and a yank she was out of my arms and up on her feet.

"Filth! Keep your hands off me! I wanted you to do me, nothing more, you damned vile human! You pathetic, miserable excuse for a lover! I wish you die in excruciating pain, you dog!" As she said this she was dressing herself with a great urgency, snatching up her bow and arrows. "If I never see you again I will be the happiest woman alive!"

Then she was gone. Gone.

That afternoon I was gone as well. I walked far into the night, cursing the roots that tripped me and the branches that whipped my face, taking my anger out them. I had abandoned that god-awful river and Rainbow's stinking fishes, and headed north-east into the hills again. I was sick and tired of women and all hellcats and this miserable forests. I wanted to get to Carosia and meet humans again, proper humans with blue or brown eyes, with even teeth, with molars, not freaks such as her! But why, o why, had her eyes been white with fear and not red with anger?

The next day I found myself walking upwards. The ground

seemed to be slowly sloping towards the north east, and so I could soon navigate by the sun as it traveled above the falling forest in the west. Maybe it was my imagination, or was the trees getting shorter and more widely spaced?

I tried to think of such things instead of Rainbow. Every time I exhausted myself climbing a ridge there would be another, taller one, behind it, and so the constant hard climbing made me too weary for my thoughts to bother me much.

Or did they? Was I seeing phantoms? I was currently cursing and spitting as I laboriously climbed a steep v-formed sloped filled with loose rocks, gravel, and dirt. Up at the next ridge there seemed to be some kind of shape waiting for me. It was small, female, and with eyes that were on fire.

I bowed my head and refused to look up again. Whether it was her or some kind of image I did not care. I was climbing this here damn wall, and that was all there was to it!

"Take my hand, Wolf," I heard her voice say when I knew I was close to the top.

I didn't. Then her grip caught me under my arm, and with that I was pulled up onto level, rocky ground. I panted for a minute, my eyes fixed on the horizon to the east. I had reached the top of my climb. This was a wild landscape of broken, naked peaks, steep hills and deep gullies. There were lots of bushes, but not so many trees. Could these be the famous Carosian highlands? Hunting grounds, sheep pastures, bandit country, the land of dragons and unicorns and every other legendary beast known to man. Even hellcats. Damn it! What was she doing here?

"There was an easier path on the south side," she continued.

I sat up then, gasping and panting. She was crouching beside me, her face impassive, her eyes almost closed and downcast. Why wouldn't she let me see them? What was she doing here?x

"I am sorry," I said as icily as I could. "I am too exhausted to use you right now."

"Damn you, Wolf," she growled. "Damn you, you cruel and hard piece of filth!"

I didn't answer. Anger swelled in me. She had come here to insult me? I panted and panted, sweated and sweated, while I forced myself to calm down.

"You think I want to be here? You think I have nothing better to do than follow you around? My tribe lives three days marches to the north and west! Fallen Maurur with its loot is far away! But I am here!"

"Why?" I replied angrily. "Why do you come to torture me?"

"Me? It is you, Wolf! You torment me! Every day, every hour. When I sleep, when I eat, whenever I try to think. And there you are! In my head. With your damned big manhood, and your damned leather, and your damned cruelty, and your damned handsome face, and your damned kiss, and your damned blue eyes!"

Then she raised her hand and her own eyes to meet mine. Red anger, blue joy, and a lighter green color. Not lust, but... Love?

"Wolf, I want to be with you." She spoke slowly. "Take me with you. Make me the first of your harem."

"My what?"

"In my race there are born more than ten girls for every boy child. I never knew before why so many women should want to hunt and care for just one lazy, boorish man. Now I know. I want to go with you. I don't care where you are going."

For a long moment I looked at her, my thoughts churning with lightning speed through everything that had just been said, and everything that had happened between us. Then, haltingly, I spoke.

"No, Rainbow. No, it will not work. I, I am not a good man. I know that. I am cruel man, and a hard one."

"But-"

"Don't interrupt me! I, well, I do not want you as my, well, companion or lover. I want to, I need to, own you, Rainbow. Any woman of mine must be under my control. She must do only what

I tell her, and not do what I forbid her. She must, she must be prepared to be punished, to accept that there is no other law than my will, and that that law is all her world. So no, I cannot take you with me."

"Are..." she began in a strange whisper. "Are you serious, truly?"

"Yes," I admitted with realization. "I am cruel, I am hard. I guess I will never have no-one, ever."

She rose, shaking with repressed rage. "Then I guess this is goodbye, Wolf. For real, this time."

"Goodbye, Rainbow."

She turned and ran. Ran down the slope I had spent so much time climbing up. With her fleet, naked feet and the bow she had stolen from Lynx bobbing on her shoulder she ran.

That could have been the final goodbye, a magical few days between two strangers. But as it turned it wasn't, and no thanks to me. No, I merely cursed myself, deplored my evil needs and desires, selfish beyond reason, and set my course eastwards again.

From hilltop to hilltop I walked, and every time I found a bird's nest, and every time I snatched a fish out of a clear highland river I thought about Rainbow. My beautiful, soft, fiery Rainbow, whom I had spurned.

It rained constantly for five days, and I was wet and cold, my cloak not offering my much protection as I wallowed in mud and waved brooks with current that threatened to sweep me away. I slept under cliffs, where it was cold and damp and uncomfortable. By rights I should be sick with the cold and pneumonia, but I stayed healthy as a buck and kept walking hard to keep my body warm and my mind off the misery that tormented me worse than the weather.

On the sixth day the weather changed, and far, far away in the east I thought I saw a general downwards tilt of the highlands. Soon I would be in Carosia, but I felt no joy. Instead I turned and faced east.

There! Some miles away, I could see something moving down a slope, clearly visible against white, sandy earth. For a moment I hoped and prayed that it was her, that she had come back to me, somehow!

But then I saw that it was not one figure, but two. It could be anything, two beasts by accident headed towards me. But in my tracks? The Iron Hammer. It had to be them. My mind had been full of Rainbow, and I had clean forgotten about them.

Of course. The Iron Hammer had wanted proof of death, they had wanted my head. And when the hellcat Lynx had failed to give that to them... Then, in the end, their inevitable vow to eradicate the Knight had brought them here. Two hunters, quick and determined, had come to finish the job. I was sure of it. I was also sure that these did had allowed themselves to be seen, unlike Rainbow who had run in circles around me.

There was nothing to do but to turn around and run eastward. I threw my birch rod away and set out. All of that day I trotted us as fast as I could, not caring about my hunger but drinking mightily from the small creeks I passed over. The moon shone all night, and I kept stumbling along in the dim light.

When the next day came and I climbed my thousandth hill I saw ahead of me the land sloping even more downwards. This had to be the end of the highlands! Soon I would reach inhabited areas. The Iron Hammer were not welcome in Carosia, and I might just save my life.

But my burning, weary legs threatened to topple me over when I turned around. My pursuers were closer, far closer. They were at the base of the hill whose peak I was currently standing on. I had maybe spent one hour climbing it, and I did not for a moment believe they would be slower at it than me.

One of them looked smaller than the other, and I guessed it was another hellcat, maybe even the one named Lynx. At least she carried no bow. The other figure, though, was evidently a man, tall

and broad-shouldered. Could it be a Gray Champion?

I did not spend considering if he was one of those dreaded knights, half sorcerers, full fiends, the order created as the elite soldiery of the Iron Hammer. As mockeries of errant knights, they had traveled the lands hunting down and destroying those of my Order who had escaped the wars and great battles.

As swift as I could I ran head-over-heels down the other side of the hill, throwing all caution aside as I stumbled over rocks and slid on loose sand. A fall now could kill me, but perhaps do so with more mercy than my pursuers.

When I had reached the bottom I turned. They were not there! Yet. I had not run over the heather-covered flats for long before I saw them running down the hill with far more grace than I had. For hours I fled and they followed, closer and closer.

At one time I passed over a tall ridge, and now I could clearly see the ocean far, far away. Closer than that, but still some way off, was a steep valley which wound its way downwards towards tilled fields and what could only be a city by the shore. From here I could not make out anything but an unnatural shape in the distance, but if I could only make it there! If!

But I couldn't, and I knew that. They were only a few hundred yards behind me now. One was indeed the hellcat Lynx, and she seemed to follow her companion almost reluctantly.

The Gray Champion was taller than me, and wore forest green clothes. Over one shoulder he had a longbow, over the other a mighty sword. A Blacksword, cursed with death and venom and blood lust, tainting all that would use it. As if the Grays were not vile enough as it were.

With a maddening final effort I sprinted towards a small clump of low thick-growing trees and bushes beneath a cliff just before the valley seemed to open up. If I should have any chance in surviving this I could not risk getting yet another arrow in my back or getting

knocked out by a slung stone.

Indeed, just before I reached the trees I heard an arrow clatter onto the ground behind me. Then I was safe, as safe as one can be when about to be stabbed to death.

The pair halted some paces in front of the trees, getting their breath back. I could see them clearly now. The Gray Champion was thin, deathly thin, almost a skeleton with a pale, gray hue to his skin. I had heard this happened to these evil knights: Their bodies could not accept the evil sorcery they subjected themselves to. Either they wasted away or, if they were strong and ruthless enough, they survived, losing their humanity and wearing the hateful flesh of immortal demons.

I had thought it was the appearance of her companion that had made the hellcat seem reluctant to follow him, but I was wrong. Lynx had been punished severely for failing to kill me. Wounds and scars crisscrossed her face and arms. One eye had been cut, and when she opened her mouth I could see no teeth there. The final eye was glowing white with fear and turned hither and thither.

The sun shone, the wind blew warm and wet and salty in from the ocean, and no-one moved and no-one spoke. I held my little knife in my hand. The Blacksword had to be four feet long. My hand began to shake.

Then the Gray Champion moved. He hoisted the bow off his shoulder and leaned it against a boulder along with his quiver. Then he slid the Blacksword out of its scabbard. It shone like black gold, so like and so unlike the glow of the hair of my beloved Rainbow. Pale, silver runes were inscribed down the center of the blade, which widened out from hilt towards triangular point.

Suddenly his movements became lightning-quick, the sword flashed, and Lynx fell screaming to the ground. As the hellcat slowly and painfully died the Gray Champion washed his blade in her blood, speaking dreadful, evil words of sorcery as he did so. The crimson

life of Lynx then started to glow, and then burned with flames.

When the Gray finally turned to face me the hellcat had made her final sound an hour ago. In his hand he wielded what more properly can be described as a firebrand than a sword. His sunken eyes were feverish with cruel glee as he sought my shadow amongst the trees.

He did not speak, he just walked slowly towards my hiding place. A spark leaped from the firebrand and into a gnarled pine, and the fire caught hold. If he had wanted he could have smoked me out.

But he didn't. His eyes roved lazily amongst the trees, but it was his ears that found me. I breathed a little too loudly, and his head turned like lightning towards me.

Step by step he came closer, and soon I had to act. This was it, this was how I died. I was the last of the Knights of the Wolf, and now there would be none.

I rose to face him. Not because I felt brave, but because I was too scared to try to run any further, to destitute to prolong the torment.

Neither spoke. There was nothing to say. He was going to kill me and bring my head back to the Iron Hammer. We both knew that.

The Gray Champion lifted his sword and swept it towards me, engulfing me in fire. But the fire did not burn me! The flames were caught in the grass and bushes at my feet, but I was unscathed.

A look of fury came into his eyes so violently that I could do nothing but take some steps backwards out of pure fear. Then his body seemed to tense, and he held his sword out in front of me. The fire might not harm me, but nothing would prevent the steel of the Blacksword from running through me.

The first arrow hit him in the belly, slowing him and drawing a gasp from his skeletal throat. The second hit him in the right shoulder, making him drop the Blacksword. The third took him in



the throat and made him topple down in front of my feet.

Then there was silence. I had not heard anyone approaching, and apart from the twong! and thud! of the arrows I had not heard them being there either.

"R-Rainbow?" I croaked.

"Come, Wolf, let us go away from this place. It is evil." A hand, a small, feminine one, took mine.

"I thank you, dearest Rainbow," I said softly, "for saving my life."

"Again," she said and smiled. Her eyes were full of the green of love and the blue of joy. Even so we sat on the ground about five long paces apart, not really knowing what to do now. Evening was coming on, and we had walked a short distance from where poor Lynx' corpse and the carcass of the Gray Champion lay.

"I apologize for the way I treated you when I first met you," I mumbled.

"Oh, that."

"Did you happen to come across the pair, and follow them here?"

"Maybe. What will you do now?" she asked instead.

"First I will go down to the city by the ocean. Then, I do not know. Survive, I guess."

"Shouldn't you do your job?" she asked then, a flash of red in her eyes.

"What job?"

"'The Wolf will break the Circle.' You have named yourself Wolf, and you are the last of the Wolf Knights."

I laughed. Then I stopped laughing. She was right, of course. There was no other road ahead for me. I would have to fight the Iron Hammer, or there would be no peace in my life. I would fight, and then, somewhere and sometime, since I knew it would be in vain, I would fall. I nodded.

"You will need more Wolf Knights to help you," she said, the fangs gleaming in her mouth.

"Yeah," I scoffed bitterly. "Who wants to be hunted down and killed by the Iron Hammer?"

"Someone," she said and crawled over to where I sat, her feline body sliding over the grass. "Someone you can own. Someone who is under your control. Someone who does what you tell her, and does not that which you forbid. Someone who is prepared to be punished, and who has finally realized that there is no other law than your will, and that law is all her world."

My mouth fell open, as her lips touched the ground in front of my legs.

"But I must warn you," she smiled. "I will fight you. Every step of the way. You will not tame me easily. But I know you now, my dear cruel, hard man, and I know that I have already lost."