

For Elroí

*Book 111 of The Heart
of Elroí*

Kerry Truelove

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The Heart of Elroi: For Elroi
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Acknowledgements and apologies

I suspect very few of us, if any, can claim that what they think, write, draw, play or otherwise create or do is totally original. We are each of us the result of our experiences, our family backgrounds, our tastes in friends, fields of study, music, literature, art, entertainment, sport and so forth. Certainly “The Heart of Elroi” is a mixture of all of these, and to acknowledge all influences would be beyond my capacity; but an effort must be made.

I can see a number of influences at work in “The Heart of Elroi”. One clear one is the anthology series “Sword and Sorceress”; so many of the authors contained in those anthologies have contributed to my tale, yet I couldn’t hope to name them all. The books of Mercedes Lackey certainly have had an influence, although truth to tell I have not read many of them (too busy writing!). The same holds for the wonderful Andre Norton, whose writings I devoured as a child and whose influence on my imagination cannot be understated. There will be other authors, I’m sure, and not all of them will have written of a world in which women are warriors; but there will have been something there that sparked in the recesses of my imagination. Quite likely there are films and television shows in there, as well, but I cannot for the life of me put a name to any which have had an identifiable influence on my writing. At any rate, to name all the things that have influenced the writing of “The Heart of Elroi” would be impossible, if nothing else because they have gone into the mix that is my memory without necessarily being properly attributed to first sources.

So where did “The Heart of Elroi” come from? It’s a good question and I can honestly say I don’t have a good answer. Is it an original work? I would like to think so, inasmuch as anything is an original work. If it isn’t, I can only offer my deepest, most profound apologies to anyone who sees in “The Heart of Elroi” their own writing - be in book, magazine, film or TV script or any other form of writing. Nothing is intentional, I just wanted to write the story and if I have inadvertently plagiarized in the process I sincerely hope the person on whom I have inflicted that insult can forgive me.

Inevitably, “The Heart of Elroi” started out as a completely different tale. It has evolved over the many years I have been writing it, a process that involved scribbling away on any handy piece of paper while waiting for aircraft, friends, meetings and any other reason that could have me with paper before me and a pen in my hand. Finally the time came to convert those scribbles to typescript - well, that had been my intention! But when I started typing into the computer what had become, over the years, the better part of a ream of scribbling... The story took itself off in its own direction

and I stumbled along behind, the main story still clear in my mind yet now going somewhere else, somewhere I confess I found far more interesting than my original thoughts. I doubt half of what I had initially written down through those many years now is contained in “The Heart of Elroi”, particularly in this and the preceding volume; but I don’t regret it. I would like to think this is an improvement on the original ramblings of my undisciplined mind. It certainly is much larger than I had originally expected.

However, here it is – the last instalment of the story. I hope the reader enjoys it, and I hope I have not betrayed said reader by going in a direction with which they do not agree. It has happened to me often enough, in my own reading.

For Elroi

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I. Taking risks

“I don’t recommend it,” said Vora slowly, looking thoughtfully at her ruler and friend. She was beginning to wonder if, after all these years, she knew any of the zora - how many, now, had taken partners and were having, or wanted to have, children? Now here was Senra - Senra, of all people! - talking of having a child. It was extraordinary, “you’ll forgive me for saying it, but you’re getting on in years, and the older you are, the greater the risk,” memory of the death of Berikyl and her baby still hurt, no matter how she tried to pretend it didn’t.

“I’m well aware of that,” admitted Senra wryly, eyes restlessly scanning the horizon, forever wishing to see Farr returning despite her private, bitter certainty that the Rider of Blizzards and Wind must be dead. Rhankar’s cart was lumbering slowly towards Linoih, followed by what looked to be half a dozen smaller carts of various descriptions. Behind them came a small herd of cattle being herded by three riders, ably assisted by two well-trained dogs. More immigrants to Elroi; well, they would be welcome. What was beginning to puzzle her was the relative ease with which people seemed to be able to come to Linoih. Had all border control broken down in Honar? Or had the squabble amongst the conquerors distracted them so much that ordinary Honari could move about more freely?

“Senra,” unexpectedly gentle, drawing her meandering thoughts back to the conversation, “I really think you need to think this through.”

“I have. I need a male who has *power*, probably the greatest amount possible, and that means Harele- Yes,” at Vora’s shocked expression, “and that means a long and unpleasant negotiation with the pair of them, Harele and Ritalise. Quite possibly Brax as well. I need to be able to work my own *power* onto my body, something which Farr told me was feasible but not easy. And I need you to work your *power* on my body. All of this to make sure the pregnancy is, Daylight help me, as normal as possible. I cannot say I’m looking forwards to it. Nor can I say any member of my family is remotely suited to assuming the throne – not Arien, certainly. Nor Baraen or Orvis. Nor, to be honest, do I think anyone else in Linoih is suited. What’s more, Farr said the ruler had to be Human, so even if Ebrald was suited - which he himself freely admits he is not, he finds it difficult enough to rule Mountainfolk - he won’t do. Nor will any among the Yarlsende. Elroi is in anything but a fit state to have a substandard ruler, so I really don’t have any

option. So I need you and the other healers to work out a plan to keep me and the child healthy. Assuming that I can conceive.”

There was an incisive, almost remote tone in her voice which made Vora hesitate. Senra had changed, there was no denying that. Now there was an air of quiet, profound and hidden sadness in her, and although she still engaged with everyone, still dealt with the plethora of questions that the unmasking of the Yarlseude had brought, she seemed to have withdrawn. It was not a surprising change, but it was regrettable.

“You two look serious,” observed a new voice. Vora looked around and something in her expression made Camren come closer, voice dropping, “what am I missing?”

“Senra’s talking of having a child,” she had the satisfaction of seeing the Group Leader look startled, head back as if recoiling from a snake. After a moment Camren looked at Senra in bewilderment.

“I hadn’t picked you for wanting children-”

“I don’t - well, not my own. Children in Elroi is a good thing. But I have to have a child in the hope that the child is fit to take on the ruling Elroi when I am gone. For Elroi. I have thought this through, I’ve been thinking it through for Daylight knows how many days, and I have worked out what I think is probably the only way it is going to work. Don’t look at me like that, if Farr can spend several lifetimes wandering around waiting for the right time for Elroi to waken, I’m not going to let her down by not putting myself through whatever it takes to produce a proper heir. One for Elroi,” she knew her tone - cool, almost cruel - bothered her companions and regretted it, but there seemed no other way to put it in such a fashion that they might accept what she was saying, “you forget. My *power* is adaptive and that’s the kind of *power* Elroi needs now. Gilli is the only other one with adaptive *power*; she’s nearly as old as me, and she hasn’t had any of Farr’s guidance in how to use it. She’d be at even greater risk than me. So it has to be me. I’ve told Vora what I need to do and what I need her to do; now I’m telling you what I need you to do. You need to let me do this,” normally she would have grinned at the severe tugging Camren’s ear was receiving, but this time she did not so much as notice, “sometimes there are things that are going to have to be done for Elroi that don’t seem to make sense, or are just plain dangerous. This is one of them. And I have to hope that Elroi understands that this probably is a one-off chance, and makes it all work. Vora is absolutely right, my cycles are becoming chaotic.”

Silence. Her eyes, unbidden, once again searched the southern horizon but there was no Rider to be seen, and she forced her gaze to wander further,

to look around the hills and mountains that kept Linoih's back. The trees they had planted in and around Linoih were tall enough to stand above the buildings, leaving a pleasant dark green fuzz over the lower slopes of the mountains - *the southern curve of the Knots*, she reminded herself - and the rolling ground closer to Linoih. Trees. Why did she want to have so many trees planted? Even at the phenomenal rate they were growing, under Elroi's influence, it would be many years before they could be harvested for timber. Yet she could not help but feel more trees were needed. So, in all honesty, was the timber.

"Well," said Camren thoughtfully, after a long silence during which Senra's gaze wandered repeatedly back to the south only to be pulled away with creditable determination, "if you've decided, you've decided. Who will be the male?" but her eyebrows soared at the answer, and another long silence fell. Finally she gave a soft sigh, rocking back on her feet, "well, you need to talk it over with Harele and Ritalise before the next Council meeting. That's not something you want to drop on him in Council."

At least that brought a wry smile to Senra's unhappy face.

There was a sudden spate of Yarlsende, rattled out in what could only be termed anger. Startled, Senra turned to behold Falathiel - she was reasonably sure it was Falathiel - yelling at Morut in a fury was uncharacteristic of the leader of the Conin, and more than a little unnerving. It was their business, of course, but Senra wished she dared intervene, because the scene had attracted rather too much attention from the Human contingent in Linoih. Every Human within sight, as well as several Mountainfolk, were staring at the pair.

"Everyone has an argument sometimes," said Senra in a very effective imitation of Camren's monumental calm. It broke a little of the shock. Camren nodded positively, Vora looked non-committal, "even you two," to her two shadows. Gorive nodded, causing Panae to look sardonic, "we shouldn't stare," wondering a little wearily how she would ever persuade Human and Mountainfolk not to stare at the Yarlsende. So far the Clansfolk had tolerated it rather well, but it must have been unnerving.

Morut listened out Falathiel's temper with his usual good humour and then quietly brought his hand up to place it over her heart. The effect was instantaneous. Falathiel stopped mid-word, eyes shocked wide, then brought her own hand up to touch over her mate's heart: an instant later, the pair of them were in thrall with one another. Senra, having seen something similar between Tsierien and the young Farr, and remembering her own experience with Farr the night before the Rider had left, was intrigued. About her Human and Mountainfolk stared, and a soft murmur began. It ended when Morut

brought up his other hand to ease Falathiel's hand from his heart, at the same time - moving like a sleepwalker - withdrawing the hand he held over her heart. The dazed look began to ease from both of their faces once contact was broken, and a moment later Morut chuckled, putting an arm around Falathiel's waist to give her a very normal hug. She glared at him, ears half back, before relaxing and letting her mate charm the anger out of her.

"Stop staring and behave as if it never happened," Senra poked Panae's midriff, "and get everyone else to stop staring. This is their business- Never mind what you've just seen, I think you will find it is deeply personal to the Yarlsende, so just ignore it. Or pretend to ignore it," and for a wonder the narrow woman nodded, turning away to pass on the instruction.

Gorive was already taking watchers aside, and small groups were obediently turning away, going about their business as if nothing had happened. In everything but a very personal sense, between the two Yarlsende, nothing had happened. Hopefully any Yarlsende who had seen the Human and Mountainfolk reaction would understand that there had been no malice intended, only curiosity about a people that the Humans, at least, had never encountered.

Nodding quietly to herself, Senra turned back to what she was doing and nearly stepped into a Yarlsende. For a moment she felt on the verge of panic, wondering which one it was, then recognised something about the other: Varienca. Of all Yarlsende, it had to be Varienca!

"Never had that myself. I loved Nillieft and he loved me, but we weren't heart-bound."

"I- I'm sorry, we were staring," and the Yarlsende gave a half-laugh, sounding genuinely amused. Senra flushed slightly, obscurely annoyed, "as far as I know that doesn't happen among Humans - that heart-bound thing, whatever it is-"

"Probably just as well, I don't know that it necessarily is a good thing. Very, very hard on the survivor if one dies and the other does not," she stepped back at the exasperated, frustrated look Senra gave her.

"And Farr, Daylight help us, has had to go through that twice!" in steadily worsening temper, she abandoned Yarlsende and Human. Gorive grabbed Panae's arm and they went after her, hurrying to catch up, while Vora reluctantly told the Rojenin leader what Senra proposed.

Varienca, appalled, went off to discuss it with the other Clan leaders - much to Wirrel's embarrassment *but if he's going to be Clan leader he has to*

deal with this sort of stuff! - although I suppose that means we'll have to deal with male stuff, too!

“What did Senra mean, Farr has had to go through that twice?” puzzled Camren. Vora shrugged her incomprehension and the Group Leader put the query aside, “well, I guess you and the rest of the healers are going to be busy working out the best regime for Senra to get her through this. Don’t look at me like that, you know perfectly well she’ll go through with it.”

“That’s what’s worrying me!”

Senra made a direct line to the stables, saddled her chestnut and rode out of Linoih without a backward glance, making her way to the place beside the Algarieden from where she could see Linoih. Gorive and Panae followed, not even talking between themselves, acutely aware of her unhappy turmoil. In silence they watched her dismount, in silence they dismounted, in silence Panae took the chestnut’s reins. In fact the silence seemed to be stretching on for hours when Senra swore - loudly, violently, using language she so rarely used that three horses and two Humans flinched. It sounded as if she really, really meant it.

“Senra?” Gorive sounded almost frightened, drawing her ruler’s gaze, “can we do anything?”

“I have to persuade Ritalise to lend me Harele, and I have to persuade Harele to be loaned to me, and I haven’t a clue how to do it. The last thing the poor man probably wants is to be asked to be a stud!” she had a certain level of satisfaction at the startled noise from Gorive; it sounded almost like a hen clucking. Panae’s jaw dropped. But at least they stopped hanging back behind her and joined her on the river bank, and while they weren’t able to come up with any helpful advice for her conundrum, they did keep her company, making her feel just a little less alone.

When she did raise the issue with Ritalise and Harele, Ritalise’s answer came vehemently in at least two languages, while Harele looked as if he feared his grasp of Honari had abandoned him completely. For a moment he didn’t hear Ritalise speak to him, then shook his head and turned to her; but if he hoped to say anything he hadn’t a chance. The madam was in full flight for a good five minutes before storming away. Bewildered, he looked at Senra.

“I’ll have to explain to her-”

“I do not think she will let you. She has gone to pack to return to Shairien- No, I think it better you leave her. For the moment. Please - I do not think I understand,” so she went through her argument, slowly and clearly,

answering his every question in as pleasant and unthreatening a manner as she could. At the end he shook a puzzled head, “but I did not think you liked to lie with a man- I beg pardon, that is not my business-”

“I’ve lain with a man and enjoyed it, but that was years ago and this actually has nothing to do with me liking something. It has everything to do with providing for Elroi. I must ensure the succession.”

Harele looked speculatively at her for a moment before giving a considered nod, followed by an equally considered head-shake. Of all the things he had expected in translocating to Linoih, all the wonders he had seen and experienced, none of them had even come close to this. For the life of him he couldn’t imagine how it would work - how would anyone in the Council take it, let alone the citizenry of Elroi? It would seem an appalling betrayal; yes, he, Ritalise and Brax had been made welcome, but they hardly were of Honari origin, and surely most of the Honari now living in Elroi would expect their queen to take a Honari male, rather than any other? Senra might see it in terms of the matter of magic - *power*, they called it here - but he doubted that most other people would see it that way at all. It would seem to them to be an extraordinary betrayal of blood.

Nonetheless, he was heartily glad for one thing: that Senra had raised the matter with them both, rather than with him first.

“I will speak with Ritalise and try to persuade her not to return to Shairien-”

“I’d appreciate it, because I genuinely would like you all to remain in Elroi. I think your presence here helps us tremendously - you, Ritalise, Brax,” the man looked puzzled and she managed a tired, slightly wry grin, “you come from a different culture, but you are recognizably Human. With the Mountainfolk and the Yarlseende walking around Linoih, there must be something very comforting in the fact that you are, at least, Human. More understandable, if you like, than the other breeds of man. Same would hold for Affion and the others, except of course they also represent enemies and conquerors,” truth be told, she was still uneasy with the way Affion, in particular, seemed to be treated with caution. Berion was beyond anyone’s comprehension, and Trarion had just settled down to be a good husband and father. In that they were fast becoming integrated into Elroi; but Affion still did not seem to be trusted.

Had she but known it, some distance away Styra had stopped to watch the ex-Kalenjin soldier heel in another tree, a reflective smile on her lips. The planting of trees seemed an unending task and her little work party had undergone numerous personnel changes, but Affion remained a constant

member of the party. As far as she was aware, there was no impediment to him moving on to some other pursuit and there usually were several groups looking for additional unskilled labour; he just stayed, quietly planting trees.

“You know, Affion, you’ll do,” with that cryptic comment she moved on to the next planting, leaving the soldier staring after her in utter bewilderment. For the life of him he didn’t know what she thought he would do. His bewilderment brought a brief gust of laughter from other members of the planting party, but no explanation.

Harele left Senra and went back to his quarters to talk with Ritalise, spending much of that time following the madam from their lodgings to the cart and back again, telling her what Senra had told him. He spoke quietly and methodically, but for all the attention Ritalise gave him he might not have been speaking at all. Finally the woman stopped, glaring at him as if it was all his fault, and he calmly went through the explanation again. His calmness rather than the explanation seemed to settle her understandable anger.

“She treats you like a stud-”

“She is thinking only of Elroi- Come, now. You saw them in Shairien, you knew it then. Knew it before I did. There is no desire in her, not for me, not for any man; she asks this for Elroi and for no other reason,” Ritalise scowled at him, not in the least bit mollified, but raised no objection when he nodded at Brax to unload the cart. After a long, volcanic silence Ritalise snorted, a warning sign he knew. She shortly would resume either her tirade, or packing the cart.

“She’s a fool. She’s too old for it to be safe, she might well die doing it and then where will this place be?! - no, I don’t want you to do it. She’s treating you no better than an animal,” and off she went again. Harele waited patiently until the tirade petered out. Finally the woman sighed, deflated, resorting to a less emotional concern, “what kind of a position does this leave you in?”

“I’m not sure that she’s thought through those issues. At the moment she just sees the need to ensure succession and nothing beyond that, but I have my doubts that her decision will have much support. Nothing may come of it, and I have no intention of leaving you for anyone, no matter what the provocation.”

Ritalise just glared at him, hardly mollified.

Three days passed without a word from Senra on the subject and Camren was beginning to wonder. She knew Senra well enough to have no doubt that the other was not going to abandon the idea, and certainly by the

way all the healers were in endless confabulation suggested they had no doubt their services were going to be required. But to date Senra had not told the Council as a whole. Given the speed with which rumour could get around Linoih, a formal announcement probably wasn't necessary; but it might allay any concerns. With that in mind she sought out Senra, finding the other trying hard to follow a somewhat chaotic explanation from Chenen and three others on the main stock requirements that were looming. They sounded enormous, but at the end of it the stout Human male, Forixin, suddenly laughed.

“Don't look so worried. We're nearly halfway there already! There's some really good stock among the new cows, and they're young, some are no more than heifers. Get a good bull to them and we'll be fine - look at the way the sheep are breeding-”

“The goats,” retorted Grinben of the Mountainfolk, “are going to out-breed the lot of them if we can't do something about that billy.”

“Shut him up in a house if that's the only way to stop him mounting every available animal,” said their ruler, face clearing, “so what is the actual issue?”

The actual issue was how to manage the animals so that they had better control over breeding. For that, they needed dedicated fields, and for that they needed dedicated field fences. From the point of view of them all - and that included the five more Humans, three Mountainfolk and what looked to be half of the Clans Rawani and Hrebur who had joined the discussion - they no longer could allow such a free mixing of animals. Something had to be done about the fences. Eventually, something also was going to have to be done about the draught horse stallion that Lyrill had brought with him on his last trip; hobbles would only hold the horse for so long, and once a mare came into season nobody in the little group could see the hobbles lasting. He was a magnificent animal and probably would throw excellent young, but they needed to keep at least some of the mares available for work.

“Right,” decided Senra firmly, “I want you to talk amongst yourselves and come up with a plan for achieving all this - yes, you lot. You now are my animal husbandry advisers,” and had the satisfaction of seeing more than one jaw drop. Surprisingly, it was Alzigurni who recovered first, bursting into laughter.

“Say the zora, who bred so many sheep for us at Esh M'Ohren!” and then laughed again when Senra pointed firmly at Chenen. The big zora coloured spectacularly, a rare event in that amiable soul.

“You also are to arrange better fencing for fields. There’s plenty of rock with which to extend the walls - yes,” as more than one mouth opened to speak, “I am aware that timber fences probably would be better but we have to use what timber we have for other things. Make do with the rock until we start getting on top of the timber situation. Co-opt whoever you need to get it done, by the sound of it this is a priority.”

With that she walked away, leaving behind her a rising hubbub. Camren watched the new set of advisers talk for a moment before striding off after Senra, catching up with the other halfway to the Great Hall. Senra gave her a small, wry smile.

“Honestly, they want to discuss everything with me and I know next to nothing about how to manage cattle - or sheep - or goats, and especially not that demented billy-goat! I’ve half a mind to suggest a goat stew, with him as the prime ingredient, but I suppose we do need him. But we need timber more and more. I wish we’d had something to offer that captain from Py, I really do. Imagine what a shipload of their timber would do. And a treasury - Camren, what can we do about a treasury?” in an unexpectedly tearful wail. Camren was swift to put an arm around her shoulders, hugging gently, while Panae and Gorive closed up.

Senra was right. They really didn’t have a great deal to offer in trade, and having no treasury would make paying for materials out of the question. The trouble was, Camren admitted to herself, she had no idea how to get a treasury. She rather suspected it was something that would be built up over time, but saying as much probably wasn’t going to reassure Senra.

Later, with sunset lining the horizon, Senra sat on the steps to the Great Hall feeling miserable and alone. Her advisers were right, it was madness even to think of having children at this stage in her life.

“Senra?” a puzzled, familiar voice and she sighed, looking at Arien. Her elder sister sat awkwardly beside her, head to one side, studying her, “you’re upset about something. You’ve been upset about it for days. Can I help?”

“Upset about something? - more like half a dozen somethings! I have to ensure the succession for the throne-” her sister stiffened ever so slightly and she sighed, putting an arm around Arien’s shoulder, “no, I’m not going to ask it of you, Orvis, or Baraen. It isn’t something I would wish on any of you. But I do have to ensure the succession, so I’m going to have a baby-”

“Don’t be stupid!” appalled, Arien straightened up, eyes wide and on her sister’s face. After a moment her alarm deepened, “you aren’t pregnant

already, are you?” then bewilderment overcame her at the dry, slightly bitter laugh from Senra. When Senra explained what she proposed to do, Arien was informed, but no less happy about it. She was silent in more thought and then, putting her arm around the other’s shoulders, she started speaking in a big-sister voice, “I don’t think you realise what’s involved. It’s more than just lying with a man - and how you are going to get Ritalise to lend you Harele for one second is another thing entirely, quite beyond me - but it’s also nine moons out of your life, getting heavier and heavier, the baby growing inside you, pulling you out of balance; getting sick at all sorts of times and for quite ridiculous reasons; and at the end of it hours, maybe, of pain that you think will never end. Your breasts will probably hurt, there’s no guarantee at your age you will be able to produce milk- Even when you have the child, it doesn’t end there; there’s still more to do, your time gets absorbed entirely by the child’s needs - they are utterly helpless, Senra, they really are, and they stay that way for at least two years.”

“Is that why you had only one child?” wondered Senra. Her sister sighed, squeezing her shoulders.

“I miscarried three times before I had Baraen- No, I didn’t tell you. There was nothing you could do and you seemed to be happy being a zora, so why should I worry you? But I mean it, Senra. I don’t think you’ve thought this through properly.”

“I don’t see an alternative. I can’t say I want to do this, in fact I can state I positively do not want to do it; but I don’t see an alternative. It would be an utter betrayal not to ensure the succession - betrayal to everyone out there who came here in hope of a new life, if nothing else-” Arien shifted, getting closer at the ragged tone in her sister’s voice, and Senra swallowed noisily, “nobody seems to understand what happened when I ended up ruler here. I’m not in charge, not really; I just have to make decisions, but they’re almost a formality, a way for us to work together. Elroi is the one in charge, if anyone - anything - is. In effect, I’ve ended up as Elroi’s servant, not her ruler. I have to do things all the time for Elroi, but we all benefit and really, I don’t mind it at all. It’s for us, as well as for Elroi, after all. This is just another of those times, and the more we argue about it, the older I get and the more risky it becomes; so please, Arien, don’t berate me. Help me. Those people out there have every right to want, to expect even, a stable kingdom for generations. This is something I have to do for them and for Elroi.”

Rather than comment, Arien tilted her sister’s head to her shoulder and held her close, a part of her reflecting on the many times in their youth when she had done just that, trying to comfort Senra over one hurt or another. She hadn’t been able to comfort Senra about the damned Zardprest who had taken

her away, the single time her little sister had really, really needed her, and a part of her still wanted to undo that hurt. She knew it was impossible, of course, as impossible as it was to persuade Senra not to do something which her little sister believed to be right. In this instance, the cost could be horrendous if anything went wrong; but Senra would be aware of that.

“Of course I’ll help you,” kissing the top of her sister’s head, wondering at the sudden wash of calm acceptance that had run through her. It was almost as if someone had just given her a nod of approval, “so I guess the first thing is to have a good look at your cycles and work out an optimum time- I’m not the first person you told, hasn’t anyone touched on that or are they all yelling at you for being a fool?”

Senra hugged her sister, unable to hold back a chuckle. Probably the healers were already working on the issue of her cycles, but they hadn’t said anything; all the other people she had told either were convinced she’d gone mad, or didn’t believe there was any chance Ritalise would agree. Nobody seemed to worry that Harele would refuse, but that was not because the aramage was lustful. There was more than enough evidence to suggest the man was content with Ritalise and sought no other female companionship. The hurdle would be Ritalise, but from the moment Senra had worked out what must be done she had known that. If Ritalise absolutely refused, then to whom could she turn? There were men with *power* in Linoih, to be sure, but none of them had as much as Harele and mostly they didn’t know how to focus their *power*. Harele might be able to school them in it, of course. If it came to that, perhaps Harele would be able to show her how to work her own *power* on her body!

The barely-contained panic inside her rose up, threatening to drown her, and she buried her face in Arien’s shoulder.

“Oh, baby. You’re really terrified, aren’t you,” closing her arms around her sister to protect her from the world. She certainly didn’t need the muffled admission that yes, Senra was terrified. Some time later, having pulled back from the panic at the thought of childbirth, Senra admitted to feeling swamped with the number of other things, other issues which had to be addressed. Arien nodded sagely and said nothing, just hugged all the tighter.

“What issues are she facing?” in the morning Arien cornered Camren, Avtrien and Rovina. It was purely by chance; she had intended to corner Camren, but the Group Leader was with the others and, rather than wait, she had barged in. All three looked at her, two of them plainly bewildered and Camren mildly puzzled, “Senra. She said something about having a nest of

issues to deal with, now what are they? And what are you doing to deal with them? - don't look at me like that, she's my sister and I won't have her tearing herself apart because nobody is helping her-"

"The succession, the lack of a treasury, her own grief for Farr," Camren stopped the other mid-tirade, "the lack of timber, the fact that Viti hasn't come back yet - nor Scarthil," in an aside to the colonel. Avtrien looked as if he'd just landed on top of an untrained horse, "the state of the wall in the Great Hall. She really wants to see that as it was, not weathered and illegible as it is now."

"Integration," Rovina picked up the list, ears slightly back but not angry, "you have three Kalenjin and two appear to be integrated but Affion still seems on the outside. Not to mention Mountainfolk and Yarlsende in your midst, it must be very unnerving for you all. Particularly the Clans, given how different we look to when we arrived here."

"There's also something about animal husbandry, but I'm afraid that's well and truly beyond me," continued Camren. To Arien's ears she sounded as if she was half asleep, causing the weaver's hackles to rise a little. This was serious business, Senra's health depended upon it, and this woman didn't seem to appreciate that fact.

"Yes. The fact that everyone goes to her with every little thing that arises - we need to do better in that regard," Avtrien turned his gaze to Camren, "we're supposed to be her Council and we've always assumed that was just to advise her, but is there anything to stop us handling some of these things ourselves? Senra really doesn't have to be caught up in the agricultural side of things, does she? Would you as a Group Leader be expected to have to make those sorts of decisions?"

"No. Nor should she have to keep appointing little groups to advise her. Good point."

"Then take that load off her," there was a tone in Arien's voice that could only be termed command. Rovina's ears flicked back for a moment before coming forwards, a slight smile forming on her lips. For a moment Arien glared at the Yarlsende, to be met with a pacific gesture, "take as much off her as possible - all three of you are leaders, now do some bloody leading! It's going to be hard enough for her to have a child, she doesn't need to be stewing all the time over things she can leave to others-"

"You are absolutely right," assured Rovina pacifically, "I will speak with the other Clan leaders and we will address as many of these issues as we can. We have little to contribute to a treasury, but there are other ways."

“Trade,” said Avtrien obliquely, a faraway look in his eyes, “we need things to trade, if we haven’t a treasury and can’t buy the things we need. I refuse to believe Elroi has nothing that other lands would not want, and many of my men come from trade backgrounds. Something to talk over with them, and with the carters when they come back. We also need trading partners, but hopefully the carters will be able to point us in the right direction. Camren, there’s nothing to stop us calling a Council meeting, is there? We don’t have to wait for Senra to call one? - then let’s do that.”

“The only thing I recommend,” Camren looked at her companions, thoughtful and considered, “is that we make sure Senra is happy for us to take on the petty stuff. I have no doubt she will be, it frees her to deal with the large-picture, strategic stuff - something she’s generally been very good at doing - but she needs to be comfortable with us taking on more. I’ll have a chat with her.”

As it happened, she had that chat with Arien standing beside her sister, anxiously watching Senra’s face as if dreading the reception. Senra listened, face developing a slightly bewildered frown. At the end she looked from her sister to her Group Leader and back again, then gave a slow, wondering headshake. Nobody had ever given her any instruction in how to be a ruler, and she had assumed it was up to her to make all the decisions. Now it sounded as if the others of Linoih were prepared to shoulder some of the headache, an innovation she was more than happy to accept. It was a pity the new arrangement was unlikely to result in a treasury.

“So you just concentrate on the important stuff,” Arien big-sistered firmly, “and leave the Council to handle the little stuff.”

“Vellum,” a small roll of it was placed in front of Camren. She raised eyebrows, fingering the fine hide, “we salvaged what we could from the hides of those animals the.. Ah, Ydr killed. And Shivrín, Tobirib, Cillic and I have been working on how to best use them. We came up with vellum - well, for the calf hides, anyway. Tobirib thinks he can do something with the fowl hides, too, though I’m dammed if I know what. Maybe something best left for the dw- Mountainfolk, there’s not much hide there. But if we can get all the hides of any young animals we have to slaughter, we can keep making vellum-” Lastin coloured slightly as the Group Leader raised her eyes to his face, “m- m- might be helpful?”

“Are you proposing to start a college, or are you thinking of trade?” the hides that were not suitable for vellum were already being utilized, of course, in a multitude of ways from thonging to waterskins to tent flies. She had had

no idea that the calf hides had been kept back, and was beginning to feel that there were quite a few things happening about which she knew nothing. Hopefully most of them had the potential to be useful, like this.

Lastin hadn't thought beyond the making of vellum, and had to admit as much. Camren returned the roll of vellum, nodding her approval. This was not the first time someone had come up with something for her to consider, and from discussions with other members of the Council she was by no means the only one to whom people were taking their prizes. They also were taking grievances and questions to the members of Council, which in many respects was the main objective of the new administrative arrangements. As far as she was aware, so far they had been able to deal with those grievances without bothering Senra.

Still, there were times when she could wish to be on campaign, under attack, with nothing more to consider than how to survive. She would not be the only one, of that she was certain. Poor Avtrien was beginning to look harried and had Farill worried, a testament to the colonel's popularity and his second's loyalty. At least the Mountainfolk and Humans seemed to be working together on various things. She had spoken with Ebrald, suggesting that their two people could do well to co-operate on projects, and the Mountain king had roared with merry laughter. Now here was a small group of Human and Mountainfolk doing things with the hides of dead animals, and other such groups working on fencing, animal husbandry, spinning, weaving... If it came to that, what were they doing in the smithies? She had been told not once, but three times, by three different people of various breeds of man, not to go there because they were trying something and didn't want to be disturbed.

A whistle drew her attention. Styra, semaphoring enthusiastically, summoning the zora to practice; at least they were maintaining their fighting skills reasonably well, even if there were quite a few now who were either past it or dealing with motherhood. So far the latter hadn't overtaken Senra - at least, as far as Camren knew it hadn't. Giving her ear an absent tug, she strode over to join the zora. Not that far away Farill was taking half of the cavalry contingent through their paces, roaring at them in disgust, while Rhankar and Lyrill watched with broad grins on their faces. It was a blessing that now there were enough horses for cavalry, zora and the humdrum of life.

"I want to get Affion training some of the other men - we need infantry, and that's what he was" said Styra cheerfully. Her Group Leader gave the ear another little tug, "even if he's had enough of fighting, he's been trained and he can train others. He's good at planting trees, one of the best, but I think we can make use of him in other areas."

“Well, then, you had better have a chat with him about it.”

Perhaps the smiths were working on weaponry. It would be good to have a decent armoury. Nonetheless, Senra was right. The pressing issue remained the lack of sufficient timber, and for the moment nobody knew how to address it. Fishing vessels only had capacity for so much, after all - more than the carts, but still not that much. Plus they also had to ply their trade and catch fish, doing their part towards keeping Linoih as self-sufficient as possible. The carpenters were very frugal in their use of what timber reserves there were, no-one could say they weren't trying their best. They had already re-purposed two of the raised barges, despite having expressed doubts about the suitability of the wood; but the rest of the barges had to remain in service as barges. Should any decent degree of trade develop, those barges were the most efficient way of getting materials into Linoih.

A swift and spirited attack from Lyskia broke into her train of thought and for a while she lost herself in the practice bout, gradually pushing the young sistin back until the other's sword dropped in defeat. It had been a good attack, nicely thought out, but Lyskia's swordplay needed work. Thought of that brought her mind to the vexing concern that Viti and her family still hadn't returned. She was beginning to fear the subterfuge hadn't worked and the invaders - Kalenjin or Gemadan, it hardly mattered - had slaughtered her wandering zora. Loath though she was to admit it, the thought rankled and she launched a mildly frustrated counter-attack that shortly had Lyskia retreating into the bout between Farri and Panae.

“Lyskia, you need to practice more,” when Farri made her sistin put up her sword, the pair of them stepping back. Farri looked for a moment as if she wanted to object and Panae gave a sardonic chuckle.

“Nothing shows up laziness like sword-play,” the narrow woman gestured openly with her own sword, “tell you what, you and I will practice every morning. Before breakfast. See if we can't get you holding your own against Camren by the next moon - dammit girl, why not take advantage of our experience while you can?”

If anyone could cure Lyskia of her incipient sloth, it was Panae.

Meanwhile, Styra took the spade out of Affion's hands and gave him a sword instead. The bewildered way he looked from weapon to her and back again was priceless, but he was quite happy to follow her to the practice ground, absently hefting the sword to gauge its weight.

“Zora are cavalry, and Avtrien's men are cavalry. We also need infantry,” Styra turned and raised her own weapon, inviting the bout, “so I

want you to have a go at training some of the other people in how to be infantry.”

For a moment Affion seemed to hesitate, but then he closed in. He wasn't bad with a sword, either, albeit a little rusty. She was starting to like the quiet Kalenjin more and more.

“Why are you so determined to do something which so frightens you?”

Senra looked at the other, eyes wide. She had been away in her thoughts, trying not to check out the southern horizon, and hadn't noticed Ritalise join her. After a moment she shrugged and began to explain her thinking, going through it as clearly as she could. Even as she spoke she knew how mad it sounded, and yet at the same time she was more and more convinced she was right. Elroi required this of her. It had seemed almost an idle comment from Farr, but now she knew that the comment had been made in earnest, the Rider continuing to guide her into the rebuilding of Elroi. Farr served Elroi - she had said it often enough - and now Senra had to do the same. At the end of the day, it was as simple as that.

“It's cruel on both of you, I know that, but I have to ask it of you. I will have no consort, not even Harele, and I will have to find some way of persuading the more... conventional thinkers in Linoih to accept that. Elroi cannot afford confusion about who is and is not ruler, so there will be no consort. And yes, the prospect terrifies me. I'll get over it.”

“But you leave Harele in a bad position. He is not your mate. You do not offer him anything-”

“I haven't anything to offer him. Ritalise, if I could see another way around this, I would take it; but I can't, I have to ensure the succession - for the sake of Elroi, for the sake of everyone who has come here hoping to have a new life, maybe even for the sake of Honar. I have to ensure that the child has the best possible start, and in a place like Elroi that means optimizing the chance of the child having *power*. Harele is the last aramage and he has more *power* - magic - than any other male in Elroi. What's more, he knows how to use it. I don't know if *power* can be bred, how would I know that? As far as I know neither of my parents had any, yet Arien and I both have. But I have to...,” words failed her and she gestured, cupped hand towards cupped hand, “or we all lose. Every one of us. Frightened? - you have no idea how frightened I am! - of this, of having a child, of failing to have a child and what may happen to Elroi, to everyone else-” she choked off the flood of words with some difficulty, head dropping. When she raised it again, Ritalise had

gone well, I suppose it might be some form of progress that she'll actually talk with me about it.

She did not expect the pair of them, Harele and Ritalise, to approach her three days later with the apparent objective of working out the best timing for all. By then, the healers had finished arguing with her and were fussing around her, trying to work out how to improve her cycles; and now, in addition to the faithful Panae and Gorive, she had to contend with Arien appearing at unexpected moments for a confidential sisterly chat, more often than not accompanied by some tempting tidbit. She had forgotten how good a cook Arien was and rarely refused the offerings, but the extra attention was beginning to shred her nerves. Sometimes it seemed the only way she could get any sleep at night was to retreat to the little room with its narrow bed. It still carried Farr's scent, a bittersweet memory that seemed to help her let go and sleep.

"Was Emerald Door actually made of emerald?" wondered Kola, her nasal voice absently thoughtful. Uncomfortably, Senra thought about when she had *sought* Emerald Door as Farr had last seen it, and slowly nodded.

"It certainly looked like it, why?"

"Well, you've been worrying about a treasury," from Gorive, sounding innocent - too innocent, Camren realized. By the look of it Senra also had picked up on that, looking at the zora alertly. The attention made Gorive colour slightly, but she ploughed on through her embarrassment, "you said Farr had destroyed it, but did the bits disappear, or are they still there? And if they are still there, couldn't they form your treasury?"

"We just think that some of us should go, find where this Emerald Door was, and bring back what's left," Panae took over, voice defiant. Elis shifted, drawing Senra's gaze, and then managed a brave smile.

"It must be somewhere in Elroi, mustn't it? So if you can *seek* it again, give us an idea of where to look, we're happy to go out after it - winter's just finished, so we should have time before it gets too cold-"

"I'm not going to lose the rest of the zora on some hare-brained expedition into Daylight knows where in Elroi," retorted Senra sharply, "be sensible, the lot of you. You don't know where you're going, you don't know what dangers might be out there-"

"But-" began Kola.

“No! And that’s final!” and stormed off. Panae muttered under her breath before jogging after her, followed by Gorive.

Camren regarded the assembled zora with a patient eye before observing that she appreciated that they wanted to help, but this wasn’t the best way to do it. That generated a host of frustrated and anxious queries as to how they could help their friend, junior Group Leader and ruler. Having no real answer to offer, she waited out the questions and reminded them that there was plenty that they could be doing, even if it was not overtly to help Senra. Once it was clear they were dissipating, she set off in search of Senra, finding the other sitting uncomfortably on the throne and glaring around the Great Hall as if it offended her. The usually pleasant blue eyes crackled dangerously at the sight of her.

“Why do they think I would want to have bits of Emerald Door in my treasury?” snapped Senra irritably. Camren settled back on her heels patiently, one part of her mind reflecting that pregnancy and Senra were not good companions, “the bloody thing glowed just like that lot,” a thumb jerked at the wall behind her, “when Farr was there, it’s obviously made of some sort of *power* stone; I wouldn’t trust it and I certainly wouldn’t trust anyone with it! - what’s the matter with them?!”

“They care about you and want to help-”

“Well, fluttering off into darkest Elroi with no clear idea of where they are going, how long it will take, or what they might encounter in the process is not helping! And I can’t bloody direct my *seeking*, the only way it ever works is because Farr’s there and if you think I want to *seek* her being torn to shreds by the Ydr getting to the wretched Door, you’ve another think coming-” her voice caught, a jolt of pure, unhappy emotion, and tears began to well. After a moment, during which the tears flowed unnoticed, she continued in a much quieter, lost voice, “you didn’t see her, Camren. The bloody things must have been eating her alive. Not even Farr could have survived that.”

“By the sound of it, I should be glad I didn’t see her. They only want to help, and to the ordinary mind, a bit of emerald lying about somewhere in southern Elroi might as well belong in a treasury. I’m sorry, I didn’t know - you said nothing about the door glowing,” Senra put her head down in mute shame. It was true, she had said very little about Emerald Door to anyone. Camren shifted stance, sorry to have added hurt to her friend, “never mind, I don’t suppose it matters.”

She watched with no surprise as Gorive quietly slipped a kerchief into Senra’s hand. The emotional highs and lows that seemed to have beset Senra were, Vora had reminded her, a sign of the pregnancy; but they were

becoming difficult for some members of the Council to weather. Avtrien, for one, was starting to go around with a haunted look on his face. He had never been a father, unlike Farill who was taking it all in his stride. The Yarlsende members of the Council were clearly uncomfortable, but managing to deal with Senra's moods; she was not sure the same could be said of Ebrald. He had started avoiding Council meetings when Senra was present, and was even talking of getting another Mountainfolk to deputise for him. Hopefully it did not signify something malevolent.

Now was not the time, she judged, to tell Senra about her conversation with Vora. She had gone to the healer to make sure that what was happening with their ruler was normal, only to be reminded that Senra's grief about Farr would not be helping the child. That had segued without warning to a quiet, bewildered observation on the part of the healer that the thief Farr should have been dead at least three times. Gifted healer though she was, Vora could not believe that the ministrations by the zora healers were the only thing that had pulled Farr back from the afterlife. But Vora had returned to the important point: Senra's grief would not be helping the child *and such a pity neither of us has any idea of how to help her through it!* At some stage, no matter what, she would have to talk to Senra about her grief.

"Daylight and Darkness," muttered Senra in a more normal, exasperated voice, "I've turned into an emotional mess - I am sorry, Camren. I shouldn't have yelled at them, you're right. Only trying to help. We'll all be glad when this baby is born, won't we?" there was a little giggle from Gorive and Senra managed a smile in her direction. Nonetheless, she waited until Gorive was out of earshot before returning to the question of Emerald Door. Camren, about to leave, stopped at the quiet voice, "the thing is, we should have those bits of Emerald Door here in Linoih, somewhere hidden. I don't think we can, in conscience, leave *power* stone out there; I don't know what kind of harm it might do. Especially in the wrong hands. So I do want those bits here, even if all we do is some night you and I go out and bury them without anyone else knowing. But I don't want the zora to be the ones to get it, at least not on their own. I don't want to *seek* it, I know I'll end up seeing Farr breaking it if I do try to *seek* it and I really don't know that I could cope with seeing her like that again. And without that, I don't see that we have a point of departure. All we know is it is somewhere in Elroi. South of Linoih, but beyond that?"

"Let me have a chat with some of the others."

Once she was sure Senra felt more equable, she strode off, passing the unexpected sight of Affion with a posy of flowers in his hand. She stopped

long enough to watch the man enter the Great Hall and then returned to her mission, smiling inwardly.

“My queen,” he offered the flowers even as Senra started to protest. Cut short, all she could do was take them, regard them in bewilderment and then look at the man’s face, “such things of beauty, I hoped they might make you feel happy.”

“Thank you- Affion, please stop calling me your queen. Can we not just take that as said?” he had even washed his hands before coming, she noticed. The Kalenjin - no, he was Elroian now - looked thoughtful for a minute, worried at her words, “we are in neither Honar nor Kalenj. Let’s leave the ceremony of those places behind. I am Senra. I may happen to be your queen as well, but I am Senra. Senra the zora. We only ever use the zora’s first name, you know.”

“The zora - ah. I came to cheer you up, but I also came because I wanted to explain to you how women are seen in Kalenj. I think people think we treat our women badly, as if they were cattle,” Senra thought immediately of a harem and a young Yarlsende child heart-bound to another Yarlsende. She couldn’t hide the wash of sadness and the man before shook his head, “I did not wish to remind you of bad things and I think- I have heard that your friend did not do well with Kalenjin-”

“She was in a harem owned by a bloody sadist.”

“Ah, that explains why she reacted when we met. I do understand. But that would be a harem of one of the high-born caste. They are not... The king does not exert enough control over them and they think they may do anything. Many,” he could not cover the disgust in his voice, “are brutes and should never be allowed dominion over the meanest mouse; but they have the advantage of birth and may do anything. I was not speaking of them. I cannot, because I am not of the high-born caste. But for ordinary Kalenjin, the woman is as important as the man; it is just that they do not fight. They are forbidden to fight. Their role is to run and protect the home, the children, possessions. If those are at risk, only then they may fight - although,” a slightly exasperated note entered his voice, “that would work a lot better if their men were allowed to teach them how to fight!”

He was rewarded with a chuckle and smiled slightly in response.

“I suppose that explains why the zora are so disliked; not only do we not stay to protect the home, we also are trained to fight!”

“Ah, worse - you fight as well as, if not better, than men. So the stories we are told, of barren women who take out their disappointment on men, are

nothing but nonsense- Yes, that is what we are told, and many things like it. Anything to make the zora appear unnatural and our natural enemies. But after all this time at war, I don't know that there are many left in the Kalenjin army who believe those stories. Some will still believe the zora have made a pact with the demons, of course," she looked surprised and he chuckled, a low rumble faintly reminiscent of distant thunder, "our masters must have some means of explaining why it is so hard to defeat a zora. It always is easier to point to some magical influence than to admit the enemy has good training and dedication, and is just that little bit better than your own forces. But as I said, I have never found the zora anything but redoubtable and honourable enemies, and I am more than happy to be here, in their company, building this new land."

"I'm glad to hear it, but why are you telling me this now?"

"You are so unhappy. I know it is because your friend is gone and you believe she is dead, but I thought perhaps something different might help your sorrow? - it is not," he suddenly looked alarmed as the thought struck him, shooting a look at the posy of flowers in Senra's hand, "that I court you! I understand why you will take no consort, I believe you are right- I just thought I might be able to ease your sorrow a little, by explaining something that perhaps you did not know-"

"I didn't know, thank you - and yes, it has helped."

Affion nodded and left her to think about his words, unaware of the awkward looks from Panae and Gorive. The narrow zora did not look as if she entirely believed what she had heard. Gorive, naturally more trusting, looked quite pleased and poked her sword-sister in the ribs when Panae muttered something to the effect that she didn't believe Kalenjin had any respect for women. That developed into a cheerful argument, Senra listening with a growing sense of familiarity and comfort. She was still smiling reflectively when the argument petered out and Gilli joined them, bearing a small platter of cheese arranged around one lonely apple.

Meanwhile, Camren found Avtrien with Rastien, scowling horribly at the healer's concoction and plainly on the verge of mutiny. He gave the Group Leader a slightly shame-faced nod, swallowing down the draught and then gulping at the taste, wasting no time in taking the honey-covered nuts the healer offered. Rastien nodded briefly.

"Now try to stay off the leg for a day or two," and left them without a backward glance.