

The Path of the Dream Lily

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August 21, 2010

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The furious sounds of a chained animal fighting her bindings started up as soon as I touched the doorknob. I opened the door, the chain links rattled, and the large wooden board with the three holes in it, one for her neck and one for each of her wrists, slammed repeatedly against the brick wall. But her efforts amounted to nothing except making sparks fly and tiny wood chips and specks of sawdust glue themselves to her sweat, born of frustration and anger.

Her eyes, her non-human eyes of fiery rage lit the room crimson. But when they saw me they were unable to suppress the joy she felt at my entrance, and blue flickers moved across them. Not because she had been standing upright with her neck and wrists caught in the unmerciful grip of the board for five hours, unable to sit, unable to eat or drink, but because she truly missed me. She would always tell me that I was cruel and hard, and loved me ever more dearly when I proved her right.

"Wolf!" she snarled, revealing her teeth. Where a human woman will have twin rows of evenly shaped ivory, she had incisors like needles, and long, sharp fangs that could easily rip out a jugular vein. "You evil swine! Release me! Now!"

I went over to my prisoner and looked down at her. I had had something to tell her, but the sight of her naked, struggling body forced it from my mind. She was a small, ferocious animal. Less than five feet tall she was a head and then some shorter than me. Her shoulders were slim and her neck delicate; she was a slender, petite woman. Her olive skin was sleek and perfect, and possessed an inner glow that also added to her strange attractiveness.

But it was not the skin that immediately drew a man's eye. Her breasts were that of a larger woman's, firm and full, and with tender nipples. But if a man saw her back instead of a front he would have seen a pair of hips and buttocks that rivaled her breasts, inviting him to put his hands on them and feel the soft touch of desire as

they swayed seductively in front of his loins.

I shook my head and sought her lips instead. When she closed her mouth and hid her teeth they looked like that of a pouting courtesan. As our faces met I felt as if I was swept up into a raging sea, for so passionate was she when she kissed. Even when she was furious with me like now, she would never, could never, deny me her lips.

Her face was one that was hard to describe other than that of a Goddess of the strongest emotion. Expressive, dark eyebrows and the longest lashes I had ever seen, framed the fiery pools of flame. Her snub nose was cute but could, like now, flare dangerously. In the same fashion her dimples could both charm me utterly as well as redden as her temper rose marvelously, and it often did so.

I patted her hair lovingly. It was jet black, straight and with a sheen to it that made it look lustrous no matter its condition. When I had met her she had slashed it short with her strong and sharp nails, but now I refused her permission to cut it. And, like her teeth and claws, it grew far faster than that of a human. In the three months we had been together it had grown almost five inches, and now it fell nearly to her shoulders.

She was a hellcat, a vicious creature of the deep forest, and she had willingly accepted to surrender her body and soul to me. It is said that it is impossible to tame a hellcat, but I had decided to try. Not so much as for the challenge, which it was, or the desire for dominance and mastery, which I felt, but because it was necessary.

"Release me," she repeated, shaking her head and, by virtue of the wooden board, her entire upper body. "I need to visit the latrine, I am hungry, and I am beginning to get cramps!"

"It depends," I repeated, my hand once more finding the tresses of her hair. She could not deny me.

"On what, exactly? On what!?"

"If you have learned your lesson, Rainbow." It was her flickering eyes that had prompted me to give her that name.

"Damn you! Why do you care about that pig?"

"Ah, good. You remember, at least."

"Yes, yes," she rolled her eyes and gnashed her teeth. "I shall not take and eat animals that do not belong to me. Yes, yes."

"That is correct," I smiled. "But have you truly learned it?"

"Yes! I have learned that I am not allowed to hunt what I want! I want to hunt my own meat and I want my meat fresh! I have learned that I have to be stuck inside this damn tiny room with this useless kitchen where you burn meat and these idiotic table and chairs or what you choose to call them, and that repulsing mattress to sleep on, and a bloody, stinking latrine down the hall! And why? Because of my race! Because you big, useless humans fear me!"

I stopped and looked down. This was the true heart of the issue. Rainbow hated the city. She truly detested it. It broke my heart to have to punish her whenever she just followed her nature. But as long as we lived in Oganzar, I had to do it for her own safety. Hellcats were known to eat humans on occasion, and they had been demonized in all countries bordering the vast forests where they lived.

"Listen, Rainbow," I sighed, the fun of my little game vanished. Untying the string that bound the two pieces of wood that made up the board, I freed her. "I don't want to force you to adapt to the city. You can go back to the forest again, if you want. You can be free and wild again, and eat fresh meat. You can sleep under the open sky, and roam wherever fancy takes you. I would love to come with you, but I have a mission that forbids me. You know that."

She stared at me for a moment, massaging neck and wrists. Then, without a word, she put on the hooded, brown robe she had to wear whenever she went outside the room, and left. Five minutes later she came back, and threw the robe on the floor.

Her flaming red eyes found mine, and angry tears sizzled into oblivion. "You filthy scum, Wolf! Don't you even dare suggest such a thing! Leave? Me? After I have gone through three bloody

months of misery!?"

Her hands clasped and unclasped in unconscious violence, and she continued: "I will stand by you on this mission! I will steal and murder for you! I will be trained in every way you choose fit! I will crawl to hell and back for you! And if you do not think that I will be true to my choice, that I wish it otherwise..."

She did not finish the sentence, but the light that flared in her eyes was so intense that I could hardly even see her face. All of the room was bathed in crimson light, and any who looked through the tiny window would surely have to wonder.

"I am sorry," I mumbled. "I just... Well... I don't want to keep happiness away from you."

"I will have to wait and work to find true happiness, it seems," she said, calming down a little. But her now protruding jaw still quivered with emotion at a point next to my nipples. "But I will find it with you. You understand that, you maggot!?"

"One day I will have to do something about your swearing," I smiled, feeling a small amount of consolation.

She arched one eyebrow.

"But not tonight!" I laughed and extended a hand.

She took it, and we kissed once more. Her dangerous body, wiry underneath its soft exterior, capable of stealth and athletic endeavors far beyond me, it melted against me, her lips upturned and her eyes closed in silent tenderness.

"What do we do tonight then?" she asked me gruffly when we parted. "Before you use that damn manhood of yours to pierce me into oblivion, I mean. Being caught in the board sure tickles me inside, and I have had four hours to work up a frustration that will take you at least four hours of hard work to release! You owe me!"

"Maybe I do," I smiled. I wouldn't mind releasing some of that frustration of hers right there and then, and my erect, needy member strained against my greenskin pants. But I had begun to get to know Rainbow by now, and knew from experience that she was aching to

go outside, more badly than she would ever admit even to herself. It had not been foggy in Oganzar for a week, an unprecedented occurrence due to the dry weather we had experienced recently.

"Am I repaid," I grinned at her, having just remembered the news I had returned to tell her in the first place, "if I say that I may just have picked up a clue, a most interesting piece of information that can finally get us out of this miserable existence as no-good, self-righteous thieves?"

"You are not a thief!" she said, sitting down demonstratively on the floor as I coaxed our small stove into life with some wood chips and lighter-bark. "You are of the Order of Ulv, and you are fighting a war!"

"Call it what you like," I smiled at her willingness to come to my defense even against myself, as I put some logs into the stove. There was the pan, and there was the raw bacon of the small pig Rainbow had killed, slaughtered, and carved. She had saved the best parts for me. I deplored punishing her, but I knew that somewhere here in the city there was a family that had been feeding this pig, just like other poor folks would do. "Robbing henchmen of sorcerers that we suspect are associated with the Black Circle and Iron Hammer is not what I call fighting a war."

"The Iron Hammer destroyed your Order! You are the only one left!" Sitting cross-legged she waved the meaty bone she was gnawing agitatedly in the air. "They took your home town of Maurur and burnt it! I know, I was part of the invasion. And now we hear news of how they betrayed my people. I have a grudge against them as well!"

"The Black Circle thrive on treachery, and of course that affects their military arm." I let the bacon sizzle in the pan while I put some bread and cheese on my plate and found a small goblet which I filled with cheap wine from a jar. "Refuse to call it petty theft if you like, but I want to truly strike against them, hurt them, instead

of us being just a couple of red numbers in their account books.”

”Yes!” she exclaimed, giving me a vicious, fanged war grin, the violet of battle lust in her eyes. ”What did you learn, Wolf?”

”I think,” I said slowly as I heaped the cooked, fatty meat on my plate, ”that I know the path of the Dream Lily.”

As we stepped out of the low, squat building where we rented our little room, the night had already fallen on eerie Oganzar. I wore long, blue pants, a light beige shirt, and dark beige cloak, while Rainbow wore her brown, hooded robe. Our garments, like most others in the city, was of the water-repellent, tough greenskin plant.

It was, along with properly waxed leather boots, absolutely required in Bog City. Oganzar was a flat, fertile land where it rained almost seven days a week, and where three rivers met in a large delta. The city was a huge, sprawling place, made from hundreds of islands that were created and destroyed by the water.

All around these isles there were thousands of streams, pools, marshes, swamps, fens, filled with a chaos of low trees and tall reeds, thick bushes and flowers of every shape and size known to man, all with slimy, watery, tough roots. Here lived, in addition to ten thousand human souls, tall-legged wading birds, sleek-furred web-pawed mammals, long, sharp-toothed fish, and snakes, toads, worms, salamanders, frogs, and lots and lots of flies.

Oganzar was not the place to live for the frail of health. It was said there lived one kind of people in this city, namely those who survived all the different sicknesses. Rainbow was feeling well right now, but had suffered from things I could not even begin to guess at. But, as was also said, once you got through your first half year in Oganzar you were only down with the fever one day out of three.

Me? For some reason, after the fall of Maurur, I had never been ill, never so much as a sneeze. I also healed far faster than should be possible. A nasty arrow wound in my side had taken me two or three days to heal completely from. I had not idea why, but I did

not complain.

The island our red-bricked one-story building stood on, as well as five others, was currently sinking into the bog. Soon one of the other buildings would have to be knocked down before the dirty water rose up over the floor. Then either the bricks would be used to build a tall foundation for a new building, or ferried away on a pram somewhere else in the city. Stone was scarce in Oganzar.

We sloshed through the bog towards our little boat, an old, gray slender twelve-footer. Everyone in Oganzar had their own boat, as walking any great distance was both tiring and potentially dangerous. If you were unlucky you might suddenly feel the mud suddenly grip your foot and refuse to let go.

Before we set off I wrapped the remaining meat, both raw and cooked, in the wide leaves of a plant known to preserve food, and put it in the boat. Next to it I put a stoppered jug of wine. Oganzar had to be the one place in the world where the lack of any fresh water made it more expensive than wine. Then I looked up at the Spire, the pointed, iron structure with its blazing lamp far away.

Between the Carosian Highlands in the west and the ocean to the east the ground's altitude varied no more than, say, ten feet. But there were so many tiny hills and low trees that getting lost and disappear in the vast bog was a very real possibility, as the landscape would often be covered by fog for days upon end. Then the Spire, the only guideline a traveler had, was completely invisible.

Like a show of defiance from the gods of the bedrock the Cliff emerged from the ocean some hundred feet from where it was generally agreed the shore was. It was the only solid stone east of the Highlands, and was barely large enough to contain the black fortress of Oganzar, nicknamed the Spire because of its slender top, as well as the harbor that was so vital to the city's survival. So vital that a channel of deep water was laboriously maintained from the open sea and in towards the Cliff.

The Cliff was, in lack of anywhere else, the city center of Oganzar. Here the merchants worked and lived, and here the warehouses and inns were. The poorer people who worked in the harbor clustered on the dreary hillocks on the mainland, walking to and fro on the causeway that had been built in years past.

We lived some distance from the Cliff, and had to travel by boat to get there. I sat down by the oars, while Rainbow took hold of the tiller. It was precision work to navigate the narrow channels, but the hellcat was a natural helmswoman. She sat in the stern and grinned impishly at me, the blue light shining faintly in the early night. This was the real Rainbow. The furious, angry beast trapped inside was gone. As the foul-smelling marsh wind caressed her hood it brought forth a smile that tickled my own lips.

Here and there we met other boats filled with coughing, sneezing people heading home from work. There were people living everywhere, though not as close together as they would in any other city, and the channel was even lined by gardens some places. Soon it would be completely dark, and we had to find the Double Tree before then. In the gray light the trees and other vegetation that lined the narrow channel we followed seemed strangely blurry and indistinct. Thankfully it was no fog and we could now and then see the light of the Spire far away on our left.

One of the boats we met was manned by two dirty, unkempt men. One of them rowed erratically, and the other steered their vessel so badly that they kept getting it caught in the tussocks on every side of the channel we followed. They were very angry, shouting at each other, and threatened the boats that they met. I knew what ailed them: The Dream Lily.

Oganzar was a city and land which specialized itself in growing exotic plants of all kinds, magical and not: From remedies for most of the diseases the city was home to, and mystical ingredients for the

occult works of sorcerers and priests, to the finest, most sought after, spices in the world and useful plants like greenskin. This was the only reason people wanted to live in this hellhole. But the incredibly varied botany also provided the inhabitants with certain herbs that gave them alternately sweet dreams and horrible nightmares.

Some of these drugs were more or less benign, if that can be said, making people mostly drowsy, lazy, and happy. Others turned their victims into living zombies in the macabre dens located off the Cliff, their presence not tolerated by the Captain of the Spire.

But the Dream Lily was something else entirely. It was certainly a drug, and made its addicts confused, withdrawn, and dreamy. In addition it also caused a smoldering aggression and unnatural cruelty, an uncommon side effect. The main difference, though, was that the drug caused a religion.

"Bow before the chosen of Uzar, the Lord of Dreams!" one of them slurred as we slowly closed in on them. The cult of the dread, decaying God that promised heavenly ecstasy and drug-induced wild abandon had gotten a solid foothold in the city from some time before we had arrived here.

The Lord of Dreams was a deity revered among the secretive Black Circle, that collection of monstrous sorcerers and other dark beings, for his powers in causing madness and obsessions. Many a clear-headed enemy of a Circle member had leaped in insanity from his battlements after succumbing to the manipulations of Uzar's followers.

In Oganzar he had been known from before, but now as the large, pale flower called the Dream Lily had come to invade the minds of more and more people, he was the new terror of the swamps. Someone would take his boat out one morning to work in some distant field, and then days later it would be sold cheaply in the harbor by the Cliff, the owner probably lying face down in the swamp somewhere.

And the raving followers of Uzar only went after the poor, avoid-

ing the persecution of the Captain, the merchants, and the scholar-sorcerers that dwelt in Oganzar. They would hold their sermons far away from the Cliff, where they preached against their earthly masters, against the now extinct Order of Ulv, and in support of the Iron Hammer.

That, more than anything else, led me to believe that there was an ill will somewhere in Oganzar, someone who worked to bring the city under its rule, or that of the Iron Hammer. The city was a member of the Merchant Cities of Carosia, which had so far violently opposed the army that was secretly controlled by the Black Circle. Three years ago the navy of the Iron Hammer had been repelled after trying to invade Oganzar, and now I suspected another kind of plot was hatching.

"Bow before the chosen!" the man with the tiller, pale of skin with a large beard, yelled again, so agitated that he steered the boat into the trunk of a tree that overhang the channel.

I did not wish for a fight with these men, and expected to avoid it. This channel was one of the most-traveled routes from the Cliff to the west, being deep and almost straight, and so there were other boats about to witness any attack. All around we could see buildings, from the large rent-houses such as the one where we lived, to solitary farms and huts. With a mighty grunt I heaved at the oars so that we could pass the boat without any further ado.

But that was not to happen. I swore inwardly as I saw Rainbow raise an brown-robed arm and vigorously wink her little finger at the two men, the rest of her body still hidden in her clothes. The smallness of the finger was meant to imply that neither of the two men were well-endowed, and the winking a suggestion of impotency.

"Boy!" the tiller-man shouted as he managed to straighten their boat again. "Insolent pigs! I will strangle you and your boy for this!"

Whether Rainbow showed any signs of being indignant due to being taken for a young lad, I did not get the chance to see. Instead I had to turn quickly around, put down one oar and grab the other, ready to fight as our boat quickly closed in on the other.

"Take this, by Uzar!" the oarsman yelled and swung his oar at me. The two had chosen to arm themselves in the same manner as me.

My oar rattled at the impact, and then it was my turn to strike. For a few seconds I fought with them both as our boats lay next to each other in such a way that I had one on each side of me. Then, suddenly a flying vine entangled the oarsman's oar, and Rainbow, who must have thrown it, pulled hard. As the man let go of the oar and tried to regain equilibrium, she lunged forward and planted her small fist smack on his nose. She was not strong, but she was fast, and that more than made up for it.

Three more punches followed. The desperate man once caught hold of her robes, but screamed and let go when she bent his pinky viciously. Then he plummeted into the murky waters between the boats. With him gone it had been easy for me to give the drugged, erratic tillerman a good whack on the side of the head, and he slumped down into the boat, giving up the fight.

I shoved off against their boat, and saw the oarsman emerge panting from beneath our vessel. "The Lord of Dreams will get you, boy!" he raged, standing with filthy water to his armpits. "I will slaughter you myself!"

Rainbow had turned her back on him, and the last thing he saw in the deepening gloom was a waving, little finger illuminated by a strange, blue light. I shook my head and kept rowing.

"Are you angry with me?" she laughed, the blue glow of joy still strong in her eyes.

I grunted.

"It was they who attacked us!"

I made a sound.

"We were just defending ourselves."

"Hmph," I said.

"I didn't even show my true nature. I really think I deserve a reward, saving your life in such a splendid manner."

I began laughing, relieved. It did feel good to thrash two troublemakers such as them, but I just happy that Rainbow was glad. To her the excitement of the wild life was everything, and a brawl with two willing opponents was exactly what she needed right now.

"Where did the woman say to turn south?" Rainbow asked after a few more minutes.

"Double Tree," I replied.

"Funny," she wrinkled her nose prettily beneath the cowls of her hood. "I didn't know there was a channel down there? Was she reliable, this woman?"

"As reliable as any Minstrel that is more into drugs than music can ever be."

"Airheads!" the hellcat barked. "I never met no Minstrel with a thought in their skulls. Love-making, magic mushrooms, and their damn racket, that's all they care about."

"You got Minstrel visits deep in your forests? The man-eating hellcats?"

"Think, you simpleton!" Rainbow laughed. "We are a people of more than ten women per man! I guess every male Minstrel that ever roamed the western lands came to our forest eventually."

"Really?"

"Sure! We once had one of these peacocks come visit my tribe. They way he sung, it was like the moon itself had descended to bewitch us! A big, wide smile he had, deep brown eyes, and skin as dark as coal. I remember-"

"Do you?" I interrupted.

She threw back her head and laughed! "Come on, Wolf! How can a mere mortal resist a Minstrel? You'll see! But I am not sure if I want one joining your pack, they are damn unreliable!"

"Well, the one I spoke was very charming," I responded evilly. "A big wide smile she had, deep blue eyes, and skin as white as-"

Rainbow laughed some more. "Go ahead! If you want someone who abandons you to go on five-year rambles every now and then, then be my guest!"

"Is it true their music is magic? They were banned from entering Maurur because of that."

"It sure felt like it!" she winked at me

"Can you stop with the bloody stories and the winking?" I grumbled jealously, while she just chuckled.

"There's the Double Tree," she said then after a frustratingly long period of mirth, her face suddenly keen.

I turned around. Indeed, along the channel which was now mostly lined with thick shrubs that severely limited visibility, there was the dark shape of a tall tree with a trunk that had been split in two about five feet above the hillock it grew on. The area was infamous for being a breeding swamp for various kinds of insects, all of whom could fly and bite you. As a consequence there were few, if any, who made their home around here. The channel was almost devoid of other travelers now, and we could be fairly sure to avoid any prying eyes. I had no way of knowing how the growers of the Dream Lily defended their secrets.

"Let's disembark," I said, and Rainbow guided the boat over to the shore of the hillock. Then she leaped effortlessly onto dry land, while I followed somewhat more laboriously.

"Bloody thorns!" I shouted as it turned out the hillock was not made for romantic picnics. I had not seen the sharp pricks in the dim light.

Rainbow had seen them, and, with the light of her eyes, moved

effortlessly around the tree. "So, there should be a channel of some sort around here?"

"Yes," I replied, trying to disentangle myself from the thorny bush without piercing my waterproof clothes. The hellcat meanwhile climbed the tree effortlessly, looking from side to side.

How could she move around here so easily? When we had first come to this place we had realized that the way to earn a living was to search for certain kinds of plants and bring them to the ships lying at the harbor by the Cliff. Since Rainbow could not show her true nature, and since she at first had spent a lot of time sick as well, it had been I who had been out here. I had learned the layout of the sprawling city the hard way, and knew my way around the Cliff. I had waded, climbed, struggled, cursed, and, because of my strange blessing of never getting neither sick nor lasting wounds, managed to earn some money. But whenever Rainbow could go out, she would run in circles around me.

"It's a good disguise," she remarked from a point ten feet above me, "but I think I see a water-trail leading south here."

Hidden channels and paths were common-place in the bog. If there was a patch where some valuable plants happened to grow, then the discoverer would go to any lengths to hide the way there. Somewhere, far from the city and prying eyes, there was a field of Dream Lilies, harvested and transported fresh to the dens of the Cliff, where they were bathed in clear water, their scent turning people into vacant-eyed followers of Uzar, the Lord of Dreams.

Rainbow and I had robbed and questioned, without much threat of violence, the vendors of the drug, but no-one had known more than that at certain places within city limits they met the prams that brought the small, folded greenskin pouches that held the fragile flowers. But now, due to a change meeting with a Minstrel that was out of her mind we finally had a way of striking at the source of the drug.

The Minstrel had been high on Dream Lily, but she had thought

I was fiendishly handsome and had told me where to find the white fields where they grew. For she had been there, though she had been unable to tell me what she did there, or why she was given the honor of being allowed to visit, or by whom. Then she had grown sad and cried bitter tears as she mourned being a slave to the drug, being trapped here in the foggy hell of Bog City, not allowed to wander like her race is supposed to do. And I had spoken soothing words, patted her sobbing back and stroked her blonde hair until she had fallen asleep on the tavern table.

In near darkness we pulled the boat across the knots of wiry roots between two clumps of shrubs that grew adjacent to the main channel. I stumbled and swore as I tripped, scratched my fingers, and swatted at the many flies that refused to go to sleep for the night. Rainbow's eyes flickered light blue laughter at me as she moved gracefully, climbing over roots and under branches, pulling at the boat.

On the other side we began a difficult, unpleasant, dirty, sweaty, and ultimately slow journey over a mire that was hardly more easy to traverse by boat than by foot. I could not row, and would use the oar to push our vessel along. Rainbow sat in the prow and looked out, trying to find the best route, but it was hard in total darkness even with her eyes of light. Now and then we had to get out to lift and then push the boat over an obstruction of some kind, and we were soon tired and worn out.

In the end we were so exhausted than we unanimously agreed that we had come so far as to not been seen or heard from the main channel. Rainbow was convinced we had being following another channel south, one of the very worst quality. We pulled the boat about thirty feet to the left, or east. There was small mound there, and lying down on the far side would most likely keep us hidden.

Or if it did not, then so bloody what? We were dead tired. Each eating large helpings of the meat we had brought, and drinking

deeply from the wine jug, we immediately fell asleep. Tomorrow would be better. We hoped.

Tomorrow was not better. I woke with Rainbow wrapped in my arms, her hair tickling my face, but from there the morning just plummeted.

Fog. Of course, just when it had been clear weather for week and we had gambled that it would continue for one more stinking, lousy day... But the fog was here. Yellow-white, clingy fog, thick beyond anything possible elsewhere. It was so substantial that it was more like foam than fog. You got the disgusting texture in your mouth, and if you grabbed it, it dissolved lazily in your hand. Even hellcat eyes could not see far in this weather.

"If we continue," I whispered to Rainbow after we had breakfasted and groaned the cramps out of our backs, "then we can die out here. If we turn around we will most likely get back to the main channel and live."

"What?" she said, her face a blur three feet away.

"I cannot see the light of the Spire. We can turn back and save ourselves." I wavered. To continue would be very dangerous, but my mission was supposed to be that, if nothing else. But sacrificing both our lives, Rainbow's in particular, to the scavengers of the bog...

"What?"

"What what?"

"I am sorry," her voice came now stronger, more angry, "I was just confused. I expected to hear a man's voice, not that of a chicken. Turning back? To that bloody room!? I will never forgive you!"

"But you are a forest creature, not a swamp toad," I protested. "You will get the fever again out here. You are not skilled in-"

"And you are poultry! So what? If your cowardice is because of me, then you can ram it up your ass. I want to live and die out here in the wild, and do both with a smile on my lips!"

"Then stop talking and help pull the boat. We are going on!" I grinned in spite of myself. Rainbow was the kind of person with whom you would draw your sword and charge recklessly at an enemy army, only so that you could die gloriously together.

But even so, there is no glory in getting lost in a swamp, having just a faint notion of where south is, and cursing and arguing and groaning and even weeping with the pure insanity and exhaustion of pulling that damn boat after you. Rainbow was constantly angry, and her tongue lashed out at everything that hampered our progress, including herself and me. I grumbled more quietly, but when we shouted angrily at each other in disagreement I found I had such a short temper that I most times just burst out that she 'bloody well do what I say!'

She would, and then she growled nastily at me when my decision turned out to be all wrong. Rainbow was not a strong woman, but she was wiry and had a marvelous endurance that kept her going alongside me until we could pull, push, and lift no more.

For two entire days we kept at this, getting further and further away from the city. Rainbow had lost the channel that we had been following in the deep fog, and could not blame her as I had never been able to recognize the faint trail in the first place.

Slowly the landscape changed character, becoming drier. We pulled the boat along over wet, long grass and stiff straws, and through copses of bushes. It got stuck there, and it got stuck in the many tiny mires and sinkholes that not even the fleet footed Rainbow was able to completely avoid.

"That bloody Minstrel!" I barked the evening of the second day. " 'It's a wide, deep channel,' she said. 'We follow it south and then we reach the banana lake in less than a day,' she said. There are no lakes here, no brooks, no nothing!"

"Why did you listen to that damn mandolin-head? Because you felt sorry for her and she was so pretty, I bet? By the Gods, you

men are pathetic! Never trust a Minstrel! Never! Banana lake? What kind of drunken monkey-drivel is that!?"

We kept bickering at each other as we lay side by side on the driest patch of grass we could find. But with the thick, yellowish fog there was no stopping dirty, warm water from creeping into our garments and mixing with our sweat. We had eaten the last of our food this morning, and had been forced to eat a raw fish that Rainbow had caught for dinner. For supper there was nothing but the scornful words we fed each other.

In the end I got so tired that I grabbed her head and kissed her passionately and violently for more than a minute. "No more words," I said then. "Now we sleep."

Rainbow replied by kissing me fiercely in return, and awarded me with the only blue light I had seen in her eyes for all of that day. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then checked herself, grinned, and crawled into my arms. She had to be dead tired because she fell asleep before my hands had even clasped in front of her.

When I awoke the morning after I did not immediately become aware that something was wrong. I kissed her hair, from which not even the long trek and the awful fog had managed to remove the luster, and rose. Working out about one hundred kinks and aching muscles I began to feel, if not eager, then at least ready to go.

"What's wrong?" I said, when I remembered that Rainbow had not risen.

Then I caught the hot, pink light in her eyes, and heard her rasping breath. She looked at me, but did not speak.

"You ill again, my sweet?" I asked, putting my hand on her cheek. It was burning.

"Don't be an idiot," she whispered hoarsely, and got to her feet with an obvious effort. "Don't stand there dawdling with your mouth open, Wolf. Let's go!"

She took a few steps, which led her in a circle, and then she collided with me. "Away! Move! Let's go!"

"You are ill," I said, feeling her brow this time. "You have a strong fever."

"Be off! We go now!" She tried to push me out of the way.

"Rainbow! Sit down!"

She slumped down on the ground like a sack of apples being dropped. "You are mean!"

"You need a dry bed, dry clothes, a potion, and rest. And lots of it!"

"You need to be nicer, Wolf!" Her head had fallen between her knees. "Do this, do that, you need this, you need that! You should treat me nice, nice, nice, nice! You stole my name! I was called Wolf. Now I am Rainbow, and I am a slave to Wolf. And I will do anything for my Wolf! Everything! I sit down, but I want to go with my Wolf!"

As I sat by her side, not knowing what to do, the weather did the only thing that could have made matters worse. It began to rain. Hard. The fog was soon washed away in a downpour so fierce that visibility was hardly improved at all.

Soon this rather dry area would become wet and maybe even feasible to travel by boat if the rain should last long enough. But right now the downpour made it impossible for me to move both Rainbow and the boat. If I made her sit in it and then pulled the boat along with her in it, then it would soon fill up with water and quickly become too heavy for me to even move.

There was no other choice but to lift her up, despite her incoherent protests, and sling her over my shoulder. For Rainbow, burning with fever, it was now just a matter of time.

Only bringing with me a small bundle of tools I left the boat behind and began trudging in a direction where I somehow guessed there was higher ground to be found. High ground might mean somewhere that wouldn't be flooded, somewhere where there was a

chance of me building some sort of tent. Maybe it was a desperate thought, but it was the only idea I managed to come up with. Better do something, rather than sit by and just watch Rainbow burn up.

I am not a very religious man. My Order is called the Order of Ulv, and as such I know by whom to swear. I know a few prayers, and can recite some fragments of the sacred texts. But it was not until now, in this hour of dire need, that I well and truly believed.

I believed, with a fever of the mind that matched even that of poor Rainbow, that this, just this!, direction was the right one. Faith was upon me, and I walked through the bog with surer steps and more speed than ever before, the rain not bothering me much at all. My sweet Rainbow should not die, and it was in my power to prevent that!

I kept walking for what I guessed was a little over two hours, never doubting my path, feeling strong and sure of myself. There were hillocks here and there, but they were not what I sought. The last coherent words Rainbow had uttered was when she yelled at me to put her down, carry on alone, and continue my mission and build my pack without her. After that it was just senseless ravings. I kept walking. I kept walking until I reached the hut.

The small hut was for real, its wooden, red painted boards, white-framed windows, thatched roof, and low door were all real. So was the cistern, chicken coop, and vast garden that surrounded it, where all the colorful herbs grew. So, indeed, was the gray-haired woman sitting in the midst of the flowers, weeding.

The rain had lessened a little, improving visibility, and when I passed over a low ridge with Rainbow still across my shoulders I looked straight at this tiny home. It had burst out of the scenery like a white knight in the fairy tales who come to rescue the fair princess.

And there was definitively magic in the air. Ordinary women did not live far away from everyone else, tending such neat gardens with a variety of plants like this. When I had first arrived in the city I had been told there were three Powers in Oganzar. One was the Captain and his men and his fleet. One was the merchants and their gold. But the real Lords of Bog City were its many sages, who grew and studied and experimented with the flora. No-one knew all their names, and no-one knew where even a fraction of them had made their abodes. This woman surely had to be one of them.

She looked up at me as I approached, her sharp expression surrounded by a wild array of soaking wet, gray curls. Her face was lined, giving the impression that she was at least fifty. Her dress was of brown greenskin, and she wore rough gloves as well.

"Good day," I said hesitantly.

"And good day to you, young man! Is that a hellcat over your shoulder?"

"How did you kn-" I began.

"That pink light doesn't come from nowhere else, now does it?"

"Yes, of course. My name is Wo-"

"Do you want to introduce yourself, or bring her inside so that I may take a look at her? That fever looks nasty. Come on, lad!" She rose briskly, turned around and walked stiff-legged into her hut, leaving the door open for me to follow.

I had never seen so many shelves in such a little space, all filled with tinted glass jars of various shapes, colors and contents including live insects, a disarray of potted plants that grew wildly, small boxes of dark wood where dried leaves peeped out from under the lids, and even strange rocks and animal hides, in addition to the worn old books that any sage will have in his study. The shelves covered every wall, and there even was a central, triangular shelf that took up most of the space in the hut. The door and small kitchen was on one side, the cluttered combined desk and workbench on the second,

and the bed on the third.

As the old woman pulled off the bedsheets so that I could put Rainbow down on the mattress, I noticed that it was clean, spotless. This was a sharp contrast to the rest of the hut which was, to me, a complete chaos.

"She your wife?"

"Well, sort of."

"Yes, I know. Then sort of take those wet clothes off of her and tuck her in. I go boil up something for that fever."

Rainbow's body was burning and she was sweating profusely. Her sleek, soft skin was covered with a foul smelling film that must have accumulated during the last few days. I had no illusion that I was any better off, but it would do her good to wash off the filth.

"Er, Madam? You got any?"

"Hot water to clean her? Good thinking, son. Just a minute. With the downpour we have right now the cistern will be so full you could have given her a proper bath!"

After just a few minutes while I listened to the crackling fire of her little stove and held Rainbow's hand in mine, she came round the central shelf with a bucket full of warm water and a clean rag.

"Now be thorough, young man! Nothing heals the mind like being clean, you know."

"I sure will," I smiled at her.

"And then you should wash as well! Hundreds of different stinks in this hut, and yours is by far the strongest."

I laughed as she winked at me before heading back to the stove. From the bucket rose a scent almost like that of very sweet orange. The plant was called oranevendel, and was used by the very richest for cleaning themselves. The cost of the oranevendel used in the bath of a noble lady in Maurur was more than her bath maid was paid in a month.

The film washed easily off Rainbow, and in just few minutes she

smelled of oranevendel and that unmistakable scent of wet, beautiful woman. Turning the mattress I tucked her in, and she fell back into delirious sleep with a groan. I threw the washing water out, and the old woman refilled the bucket for me. Then I undressed and washed myself and both our clothes.

With my clothes now hanging on a creeping vine close to the blazing hot stove, I sat down on the bed and covered myself nakedness with the bedsheets. "Thank you for your help and hospitality," I said to the old woman, whom I guessed was now boiling what smelled like a bitter-tasting potion.

"Oh, that! It's fine. What are you doing out here anyway, with a hellcat and all?"

"My name is Wolf, and I-"

"There goes the introduction again!"

"Wolf, and I am a Knight of the Order of Ulv."

"You are, are you?"

"Yes, and I come-"

"Last I heard was that they were, pardon my speech, wiped off the face of this world by the Iron Hammer."

"Yes, I have lost a lot of brothers lately." I said slowly. "But, there is still me left. Me and Rainbow. And I intend to fight back at them."

"You two? Alone? And here? Here in this godforsaken swamp? Pull the other one, I can hear tinkling!"

I opened my mouth to explain everything in detail, then closed it again. "We are searching for the path of the Dream Lily."

Silence. The old woman had stopped stirring. Then her voice came slowly, evenly, almost threateningly. "Why are you seeking the Dream Lily?"

"The madness, the violence, the cult of Uzar, the Lord of Dreams. The Black Circle. We want to put an end to it."

"You are determined to do this? Truly determined?"

"Yes. That is why Rainbow is close to death. I was told of the path from one of the flower's victims, a Minstrel now stranded in Oganzar, but we got lost in the fog. We are but recently come to this city from the west, you see."

"Maybe I do..." the old woman said. Then she came walking around the triangular shelf, a small cup of thick-flowing violet liquid in her hand. "Here! Try and make her drink this."

I took the cup, and slowly shook Rainbow's shoulders. I got no reaction. I tried again, but she slept soundly, and her beautiful face was twisted in pain. Her brow was hotter than ever.

"I can't wake her," I said, feeling a fist close around my guts. "And she's burning up."

"She must drink," the old woman said, shaking her head slowly.

"Rainbow," I called, shaking her again. "Rainbow, wake up!"

"No," she mumbled then, after a short pause.

"You must!"

"Please, Wolf, no..." Apart from her voice there was nothing in her behavior that hinted that she was conscious.

"Drink this!" I lifted her head and put the cup to her lips.

"Don't want, Wolf."

"Drink!"

"Yes, Wolf." She opened her lips slightly, and the thick liquid flowed slowly into her mouth. Apart from her swallowing motions, she might have been fast asleep still.

When the cup was empty, I lowered her head again. "Now, go back to sleep, my dear Rainbow..."

There was not much change in the hellcat after having drunk the potion, but her face seemed to be slightly calmer now. I turned back to the old woman and handed her the cup. "Thank you. Will she be all right?"

"I think so. But how could you be so stupid as to journey into the swamp without any elixir? Any antidotes?"

"I, well, I-" I did not know what to answer. I had always been

able to keep Rainbow warm and dry, and buy medicines when she needed them. I guess I had just not thought of it.

"What if you had become ill as well as her? Could you two have crawled all the way to my house?"

"I don't get sick," I answered truthfully.

"You do- Come again?"

"I have not sneezed even once since the fall of Maurur."

"And that was when?"

"Three months ago. We have lived in this place for a little more than two."

"Over two months in Oganzar, and you haven't... Let me look at you!" She cupped my face in her hands, and stared intently into my eyes. Her hands were rough and calloused, but gentle. "Do you, Wolf, ever get drunk?"

"Er..." What kind of question was that? "I don't drink a lot. Anymore, that is. Rainbow is a hellcat, and they prefer water. Water and raw meat."

"That's disgusting!"

"Raw meat?"

"No! Raw meat is good for you. What's disgusting is a healthy young man like yourself not getting drunk! Now, when I was a lass... Anyway, when you cut yourself, does your wound heal itself quickly?"

"Very," I replied, amazed. "I was once shot by two arrows. Three days later the wound and pain was gone. How on earth did you know that?"

"I see. Anything else? Does magic affect you in any way? Are you tougher than before? Stronger?"

"Well, I don't think so. Don't know about magic, at least. Not stronger, either. Yes, there is one thing. I don't feel hunger so much anymore. For sure I am hungry when I haven't eaten for a long time, but I don't feel weak because of it."

She stared suspiciously into my eyes again for a moment, then

she broke our mutual gaze. "Hunger! Where are my manners? You must be hungry?" She rose quickly.

"I am. But your manners should also prompt you to introduce yourself."

"What? Of course I have introduced myself. Don't be daft." The old woman disappeared behind the triangular shelf once more and the sound of clanging pots told me she had begun cooking.

"No, you must have forgotten in the confusion."

"Ridiculous! It is you that has forgotten my name."

"If you wish, then I have forgotten. What is your name? Again."

"Don't be condescending, young man! My name is Marilla, Baron's daughter by birth, witch by profession."

"Oh, I am sorry, my Lady." I put my hand on Rainbow's brow once more. It was hot, but perhaps not as searing as it had been.

"'My Lady' me again and you sleep in the chicken coop tonight!"

"All right," I laughed. "So what kind of witchery are you doing out here, you old crone?"

"I am looking for ways of turning cheeky young men into toads," she chuckled. "No, seriously. I am interested in everything, but lately this Dream Lily has been on my mind. I know it has been the fashionable drug among the poor of Oganzar for a few years, but never paid much attention to it until they started showing up around here."

"And they are...?"

"The poor wretches enslaved to the Lily, of course! Like you they got news of the path to it or maybe the Dream Lily called out to them, and their need for the flower drove them here."

"And?"

"And, well. I tried to dissuade them, I tried to talk sense into them, I tried to heal them of their addiction, I tried everything. But in the end they all left, searching for the fields of the Dream Lily they fantasized about. I think I got about ten poor souls showing up here, and the Gods only know how many didn't happen to stumble

upon my little hut.”

”What kind of devilry is this damned hell-flower!?” I growled.

”That, at least, can be easily answered.”

Soon came the sound of scissors snapping. Then Marilla came over to me and I held my palm out to her. On it she delicately laid the flower.

The Dream Lily was a large flower, my hand wholly invisible beneath it. It was a sickly, light yellow, and the long tight pointed buds brought fourth what can only be described as moist-feeling, tear-shaped petals that somehow seemed to be alive. The petals spiraled inwards towards the center of the flower, a center which was both an empty nothing and also the center of an occult whirlpool. The scent was awkward, the sweet smell trying and failing to hide some evil stench. I wrinkled my nose. The whole thing gave me the shivers.

”And thus,” the witch said when I handed her the flower back, ”I got my answer as well.”

”What answer?”

”Concerning you, of course!” I noticed she was holding the flower at an arm-length’s distance, not looking at it. ”It is a plant of power, my young friend. Yet you found neither the scent enchanting, nor the flower’s eye fascinating.”

”And what, pray, does that mean?”

”Think, man! Don’t you know nothing of your own Order’s history? What this means, I think, that I should address you as ’o Blessed One’.”

I burst out laughing. The witch did not laugh. She wrapped the Dream Lily away in some leaves and looked at me.

”Are you serious? There hasn’t been any Blessed of Ulv for ages. If they ever existed.”

”I am not surprised there hasn’t been one for that long! For the last two hundred years the Order of Ulv has not been much better than a gentleman’s club for the very rich and martially fascinated.

No, do not object! My father was one, and I know what I am talking about. No champion of good and truth, no white knight seeking the destruction of evil, no paladin bringing light into dark places would feel at home at one of the lavish garden parties my parents would have, with their many servants, sterling silver plates, and a lawn so finely tended you could play with marbles on it.

"But all that is gone now. Now there is you. The last of His Order. You are alone. You are a good man, but also a warrior. You have power beyond ordinary men, and the power to make ordinary men flock to your banner. And also, it seems, to make extraordinary women devote themselves wholly to you."

"Devote what now?"

"You heard me, son. When you came out of the rain like that, marching like a true soldier with your back straight, the hellcat over your shoulder, I suddenly felt like a giddy young maiden again."

"Young maiden? Huh? What on earth does that mean?"

"That means you and your Blessed powers should get the hell away from me as soon as possible," she laughed, eyes narrowing. "I am far too old and wise to follow some knight around on a foolish quest."

"How," I said to Marilla after complimenting her on her cooking several times. The stew was made of just vegetables, but so thick and nourishing and wonderful as I had never tasted before. "How come you grow the Dream Lily? It is an evil flower."

"It's good to know one's enemy," the witch smiled back at me. We were sitting eating by her desk. Rainbow was still sleeping in the bed, but the fever had gone down a little. Marilla had told me she was going to be all right.

"I have been trying to find a remedy for the condition of the Dream Lily, but in vain. It is hard. You see, the flower seems to destroy something in its victim's mind and replaces it with something else. Anything they ever cared about is gone from their thoughts,

they all just want more of the Lily, and find their consolation in the rituals of the Lord of Dreams. Once I managed to remove all traces of its influence from someone, but the hapless man was turned into a mere hull of a human, devoid of feelings and intelligence.”

”The Lord of Dreams... I think he is famous for his subversive ways, for reveling in the insanity of his followers, but even more in the madness of his foes.” I shifted. I was still naked except for the rag I had used to clean myself with wrapped around my loins. The witch was careful not to look at me, and her fingers would fidget irritatedly with her wooden spoon. Twice she had checked if my clothes were dry, and twice she had been disappointed that they were not.

”I guess so, but I have not studied Uzar to any great degree. They fill themselves with insanity, and think themselves stronger, while inside they go brittle. Flitting around while high on the Lily and his treacherous whisperings, they commit irrational, selfish acts until they end up as shivering wrecks with minds that will never let them in peace again.”

I grunted while eating the stew. The two men in the boat that we had thrashed, what would become of them? Would their loved ones who now probably feared them come to care for them again when they later would sit in gloom somewhere, choking on tears and lamenting their broken souls?

”I got the seeds of the Dream Lily from a Minstrel a little more than a year ago,” Marilla continued. ”Much like you and everyone else she got lost on the path but, and mark this!, she was going the other way. She had been to the fields, somehow.

”The flower had carved deeper into her mind, and replaced more of her soul with its own dark presence than that of any others I have so far encountered. There was not much left of her race inside her. She could not leave Oganzar for the next great adventure. She could not take new lovers. And worst of all, she could neither sing nor play. Except to the Dream Lily, she said. She could make music

for it, and nothing else. The shadow of the Lily prevented her from telling me anything more, even though I pressed her. She left one day, in the night."

"What did she look like? A blonde, with blue eyes? Short, but with a very, aha, generous body?"

"Yes, I think we have spoken to the same one," the witch said. Our eyes met, she looked away, rose and touched my garments again. "These are dry," she said tossing them to me. "Finally! I am sick and tired of not looking at that half-naked, firm body of yours. Damned your powers of blessedness! Put those clothes on and follow me, son."

After dressing I checked on Rainbow who was now sleeping peacefully. The potion the witch had given her must have worked wonders! Planting a kiss on her closed lips I left the hut, following Marilla.

"I lied about you sleeping in the chicken coop," she told me as we rounded the west wall. There was a low building there, from which could be heard the sounds of hens clucking happily. "You see, I already have a guest there."

The coop was divided into two parts: A noisy, busy one where the brown and white hens, five in number, were kept, and one that doubled as a garden shed. There were various tools stacked here, such as spades, ropes, and gloves.

In addition there was a woman there, tied hands and feet, glaring up at us. I blinked my eyes and looked open-mouthed at the witch. I had tied Rainbow up like this before, but what reason could the witch have for doing it "W-What? This is the Minstrel Ilina? Why?"

"Oh, this is just what will happen to you if you should go to sleep in my home," the witch said sardonically. "Can't you guess?"

"Er... No?"

"Beware the Lord of Dreams!" the Minstrel said, her large blue eyes so full of mad fire that they looked akin to those of a hell-cat. "Uzar will touch your souls! He will send you to a screaming

nightmare from which you will never return.”

Invariably I took a step back. There was such vicious hate in her voice, mingled with utter desperation, that I was shocked. When I had met her in the tavern at the Cliff she had been sad, yes, but certainly not like this. Her voice should be sweet and musical, like that of a true Minstrel!

”That should explain the ropes,” Marilla commented lazily. ”Though I find no pleasure in doing so. She came here late last night, and begged me to help her break free from the Dream Lily. Maybe you questioning her about the path made her decide to seek me out? As you can guess, I have not succeeded.”

”You promised to help me! You promised!” There was now merely anguish in the Minstrel Ilina’s voice. She thrashed about on the floor, obviously in great pain.

In the tavern she had merely been a shadow of what a Minstrel should by rights be. It was not just because of her miserable spirits, so far from the famed optimism of her race. No, the blonde hair that ought to have fallen smooth and shiny down below her shoulders had been lank and greasy. The generous hour-glass shaped body, with breasts and hips that should have been caressed by a tight dress and made men descend upon her like ravaged dogs, had given the impression that she was fat. She had not looked like a musician about to seduce and thrill her audience, but rather like a drunkard longing to be seduced and thrilled by the next glass of whatever she truly needed.

That had been in the tavern. Now she had fallen far below even that state. The eyes were blood-shot. The hair was a mess. She was dirty and sweaty, and looked more like a sow than a woman.

In terror I looked at the witch. She was biting her lips thoughtfully while watching the Minstrel. ”I promised to do what I could, my dear.”

”You have the Lily, Marilla! Give me of the Lily! Please!”

”Are you sure? Really sure? You were determined to keep away

from it last night, even if it meant ropes to keep us both safe.”

”Yes!”

”Before I do that,” the witch said, ”I thought I would show you young Wolf here. Wolf is a Blessed of Ulv. Do you know what that means?”

”Dunno! Just... Give me... The Lily!”

”Wolf!” the witch said hastily. ”Sit down by her and comfort her. Use your Blessed powers or whatever. I will go and mix up a potion of the bloody Lily!”

As Marilla swiftly left the coop I, who had no idea how to use my so-called blessed powers, was left alone with a bound, sobbing woman. A woman that might be hundreds of years old, who had seen wonders I would never have, who had played music that had made mortals weep. And she was lying crying face down in the dirt of a chicken coop in the middle of a swamp.

Sitting down I carefully patted her hair. The only thing I thought of saying was ”There, there,” which was thoroughly inadequate. She wept and growled, occasionally shouting an expletive or two at nothing in particular.

Then, after a few minutes, she seemed to calm herself somewhat. Gasping for air, she looked up at me with her out-of-focus blue eyes. ”Y-You? The guy I met in that dump on the Hill? The handsome, tall one?”

”I hope that’s me,” I smiled, stroking her brow. She looked as if she had just woken from a nightmare.

”Yes, it is you! Remember we talked about lots of stuff? You made me think of old times, before the Lily gave me my strange dreams... I like you. Your smile looks nice.”

”Thank you. You are very charming!” Be polite now, while not too intimate.

”I want to be charming again... I want to drink wine and chatter away with the girls and flirt with all the men! I want to sing! I want to play! But I cannot, nice man, I cannot! I can only make music

for that evil, vile flower! I must play for the damn flower!"

"Marilla will find a cure for you, I know it!"

"I want to sing for you, my dear nice man! I want to, but I cannot. We should go anywhere together! To Portasol, to the Faire Islands, to the steppes of Vambol, to Andomin! But I cannot leave the flower! I cannot! No! I cannot!"

And with that she worked herself into hysterics again, sobbing and screaming. I resumed my hair-patting, and eventually she settled into a state of quiet weeping.

"Why don't you kiss her?" Those words, from any other women who caught her man caressing another, would have been so heavy with sarcasm they could have sunk ships. But from Rainbow, of a race where a man's wives could number more than ten, they were merely inquisitive and helpful.

"Huh?" I turned around. There she stood in the doorway, looking a bit woozy, but otherwise fine. Her eyes were light blue, and she peered curiously at the Minstrel. "Rainbow! How are you? You should be in bed, resting!"

"I bloody well shouldn't!" she snarled, showing fangs.

"Really? Does the old woman know you are up? If not, then you are going back inside!"

"Marilla? Of course. I helped her cook the potion. Can you kiss her now? I am getting restless."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because you have the power to influence her," Marilla said, appearing beside the hellcat in the doorway. She carried a cup full of a steaming brew, carefully avoiding smelling it. "But let's see if you can make her drink this first."

I took the cup from the witch's hand, and as soon as the Minstrel got a whiff of it her whole body jerked, she opened her eyes and mouth, struggling against the ropes in order to get at the brew. I put it to her lips, and she swallowed it in one gulp.

"For some reason this brew is far less potent than what comes down the path of the Dream Lily," Marilla said as Ilina fell back onto the ground with a desperate and satisfied sob. "So she will not become aggressive or too affected, but she will not be at ease either."

When the Minstrel came to again she opened her big blue eyes again. "Hello, Marilla! And you, nice man. And... A hellcat?"

"My name is Rainbow. Pleased to meet you," the black-haired woman said.

"I am Ilina. Is this nice man yours, by any chance? Do you mind if I kiss him? I think I heard that being mentioned." The blonde seemed now positively cheeky, but there was still a haunted look to her eyes.

"Not at all," Rainbow grinned. "Just leave something for me."

"Do I get a say in all this?" I asked pointedly.

The two young women, or at least young-looking women, as Ilina might be the oldest of them by far, burst out laughing. But Marilla looked intently at me.

"You get a say, Wolf," she said slowly. "But this is not just about kissing another woman. This is about your destiny."

I was about to ask her what she meant, but then I saw it all before my inner eye. On one hand there was me and Rainbow, living in a cottage somewhere by a forest lake, or forever wandering trying to make small chips in the armor of the Iron Hammer. On the other hand there was vision of a band women, all powerful, all special, all dedicated to me. Their naked bodies yearning for my touch, their clothed bodies aching to serve me on my mission.

It appealed to me. There was that damn, intense need again: I wanted those naked, eager bodies to be crawling on the floor for my favors. Wanted it bad! Without further ado I bent down and placed a hungry kiss on Ilina's soft lips.

I don't know what I had expected. That she would instantly stand up, smiling, and be free of all enchantment like some sleeping princess? In my dreams, perhaps. That she would be hungry for more kisses, that they made her forget her plight? I hoped so. Then you can imagine my disappointment when she began weeping bitterly, turning her head away.

"What- What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said quietly. Then, after a pause when we all held our breaths, she continued bitterly. "There was no enjoyment! Such a nice, handsome man, and I could not! I could not enjoy it!"

"You didn't feel anything?" The witch asked.

"Yes..." the Minstrel replied. "Yes, I liked the taste of his breath, the force of his lips, the warmth, you know. But the tingle was not there. The, you know, spark. It was missing."

"Then I guess your theory was wrong," I said to Marilla, beginning to rise. I could not help feeling slightly stupid. "My so-called Blessedness does not really matter one way or the other."

"No!" the Minstrel shrieked as soon as I had risen. "Stay! Please! Don't leave me. Don't..."

She pleaded and wriggled around on the floor. I wondered why I had not free her from her bonds. Maybe I was too used to seeing Rainbow like that?

I shrugged and sat down, patting her hair yet again. She sobbed in relief. "Thank you, nice man, thank you..."

And so it was that the chicken coop became our residence for the remainder of the day. The Minstrel was freed from the ropes that had bound her, seeing as she had calmed down. However she did not move, she just curled up on the ground, clutching my hand feverishly. Only when I was eating did I let go, and then she turned to look fearfully at me, as if I should vanish into thin air.

Rainbow sat on the other side of me, still a bit weak from her attack of fever, her slim shoulder occupying my other arm. We discussed our plans with Marilla who went to and fro between us

and her chores.

"The banana lake?" the witch said. "Silly name, but I think I know the place, unless there are a myriad of bent, longish lakes around here. It's in the west, not far from here, which would explain why so many victims of the Dream Lily have ended up with me."

When I tried to get the Minstrel to verify this, or to supply more information about the path to the Dream Lily, she refused to answer me and buried her face in the dirt of the hut.

"At least she is not spouting the idioms of the Lord of Dreams, while threatening to kill us," Marilla said lazily. "So I believe you do have an influence on her, your Blessedness. Too bad for her that you ought to leave tomorrow morning. If my weather sense is any judge, then it will be clear, with only a drizzle. I also wish you could stay, so that I might study you."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Study your ability to shrug off the effects of the Lily, you nitwit, not your holy cucumber."

"Watch your tongue, old hag," Rainbow said suddenly, her eyes burning red. "Do not treat my master disrespectfully."

"Well, let me just remind you, girl," the witch said tersely, "that I have saved your life, that you are in my house, tha-"

"Let's be reminded that we are all friends here, shall we?" I said hastily. The hellcat had a frightful temper, and the witch did not look like one that would back down easily. "Er, Marilla? I am getting second thoughts about destroying the fields of the Dream Lily. When I now have seen what has happened to Ilina when she has been deprived the true drug... Wouldn't there be hundreds people suffering such miseries if we destroyed it?"

"Wouldn't there-" the witch spluttered. Then she faced Rainbow. "Shut your ears for a moment please, dear. Wolf, are you out of your blessed mind? Wouldn't there be hundreds more of those people if nothing is done about it? And nothing will be done, if not for you two. Whoever is behind this is careful not to awaken the wrath of

the powers of Oganzar. No, you get rid of this devilry once and for all, and I will do the best I can to cure the unfortunate souls who are enslaved to the Lily. Remember that the Minstrel here is further gone than any others I have seen, and those who are so desperate as to heed the call to go out into the swamp in search of the fields must be worse off than most. But for Ilina, alas, I fear her mind is irrevocably damaged, too damaged..."

We all looked at the Minstrel, but she made no sign as if she had heard. She had not moved for over an hour, her eyes still facing the ground. When, later in the evening she began breathing heavily like sleeping, I went inside with the hellcat and the witch.

Rainbow and I were determined to leave when we fell asleep on the floor of the hut. Marilla had said she could handle the Minstrel, and we would depart at first light. The fields of the Dream Lily had to be destroyed.

In the morning the weather was a steady, light drizzle like Marilla had promised. The witch told us Ilina was still sleeping, handed us a sack of useful items, including food, and we said farewell.

I followed Rainbow's lead, and walking westward across some nasty, fly-infested mires we came in a short while to what could only be the banana lake: a longish, narrow, and bent body of some of the clearest waters I had seen in Oganzar. Which still meant I would never drink it.

Going was difficult. What looked like a grassy, level field was instead a treacherous mire, clutching at our boots at every opportunity. We had a short, thin, strong rope that we each tied around our left wrist, in case we should plummet into the wet ground.

"I wish we still had the boat," I grumbled as we reached the lake. "The Minstrel said to follow the stream flowing into the lake until we reached the harbor."

"Damn it!" Rainbow swore. "Stream? More like a proper river, it is. Deep and wide. Rowing would be as easy as that! Bloody hell,

why did I ever lose the path in the first place.”

”Well, I never saw the path in the first place,” I smiled. ”If we have to walk, walk we must. Never fear, if you fall I will be there to pick you up.”

I fell, fell, and fell. I cut my hands, twisted my leg, got my face full of mud, and each time Rainbow was there to pick me up. But by night fall we were still walking, and still were as the moon rose above the horizon, and as the morning fog seeped in over the landscape, and we did not stop for anything but food and water until late afternoon, when the fog was thick as soup once more.

The featureless plain we have traveled had seemed dreary at first, but Rainbow pointed out the different flowers, the little worms, the birds, and every creature that made this place their home. In the end I relented: The landscape had a certain melancholy charm to it, and the sad river flowed like a slow, stately funeral through it. We became more used to living in the Bog, we learned how to stay on course, how to choose our camping sites, how to find fish, and how to light fires in the damp.

One thing we, that is to say I, did not learned, was to use my faculties, though. I could have guessed that Ilina might have been hysterical when she woke up alone, that she might run off towards the fields where she could get the true Dream Lily. When I, on the second night of travel, seemed to hear the sound of soft, slow music in the distance I put it down to being weary. The fact that Rainbow, on whom magic would have an effect, was sleeping extremely deep just then did not bother me. And since she, who was the one with the acute sense of hearing, was sleeping, I did not hear anyone who might be sneaking past us in the dark.

”What is that?” Rainbow said on morning of the fifth day, pointing at a pole out in the river which now, after passing a lot of smaller streams that flowed into it, had almost too little water to float a boat.

We came around a small clump of low trees, and saw a wide bend

in the river, or maybe even a small lake. At any rate, it was clear we had reached some sort of harbor. On the lake shore were lots of long furrows in the soft mud and grassy earth, marking where boats had been pulled up on land. Only one boat lay there now, a typical low-keeled boat that was used in Oganzar. The lone pole was probably used when loading a boat heavily.

All around were several pines, the mighty and for the swap unusual trees standing spaced several feet apart, graciously letting the sun seep through and lesser trees living under their branches. From the mooring site went a trail into the trees on the southern side of the lake.

We didn't really care about the lake, the boat, or the trail. Because to the mightiest pine tree that lined the lake there was pinned the body of a man. Walking slowly closer, drawing short, agitated breaths, we saw that a longish nail had been hammered through the belly of a this young man and into the tree trunk so that he had burst open and the guts had spilled out. By his clothes he was most likely a poor man from Oganzar, but anything was hard to make out because the carrion eaters had been at his face.

"What is this evil?" Rainbow growled. She did not flinch or retch, she did not break into hysteria or clamp her nose shut. A hellcat was a true child of the wild, used to seeing and facing death.

I pondered this. We had stopped about twenty feet away from the sad remains of the man. "It's a warning, I guess. A warning not to follow this trail."

"A warning? By the Gods!" she snarled. "Who are these people? Who has done this? Who can possibly... Damn it!"

"No-one knows. And those who know, like Ilina, cannot tell."

"Are we put off by this warning?" she asked, eyes blazing.

"On the contrary," I replied.

Even so we walked in a wide circle around the dead man. The path ran in what can only be described as a ditch. A tiny stream

ran beside it, and all around the ground rose slightly and was lined with bushes, so that we could not see anything but a wet, muddy trail leading off into the distance. My bravery trickled out of me for every trudging step we took.

This whole thing unnerved me. The corpse had told me in no uncertain terms the evil of the enemy we were facing, of course. But also the path in itself, its mere presence as a continual proof that there indeed existed that enemy, scared me even more. I cut myself a stout cudgel from a bush, and my eyes went constantly to the slopes lining the path, looking for an ambush.

But when the ambush finally happened it was of a kind I had never anticipated. Suddenly, without warning, I saw Rainbow duck, then turn to look at me with anxiety in her eyes. She turned forward again, and with a scream of rage set off up a slope as if in hot pursuit of something.

I followed her, even though I had seen no enemy or attack of any kind. When I had managed to climb the slope despite its muddy surface, I saw the hellcat running head over heels into the mire that surrounded the sunken path. For the moment it seemed as if her feet managed to find a tussock each time they impacted with the ground, but it was clear she would soon get lost.

"Stop!" I bellowed with all my might. "Rainbow! Stop!"

With a fall and a tumble she halted, rose, and looked at me with fiery red eyes. "What, you fool!? I almost had him! Almost!"

"No! There was no-one there!"

"Yes, and he shot at you!"

"No, there was no ambush! I didn't see any arrow!"

"Are you blind!?"

"No! Now come here!"

With a choice selection of oaths that do not bear repeating she trudged back across the mire towards me. In the end she stood facing me, her finger shaking. "If he returns... Then.... Told you so!"

"If who returns?"

Her jaw dropped. "Er..." Her eyes calmed down and looked at nothing. "I... I don't know. Can't remember."

"Did he shoot a dart or an arrow at us?"

"Can't remember. But," and she ground her teeth together, "I remember that the Lord of Dreams can put a madness on people and give them waking nightmares."

"So instead of firing arrows at us to kill us, they wanted us to get lost in the swamp instead..."

"But you are blessedly immune," the hellcat smiled wryly. "I was so angry I would have followed this dream-assassin to the ends of the world. I guess you have saved my life again, and that we are now even."

After she had given me thanks with her sweet, soft lips, we continued along the sunken path. Once more, ten minutes later, she dropped to the ground as a dream-arrow was shot at her. But this time she waited and looked at me before taking off. It was another false alarm.

"I hope we do not have far to go," she grumbled. "Because I do not want to go to sleep in a place like this. What if they make me bite your jugular in the middle of a dream?"

"I may have to tie you up to prevent that," I winked at her. "But I do not think we are far from the fields of the Dream Lily. I was taught that, to a layman, magic is like a weapon. The closer you are to your victim, the stronger it is."

"Good, because my teeth would like collect damages from my wounded pride."

It now became a matter of urgency to reach our goal: We had no idea what whoever was behind the Dream Lily could strike at us with. Arrows and spears we could relate to, but magic and strange dreams was something else entirely. Nothing more seemed to happen to Rainbow, and I assumed that our enemy had realized that his strategy had failed. It meant he had also realized that we were

coming.

It was in the early afternoon when we finally saw what could only be the end of our journey. Some miles ahead in the south, visible through the now almost transparent mist, there came an eerie blue-green glow up the path, looking more like witch-light than the bright flames of a fire. Not, of course, the light a witch-sage like Marilla would employ, but the damned burnings of sinister rituals or offerings to some evil God.

"Can you see the light?" Rainbow asked me, still suspicious about everything she saw.

I nodded. "I do not much like it."

"Can you see those two men?" She said.

"Can I-? Huh? No. Wait, yes I see them!" From out of the witch-light and down the path, came two men shuffling towards us. They were still far away, but I could see that they were moving slowly and awkwardly. The men were clearly under the influence of the Dream Lily.

Rainbow slipped instantly into the bushes on one side of the path, and I followed her rather more clumsily. There we sat, side by side, as the men staggered closer, uncertain foot by uncertain foot. There was no indication that they had seen us, and if they had not wielded clubs then I could never have guessed they were searching for us.

During the long wait I got time to be properly amazed by the way they were dressed. They wore finery, far too good for wretches such as they! One, the biggest, was dressed in sensible wool and leather clothes, such as a well-to-do farmer might wear. The other wore the sharp, black linen of a manservant or butler. He, in particular, looked so out-of-place in the swamp that I wondered if not I, too, was caught in a strange dream of Uzar's.

I had never ambushed anyone before, and it showed. When the men were passing us, I jumped out and took a step towards the big man. Lifting my club I was about to hit him hard on the head, but my foot slipped on the muddy slope. With an oath I stumbled

towards him.

If he had been anything but a wretched slave to the Dream Lily I might have been struck down right there and then, but he reacted too late and too sluggishly. Even so I had to hit him thrice with the cudgel before he slumped down on the ground.

Turning to Rainbow, however, I saw blood on her lips. She had killed the other man, and his corpse lay at her feet.

"What did you do that for?" I growled. "It was not necessary to kill him!"

She just snarled, and showed me his neck. The hellcat had merely bitten him on his shoulder. "Strangled," she said slowly. "But alive."

"I apologize," I mumbled.

"All right."

"I am an idiot."

"Maybe."

"I am. I keep thinking your race is cruel, but you are not. I apologize again."

"Never mind," she said gruffly. "If he had offered me more resistance I just might have had to really kill him."

I smiled and took a closer look at the two men. The manservant was clean shaved, the big man had the typical farmer's beard, albeit somewhat scraggly. They smelled of scents, in that way one does when one is sweaty and merely dabbles perfume on oneself. My conclusion was clear: They were two unlucky wretches that had tried to disguise themselves as men of a higher station. But for what purpose did they do so out here in the Bog?

Rainbow laughed harshly. "Is this the best show our enemy can put on when it comes to fighting? Really? Two Lily-seduced bozos like these?"

I did not know the answer. Instead we dragged the unconscious men up the slope and laid them in the driest spot we could find. Then we continued onwards. The distance to where the light had

come from was not great, it had just seemed like that the way the two men had stumbled slowly towards us.

With the hellcat in front we sneaked up the now sloping mud-path as the flickering witch-light became stronger and stronger. When she had almost reached the top of the slope Rainbow stopped and took cover in the bushes again. Inch by inch she crawled over the top, until she was almost gone from my sight. Then she motioned me to follow.

I took a few cautious, slow steps up the slope and into the bushes, and she motioned again, her meaning clear. I stopped, blushed, and began moving once more, but now even slower and even more cautiously.

When I reached her I found myself looking down upon the fields of the Dream Lily, a circular, shallow mire some five hundred yards across, sunk thirty feet into the terrain. It was an unholy witch's cauldron filled with the flickering, pulsating, hypnotizing light of thousands upon thousands of Lilies, all lifting their pale yellow petals towards the darkening sky.

The fields were watered by streams running into the mire at the border of the great circle. But no water ran out of the fields: The hell-flowers must be consuming it all. The whole field stank, an awful stench of sweet seduction and vile decay that assailed my nostrils.

I turned quickly to Rainbow. I might be immune, but who knew what she might be feeling. If the sight of the witch-light or the scent of the Lilies should capture her mind, then I might have to make truth of my threat to tie her up.

"How do you feel?" I whispered.

She mouthed a few words, eyes reflecting the ghastly light. Then she shook her head and smiled bitterly at me. "I belong to you. Not to this... thing. By the Gods how they call!" Then she growled quietly. "But I am your slave, Wolf, not that of this flower! Yours!

Yours!"

With a fierce passion she grabbed me and kissed me intensely. For a long time she held her lips to mine. When she finally let go, her eyes looked fondly at me. "Yes, I am yours. Yes."

"You are," I smiled back. "And don't you forget it."

With that we both relaxed slightly. But not too much. There was still the heart of the circle to consider, the maddest part of it all. Not in its appearance, but just the fact that it was here. Here, of all places.

On an island in the middle of the mire was a mansion. It was a white-walled, many-windowed, marble-pillared, two-winged, croquet-lawned, rose-gardened, weather-waned, gravel-pathed mansion, and it was beautiful and well maintained. It was the kind of mansion that would be the envy in the rich countryside of every city in the civilized world. But here it merely looked absurd, like a king holding court in a sty.

There were people on the neat lawns. Women in long dresses and men in frilly suits, such as the richest merchants in Oganzar might wear. And they were sitting on chairs, sipping at their afternoon tea.

There were men and women serving them sweets and cakes, cleared away dirty plates and used cups, and raked and cut the lawn, and they all moved with that slow clumsiness that we knew so well by now. Here, far into the darkest corner of a foul-smelling bog, had someone decided to create a mockery of upper-class country life.

I looked at the men and women having their tea, about five of them altogether. From this distance I could discern nothing about their expressions and behavior, except for two things. One was that they did not seem like close friends, more like a family of tyrants and shrews forced together for the funeral of the most hated member of that family, and finding out his will had left them nothing. The other was that they would all now and then look in our direction,

which was not so strange considering that they had sent two of their 'servants' to investigate our approach.

But the most unnerving thing about the whole scene was the boat that slowly came into view. It was a small boat, and it seemed to be circling the mansion and the lawns in a narrow channel in the fields of the Dream Lily, but no visible means of propulsion could be seen.

In the boat sat Ilina. She sat there playing and singing, but she looked now more like a goddess of pain than a Minstrel. She looked clean, and she looked well. Her blonde hair was reflecting the witch-light, hanging down over her shoulders like a golden, silken sheen. Her generous body was clad in a black, tight dress, and that and her posture gave her back the divine allure that her race by rights possesses.

In her hand was an instrument that looked kind of like a lute, or a small guitar, and she played a tune on it while she sang the melody. It was an foul song, a song of power, utterly alien, yet one that made me shiver. But the Lilies, they all turned to face the music as her boat glided past them.

As the Minstrel came closer I saw there was an evil, satisfied smile on her lips. It made me sad to see. Her mind was being eaten by the Dream Lily, and all of the Minstrel's charm, friendliness, seduction, and wanderlust, all other emotions were replaced by the pure malevolence of that cursed flower.

It made me sad to see. But it also made me understand several things. I understood why Marilla's Dream Lilies had been false images of the true flower. The tea-drinking actors playing rich on the lawn, if indeed they were the masters of the Dream Lily, had abused the powers of a Minstrel's music. Because it contains great power. Strange are the ways of such music, and it causes rapture and delight for the listeners, but never will the Minstrels use it for worse purposes than to get a few coins, a passage by ship, a warm bed, or a lover.

Ilina was the one who had created the Dream Lily, and she was the one furthest in its grip. Of course she had been here before! Had she tried to escape many times? Had she tried to when I met her on the Hill, but found herself unable to tell the truth, unable to leave Oganzar? Had it been the servants of the tea-drinkers that had brought her back to sit in this boat play, or had it been the terrible yearning for the flower?

Somehow she must have passed us on the way here. Yes, that night when had I heard music. She must have known where we were lying, and put Rainbow to sleep. And when she came here she must have told her masters about us, told them we were coming.

"What do we do now?" Rainbow asked me softly.

"We wait until nightfall."

"And then?"

"We try to capture the Minstrel. Her music is what feeds the malice of the Dream Lily."

"But the fields will remain."

"What do you suggest, then? Chop them all down? They are thousands. Burn them? In this wet hell?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment. The flames in her eyes were dim. When a hellcat was hunting, she did not alert its prey with her light. "We should not stay here long. I do not trust the arts of those... Those... What can I call them, the tea-drinkers?"

Soon night was creeping in on all sides. The fog gathered, thick and yellow, but the witch-light persevered. Through hazy air we could see the Minstrel in her boat gliding softly around and around the manor and the island. The tea-party ended with, absurdly yet logically enough, cigars and drinks and small talk.

But then it all changed. Instead of retreating into the mansion for bed, the tea-drinkers were joined by five others men and women dressed in finery, who came out onto the lawn. They all seemed to

gather round in a wide circle on the wet grass, with one of the late arrivals standing in solitude in the middle.

The nine that made up the circle sat down on the grass, folded their legs, and bent forwards. Then the figure in the middle, a woman judging by her stance and dress, slowly paced the circle and put her left hand on the heads of each of them. I could not be sure because of the distance and the haze, but it seemed as if they fell asleep one by one as she touched them.

In the end the walking woman sat down at the exact center of the circle. Like the others she crossed her legs and bowed her head. Then all hell broke loose.

The men starting howling and roaring while waving their arms, and the women started shrieking and wailing as they clawed at the air. The words were that of the insane, incoherent snatches of curses and imploring words, fragments of sentences, all full of either hate, jealousy, greed, or other evil emotions.

And the woman in the middle, she sat all quiet. And I got a nasty feeling that she was listening. Listening to the nastiest, most innermost secrets and desires of the other nine.

But this was no mere confession. It was a magic spell, it had to be a ritual of the Lord of Dreams. Because the light of the Dream Lilies grew stronger as the howling and wailing went on, the mansion seemed to grow clearer, and Rainbow beside put her fingers in her ears, closed her eyes, and ground her teeth together.

It cannot say how long this lasted, but when the woman in the middle finally rose, the macabre sounds stopped, and when the others stood up as well, wiping the water and grass from their fine clothes, then darkness fell. I could still see because of the Dream Lilies, but the change was substantial.

The ten filed into the mansion, followed by their hapless servants after the tables had been cleared. Inside the building some of the windows were lit, and after a while most of those lights went out. I looked away from the manor and my eyes found Ilina. She continued

her solitary journey, but what was that? Something seemed to be moving towards her between us.

Rainbow! The hellcat had left my side while I focused on the tea-drinkers, or maybe dreamers is a better word, and now she was gingerly leaping from tussock to tussock down in the midst of the fields. As she passed by, the Dream Lilies seemed to emit a more malevolent light, and my heart leaped in my chest.

I rose and followed her as quickly as I dared, but the hellcat was headed straight for that spot where she would intercept the path of the Minstrel's boat. As the boat glided up in front of the hellcat, Ilina looked astonished, but Rainbow merely raised her fist.

A hellcat does not weigh very much, but she put all her mass and considerable speed behind the punch, and the Minstrel fell like a sack. The music stopped, the boat lost its velocity, and the light from the nearby Dream Lilies wavered. Rainbow grabbed hold of the boat, and began pulling it towards us.

I slipped and slid down into the field of Dream Lilies, their green, slimy stems and tangled, tough roots made me pray they would not suddenly grab at me. When I reached Rainbow I saw that she was squinting and muttering words under her breath. She was terrified of looking at the flowers! What on earth had possessed her to go after the Minstrel alone I could not tell.

Together we pulled the boat to the shore, and then we dragged both it and Ilina up into a thick cluster of bushes a small distance from the path leading back towards Oganzar. Turning around, I could not see anything that would imply our capture of the Minstrel had been noticed.

As I used our rope to tie Ilina up I could not, despite the severity of the situation, fail to admire her curvy body, big blue eyes, and long blonde hair. Oh, and I also felt sorry for her. I truly did.

"You should find a woman like her," Rainbow whispered in my ear. And again there was that strange interest of hers. "I would not mind her joining your pack at all!"

"Yes," I agreed. I also wouldn't mind at all. Then we stood and looked at the bound and gagged woman, neither saying, but both thinking, what a tragedy it was that it would not be her. What would become of her, poor thing, should we succeed? But we could not do any more for her right now.

I held Rainbow's hand as we waded across the fields of the Dream Lily. We had decided that it would not be enough just to bring Ilina back home with us. The fields would remain, and so would the tea-drinking dreamers. And if we could not destroy the fields, then we could at least try to capture the woman who evidently something of a high priestess of the Lord of Dreams.

They were many, how many I could not guess, but I had my cudgel, and Rainbow had her claws and teeth. And from what I had seen all of their servants were slaves to the Lily, and the dreamers themselves did not seem to be of the warrior cast. Still, we could only hope to catch them unawares.

As we walked onto the lawn the hellcat drew a sigh of relief. I had no way of knowing the extent of the attraction she must feel to that awful flower. The lawn grass was as short and neatly tended as I had expected, but we did not linger there. The main double doors of the mansion loomed before us between the two wings. The one on our right had larger, barred windows and seemed to be the masters' wing. This was where we were heading.

The double doors creaked as we pulled them open, releasing warm, dry air into the damp night. Inside was a large hall with a corridor leading off into both wings, and a flight of red, velvet stairs going up.

This hall was lit by candles, of which some had gone out. As it happened a man came shuffling into view, carrying fresh candles and a fire pot in his hands. Despite his livery he was just a drugged

swamp rat from Oganzar, and was merely able to utter a curse before we were on him.

Rainbow kicked him in the stomach, and I knocked him out cold with my cudgel as he invariably bent forward in pain, dropping his possessions. Thankfully, the floor was covered in a deep, soft, brown carpet which muffled all sounds. Smiling briefly at each other we took off down the right hand corridor.

The carpeted corridor had eerie, greenish stone walls, and red painted doors at long intervals. Each room here must, based on its size, be a fabulous suite. In the walls between the doors, and lit by white candles, were bronze and stone sculptures and paintings, all depicting people in trances, their dreams causing havoc all around them. A man made another man kill his wife. A woman dreaming while her mother jumped off a cliff into the raging sea.

There were doors on each side and, as we turned the corner into the wing proper, we came face to face with a maid carrying bed lines. At least she was dressed like a maid, but her unfocused eyes made it easy for us to knock her down in the same way we done with the man who replaced candles. We continued on down the corridor.

There! At the very end there seemed to be a door that was more ornately carved than the others. That had to be her room! I turned to Rainbow to grin at her, but she was facing one of the other doors.

With a sudden snarl she tore it open and leaped inside! The doors instantly slammed shut. I grabbed the handle and twisted and pulled. Locked. I banged on the door. From afar, it seemed, I heard the hellcat reply with her own fists. I banged some more.

Tricked! The mind-trick that they had attempted in the bog had finally worked. What Rainbow had seen, or thought, that had made her act so rashly I did not know. But she was trapped, and we were separated.

"Who is she?" a voice behind me said. "Your woman?"

I spun around. It was her. The high priestess. She looked about

forty years old, tall, with long pale, almost white hair. Her eyes were brown, and skin almost as dark as Rainbow's olive hue. She looked and spoke like a native of Oganzar, but her long, red dress was of an eastern cut with its bare shoulders and arms.

"Yes," I said, almost absentmindedly. Then I raised my cudgel.

"Do you want to see her again?" she smiled.

I lowered the weapon. The sound of the beating of Rainbow's enraged fists was so faint that I guessed the hellcat was trapped by some sort of magic. I could not risk anything.

"What do you want to do now?" Her arrogant smile stayed put. "Bang at the door for some hours? Pick a fight with all of the Dreamers and the staff as well? Or come with me and have a drink and a chat?"

"What's the fourth option?" I said gruffly.

"You tell me. Come!" She turned around, the long dress trailing after her as she walked.

In frustration I slammed the door with the cudgel as hard as I could, then followed the woman down the last stretch of the corridor. The carved wood of her door depicted a scene I had already witnessed, that of a woman surrounded by a circle of nine Dreamers.

She opened the door and, with her infuriating smile, let me enter first. Her quarters were more like a small apartment than a sleeping chamber. I was in a combined library, complete with bookshelves, comfortable reading chairs, and table, and a meeting room with a round table and tall-backed chairs. Everywhere there was gold and silver, lace and gems, statues and flowers, paintings and candlesticks. It was the room of a woman who wanted to live like a princess, albeit a princess that could both read and think. Two doors led off to other rooms.

As she showed me to one of the comfortable chairs in the library, I got a sudden sensation. It was as if the voice of Ulv himself had spoken to me, here in the stronghold of the evil Uzar.

"Lie," the voice seemed to say. "Lie!"

The woman poured me a drink of an almost black liquid. It was probably Agon. Agon was a strong tasting, almost foul, liquor that was produced in Oganzar and exported widely at exuberant prices. It was regarded as a drink for real men, and she was probably trying to flatter me.

For herself she had a glass with a long stem and a very pale, amber drink. She sat down in a chair opposite me, one foot daintily dangling over the other, sipped, and smiled at me.

"So! We get many visitors to this place, but they are all servants of Uzar. Who are you two?"

"I am Parag," I said, choosing a name common in my homeland. "I come from Andomin," naming the capital of the ancient realm that was now taken by the Iron Hammer. "My woman's name is Ellja, from Oganzar."

"And why are you here?"

"What?"

"Why are you here?"

"I am sorry," I said as insolently as I could, "I thought you was going to introduce yourself."

She smiled and laughed. "Indeed! Priestess of the Lord of Dreams, that is me. Uzara, you may call me."

"Nice place you have here." I looked around at the room. Far too garish for my taste, as far as I had a taste when it came to women's private quarters.

"Thank you, Parag. Now, why are you here?"

"I was curious about the Dream Lily."

"Why?"

"It is a powerful drug. There is a lot of people down on the Cliff and in the Bog that are under the influence. A lot of money is involved." I was out on thin ice, and I knew it. If Ilina had told the Dreamers about who Rainbow and I truly were, or the purpose of our mission, then the game was up before it had even begun. Indeed, if it not been the sign from Ulv to lie, then I would never

have dared answer her this boldly.

"And you want in on the money and the power?"

"Yeah, I hate plodding around in the swamp. I want up."

"How did you find this place?"

"Someone spoke."

"Who?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, but it can wait."

We both sipped at our drinks. The Agon tasted as awful as I had feared, but I knew I would not get drunk at least. There was a kind of challenge in her eyes when we looked at each other, but I had a feeling that I was interviewed for a job rather than interrogated or even seduced.

"Are you much attached to your woman?"

"I like her."

"But?"

"I do not plan to marry her."

"Good. Because you know what will happen to her?"

"No?"

"We cannot let her go back to Oganzar, not after she has seen this place. And, well, after some time here most people tend to get influenced by the song. You have seen the Children of Uzar?"

"The ones who shuffle around?"

"Yes..." she smiled wickedly. "Their minds are with him. It is a noble sacrifice they are making. And we, the Dreamers, are their shepherds."

I did not tell her what I thought of that viewpoint.

"Some of us have a greater affinity with Uzar," Uzara went on. "We do not get overwhelmed like his Children. Instead we work with him to make his dreams come true. A society without inhibitions and regulations, but one of love, and of life. And it seems to me that you, my dear Parag, do not get overwhelmed by the presence of Uzar."

"Can I speak bluntly?"

"Yes..." she purred.

"You want me to join you, as a Dreamer?"

"Maybe," she saluted me with her glass.

"Grow Dream Lilies and ferry it down to Oganzar?"

"No, no!" She laughed. "No, the Children are so eager to do that. So very eager. We, the Dreamers, we live out our dreams right here. The Children take good care of us. They bring us only the very best of food and drink, clothes and shoes, jewelry and trinkets. You have seen this glorious mansion? Here we live in joy and peace. We lack nothing. And the drudgery of maintaining the song is the task of a devoted Minstrel."

"The music of the strange woman in the boat? What about it? I thought you grew the Dream Lily?" I managed to keep my voice calm, but something inside me urged me to ask that question, to know the answer!

"Ah!" she smiled. "Here is a little secret. You see, the Dream Lily is not the influence itself. It is, well, almost like an acid. It removes the excess thoughts of the Children's minds. Makes them ready to receive the true influence: The mind of Uzar. His mind is a blessing, and that blessing is contained in the music the Minstrel makes."

"Huh?" I pretend to be more foolish than I was. "Pardon me for a stupid example, but might it be possible to mix this most excellent Agon with the essence of Dream Lily, and so create many, how shall I put it, devoted drinkers of the liquor?"

She laughed loudly, tossing her long, pale hair. "Not a stupid example at all! And it has been tried, and many similar things. But, you see, the potency of Agon would have to increase thousandfold if that were to happen. No, only the might of a Lord such as Uzar has the power to fill up what has been removed."

"The Lord of Dreams is mighty indeed," I said solemnly.

"He is. Now, Parag, about you. I will be blunt. You have two

choices. You can stay with us, as a Dreamer, or you will have to face us all.”

”But if so, then I will face you first,” I smiled.

”Oh...” she purred. ”Even someone as weak as me would not have any trouble facing you right now. Not after what you have been drinking. Try standing up, my dear Parag. Is there any strength in your limbs?”

”No,” I lied. There was nothing wrong with me, but Marilla had ensured me I could not be poisoned.

”Good...” She rose from her chair and went over to me, stroking my hair lightly.

I wanted to reach out and push her away, but I had to think about Rainbow. If I did not play along she might die in that room of entrapment.

”Now listen, my dear Parag. I will,” and here I felt her hands fasten some kind of metal restraints around my wrists, ”let you stay here tonight and think things over. Tomorrow, when your woman has become a child of Uzar, we can speak again. But I like you, Parag. You are rude and arrogant, and you have a strong will. You may help me create the feelings that we need to grow mightier. For we Dreamers are ambitious, my dear. We do not wish to restrict ourselves to this little house. Eventually we want to make Oganzar our little paradise.”

I looked down. The armrests each had a solid-looking steel band attached to it, and they now locked my arms to the chair by some mechanism. There was nothing to do but to play along. If I kept cool, maybe!, I could escape somehow. Maybe!

”One of the perks of being the Uzara,” she smiled evilly, ”is that I get to poke in every corner of my Dreamers’ minds in peace and quiet. And they all sit quiet where you sit, whether they want to or not. I will go and look to you woman now, and then, when you are asleep, I will see what kind of person you really are.” With a finally ruffling of my hair she rose and went over to the door.

But before she could put her hands on the doorknob, it burst open. There she stood. Rainbow. Bleeding from many wounds, her slender, graceful body now limping, her snarl showing several missing teeth.

"Filth!" she spat. "Filth!" With a swipe of her right hand she clawed the face of Uzara.

The priestess took a step back.

"Wooden bars in the window!" the hellcat growled. "No matter how thick, I knew I could gnaw through them in the end! My Master! What did you do to him? Poison? Is he dying?"

And with that she shook the wailing priestess. Uzara tried fighting back, but with a scream of rage the hellcat struck at her with the teeth that remained to her. Blood pumping from her throat, the Uzara fell whimpering to the ground.

"Are you all right?" Rainbow limped over to me and stroked my hair. I enjoyed it far more than when Uzara had done it.

"Of course," I grinned. "I am immune to her potions, you know. And you? You look awful!"

"The hole in the barred window I made was barely large enough," she shrugged.

"Ouch," I winced. "Now get me loose from this damn chair!"

The hellcat's expressive eyebrows arched themselves as she looked at my restrained hands. She soon located the catches that released them, however.

"Yes, this was also a nifty little trap," I smiled. "Be nice and I will have one made to fit you."

She laughed despite her pains. "Why not! Seem more comfortable that the board. But... what do we do now?"

"Now," I said, straightening up and fetching my cudgel. "Now, like two brave knights, we flee!"

Outside in the corridor stood two agitated Dreamers dressed in sleeping clothes, alerted by the racket made by Uzara's death. I swung the cudgel at them, an old man and a short, fat woman, and

they retreated fearfully into a room.

We ran out, or I ran and Rainbow hobbled, pushing aside one of the Children of Uzar who tried to stop us in the great hall. The mansion was slowly entering a state of panic and, carrying the hell-cat over the fields in my arms, I had a feeling we might escape in the confusion.

Their leader, the Uzara, was dead, and whether they would merely choose a new one, or fall apart, I did not know or care. Right now I just had to get Rainbow to safety.

Ilina lay where we had left her, still tied up, but now awake and glaring at us. I loosened the ropes, and she sat up, rubbing her wrists and ankles.

"You again?" she said sardonically, the evil leer of the Dream Lily in her eyes. Or rather, it was the evil leer of the song, the mind of Uzar. "I guess I will never get rid of you, Wolf."

"So you remember my name?"

"Yeah, that's about it. Nice ass and a silly name." That was the Minstrel quipping, what was left of her anyway.

Rainbow laughed raucously, then said: "They are swarming like flies down there."

"What?" That was Ilina.

"Oh, we just killed the Uzara."

"Way to go! That bloody bitch! I hated her guts. Treated me like filth, treated us all like filth."

"Listen," I said and bent down beside her. "We are taking you with us. The Uzara is dead, and the fields of the Dream Lily are doomed without your music."

"W-What?"

"No more Dream Lily," I said slowly. "Ever."

A flash of fear touched her cruel face. Then she breathed heavily. "I... I need to get well. To get away from it. Bloody slave-flower! Damn it! Kiss me, Wolf! Kiss me! Make me feel it!"

I did, and she kissed me back with such ferocity as I had never felt before.

When she released me she snarled. "No! I can't feel it! Not really!"

"Can you feel something, at least?" that was Rainbow.

"Yes! Something! I must... Must! No more of the damn flower!" And then she rose, grabbing her instrument as she did so. "Wolf, please, hold me!"

I was behind her and so let my arms encircle her waist, resting my head on her blonde hair. I had barely time to notice that it smelled far better now than it had in the chicken coop, but that the smell was heavy with Dream Lily.

With a silent roar, and with tears streaming down her face, Ilina began to play. The melody was harsh and warm, almost like a soldier's tune, and quite different from the alien music of Uzar.

Over her head I saw the people milling about on the lawn, nine Dreamers and about thrice as many Children of Uzar. They had seen us, of course, but it seemed no-one wanted to charge over the fields to attack us. I understood why when I heard the word "hellcat" being shouted.

And so Ilina was allowed to play her music in peace. And as she did so the early morning sun appeared, and the fog vanished. It felt dry. And warm. Very dry, and very warm. Still Ilina played and sang with an almost religious fervor.

The fields dried up. They did, despite that not being possible. The water seemed to be sucked down into the ground or up into the hot, dry air. And Ilina played. With tears in her eyes she played a music that turned the mires of the Dream Lily into a land afflicted by drought. It was music like she had never made before, and such as she maybe never would make again.

Then the smoke came, and the flames. As the malicious flowers burst into fire all around them the Dreamers and the Children fled into the mansion. But the lawn they stood on was as damp as

ever, and so was the grass and straws encircling the fields. Only the flowers perished.

When the Dream Lilies were burnt to cinders, every last one of them, then Ilina dropped her instrument and fell to her knees, weeping. "Nevermore! Never! Wolf... Hold me? Forever?"

I looked at Rainbow, and she at me. We had completed our mission. But when the influence of the Dream Lily disappeared, then the Minstrel would enter a nightmare beyond any other. There was nothing to do but to return to Marilla's hut as soon as may be.

The witch was tending her garden just like the previous time we had come to her hut. And similarly I was also carrying a senseless woman. But this time it was the Minstrel Ilina, a far heavier burden.

During our passage along the path to the harbor, and subsequent journey down the river by boat, she had passed through stages of despair, violence, hysteria, and now complete apathy. Her mind was, for all purposes except existing, gone.

We brought her inside and lay her down on the bed, Marilla shaking her head as she looked down at her. "Poor thing," she said. "You tell me she got her revenge in the end, but what good does it do her?"

We then told the witch all about what had happened to us. She was particularly grateful for my information of how the song of Uzar was the key to the curse of the Dream Lily.

"I must find a way," she mused, "of capturing the essence of all that is good in life. Love, friendship, laughter, kindness, you know. Somehow. If it works then I think I can help some of the poor bastards, at least."

"But not Ilina?" Rainbow and I asked simultaneously.

"No," she shook her head. "I cannot replace the mind of a God. Even if I manage to help others, then they will never be as they were. Not really cured. Like using a rag to plug up holes in the bottom of a boat. But Ilina... Her ship is sunk. I think it will be

better for her if... If... Well."

And with that gloomy thought in our heads we all went to sleep. Marilla in her bed, Ilina by the stove, and Rainbow and I in the chicken coop.

It was still dark when I was wakened by the witch shaking my shoulders. "Wolf! Get up! You idiot, get up!"

I rose as in a daze, and in the light of Rainbow's curious light blue eyes I saw that Marilla was beyond excited. Her eyes were wide, and her nostrils flared.

"What?"

"I think. No, I hope, that I can heal Ilina!"

"You can!?" the light in the hellcat's eyes intensified by an order of magnitude, bringing an eerie blue dawn to the coop.

"Maybe!"

"How?"

"Wolf? What did you say her last words were, after she had burned the Dream Lilies?"

"Er. Hold me forever?" I was not sure what she meant.

"Exactly!"

"What?"

"You, Wolf! You blessed little boy! You have an effect on her, and you sure are potent!"

"I don't understand..."

"Of course you don't. You are not a sage, you are not even very wise. But I am. And I say that we can brew a potion made from the Lily, if that Lily has drunk your blood. A Blood Lily. That, my dear young man, will fill up her the lost parts of her mind with yours."

"My mind?"

"Yes! If it works, then she will live again. But then she will be completely devoted to you, instead of the song of Uzar. She will

live again: If you smile, she will feel joy, if you talk to her, she will listen, if you are with her, she will not be alone."

"What you are saying is th-"

"What I am saying, is that you will have to carry a heavy burden. She will be able to make music again, but only for you. She may go on adventures, but only with you. And she will want to be loved again, but only by you. But if you should lose her, or leave her, then she will lose her mind."

"R-Really?" I said, my heart hammering.

"Maybe," the witch insisted. "Maybe!"

"But she is immortal. What happens when I should die?"

"Who knows? But that may be far off. Now. Will you do it?"

I looked about me. The hens in the coop were watching us mistrustfully. Rainbow was looking intently at me, but the blue-green glow in her eyes betrayed her.

"Oh, save her!" she exclaimed. "Being yours has never given me cause for regret. Not often, anyway."

"But, this is deeper. This is about her soul. My mind invading her soul."

"In order to save it," Marilla said. "You are Blessed, Wolf. That means you are special. You may be her only chance."

I sighed, and then I nodded.

The Blood Lily was red, of course. Apart from that I could not see much difference between it and the Dream Lily, but it did not fill me with revulsion.

"And now I will make the potion from this," Marilla said after showing it to us, and carried the flower into her kitchen on an arm-length's distance. "This flower smells of you, young man. A more wholesome smell, I admit, but I have told you before that I am not interested!"

I did not reply to her banter. With Rainbow I sat at the witch's desk, the empty shell that was Ilina immovable at our feet. Marilla

had drained about a pint of blood from my arm to water the flower, and I was feeling slightly woozy.

The sound of boiling water, ingredients being added, and the witch's out-of-tune whistling made both of us fidget. The brewing seemed to go on and on, and the Minstrel was slowly wasting away.

"I have to go out!" I said finally, when I could take it no more. I rose, a bit unsteadily, and made my way into the pouring rain. Pacing up and down between Marilla's herbs I tried to make time pass more swiftly.

The rain flattened my hair, and soon all my clothes were soaked. I looked out over the Bog of Oganzar. I did not care about that it was one of the richest cities in the world, about its spices and perfumes and drugs that were exported all over the world, about the wealthy merchants down by the Cliff, and the sage-farmers up here in the Bog.

Right now, I just cared for Ilina to get well. And if she did, then I would take her and Rainbow away from this place. We would travel the world together! We would take on the Black Circle and the Iron Hammer together!

The rain continued to pour down, and I watched the water flowing in hungry streams down out of the little garden. The streams would gather together in larger streams, and then in even larger ones, until they flowed into the river we should have been following when we arrived. And that river would eventually reach the sea, its waters mixing and getting drowned in the enormity of the great big, ocean.

With my inner eye I could see the hot, angry sun that shone down on the ever moving, salty Ocean, the myriad of steep and rocky and fertile islands, and the great, white cities where people lived almost on top of each other. I would go there, and so should Rainbow and Ilina!

"Yeah, that sure is a fine piece of ass, all right!" I heard a voice behind me say.

Turning around I saw Ilina stand there in the doorway of the hut, leaning casually against the frame. She looked beautiful. Her dress was crumpled, her hair was disheveled, and she had dark rings under her eyes, but she looked beautiful all the same. The madness of her flower-need was gone, and so was the evil I had seen up at the fields of the Dream Lily.

Instead there was that smile, the Minstrel smile. That cheeky, ironic, happy-go-lucky, flirting, cheery, and pure happy smile that so naturally belonged on her face. But as she took a few bare-footed steps towards me, I saw that her eyes were somewhat restless.

She stopped in front of me, and for a long time she just scrutinized me with a passionate, almost frightened, intensity. Then she threw back her head and laughed out loud.

"By the Gods! I do believe they told the truth!"

"Who?"

"Marilla and Rainbow of course. That my mind now belongs to you."

"Er. And how do you, well, feel about it?"

"Vulnerable," she smiled. "Imprisoned. Scared. Enslaved."

"Yes, but this was the only option we could se--"

"No, I am only joking," she laughed, throwing her long, blonde, wet hair back. "I feel.. Strange. I feel... Like I want to be no other place than right here in the rain and mud with you. Like I want to sing and play for you every silly, soppy love song I ever knew. But most of all I want a kiss. Finally a kiss I can feel."

When our lips finally parted she looked up at me, an impish smile on her lips.

"This I felt. At the very bottom of my soul and being."