

The Sayer's Lie

A sound like splintering wood alerted Rogaris to the Sayer's warding. He almost turned away from the interlocked tree branches blocking his way, not because of apprehension, but anger at the insult. He snapped his fingers. The boughs sprang to their natural state and let him pass.

"I didn't come for your pathetic magic," he growled, "but for information."

His first glimpse of the hut disgusted him. It huddled under the branches of a giant tree. Thatch on the roof barely clung to the peak and slumped around the edges as though afraid to stay, but afraid to fall. *Couldn't all of your famed abilities be used to build a better house?*

His horse shied away from the hut, but Rogaris reined him in. "You will obey me."

Near the hut, three barefoot girls stooped over garden plants. One of them ran to the door. "Mama, someone's here."

A woman with black hair appeared in the opening. Her graceful movements belied the rustic surroundings. "Thank you, Sollie. Finish your chores while I speak with our guest." She spoke as one who had been educated; a privilege reserved for men, not females.

"Yes, Mama."

The girl's cheerful compliance galled Rogaris.

As he tied his horse to a sapling, he thought of the soldiers under his command.

I had it under control. He knew about the ambush, but his soldiers and his spell would be more than enough to overpower the enemy. They charged, but just as they got to the critical point, Lester rode up with his men shouting a warning. *My men deserted and fled to my meddling brother.*

Fighting down the rage, Prince Rogaris proceeded with his plan. At last, he would have access to the power to eliminate the real enemy.

He now faced the woman who would lead him to his old master. And so he entered that hut and followed her to a little table.

Sitting across from Tallina, Rogaris accepted the steaming mug of tea she handed him. Tea made, he assumed, from one of the bundles of herbs hanging from the rafters.

Some of his childhood classmates dabbled with plants. Foolish boys. He knew the source of real power and it wasn't in flowers and foliage.

Tallina tilted her head. Waves of her black hair spilled over her homespun linen shift, distracting him momentarily from his purpose. Her words brought him back. "So tell me why one of your high birth has sought a humble Sayer such as myself."

"Your reputation precedes you, Tallina. The elders of the Gray Clan said that you could tell me the whereabouts of an old man of my acquaintance."

"An old man. There are many old men in this area."

Rogaris waved toward her rafters. "He is knowledgeable about herbs. He used to teach. I've been looking for him for some time, but no one has seen him."

"Perhaps he doesn't want to be found."

"This is very important. I'll make it worth your while."

She nodded. "A hermit who knows about herbs. My searching may take time. Make yourself comfortable. Enjoy your tea and let's talk about less pressing matters while I feel after this acquaintance of yours."

He could not reveal his real purpose, she would never cooperate, but if he told her something of the story behind it, she might be persuaded.

"All right, then..." After taking a long sip, Rogaris peered into Tallina's deep brown eyes. He felt his cares slipping away. "My father gave me a horse named Thunder when I was seven."

"That is quite a gift for a seven-year-old."

"He thought Thunder was too high-spirited for a child, but I wanted that horse more than anything." Words came easily, perhaps too easily. A remote thread of caution teased his awareness then slipped away as his story broke free. "He offered to get me a different one, but I insisted that I could handle him. Thunder was the only horse I wanted."

"Did you convince him?"

"No." He smiled through the pain and then revealed something he had not intended to say. "My mother did."

"Ah." She placed her rough hand on top of the hand that bore the ring with the red stone and the royal crest.

Her touch felt a little too comfortable – too reassuring. Rogaris' strength had been forged in the furnace of pain. To this day, only his mother knew his distress, but the words would not stop. "Mother reminded Father that my brother, Lester, received his first horse when he was seven. My father finally consented, but only after commanding me that I was not to ride alone."

Tallina's eyes sparkled. "A command soon broken?"

"What difference did it make if he didn't know about it?" Rogaris chuckled. "It took every shred of strength I had to get that saddle on. I was so excited. I led Thunder out of the stable and into the corral. He danced and sidestepped. I don't know how I ever got into the saddle. But there I sat and for one brief moment, I was the king. Then he bolted, jumped the fence, and raced away with me clinging to his mane." The story sounded so ridiculous to him that he expected Tallina to laugh out loud, but she didn't. She just listened as though he had more to tell – and so, against all reason, he raced on with his story.

"All of that power was delicious to me. I could have ridden forever."

"But you didn't."

"My eleven-year-old brother, the horseman, rescued me. "Rogaris spat the words. "Then he told Father."

He lifted the mug and swallowed a gulp of the liquid, rolling the remaining bits of herb in his mouth with his tongue. Biting fumes danced in his nose and made his eyes water. It must be the tea, he thought, as he brushed at the tear trickling down his cheek.

"And then?"

He took a sharp breath. "Father sold the horse."

A little groan escaped Tallina.

Rogaris shook his head. "It's not so bad. That's when my schoolmaster, Rayf, began to teach me magic. I was good. I learned fast. I learned everything I could. The power was inside of me to do amazing things. With a wave of my hand I could make things rise up in the air and with a snap of my fingers, they crashed

to the ground. Rayf told me not to flaunt my talents, but to guard them carefully, so I hid what I knew. I didn't want Lester to tell Father and take away my lessons with Rayf and access to his books.

“Four years passed and I gained more and more skill. Rayf brought books to me and I spent every moment I could, consuming their contents. I even began to combine spells and come up with my own little mutated conjurations. Sometimes they were funny. Once I turned a white rabbit bright red.” He found himself laughing at the memory of a little girl screaming and running from the crimson bunny.

“I guess that's when Rayf decided I was ready for something larger. He told me that he was the keeper of ancient records – a library so vast I would never be able to read all of the volumes.”

Rogaris drank the last of the tea then leaned forward and grasped Tallina's hands. “He showed me a talisman that he wore around his neck. Said he had kept it hidden 'til then.”

Tallina pressed his fingers in her own. The touch thrilled him.
“What did it look like?”

“It was carved of green stone...” He traced around her palm with his finger.
“A circle – open in the center with a dragon winding its way around the ring.”

Tallina gasped. “I've heard stories, but who would believe such wild tales?”

“They were true. He even let me touch it.”

“How did it feel?”

“Oh no. No, no, no. I don't speak of it.”

She closed her eyes. The loss of her connection brought panic. Her words

echoed in the emptiness, "That's very wise of you."

When she opened her eyes, he felt relief and a craving to hold on to her.

"We'll talk about something else," she said. "You are a very powerful man."

"Yes. I am." He laughed.

"Tell me about your power."

"I have used it for control. I have even killed with it."

"That's a serious thing."

"It was for a good reason. Just so you know. It was a very good reason."

"Tell me."

"When I was fifteen, I found Thunder. I went to Father and asked for money to buy him, but he refused. Rayf said if I earned the money myself, the horse would mean more to me. So, I traveled around for a while doing magic. By that time even my father knew about my talent. People paid me. Neighboring noblemen hired me to turn a game of chance, lure a white bear to a hunting expedition – that kind of thing. When I finally had enough, I came home. Thunder was already in the stable."

"In the stable?"

"Father gave money to Lester to purchase my horse. My brother told me I had no business owning such a fine animal. Thunder belongs to a king and he was that king."

Her eyes grew wide. "What did you do?"

"I went to Rayf – walked right up to him and grabbed a hold of that talisman. I felt like I had grabbed a hold of lightning. Rayf just stood there. He couldn't move – couldn't stop me. I thought about Lester and how everything I

ever wanted he got or he was going to get.”

“You didn’t strike your brother.”

“No. It was better than that. I focused all that lightning on Thunder.”

Her voice became a whisper. “You killed the horse.”

“Yes.”

“If you couldn’t have him, nobody could.”

“No.” He searched for the real reason. “It hurt Lester to lose Thunder.”

“You wanted revenge?”

“No. To punish him. Father won’t do it.”

“So you are powerful because you did something your father couldn’t do?”

“Yes.” Somehow she had put words to what was most important. “I am more powerful than the king. I did what he couldn’t do.” And then a realization he dared entertain only in his most private thoughts slipped through his guard. “I am the second son. If anything ever happened to Lester, I would be king.” The picture of the smoldering horse came back to him.

He tipped up the mug, opened his mouth and waited for the last drop of tea. Setting the mug down, he looked again into Tallina’s eyes. “You are so beautiful.”

A sensation of flight overcame him. His mind soared in dream-like freedom. “You truly are a Sayer.”

He thought of his brother. “Lester will finally get what he deserves.”

He began to laugh. He couldn’t stop – didn’t want to stop. Laughter filled the hut and spilled into the forest. It carried him along, making everything funny – the dead horse, his brother’s rage, his father’s silence, the empty mug, the

finger with the missing ring – all of the hysterical seriousness.

He grabbed Tallina's wrist so he wouldn't float away before she shared her secret. Her wince sent him into a new fit of hysteria. Finally, he wheezed, "Tell me, Sayer, where is Rayf?"

She moved her fingers, forming symbols in the air between them. Something deep inside knew what it meant, but he couldn't think of it just then. Her words pulled him along to a place where the laughter died and he joined with the sound of her voice.

"It's getting late. You are very, very tired. You can rest here tonight. In the morning you will wake up from this bad dream. You will be glad it didn't really happen."

Tallina rode Rogaris' horse hard. She had to reach the north pass by midday. Everything depended on it.

She galloped into camp just as the last fire of the noon meal hissed under water poured by a red-cloaked soldier. Panting, she swung herself out of the saddle and faced Prince Lester.

He possessed the bearing of a king in every detail, from his clean-shaven face to his polished black boots. He exuded command presence. His blonde hair softened his appearance to present an image of benevolence. She saw how a father could favor such a son and how only a mother could know the tragedy of it. Tallina knew personally of the cruelty behind those green eyes.

Fighting an urge to stand proudly before him, she made a shallow curtsy, then turned and grabbed the bundle tied to the horse.

She threw a pair of black boots at the prince's feet, fine leather gloves, then black leggings and a black silk tunic emblazoned with the royal crest. A red cloak with gold ornaments clinked as she tossed it on the heap.

"It's all here." All except one small piece of metal, she thought, then hastily shoved the reins of Rogaris' steed into Lester's hand. "Just as we agreed. He didn't find Rayf."

Lester nodded to one of his soldiers, who stooped to pick up the pile of clothing. Then the prince turned his back.

Tallina shouted, "Prince Lester. We have an agreement. Should you leave without honoring it, Rogaris will awaken. I will be unable to reign his vengeance or keep him from finding Rayf."

Without breaking stride or facing Tallina, the prince snapped his fingers. One soldier drove a wagon up beside the Sayer, climbed down, and handed the reins to her.

Prince Lester's voice trailed behind him. "It's all there. Silk dresses for yourself and your three daughters. The horse, the wagon, a box of gold coins, clothing for your 'devoted mate' Rogaris." He clicked his boots together and pivoted to face Tallina. "Just remember, Tall, should the spell be broken, you will forfeit your life."

How dare he call me Tall. She hated the name and Lester knew it. *He hurled me an insult with his threat.* She bit down an impulse to demonstrate her power. That would not serve her in the long run. He didn't need to see her power, he would soon feel it.

Prince Lester masquerades as the honorable one. She thought of the stories Rogaris told her. His injuries were hard. Though she knew worse, she sympathized with his anger toward his older brother. Tallina was glad that Rogaris was too young to know what Lester knew. Otherwise, she never could have bound him.

She blew out a long breath to calm herself. If only she had been able to control Lester as easily as she had Rogaris. Things would be very different now. She would be sitting on a throne instead of the seat of a wagon.

Still, it was a very fine wagon, better than most in these parts – pulled by a horse from a royal stable. Her cargo included resources enough to provide a comfortable life for herself and her daughters, for the time being. But the future promised even greater privilege. She pictured them wearing the extravagant clothing in the castle of King Garthor. “That would be something,” she laughed, “to return in a silk dress.”

Rogaris slept now and would until she returned. She gave her daughters instructions not to disturb him. She sighed when she thought of Rogaris, so different from Lester. It went deeper than the black hair color. Lester was cold, but Rogaris burned with a passion for life. He would have made an exciting mate as he had been before she handed him that mug of tea. Oh, he never would have made a proper husband, but my, what a lover.

She hated to spoil him – tame him – take the fire out of him. That's why she kept the ring. Well, partly. *Perhaps after his son is born, I can restore Rogaris enough to... Well, perhaps not that much, but at least to return him to his father's castle. And one day our son will wear the ring and inherit the*

throne.

She took an awful risk in keeping the ring, but her spell would keep Lester from realizing it was missing until it was too late for him to interfere. She committed the spell to paper, the highest level of warding, and wrapped it around the ring before she slipped it into the cloth bag. It would hold. *It must hold.*

Rogaris' son, conceived before the binding took full effect, would be heir to more than a throne. He would receive an endowment of magical talent from both parents. But she knew with certainty that if Lester made good on his threat, the child within her would also die. She could not run any risk of breaking the binding too soon. The child must live.

Lester will never have an heir. Regrettable, but there was no other way. He had his chance but chose not to cooperate. Best not to have any competition for the position.

The journey home took far more time than the one to meet Lester. A pressing matter awaited her, one she dreaded, but plodded toward resolutely. Up into the high mountains, she urged the horse. The wagon clattered along behind – her precious cargo sounding more and more like emptiness than fulfillment. The trail narrowed. She worked her way carefully, knowing that sometimes the peddler took this trail. She felt sure that she could maneuver through.

The air grew cooler and more fragrant with pine. Several times she stopped to harvest herbs that didn't grow at lower elevations, herbs she learned about under the tutelage of a master.

At sunset, she pulled up at a ramshackle hut with a thin white curl of

smoke ascending from the chimney. Her stomach churned as she called, "I seek an audience with Master Rayf."

Tallina waited in the wagon for a long time, wondering if he had heard her. Finally, she took a deep breath, climbed down from the wagon, and approached the rough wooden door to knock. As she raised her fist, the door swung open and a white-headed man with a scraggly beard confronted her.

"What are you doing coming here?" he demanded. "You might have been followed."

She met his stare. "I wasn't."

He cocked his head severely and bunched his eyebrows.

"I made certain."

He appeared old, un-kept, haggard. Perhaps it was the beard. He looked nothing like the master she remembered.

He leaned forward, his eyes intense. "You called me back from a place of safety – for what?"

Safety. Images assaulted her: finding her mother dead when she was a little girl and being forced to live a lie until the discovery of her womanhood. The years of pretending exploded. She couldn't hold it in a moment longer.

"Where was my safety? And where were you, Master Rayf, when I needed protection? Barricaded in your quarters with your brew. Didn't you hear me screaming?"

His eyes reflected pain. "No." He looked down and then whispered, "When I learned that you left, I searched for you."

"And what would you have done if you had found me? You couldn't take

me back to the castle. I jeopardized your standing in the court. I was a disgrace to you.”

His jaw flexed. “You don’t know what I risked to educate you. Your safety was always fragile.” He ran his hand through his hair. “The one who killed your mother also wanted to eliminate her daughter. The only protection I could give you was to claim you as my son.”

His disclosure startled her. Tallina’s anger eased. “You couldn’t find me because I learned well your lessons and read well your books.”

“That was the reason for your schooling. It was all I could give you.”

She drew in a long breath and let it out. “Master Rayf, there are things you should know. Prince Lester hired me to bind Rogaris.”

He sighed. “That’s probably best, for a while anyway. His rage runs deep. Lester caused him to lose face and Rogaris is bent on revenge. Even without the talisman, he is extremely dangerous.”

“I can handle him. I set a warding to test his skills and I know how to control him.”

“You can’t hold him forever.”

“I can keep him as long as I wish.”

“Oh, come now, Tall, it’s not meant to be.” He shook his head. “Even the child you bear won’t change that.”

How can he read me so easily? Anger ousted her doubt. Her resolve jarred back into place. “I can hold him for nine months, long enough for the heir to the throne to be born.”

A startled look eclipsed his face. “What have you done to Prince Lester?”

"I just protected my child – my children."

"You have altered the course. You have changed the affairs of nations. There will be no one to provide a balance. Lester's child should have been the one. Oh, Tallina, Tallina, how could you be so short-sighted?"

Hearing her real name plunged her into turmoil. She had been so certain when she cursed Prince Lester. Had it been a mistake? "Can it be changed?"

"It's too late. The gate is already closed. It will cost you dearly, my daughter."

"Daughter," she whispered.

All those years of pretending to be his son crashed upon her. She grieved for the pain.

The lies purchased an education in the court of King Garthor as an apprentice to this man of letters. She never called him father, but Master Rayf, and he called her Tall, a fitting name for a boy.

In her thirteenth year, Prince Lester confronted her one day as she came out of the apothecary holding a remedy for female complaints.

"Now what would an old man and his *son* be doing with Red Raspberry leaf?" he sneered.

Fear gripped her. She tried to hide the bundle, but it was too late.

The next morning when she returned from breakfast, the door to her quarters was locked. She rattled it and pounded. "Master Rayf," she called. "It's me, Tall. Let me in."

"He won't answer." The voice belonged to Lester. "He's been into the brew."

She turned to see the whole class standing behind the prince. His arms folded across his chest.

Anger flared in her. "How would you know?"

Lester smirked.

She glared at him. "You wouldn't bring him brew on a school day."

"I can't help it if he is too weak to control his appetite."

"It violates the rules. And you know it."

"You want to talk about violating rules, Tall?" He stepped forward nearly contacting her, but not quite. "What do the rules say about a girl attending class with young men?"

The boys circled around boxing her in.

She raised her hand to form the symbols of repulsion, but one of the boys grabbed her wrist and slammed it against the door.

Lester stepped out of the way. "I think Tall needs a lesson. Who is man enough to teach her?"

He stood by and gloated as the other boys took his challenge and she could no longer hold the magic that supported the lie. The deception ended in horrible pain, forcing her to flee; forcing her to bear a child alone. Two daughters followed because she was too young, too naïve.

No one to guide her, except the men who professed to love her. Oh, the lies those men told her.

But this man, Rayf, finally acknowledged the truth. She trembled, trying to grasp it.

"Daughter." Tears seeped out of his eyes and ran down into his beard. He

reached out to her and the barrier of years collapsed. "I will not see you again."

She fell into his arms and wept bitterly.

Her father's admission changed everything. "Daughter." The word rang in Tallina like the bells of the castle calling her to lessons. At the same time, his prediction hounded her.

She gritted her teeth. *I made my decision. I will deal with the consequences as I have dealt with everything else.*

She thought of how easily Rogaris had broken her warding; her test to ascertain his strength. *Yes, he does have great ability. After our son is born, I will return the ring to Rogaris and together we will defeat Prince Lester. My father will not see me again because I will be living in the castle with my family.*

The echo of her name from her father's lips accused her daily of what she had done to Rogaris. Guilt drove Tallina and gave her no rest.

To appease those accusatory inner voices, she began to give Rogaris tiny bits of truth; always testing each new message against the warding that held her binding. Too much would weaken the boundary and alert Lester. Too much might restore the vengeance of Prince Rogaris. *One day he will know it all, but for now, he must learn one drop at a time.*

She searched in the story he told her that day he drank her tea. She saw in his confession a wounded child trying desperately to find his place. She could not restore the memory of his climbing up on that horse, but she could say, "You have great strength." She purposely did not say power. He had killed with power. But he had gotten the saddle on with his strength. And because it was truth, it

resonated in him. And because she was a Sayer, she knew.

When the time came to repair the roof of her hut, she watched as he went into the house and came out with a chair. He bowed with a flourish as he offered it to her. While Rogaris and the girls worked on the roof, she sat in the shade and sewed a larger dress to accommodate her blooming figure.

On his journey to earn the horse, he must have learned how peasants live, Tallina thought. By the time she finished the dress, Rogaris completed the finest thatch she had ever seen. Her daughters cheered and she joined them. "You are victorious."

Sitting on the apex, Rogaris raised his arms and puffed out his chest. Tallina recalled the story of him sitting on his horse and feeling like a king. *No one will take this victory from him.*

The Sayer made soap in two batches that year: lavender for herself and her daughters and biloba for Rogaris.

"What's the difference?" he asked.

"Smell them and tell me which you like better."

He made a great show of comparing the two.

"Well?"

He held up the lavender bar.

Tallina's mouth opened. "Why?"

He grinned. "It smells like your hair."

"Oh, come now. Which do you want to use?"

"Guess."

She laughed.

Tallina knew that the memory-herb would have worked much better in tea, but she chose the soap. A little on the skin and a little of the scent would be enough.

Toward the end of the summer, the pile of sticks and twigs Tallina's daughters gathered in the woods grew to a great heap as Rogaris bent his back to chopping and hauling the fuel. "Thank you for being kind to my daughters," she told him.

When he brought a big buck home from his hunt, her girls shouted, "You are the hero."

"You won't be hungry this winter," he told them.

Tallina's youngest daughter replied, "We won't be hungry forever."

Rogaris chuckled. "Well, not for a long time."

They set to the task of butchering and drying the meat. Tallina told him, "You really are the hero."

He smiled.

In private moments, he pressed his hand on her belly to feel the baby kicking. "You're getting strong, Garthor."

The name worried her at first. It was a king's name, but Rogaris chose it, and over time she relaxed and accepted it.

Each new taste of truth changed him. He stood a little taller, his eyes shown a little brighter. The transformation thrilled her. She became obsessed with revealing to him his magnificence. It had nothing to do with position, rank, or privilege, but everything to do with him.

The more he learned, the more he fed her soul. He doted on her, bringing

her gifts, simple things – a flower for her hair, a clasp for her cloak made from a piece of wood. This wasn't the mindless devotion of a bound man, but something deeper, more alive.

She wanted to keep him just as he was, to never let him go. The ring and the throne faded into the distance. *I want our son to be as loving as his father.*

When the peddler came that fall, she decided to use some of the money from Prince Lester to buy cloth to make winter cloaks for her daughters and clothes for the baby. She opened the chest where she kept her treasures and found the box of coins. She picked up a hand full. Her fingers tingled as she dropped the coins into her bag. After she closed it, she wiped her hand on her dress. The sensation passed.

Guilt punished her for using the money from the binding, but she suppressed her conscience by reminding herself, *I earned it. It's mine. The agreement is kept. The binding is still in place.* And then that, too, troubled her.

The trader opened cart doors lined with shelves and bins of tools and utensils. Cooking herbs hung from the ceiling; sage, peppermint, rosemary, and garlic. She smiled. *The women in this land have no idea what herbs can do beyond flavoring their food.* Rolls of cloth rested against the back wall, brown and white and black. Tallina's glance stopped on a bolt of gray as light as clouds on a misty day. "I'll take that one."

As she reached for her bag of coins, she noticed Rogaris. He picked up a razor from a bin of knives. He studied it, opened it and closed it several times, and then set it on the counter.

Stunned, she recognized another lie. She looked at his black beard. *He*

came to me clean-shaven. When I took his belongings to Lester, his razor must have been in his gear. She remembered the men in the castle. None of them grew beards. How can he know his truth if he is not well groomed?

She laid out coinage for the fabric. Rogaris hefted the cloth and carried it to the hut. While he was gone, she bought the razor and a polished metal mirror.

Before he awoke the next morning, Tallina hung the mirror over the basin where he always washed and laid the razor beside the bowl with a bar of his soap. Then she waited like her little girls wait for birds when they leave seeds on the snow.

He approached as usual, bent, splashed water on his face, lathered and rinsed, and reached for the cloth to dry.

Seeing the mirror, he stood, staring at the image. Water dripped from his beard onto his tunic. He didn't move for a long time, and then he looked down, shook his head, and picked up the razor.

He used the biloba soap to soften his whiskers and began shaving the long facial hair and dropping it in the basin. When he finished, he carefully cleaned and dried the razor, folded it, and put it in his pouch. And then he looked into the mirror again for a long time.

She couldn't contain her excitement any longer. She ran into his arms and kissed his smooth cheeks. They laughed together. He twirled her around 'til she was quite dizzy. And then they took the basin of whiskers, went into the woods, and left gifts for the birds to line their nests. Winter would soon come, but the shaven hair would still be there in the spring when the snow melted.

The time for the birth drew near. One day Rogaris came up behind her and circled her with his strong arms. He whispered in her ear. "Princess."

Panic surged through Tallina. *Have I spoken in my sleep? Have I given away too much? Are the binding and the warding intact? How could he say such a dangerous thing?*

She felt the gentle pressure of his arm as he turned her and gazed into her eyes. "What is it, my love?"

Her mind raced to find an answer. She found none.

"Is the baby coming?"

She could not add another lie. She took a deep breath to calm her shaking. "Not yet."

"Then what?"

"I'm not a princess."

He smiled. "You will always be a princess to me."

She shook her head, then leaned over to steady herself on his chest and breathed in the woody scent of his soap. "I'm only a Sayer." But she could not tell him the rest, not yet.

Tallina's time came. Her pains made it difficult to move, but the urgency of her situation drove her.

Pain struck. She started to fall.

Rogaris grabbed her. "What is it?"

"Bring the midwife!"

Rogaris ran from the hut.

She dropped to her knees.

Something's wrong. Very wrong.

Did Lester learn that I weakened the binding? She thought of the coins and the razor.

“Dark magic.”

Pain stabbed her.

She lifted the hearthstone and clamped her fist around a little cloth bag.

The pains came faster now. It was happening too fast – much too fast – unnatural. Danger.

She clenched her teeth. Not here on the hearth. The urge to push overwhelmed her. When it subsided, she called out to her daughter, “Sollie. Take Bekka and Rya. Run to the woods!”

The door no sooner closed than she felt the head emerge and then the body. *Where is the midwife?*

“She’s dead.” The midwife’s words thudded against Rogaris’ consciousness. A feeling of loss overcame him. Tallina, the center of his world, lay cold and still.

A fog of disbelief muted all but the body before him. The midwife’s voice faded to a buzzing in the background. All was swallowed up in the awful aloneness – the isolation from Tallina.

“The child is blue.” Tallina heard the voice of the midwife and opened her

eyes to find herself floating near the ceiling. Below, the midwife and Rogaris bent over a woman's body and the purple form of an infant – both lying in a pool of blood. That's my body, she thought, and my son, Garthor.

The old woman turned to look at Rogaris. "We weren't in time to save either of them."

That's not true. Garthor's life is still in him! I see it there. Don't give up on him.

She swooped down, laid one hand on the midwife's hand and the other on the baby, willing a connection. All of the powers of Sayership she had ever possessed poured into heightening the awareness of the old woman for the child.

Then as Rogaris lifted Tallina's body, the midwife shivered. She picked up Garthor and began massaging him. "Breathe, Little One, breathe." she crooned, "Yes, that's it. Look, you are turning pink."

Tallina watched as Rogaris laid her body on the bed. He knelt to kiss the forehead, the cheeks, the eyelids.

The midwife wrapped the infant in a coverlet. "I'll keep him with me for a few days 'til you can care for him."

Rogaris nodded.

She left the hut with the baby.

Relief saturated Tallina. Her son lived.

All of her attention turned to Rogaris. He appeared vulnerable; distraught. She brushed his cheek. Her finger tips passed through his tear without disturbing it. If only I could ease his pain, she thought.

If only I could give him the peace my father gave to me when he spoke the

truth.

It was too late for confessions now, so this would have to do. Tallina thought of the threat Lester threw at her when she took him Rogaris' clothing. If the binding was broken, she would lose her life, and she knew her baby would die with her if he was still in her womb.

Now her son lived. Prince Lester no longer controlled his life. Lester attacked her, but the hand of Tallina's lifeless body clenched the power to break the spell on Rogaris.

She thought of the cup of tea and the story of a horse that could not live, and though he did not say it, she knew his pain at destroying that magnificent creature. She was a Sayer, after all.

She felt his pain as he now hovered over her body, lifted one of her hands, and placed it on her heart. His tenderness touched her deeply. I could go back, she thought. I know the body is horribly torn, but I could go back for him and for our son.

She settled onto the body and began to meld with it. Pain seized her – more intense than she had ever experienced – nearly forcing her out, but she thought of the teardrop and the child and she fought for life.

Rogaris lifted her other hand. "What's this?" he whispered.

It is my gift to you, but the words would not form. The body was cold, stiff, and unwilling to obey her command. *My gift, my love, your freedom.*

It's time for the lies to stop.

Tallina felt his tear fall upon her hand as he pried the little bag from her fingers. She struggled to keep her hold on life – clawing at the body from within

to hang on – but her grabbing hands passed through the flesh and could not possess it any longer.

Opening the cloth bag, Rogaris emptied it into his palm.

A ring – his ring – stared back at him. The royal crest upon its surface jarred him. Memories erupted like a volcano spewing rage over the cold reality of Tallina's binding.

The trees that blocked my way weren't meant to keep me out but to lure me in. The tea muddled my mind so she could work her spell. She deceived me into revealing my most private thoughts.

His disclosures slapped him. The pain of losing Thunder, his mother solving his problems, Lester usurping every shred of his power. *You pulled it from me, Tallina, every humiliating detail. And you made me believe you would lead me to the talisman.*

“Traitor. It was all a lie.”

He jumped to his feet and backed away from the lifeless body, knocking over the table where he drank the Sayer's tea. “How *dare* you bind me. How *dare* you suck away my identity and turn me into a groveling dog.” He picked up a chair and threw it against the wall. “How *dare* you make me crawl after you.” A howl escaped him.

He slumped forward, holding his head in his hands. “How dare you *die* and leave me alone.”

She would never again tell him of his strength or cheer him on or kiss his shaven face.

The cloth bag lay on the floor. He stooped to pick it up and felt something else inside. He pulled out a piece of paper, unfolded it, and stared at a perfect likeness of the talisman. The memories flooded back on him. Tallina's hand rested in his. He traced around her palm, describing the magical token. She knew all along; knew it in intimate detail, knew its power, and knew how to use it. She knew where it was, but she never told him.

Around the perimeter of the drawing, Rogaris now saw symbols to conceal the ring from – he swiped at tears blurring his vision – “Lester.”

She held it back, the key to my awakening. If I hadn't seen it, I would have wandered, still under the binding, with no knowledge of my past or my foes.

He thought of the men under his command. *I was so focused on you wresting control of my men, Lester, that I didn't see what you were really doing. You withdrew my men to leave me alone with the enemy. You set me up to be slaughtered.*

You couldn't have me finding Rayf. You would have ended like Thunder, so you hired Tallina to bind me.

You didn't factor love into the deal, nor the healing in her voice.

Rogaris took a deep breath and stood. He raised arms streaked with Tallina's blood and slipped the ring onto his finger. It fit like the image looking back at him from her mirror.

“Stay close, Tallina. I cannot go against Lester alone. Together we will avenge your murder and serve justice to my brother. Then I will return for our son.”