

Chapter I: Ninilwen

A Fox in the Underbrush

Ninilwen stood braiding her hair in front of the wash basin – a tedious enterprise considering the length of her locks – when word came that the Arayin would see her. She waved the acolyte away after giving assurances of haste and sighed. If she let her hair grow any longer, Rosenth might follow up on his threat to cut it all off while she slept. In their line of work it was not exactly practical, but surely she could allow herself this one luxury. A few more plaits and she tied off her morning's effort neatly with snug leather cords. Her mother had instilled in her the merits of a groomed appearance, though she doubted the Arayin would even notice. A distracted man at the best of times, with his daughters missing she'd be lucky to command enough attention to get through the briefing.

Giving her braids a final tug, she ducked out of the tent. The camp bustled with activity, Aiayin and acolytes shifting about no doubt trying to make sense of every tidbit of information the Oracle had given them. Ninilwen saw a lot of blood-shot eyes; it had been a long night.

Halfway to the main pavilion, Rosenth appeared and fell in step beside her.

"I'd watch out," he warned, "He's in a mood today."

"Ill-tempered, or just excitable?"

"A bit of both, I think." He combed his sandy beard with his fingers, "Do I look presentable?"

She grinned and reached up to flatten his hair. "Acceptable." Her features turned serious. "You've alerted the pack?"

"They're waiting by the west mound just inside the forest. That's as close as they'll come, I think." He cocked his head, "We're really going to do this?"

"The Oracle herself suggested it. And if you can think of a better way to track down those girls, I'd like to hear it."

"If it was just you and me, I'd have no objections. I'm just not sure if the pack will agree. Especially Brekk. You know how much he hates outsiders. And they're all terrified of leaving the forest."

"If I ask her, Nerikka will come. And Brekk and Dosn will follow her."

Rosenth shrugged. "Branen will decide. Those girls better still be alive or this is all for nothing."

Ninilwen touched his arm. "Have faith, partner. This is an opportunity we thought we'd never have – to study them in conditions outside their home environment. And it will be good for them."

"All right, all right," he smiled, "the faith part was good enough."

Inside the pavilion, the Arayin stood bent over a large map of the country, calling out observations to anyone who would listen. His beard was flecked with breadcrumbs and he looked as though he hadn't slept at all.

"It all makes sense now," he said as they entered, "The Thranydd Wood is almost as hard to penetrate as the Mists. My father claimed that the trees there exude a protective shield of some sort. If the Oracle was right about the girls' location, that could explain why our communication attempts have failed. We'll simply have to send someone to investigate."

Finally registering Ninilwen's presence, he waved a hand at her and Rosenth. "A few more minutes please, I'm in the middle of something."

"But sir, it's about..."

"Please, I'm trying to figure out a way to find my daughters."

Patience had never been Ninilwen's virtue. She would have to come out and say it. Ninilwen cast a quick look to Rosenth for approval. He nodded. She raised her voice as loud as she dared.

"Sir, the Oracle told us that we have the Mark."

That got his attention at least. Branen straightened quickly and stared at them with slightly parted lips.

"Both of you?"

Ninilwen nodded. "And she told us —"

But the Arayin had turned his head elsewhere. "Dhel? Where is that boy? Dhel, come over here."

The black-haired young man who had been introduced to them the previous day came forward from the back of the tent, rubbing his eyes with his fist as though he had been summoned from sleep.

"Yes, sir?" said Dhel.

"I want you to test these two. They say the Oracle spoke to them."

The young man took a good look at them, eyebrows raised warily, then shuffled over and extended his hand. Ninilwen gaped at it, not comprehending, so it was Rosenth who moved to shake it first. As soon as their palms met, however, Dhel jerked back his arm as if he'd been burned.

"Yes?" The Arayin's face was eager.

Dhel nodded. He put his hand out again, this time to Ninilwen. His eyes squinted as if anticipating a shock. Ninilwen reached out to grasp the proffered appendage, trying not to wince herself. However, when the boy jerked back exactly as he had with Rosenth, she did not feel a thing. Strange, whatever gift this boy had, it was not a magic she could sense. If he had felt something that made him recoil, it was decidedly one-sided.

The Arayin beamed and quickly pulled them aside. "Marvellous," he exclaimed, "I was hoping there would be more of us among the Order. Come, come, tell me everything she told you."

The forum she'd been waiting for had come at last. Ninilwen cleared her throat and tried her best to elicit a composed voice from the excited jabbering that threatened to take over her head. If she couldn't convince him now it could be years or never before another chance like this came along. She was tired of the forest, and of the secrecy.

"Well sir, the Oracle confirmed to us what she told you in regards to your daughters."

"They're in the Thranydd Wood?" Branen interjected.

Ninilwen nodded. "She said it was important that they be found—"

"It's not just me then, they *must* have the Mark."

"—But that you couldn't go yourself because she had given you another task."

A torn look spread across the Arayin's face. "Yes, well, as for that, I have not yet decided..."

Wary of tipping him off into a tangent, Ninilwen pressed on, "She said we had the means to find them for you, Bran." She did not often take liberties with his name, but now she needed his full attention, "She said that we *would* find them, if we used the pack." Pausing for effect, she tangled her fingers in the ends of her braids and waited for his reaction.

"The pack... you mean the shapeshifters you've been observing?"

Rosenth stepped forward. Ninilwen shot a suspicious glance at him, hoping he wouldn't see fit to air his reservations, but the cocky smile he flashed her was reassuring.

"Sir, we've been working with these people for a good space of time now and we've managed to develop a fair rapport with them. They trust us now as much as they'll trust anyone who isn't one of their kind. Ninilwen has developed an especially close relationship with the pack mother – that's the highest status female. If we can convince them to help..."

"When we convince them to help us," corrected Ninilwen, "they'll be a tremendous asset. The Thranydd Wood is full of unknown perils. The pack can maintain a low profile, be virtually invisible when they care to, as a team of Aiayin cannot. Give us leave and we will find your daughters for you, sir."

"I daresay," Rosenth added, "we're your best shot at doing this quickly."

The Arayin searched their faces, lingering longest on Rosenth. Something nameless passed between them that Ninilwen was not privy to, but she could guess. Rosenth was not unfamiliar with loss, and his grief had been largely responsible for his assignment to Hlowyl Forest.

"Let me make sure I understand you," said Branen, "you're volunteering to take on this search and see it through yourselves?"

"It would be our honour," said Ninilwen.

"And in return..." he left the suggestion hanging.

"The opportunity to observe how our charges respond to such a task would be its own reward."

"And if a new assignment came out of it, something more exciting than these backwoods, a political hotbed perhaps, it would just be an added perk?" The Arayin gave her a brief smile. "I appreciate your willingness to assist me in this, I really do. I am... perhaps not yet ready to hand off the fate of my daughters, though the Oracle's task hangs over me like a thundercloud." He pulled back from them, his face falling into shadow.

Ninilwen started to push her case, then bit her lip when she felt Rosenth's hand on her shoulder. It wouldn't do to seem overbearing, the Arayin would come around on his own if they gave him enough time. He just needed assurance, as any father would.

As it turned out, he suggested the next step himself.

"Well if I am to entrust this to you, I must meet this pack, as you call them, don't you think?"

He'd brought the boy along, despite Ninilwen's warning that strangers made the pack nervous and it was best not to introduce more than one new person at once. While they walked across the encampment, she sought to observe the boy as best she could without seeming obvious about it, but there wasn't much in his appearance to justify her intrigue. A well-built lad, somewhat shy in his movements, in the way he hunched his shoulders, but mostly she wanted to grin at the looks he kept casting about himself as though he was not quite convinced that the landscape was real. He wore clothing cut in the style of the Riders of the western plains, with geometric patterns embroidered on the hems, though his skin and hair seemed far too dark to be of pure plainsfolk stock. But that in itself said little except to the probability of some eastern ancestors. He would be off south soon in any case, if the rumours were true, and the Arayin with him.

It was time for her own prodigies to shine. Much as she had despised at first her assignment here, she felt proud of her results. She barely remembered the young woman she'd been six years ago, frightened by each and every small noise of the forest.

Rosenth led the way into the wood, the sharp light of the morning softening as it struggled through the foliage and tangled in his hair. Hair that stood up resolutely despite her earlier tendings as if in defiance of its own imminent recession. Though he often maddened her, she was grateful for his support through these difficult years. And for once their work would receive some recognition.

When Rosenth paused with none of the pack yet in sight, Ninilwen worried that the loudness of the Arayin's movements through the bush had scared them off. Six years watching the pack, earning its trust, learning its ways, had at least taught her some decent woodcraft. It seemed a wonder that some of the so-called hunters who rampaged through here, stomping away, posed any threat at all.

Then she heard the soft howl of the call they used amongst each other and knew they were close. She could feel their trepidation as their shadows slipped around trees, heard them smelling the strangers as they loosely encircled them. Yet, as ever, they hung back half-hidden in the brush. It was only Nerikka who came forward to stand where they light could hit her squarely, eyes narrowing, nostrils flaring as she looked the strangers up and down.

"Nerikka," greeted Ninilwen, urging her voice into calm, persuasive tones, "This is the Arayin, Branen Landstrider."

Nerikka plucked a leaf from a bush beside her and teased her lips with its veins, feigning disinterest. Sunlight illuminated the dusky redness of her hair even in its knots and tangles, catching the ends where they spilled down past her collarbones and lightened until they achieved the shocking transition to white. *Foxhair*, the others called her sometimes, but only when they were acting impudent. Her furs were cut in summer fashion, her sleeveless deerskin tunic showing off the healthy sheen of her skin and the well-defined muscles of her arms. A strong woman. Had to be, with this pack. Behind her, Ninilwen could make out that hulking bear-of-a-man Dosh and the lean, feral figure of Brekk. Brekk liked to think he led the pack, and when they hunted as a group, that was often so, but in matters like these it was always Nerikka who stepped forward, who was able to respond to change.

"Who be this?" asked Nerikka when she finally spoke. Ninilwen felt a surge of pride at the smooth confidence in the woman's voice. The girl had almost forgotten how to speak when she'd first found her. Surely now no one could mistake now her for some mindless wildling, even if she was rather unladylike in the way she was poking her finger at that boy.

That boy – once she'd dismissed his presence she'd nearly forgotten about him. Ninilwen fumbled for a fitting introduction but was beaten to it by the young man himself.

"I'm Dhel," he told the wild woman. "Pleased to meet you." Nerikka rewarded him with a show of her fanged teeth, then caught his hand and shook it vigorously. "Handshake, yes? Very pleased to meet."

Dhel jerked his arm back a little too quickly and held it back from his body. Nerikka stepped back a pace, her composed body language dissolving into wariness. The boy tugged on the Arayin's robes. "Uh, sir? I think she's got it too."

"Really?" marvelled Branen, "How utterly fascinating."

It took her a moment to comprehend, then Ninilwen's heart leapt to her throat. What fortune! Surely this would clinch the deal? He couldn't refuse *three* persons bearing his

precious Mark. Perhaps there had been rhyme and reason to her six years of toil here. Thank Kija for Nerikka. Without her they never would have made any progress.

"I'm wondering," the Arayin said, rubbing his palms together, "If I could perhaps witness a transformation?"

Rosenth gave Ninilwen a pointed glance. This, at least, they had anticipated. Sidling over to Nerikka, Ninilwen took her arm hoping to reassure her. "Do you understand?" she asked gently, "He wants to see you change."

Nerikka eyes flickered between them uncertainly. Ninilwen bit her tongue. If that boy had scared her off... but at last the wild woman let the leaf flutter away from her fingers and nodded.

"Give her some space," Ninilwen ordered, and everyone obligingly stepped back. The Arayin still rubbed his hands together eagerly and the boy's mouth fell open a bit as he watched Nerikka shaking her limbs in preparation.

Ninilwen had seen the process enough that she was no longer awed by it, but she could still be moved by an appreciation for the efficiency with which these people could manipulate their bodies. She'd seen Firewinds transform, but the process differed drastically. With the Firewinds it was as if two beings were vying for control of the same space – a painful and violent process in which one form emerged from the other's skin. And while transformation for the secret denizens of Hlowyl Forest was no less taxing, watching it happen was like watching a cloud change shape on a windy day: a smooth, sleek and graceful transition.

Twin indrawn breaths gave witness to the first stage of change. All of the shifters had testified that size change was the most difficult element of a transformation and it was the part Nerikka preferred to dispense with first. Her body shimmered a little as it shrunk, becoming less and less human. Her hands came down to become paws, her back arched, and her face lengthened to a pointed snout. The fur came last and almost all at once while she gave a final shake and it seemed to fall out of her skin. Crafty ears swivelled to greet them and at last it was very much a fox that sat before them in a pool of discarded clothing, regarding them with large eyes calm and still.

Ninilwen clapped her hands together, happy that Nerikka had chosen this, her favourite form.

"Incredible," stuttered the Arayin, "How is she able to diminish herself like that, I wonder? Where does the extra mass of her body go?"

"They don't really know," interjected Rosenth, "To them, it's all intuitive, but the way Nerikka describes it, it's as if she takes the extra matter and rolls it up."

"Rolls it up how? And where?"

Rosenth shrugged. "It doesn't seem to be something they can explain. The smaller they go, the harder it is. Most of them won't risk a transformation to something, say, as small as a mouse. And going bigger than their original body weight is a strict taboo as well – they claim it's simply impossible."

The Arayin frowned, "But the Firewinds..."

"Are a special case," supplied Ninilwen. "If I were to guess, I'd say that comparing them is like comparing my powers to that of a Sister of Jareldeh. Magics of a different sort. Now, if we could study them side by side..."

But Branen had ceased to listen. "The Sisters of Jareldeh..." he was muttering, "I'd almost forgotten. But that's Viryna's territory, not mine. She thought that one girl had potential... whatever happened to those records? Oh, of course, Maevelle was supposed to

handle those. That damn woman and her secrecy – I'll have to send someone to fetch them. So much still to do before I leave! Viryna will have to deal with this, yes." He turned and started walking back to the encampment.

Ninilwen stared after him, jaw hanging. "But sir!" she cried, unable to keep the frustration from her voice, "What about—"

"I trust you two will bring my daughters home safe," he called back to them. "I'm rather attached to them, you know. Take any supplies you need but don't wait too long. The storms on the coast are bad this time of year. I've got my own journey to prepare for. Come along Dhel, I must speak with my wife."

The dark-haired young man did not move an inch. His eyes were still fixated on the changeling woman who was no longer quite so foxy nor quite clothed. As the red-haired woman slipped her deerskin tunic back over her head, a low rumbling growl sounded from the shadows of the brush. They couldn't risk a jealous scuffle now. Ninilwen gave the ogling boy a good push. "Run along now," she told him, and then turned and gave Rosenth a square kick in the shins for good measure.

"What?" he snapped back, though he knew very well.

"We haven't got time for scenery," she told him, smoothing her braids, "We've got a search party to assemble."