

# Nothing Left to Lose

by

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Perl clenched her hands on her favorite scarf and resisted the temptation to shred it to bits.

"Why?" she demanded of the man before her. "Why would you tell my brother?"

"You might be with child," he began in a conciliatory tone, reaching his hand out to rub her shoulder. She jerked away and slapped at his arm.

"Wouldn't it have been a bit wiser to wait and see if that were the case?" she said accusingly. "Instead you get up from my bed and run to his knee, confessing your dastardly deed, and who suffers the consequences? Surely not you."

"We must marry," he pronounced, kneeling down before her, as though to ask for the hand he'd just declared was already his.

"Oh please! I wanted you in my bed for a few hours, not at my table for the rest of my life."

He frowned and stood up slowly. "How could you be so stupid?" she cried out, finally throwing the scarf at him in place of the candelabra her hand itched for.

"I believe I have behaved honorably, Princess Perella," he said, standing tall and staring down his nose at her. She wasn't short, by any means, but the Earl of Daneb was at least a handspan taller. She fought the urge to kick him in the shins.

"Don't call me that," she returned petulantly. And then, "you call that honorable? I thought preserving my honor was the honorable thing here. You've been nothing but the most callous, inconsiderate, not to mention gull-headed, knave imaginable. How can you even think that you've been honorable?"

"Tis true. I bedded you without the sanction of your brother and the Gods, and for that I am eternally shamed. But now I am bestowing upon you my name. It matters little that we consummated our marriage a few days early. Rolan and I have agreed that you and I should be wed four days hence, and then all will be made right."

"No."

"No? Don't be foolish. If we wait much longer for all the trappings a woman wants at one of these things, then there will be gossip should our heir come before nine months' time. Anyhow, Rolan assures me that with everyone working around the clock, and with enough gold, the wedding will not lack for proper frills." He smiled at her then, a placating parental smile. Perl wanted to spit.

"No, I don't care about proper trappings, as you call them. I mean, no, I am not going to marry you. Neither you nor Rolan can make me either." She hadn't a leg to stand on with this last statement, and surely Caers knew it. He shook his head, then took her hand in his and patted it gently.

"You are confused—and it is my fault I know." He sighed. "Had I had more care for your purity . . . . But you don't know what you are saying, and I understand, believe me. You are upset and muddled and that is my fault as well. Had I not been overwhelmed with your beauty, well, I should never have sunk so low as to disgrace you like this. Be cheered—your conscience is unbesmirched. You could not have known about, nor prevented my base lust. Don't worry, little one, we'll take care of you. Marriage is what we must do. And of course, I would never again use you so violently or lecherously again."

Perl yanked her hand away and balled it up, shoving it into the other to keep from hitting him. Bedazzled by her beauty! Ha! And what was that he'd called her—little one? What happened to vixen and all the other things he'd called her in the dark? And what was this? Not her fault? After she'd set about for so long to get him to even conceive of the idea of taking her to bed, and then gone to all that trouble to seduce him, and now he told her that her conscience was unbesmirched. Clod. Buffle-headed pig. What was his chivalrous plan—marry her and then strand her on some white altar while he trifled with her maids or whatever other likely prospect happened to come along? Not hardly. She had wanted him, but not for marriage. Neither he nor Rolan was going to rope her into this one, not if she could help it.

"Go away Caers. I don't want to hear any more of this. Tell Rolan I'd rather he banished me than marry you—no offense intended. But when I get married, I'll choose who and while yes, it might be you, it could equally well be Siros." She ignored his sharp, indrawn breath at even the suggestion of her marrying the half-elven lord who had recently become an ally of the kingdom. "The point is, not matter who I marry, it will be my choice. So go away and tell Rolan that the wedding's off." Perl turned then and marched

into her bed chamber, sure that Caers, in his chivalric mode, wouldn't follow. She was right.

It had been stupid to compare him to Siros, but he had been the wildest possibility that she could think of, and it was better—if not quite as satisfying—than comparing Caers to a jackass, as she'd been tempted to do. Not that Siros wasn't handsome, and not that she hadn't long admired his body and wonderful wit, but the elf-lord was simply not interested in the wild and difficult sister of the King of Berriar. Besides, in spite of his new status as a trusted ally, most everyone still made a ward of evil when he came into the room or walked down the street. In Berriar, the ancient legends of evil elves entertained a more stable reality than did the elves themselves. If she in truth married him, she'd probably start a civil war. Personally she liked them, especially Elon, Siros' cousin and usual traveling companion.

Perl paced the room, her heavy skirts sweeping side to side in a most unladylike fashion. Married. Well, no matter that she refused, it had always been Rolan's pet project to get her safely and properly entangled—he thought she'd always be a spinster, the way she antagonized the prospective suitors he paraded before her. But to have his favorite—the Earl of Daneb—offer for her, and to compound it with her own indiscretion—well, she was going to get married to that colossal idiot whether she liked it or not. For her own good, for the good of the kingdom and all that rot.

She had never, for even one single moment, thought that Caers would suddenly get a guilty conscious and confess to his liege-lord. She went to the window and tapped angrily on the purple and blue stained glass. He'd been in the bed of every woman from here to Calladras—except for Elon of course. Not that he hadn't tried to bed the elven

woman. But she'd had more sense, unlike Perl. Her hand bunched and she leveled a blow at the glass, her fist bouncing away and knocking against the sill. It stung. She put her knuckle to her lips and went back to pacing.

She was going to have to do something if she wanted out of this. But what? Her tongue traced the sharp edge of her teeth. If not banishment, then how about escape? Elon would take her in, if she could make it that far. There were no guards on her doors—no one would dream that she'd actually run away. They probably already assumed that the trap was sprung and she'd have to resign herself to their fate. She had enough gold and jewels to hire horses and a guide—but then her plan fell flat. No one in the city would consent to work for her. Not that there weren't mercenaries aplenty, but once they found out the assignment . . . well, no one was going to antagonize Rolan or Caers in any way. They were heroes of the realm! And she didn't have time to look elsewhere, even if she'd known where to look.

So she'd have to do it herself. A horse was no problem. She could easily take any in the stable out riding without suspicion. Clothing she could filch from Rolan—he was a bit bulkier than she, but had nothing on her in height. She could also get a dagger or two from him, just in case. Food she could get from the kitchens, and buy more in a village where no one would know her. As for a disguise, she hated the thought of cutting her hair, but it would grow back. In men's clothes, riding astride, with her height she could pass for a man. And no one would be looking for the king's sister in such garb.

The plan came together in its simplicity and in two days time, Perl figured that she could be ready to go. That night she feigned illness so she wouldn't have to suffer the congratulations and twittering of the court, who she was sure would be absolutely amazed

at Caers' choice—questioning his taste in women. The next morning, she watched as messengers rode out from the mews, at least fifty of them, all riding out with invitations to the royal wedding, now three days hence. She sniffed and shut her window. Rolan had come by the night before and just like Caers, told her it wasn't her fault, that the marriage was for the best, and generally was so patronizing she thought her teeth would be ground to dust before he left.

She turned now to confront the half-dozen seamstresses who crowded her chamber. She'd have to suffer their ministrations, she knew, if she was not going to arouse suspicions. Let them think she'd acquiesced to their plans. Besides, they could be useful. She sent down for food, a lot of it, and soon trays of meat, cheese, bread, fruit and various vegetables were brought up. As the women ate, trilling over the wonder of the sumptuousness of the feast, and at Perl's amazing generosity, that same guileless princess snatched a cache of food from the table, to later be wrapped and packed in a saddle bag for her journey. It wouldn't spoil before she found an opportunity to purchase more.

The only part of her plan that disturbed her was the lack of a companion or guide. She knew that Rolan had managed to rid Berriar of many of its thieves and highwaymen, but some still lingered, and she had no skills to fend them off. Should she be attacked, and should they discover her to be a woman, well she shivered to think of that. And even worse, if they ascertained her to be the missing princess, then she'd really be in trouble. She'd likely be turned over to Rolan for a handsome reward and then put under lock and key until the marriage took place. Still there was no help for it, she would simply have to be careful, and hope that the legends of the elvenhome were as true as those of the elves had turned out to be. On the other hand, she didn't relish the idea of a lifetime spent

wandering lost in the Elven forest, and would have to hope she found Elon in Calladras, which was on the outer edge of the elvenhome, when she got there.

That same night, while Rolan and Caers congratulated themselves into oblivion over cigars and port, Perl sneaked into her brother's chambers and filched two pair of breeches, two overshirts, several pair of thick socks, a hat, and a pair of flared gloves, designed to fit over wrist gauntlets. She had been tempted to make off with a pair of his boots, but his feet were larger than hers and her own riding boots would do, if she mucked them up a bit to hide their more feminine design. She then found in the back of his wardrobe a brace of daggers. They were long and thin with pearl handles—no doubt very expensive—but they were also sharp and so Perl jammed them in her bag on top of the gloves before making her way back to her own chambers.

No one saw her, as she had requested that Rolan order all the servants to keep away from her rooms that she might get enough rest. He agreed, wishing her to be fresh for the influx of visitors that even now had begun to roll in. Besides, as she had no compunction about reminding him, she might be in that delicate condition which required so much pampering of a woman. She'd had to make a great effort not to laugh outright when he'd nervously agreed. The herb-woman in the village where she'd stopped to make the anonymous purchase had promised against just such a possibility.

As she had thought, Rolan's clothes fit, if a bit loosely. She packed the two saddlebags with her stolen supplies and added to them a water bag and a blanket, and then sat down at her dresser and stared at herself in the mirror. Her hair was her greatest vanity, and she hated to cut it. It hung in natural curls to her elbows, its bourbon colored lengths glowing in the candlelight. But as fond of it as she was, it had to go. She'd laid out her

riding dress and now into the pocket she slid a pair of shears. She'd cut it once she was free of the city.

Perl slept little that night and was awake to see the glow of the sun rise behind sodden banks of clouds. She waited a little longer and then called for her maid to dress her, as was necessary to her plan, for she told the girl she planned to ride north and pick flowers along the lake some two leagues away. When questioned, the girl's story would match that of the groom Perl would tell the same story to, and send any pursuers off in a wild goose chase. Just as she sent the girl away, however, and was preparing to make her way downstairs with the saddle bags slung over her arm—a picnic she would explain if anyone asked—something unexpected happened.

There came a rap at her door and a message was given to her on a silver salver. It was from Elon. One of Rolan's messenger's had overtaken the elves as they passed through Berriar from Gevold and they had come immediately to be on hand for her wedding. Now Elon requested her company. Telling the page to wait, Perl quickly penned her refusal, citing a terrible headache, and asking for Elon's patience. Though she hoped to find sanctuary with Elon, to actually ask the elf-woman to participate in this deceit was asking too much of their friendship. Siros had made a pact with Rolan, and Perl would not be responsible for its collapse by making him, through Elon, partners in her crime. So she lied and hoped for her friend's forgiveness.

Perl was an excellent rider, and it was not unusual for her to take out one of Rolan's horses, in spite of his protestations that she should ride the gentle palfrey's he had purchased for her. Today she ordered Kesh to be saddled and brought to her. It was done quickly and soon she was mounted on the spirited three-year old. She and the Petar, the

groom who generally waited on her, had a deal. She bribed him with a coin here and there, and he conveniently forgot that she was a woman and saddled the horses with regular saddles whenever she wanted to ride. Nor did he, as a loyal subject to Rolan, insist that she ride out accompanied by a groom or maid. It was one of Perl's few privacies, and she had always cherished it. Now she depended on it.

She rode sidesaddle, the skirts of her dress hiding the fact that she did not in fact sit in a sidesaddle. She went through the northern gate of the castle grounds, winding leisurely through the streets to the northern sally port of the city, so that if followed, her story of going to the lake to pick flowers would not be doubted. Already the streets were alive with merchants, bakers, pickpockets and travelers, all preparing for the festival which would be a part of the wedding celebration. Perl waved graciously at her well-wishers, biting the inside of her cheeks all the while as they congratulated her on her fine match.

At last she found herself outside the gates and out of sight of the city walls. Turning Kesh west, she gave him his head and put another two or three leagues between herself and her prison. In a copse, by the edge of a small rill, she dismounted and changed her clothing, weighting the dress down with rocks and sinking it into the water. Next she clipped off her hair, hiding it in a hole in the bank which she filled with dirt and rocks. Within a half a glass, she had remounted and now rode south, toward the main road to Calladras. She did not get far.

First a white shadow skimmed from the underbrush as she made her way up another folding hill. It was soon followed by a grey horse, ridden by none other than Elon, who pulled up in front of Perl, her face impassive as she took in her friend's metamorphosis. The white shadow turned out to be a wolf, Elon's ever loyal companion. It came to sit

beside her, its head at the elf woman's toe as she surveyed the princess of Berriar. Perl broke the silence first.

"How?"

Elon shrugged. "I went out riding shortly after you did—I could not stand the business of the castle. It surprised me that you, so pained, should have recovered so suddenly as to go riding as well, and so quickly after refusing to see me, that in fact you left before me."

Perl smiled and shook her head. "Everything went so easy that it didn't occur to me that I'd be uncovered so soon." She shifted in her saddle.

"You don't look much like a bride," commented the elf-woman.

"I don't plan to be one."

"This isn't much like you, you know," said Elon. "It's a bit juvenile, don't you think? Running away from home."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Now Perl grinned at her friend. "But Rolan's dead set on this stupidity, and I'll be damned if he's going to make me do it. I'm nearly thirty turns old, for goodness sake, and he's all of one turn older than I am." She took her hat off and rubbed her hand through the fluffy remnants of her hair. "It's my fault too, I suppose. Seducing that loose-lipped Caers. But he is handsome, and I have been so tired of being the world's oldest living relic of purity. I admit, it's a ridiculous situation. But Elon, I am not going back there."

The elf-woman nodded slowly, wisps of her ash-blond hair floating in the breeze.

"What are you going to do?"

"Well. I'd hoped to find refuge with you, once I was free. But I can't ask you to help me now. If Rolan found out, your alliance with him would be over—he'd be your enemy for sheer honor's sake. I'm simply not worth the risk, as far as that goes." Perl spoke without blame, for she was a princess and knew that the needs of kingdoms outweighed by far the needs of a single woman. "Now I'm not sure where to go."

Elon glanced down at the white wolf who was staring up at her. After a moment she sighed. "Only Siros can provide you shelter in his lands. The magic which protects it is his. I could ask him—"

"No, Elon," Perl cut in. "I couldn't do that. He would be torn between his ties to you and his obligations to his people. That isn't fair." Tears were pricking at Perl's eyes and she swallowed, trying to force them back. The best laid plans often went awry, and hers had never been a very good plan. She needed to think.

Elon's voice was strained as she replied. "Fair? After what you did for him? I know, I'm not ever supposed to mention it, but Rolan would never have made this alliance but for you. How you convinced him, I do not know. But we were not welcome, and then of a sudden we were, and it was your doing. We owe you."

Perl urged Kesh up next to Elon's horse and reached her hand out to the other woman. "I drugged him." She shrugged. "So what I did was not only dishonorable, but probably treasonous. I drugged him, you see, and then I signed the documents for him—I can do his signature better than he can—and told him the next day that he'd done it. He thought he had been too drunk to remember and couldn't afford to lose face by backing out. Oh, now that it's turned out so well, he's proud of himself, and so I really didn't do much. But what I did was, at the very least, despicable. If Siros ever heard of what I'd done, he'd

probably end the alliance himself, just so as to not mar his honor. Oh but I'm sick of that word. It's Caers' stupid honor that got me into this whole wedding mess in the first place—

" She stopped and took a breath. "What I'm trying to say, Elon, is Siros doesn't owe me, and you don't owe me. I did what I did because it was right for Berriar, not for elves."

Perl glanced up at the sun just about halfway up its zenith, and pulled her hat back on. "I have to go. I need to put as much distance between me and Rolan as I can. Don't worry about me. Even if bad things happen, at least they won't be as bad as being stuck with Caers." She smiled, but her lips trembled and Elon saw. The elf-woman, in a rare moment of feeling, reached out to grasp the human woman's arm. But before she could, the princess had kicked her horse into a lope and had vanished over the swell of the hill.

"I think you should follow her," Elon said to the wolf, who nudged her calf with his nose and then trotted after Perl. Elon watched for a moment, and then set about backtracking her friend's trail, doing her best to obliterate any signs of Perl's passing.

Perl trotted Kesh through the foothills, her ankles and back aching from the strain, but knowing that, though it would be far more comfortable to settle into a canter, he would be able to go further without resting if she didn't run him into the ground. She walked on occasion, the early summer sun turning Kesh's chestnut coat to a liver brown. It was during one of these walks that she noticed Elon's white wolf, matching her pace some distance to the rear. She pulled up and waited for it to approach, as always amazed that the horse remained so calm. The wolf stopped beside her and glanced up at her with dark, almond-shaped eyes, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. Perl watched him a moment and then urged Kesh on. Wherever Elon was, Perl was happy to have some more company. Especially now that they were heading into country she was not at all familiar with.

Sweat dampened her hair and shirt, slicking her hands on the smooth leather of the reins. Shortly after noon she paused to eat, giving the wolf a chunk of cheese and bread while Kesh cropped the rich spring grass. Before long, they were on their way again, this time veering a little west, toward the mountains. She wanted to avoid the farming villages this close to the city. She had enough food for at least another day or so, and the freedom of being alone, of sleeping in the open, enthralled her.

An hour or two before sunset, she came to a broken country, where the foundation rocks had buckled and split by what long ago catastrophe Perl did not know. The hills, though green and lush, wrinkled and bulged like a wadded silk counterpane. Through this uneven land she was forced to ride slowly, Kesh picking his way over the difficult ground. They climbed higher into the hills and she saw in the distance in the fold of several hills, a copse of flowering trees. A good place to camp, she thought. There ought to be firewood, and maybe even fresh water, as well as cover, and Perl reined Kesh toward it. As she rode closer, she began to hear a roaring sound, much like that of a winter blizzard. But the breeze on her cheeks was mild, and there was no sign of a storm. The sound didn't seem to bother the wolf, nor did Kesh balk at it, and so she continued on, trusting in the instincts of the two animals.

The copse had been hidden from her for nearly a turn of the glass, and the sun had nearly begun to set, when they topped a rise and found the grove of trees before them. Just beyond, from a great break in a stark cliff high above, a waterfall dropped, making the noise that she'd heard as it careened through the gap. It fell in a crumbling cascade into a pool far below, which drained into a narrow, deep river, running away to the west. Perl

gasped in surprise and then yelled exuberantly, her voice bouncing back. The wolf paused a few steps ahead and looked over his shoulder at her.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said, urging Kesh forward. "But it's so lovely and perfect. Too wonderfully perfect."

Swiftly she unsaddled the chestnut horse and hobbled him, promising a rubdown shortly. Then she nearly danced down to the rim of rocks which cupped the water in a deep, clear pool, disturbed only by the constant prodding of the waterfall. The wolf followed her and sprawled out on the rocks. Grinning at him, at the setting sun, at nothing at all, Perl pulled off her hat, tossing it to the grass, followed by her boots, breeches, shirt and the rest of her clothing. The wolf had turned on his stomach, his head caught between his front paws, and was watching her intently.

"If you were a man," she said to him, noticing his gaze. "I'd be blushing like a fool, and calling you all sorts of rude names for staring. And if you didn't stop, I'd probably slap you until your head rang." She reached over and scratched him behind his ears, never thinking that he might not be so tame a beast as to allow such liberties. "I'm glad you're here though." With that she turned and plunged headlong into the water.

The wolf watched as she swam and splashed, and then dove under the waterfall, her head falling back, laughing as the water fell over her face. Time and again she climbed from the pool onto the rocks and leaped into the water, sometimes slicing it with a dive, other times jumping, arms wide, making great waves which broke against those caused by the waterfall.

At last she climbed from the pool and dressed in fresh clothes from her bags, having rinsed the others in the water and laid them on the still warm rocks to dry. Next she

gathered wood, the dying glow of the sun giving her just enough light to find it and light her fire. Before eating, she rubbed Kesh down, the horse leaning into her as she worked, sighing with gratitude as she rubbed away the stiff, dried sweat. Once again, she parceled out bread and cheese for the wolf who looked at her a long moment before gently lifting it from her hand.

She slept wrapped in her blanket against the chill night air, and woke to find the white wolf curled against her stomach, his warmth permeating her. She yawned and sat up, gasping as the stiffness of yesterday's ride caught her. The wolf moved to other side of the fire where he sat watching her, his head lowered, looking at her as though from far below. It was a typical wolf posture, and made her uncomfortable. She looked around, fishing in her bag for food, which once again she divided with the wolf.

"I hate to leave here," she said out loud, glancing around as her voice seemed to echo. She sighed, "I'm not sure I can even get that saddle on him today, much less get myself up there. City girl. Worse, a princess. Talk about pampered. But the real question is, even if I do get him saddled, and I do get on top of him, where am I going to go?" It was a question which had plagued her since seeing Elon the day before, and still she had no answer.

"What can I do? Be someone's housemaid? I'm dressed as a man now, shall I learn some trade? What does princessing qualify a girl to do?"

The wolf straightened suddenly and stood, his ears pricked. He paced away to stand at the edge of the clearing, staring back down their trail.

"What is it? Have they discovered us?" she whispered, forgetting her aching muscles as she clambered to her feet, shoving her damp clothes into her bag at the same time, while swiping a foot at the fire to put it out.

The wolf cocked his head, and his body was still, except for the tip of his tail which quivered gently.

Perl reached for Kesh, removing his hobbles and bridling him before laying the saddle blankets over his back. In only moments she had him cinched and her bags tied in place behind the cante. She swung up, turning to glance again at the wolf.

He had turned back to watch her, and now as she watched, the white of his coat seemed to grow brighter, glow like moonlight on the water. The glow grew brighter and then his body began to shimmer and shift—growing larger—until a wolf no longer stood before her, but an elf. Perl just stared, her mouth open, her legs clamped tightly on her horse.

"Greetings," the elf said, putting his fingers together and bowing slightly. "I hope I did not startle you. I am Avios." He looked at Perl who'd managed to close her mouth, but now her lips had tightened into a flat line and her eyes had narrowed above cheeks flagged with red.

"Elon has returned to the city, and they believe you to be kidnapped." He paused, looking for a reaction. His eyes were just like the wolf's, she thought inanely. She'd never seen an elf with dark eyes before.

"She has suggested a safe way out of your predicament," he was saying. "It is her suggestion that you stay kidnapped. By way of evidence of foul play, she discovered your dress which, treated amply with the blood of a rabbit, she shredded and left in the hills

above the lake where you were last thought to be. Soon the searchers will find it and assume the worst." She continued to stare at him, and he stepped across the small space to lay a strong, deft hand on Kesh's neck.

"You will never be able to return home," he said. "You will have to find another name, another life. Elon will help you."

"How—? How do you know?" she asked for lack of anything better to say while she came to terms with his words.

He shrugged and turned his head away for a moment. She felt her body heat in a flood of embarrassment. Stupid question—the elf could turn into a wolf. What's a little magic communication? Her fingers tightened on the reins, but she couldn't look away from Avios. He looked a little like Elon, she thought. His hair was the same blond. His eyes, though, they were truly different. She wondered if, like Siros, he was only half-elven. It would account for his eyes, so dark compared to Elon's pale green. She remembered then, the way those eyes had watched her the night before as she swam in the water and the color rose in her cheeks again. He turned his head back and snared her in his gaze, and a similar pink flushed his cheeks, startling her again.

"I believe I must apologize," he said. "What was it you said? If I were a man you would call me names, slap me?"

The color in Perl's cheeks grew brighter and she looked down at her hands.

"I meant you no offense, Princess—"

"Perl," she corrected him. Then, "No, not Perl. If I am to be dead, then I must have another name. Is that right?"

"It would be wise."

"What does a person call herself?" she asked. "I've always hated my name, but I never thought of another." She paused. "What do you think?"

He stared at her a long moment, a smile curving his chiseled lips. "If I were to name you, I would call you Belanon," he said at last.

"What does that mean?" she asked, curious.

His smile widened and he shook his head. "You must choose your own name, Elon-friend. It is not my place."

"I will have to think about it." The subject had turned from her wanton exhibition the night before and she prayed that it would not come up again. Even thinking about it made her want to crawl under a rock. Then another thought struck her and she remembered the warmth of the white wolf's body—Avios' body—against her stomach, staving off the dawn chill.

"What now?" she asked quickly, forestalling any comments or apologies that he might make and compound her embarrassment.

"I will take you back with me."

"What about Siros? Does he agree to this?"

"Elon had not yet spoken to him, but it matters not. I take you to my home, not his. He will not be compromised in this."

"And then what? Will Elon come for me?"

"As soon as she can. But she will continue on with Siros as long as he needs her. I'm afraid that you will be stuck with me for awhile."

Perl looked down at him for a long moment, his fingers threading Kesh's mane, his eyes looking up at her but past, as though he were unable to meet her gaze. Strange. And thrilling.

She asked the obvious. "So we are not being pursued?"

"No."

She thought a moment. "In that case," she said, sliding down from atop of Kesh. "I'm too sore to ride even five steps, much less however far we have to go." Perl set about unsaddling the confused horse, pulling her damp clothes from her bag and once again spreading them across the rocks to dry, before settling back against a tree. A name. Avios merely watched her, coming to sit near her when she'd finished her chores. A dozen, dozen questions popped into her mind to ask him, but she felt comfortable with none of them and so sat silently. At last he spoke.

"I have angered you." His voice was low and faintly mocking, she thought. Clearly he was not particularly apologetic, but merely placating her.

"You were rude," she said. "Not to mention deceptive. I suppose you've never seen a woman cavorting naked beneath a waterfall before and you were mesmerized by the whole experience. How many times have I heard that one before, I wonder," she said sarcastically.

"Mesmerized. Yes, indeed that was the word." The mockery had left his voice and now he turned to face her. "You haven't asked why I do this for you—why I take you into the elvenhome." Perl didn't answer, and he reached out and took her fingers in his.

"I have known you far longer than you've known me, and I have watched you often. I thought you were witty, and a good friend to elves. I know now too, that you are brave

and even devious. But yesterday you were something else. You shared your food with me—a wolf. And you put your hand on me, with no fear. I was amazed. And then such joy in the water. I have not known a human like you. I take you home as a favor to Elon, but also because I would like you to see my home—the elven lands.” His voice was soft and persuasive and his fingers on hers were warm and cool at the same time. She shivered.

“What kind of name do you think would be good for me?” she asked suddenly, leaning away. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was making love to her.

Impossible.

He let her pull away and rubbed his fingers through his hair. “Any name you like. It will, after all, be your name. No one should choose that for you.”

She looked at him then, a sudden grin flashing across your face. “You’re right. My name.” She stood up suddenly, her fingers on the laces at her throat. “Do you want to go for a swim?”