

Chapter IX: Ninilcwen

Dogfight

Things began to go wrong when they reached the edge of Hlowyl forest and moved out into open country. Rugged hills and even a few woody outcroppings offered some cover but Ninilcwen could sense that the pack felt naked. In daylight they jerked at any out of place noise and bunched together, sometimes even growling at an imagined threat. Eventually, Ninilcwen gave in and altered their schedule so that they moved more and more by evening and moonlight, despite the danger to herself and Rosenth, on horseback and lacking the pack's gift of strong night vision. More than once Ninilcwen had had to summon a burst of unnatural light to her hands in order to navigate a particularly difficult stretch of terrain – risky business if she were spotted and it only made the pack, who distrusted anything beyond their experience, even more nervous.

This far from the towers the locals could not be counted on to be friendly and back country folk were always suspicious of Aiayin, convinced you'd spell their crops or give them warts or steal their children. In a larger group that fear tended to keep them unmolested, but with just Rosenth at her side and the pack to worry about, Ninilcwen preferred to be cautious. She'd stashed her robes away in the saddle bags in favour of more common southern-style riding leathers and she'd convinced the pack to travel as a group of hounds. At a distance, they'd look like a small hunting party and hopefully be dismissed. None of the pack members seemed reassured by the disguise except Nerikka and their first days in the open it was she who kept the others in line and reassured them when they became agitated. If only Brekk would follow her lead.

The dominant male ran ahead of the others, his lean, powerfully muscled body striding effortlessly across the ground. He was big, with great tufts of shaggy hair, the biggest in the pack except Dosn, who Ninilcwen would be more tempted to classify as a giant. Tall and lumbering as a man, in canine form he could be mistaken for a bear. He was the only one Ninilcwen had been unable to teach to speak – she had never heard him utter a single word in her hearing and harboured a suspicion that he was mute. Even in animal form he was unusually quiet, though he could growl as loudly as Brekk if Nerikka was threatened. With his size he could easily challenge for pack leader but he had never done so and Brekk's tolerance of the man seemed to be based on the understanding that he was a dimwitted oaf who was useful to scare away hunters – a task that Dosn appeared to enjoy immensely.

That night the sky was overcast, thick with murky clouds that obscured the moon completely, so they made the decision to camp earlier than usual. No sooner had they settled themselves than the clouds rumbled and a torrent of rain began to fall upon them in an avalanche of sound. Sighing, Ninilcwen mustered her energy reserves and bound an invisible domed shield above their camp. It was a trick she had learned out of necessity and when the rain began to bounce away she scrutinized the seals with satisfaction. It was not a difficult bind; just a thin alteration of air density. The real trick was maintaining it for hours at a time as she slept. But by now she'd done it so often that setting aside that small part of her mind was almost instinctual. Unless a bird smacked into it and dislodged a seal, the shield would keep them decently dry.

When she woke at dawn the sky had cleared and she let the shield bind disperse like a coil of built up tension from her brain. A few feet away, the pack was curled up in a knot of

sleeping bodies. Ninilcwen fingered her hair, decided it didn't need to be replaited just yet, and wriggled free of her bed roll. Stretching, she winced at the stiffness of her back after a night on the ground. Across from her, Rodenth sat cross-legged with a vacant expression. At first she thought he was communing with the towers but it was his habit to mouth words when he did so and at that moment his features were utterly still.

Ninilcwen took a step toward him and he seemed to come back to himself, shaking his head as though to clear it and standing up rather unsteadily.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He looked at her with a kind of fear in his eyes and she sensed his reluctance. So she took a guess. "Your son?"

He nodded and cleared his throat almost painfully. "He was in my dreams last night, trying to tell me something. I think things are getting worse in the Mists. It's not just Dremunkyund attacks on the shores anymore, there's... something else." He shook his head again, "It's so frustrating. I wish I could commune with him as we do. This way is so... unclear."

Ninilcwen wanted to say, *Well maybe if you'd brought the boy in for testing*, but that was an old argument that only brought up sour memories so she let it go.

"Well you can't do anything about it now Zenth. Call up the towers if you like and pass along the message but you know they can't send someone to investigate unless the Prijans ask for help directly through the proper channels."

"I know, I know, I'm just worried. Hey, where's Brekk gone off to?"

Ninilcwen spun to regard the pack, who were now just beginning to stretch and yawn. She counted them quickly and indeed, the large shaggy pack leader was noticeably absent. Another was missing too, the little one, Peffwell. At fourteen he was the youngest member of the pack and idolized Brekk, following him everywhere. Ninilcwen frowned. "Where is Brekk?" she demanded of the sleepy-eyed canines, "Where is packleader Screamingclaw?"

Oonevione, one of the females, licked her chops, gnashed her teeth and gave two energetic swishes of her head – a gesture Ninilcwen had come to recognize as meaning the pack leader had gone out to hunt.

"Which way?" asked Ninilcwen, a knot of uneasiness building in her stomach.

Oonevione tossed her snout in a northward direction, confirming Ninilcwen's fears. North lay the village of Orleaf, which she had been taking great care to avoid. If Brekk had gone there it was likely because he had scented an easy kill in some farmer's flock.

"Idiot!" railed Ninilcwen out loud, "I've warned him time and time again... and he complains about hunters!"

Oonevione had curled her lips back at Ninilcwen's insult but Nerikka, easily identifiable by her reddish fur and white-tipped paws and tail, stepped in front of her. The pack mother's snout twisted and curled inward as she modified her vocal apparatus enough to speak. "I will go after him," she told Ninilcwen, "I will make sure they go unseen."

"Thank you," said Ninilcwen, "There is a village north of here that I have been through before. The farmers there have problems with wolves and arm themselves with many sharp arrows."

"I will breathe caution," Nerikka assured her, and spun away into a run. Seeing her go, Dosn broke from the pack and followed her. Ninilcwen frowned, but knew better than to try to stop him.

Rosenth cast her a concerned look. "Are you sure that was wise?" he asked. "Four will attract more attention than two and she's got that lumbering hulk with her."

"Nerikka will keep them from doing anything stupid," said Ninilcwen, as much to convince herself as her partner.

They broke camp as they waited and Ninilcwen amused herself by muttering colourful curses under her breath. She should have known something like this would happen. Thus far, they had been able to control Brekk through his fears of the unknown, but where fresh meat was concerned he lost all sense of caution. Hadn't she taught him better? Hadn't she instructing him on the consequences of stealing from flocks? Ninilcwen stewed on those thoughts for a long nerve-wracking hour. She had Rosenth had just about decided to go after their wayward charges when they spotted them coming over a rise.

"I only count three," said Rosenth.

Ninilcwen swore loudly. "Who is missing? Your eyes are better than mine."

"Hard to say. The big one must be Dosn, looks like he's in his *bjorn* form."

Bjorn was the name they'd given to Dosn's half-man, half-bear form. It was unique to him, a signature of sorts, but that he had been prompted to change spelled disaster to Ninilcwen.

"I think," said Rosenth, "I think he's carrying... oh Kija, that's got to be Littlefeather, I mean Peffwell."

They sprinted to meet them, not taking the time to mount, the rest of the pack at their heels. Nerikka shifted to her human form as they neared each other, her face an anguished contortion. She ran to Ninilcwen, clutching her by the arm and clinging to her. "Littlefeather bit, Nin! Littlefeather bit by flying-thorn. You fix him Nin? You fix Littlefeather?"

With a gentleness that contradicted his size, Dosn laid the boy upon the ground.

Peffwell had shifted to human, as was apt to happen with unconsciousness – a blessing under the circumstances as the pain must be horrible. The arrow was embedded deep in his side, just under his ribs.

"Kija," murmured Ninilcwen, completely at a loss. Nerikka pulled harder on her arm. "Nin? Help Littlefeather please, my sister-son he is."

It took a moment to register. "Your nephew? I never knew that." She had guessed that Brekk was likely the boy's father, but barring Nerikka, who looked a tad too young, the mother could have been any of the other females.

"Gods, this looks bad," said Rosenth, kneeling beside the body and touching the arrow shaft lightly. "You any good at healing, Nin? I've done some minor cuts and bruises but nothing like this."

Ninilcwen's mouth was dry. "I don't know if I'm up to it either, Rosenth. This is something for an Iroodian healer."

He reached across to grab her by the wrists. "It's only us, Nin; we've got to try at least. We'll do it together."

There was a wildness in his eyes which Ninilcwen did not like at all – it reminded her of the early days of their partnership when his wife's death had still been fresh in his mind. If he fell back into that craziness... no, she would not let that happen.

"Nin?"

"Okay, all right, we'll give it a try. Everyone back off and give us some room."

She pulled Rosenth's hands with hers down to probe the arrow wound. Poor kid. If they lost him now the pack could very well turn on her. But if she saved him...

Closing her eyes, Ninilcwen reached into that warm part of her mind that always floated there like a ring of violet light. She let it seep into her until her head tingled, violet sparkles flashing on the insides of her eyelids. Opening her eyes, she concentrated on the immobile body of Peffwell and suddenly he came alive to her – the throb of his heart, the flowing of blood through the lines of his veins – and pain too, dulled to her luckily but still a low fire of shocked and torn nerve endings. The area around the arrow was hot and inflamed, she could feel how deep it went and the hard steel head where it lodged under his ribs, dangerously close to vital organs. Beside her, Rosenth shimmered with a slightly darker blue-violet glow. Reaching out to him mind to mind she tried to convey a sense of horror at what she saw. *Look how deep it is Zenth, if we pull it out it will only do more damage.*

Leave it for now. Do you see where he is bleeding internally? We need to stop that first.

How? A clamp? A tri-part bind might work.

We need something permanent. What if we cauterized the veins?

Have you ever worked that small before?

There's a first time for everything, Nin.

She let his mind go then, putting all her concentration to the task at hand. Bit by bit the bleeding was stemmed and Ninilcwen's eyes began to water from the effort she was putting on them. Rosenth saw her faltering and told her to pull back. When she shook her head he said, "Well she what you can do about the arrow then – there's not much more we can do with it still in the way."

When she tugged the arrow experimentally, Peffwell groaned and was nearly jogged back to consciousness. Ninilcwen let go immediately and rubbed her temple, trying to get a better view of the weapon's positioning. She might be able to push back the flesh surrounding the arrowhead enough to allow it to emerge without gouging the boy further but there was so much trauma to the area doing so would likely rupture the veins that she and Rosenth had worked so hard to contain. At last, she decided to separate the shaft and at least get it out of the way. A quick, tight fire coil did the trick and she pulled it free in one quick motion. Blood surged in its wake and again she bent to the task of staunching its flow. When she had done what she could she leaned back, mopped her brow with her sleeve, and went to fetch one of Rosenth's shirts from the saddlebags. Using it to mop away the blood that had welled to the surface, Ninilcwen was shocked to see that the flesh around the arrow wound was slowly knitting itself together on its own now that the obstruction had been removed. All of her time with the pack and she had never known that their biomorphic powers were capable of such a thing. She showed Rosenth and he became just as excited. For a while they sat there in awe and did nothing but watch the arrow puncture grow smaller and smaller.

"If he's unconscious it must be instinctual." Rosenth observed.

"I only see evidence of it on the surface level so far. If anything is being healed internally it must be happening too slowly for our eyes to catch."

"I wonder if it's a skill that can be developed with practice and controlled?"

"Can they all do this? I'm sure I've seen some of them with a healthy array of scratches and bruises."

"Certainly we will have to investigate this phenomenon further. Is he stable for the moment do you think?"

"Seems to be. The arrowhead is still in him but if he lives out the next day or so we can come up with a plan to extract it safely. Good gods... what are they growling at now?"

It had come to her ears like sudden thunder now that she could spare the concentration. Letting the violet haze slip away, Ninilcwen wiped her bloody hands quickly in the grass and jogged to where the pack was gathered, determined to avert any further incidents.

Brek and Nerikka had both shifted to human form. Dosn – the source of most of the growling, still wore his Bjorn phase and around them the pack hunched in canine bodies, waiting an outcome to an argument Ninilcwen had been anticipating. Packleader and packmother stared each other down, the air practically sizzling between them.

Ninilcwen hesitated, unsure as to whether she should upset an already volatile situation, but then she saw the fresh, livid claw marks on Nerikka's cheek and caution fell away. "What is going on? Stop this nonsense now! One of your own is wounded because of this foolishness. I'll have no brawling – do you hear me Brek?"

The pack leader turned his flashing eyes on the Aiayin and Ninilcwen was startled by the violence in his features. Her mouth went dry as he took a step towards her but Nerikka put herself in his path, putting her hands out in a soothing gesture. In one wrenching movement Brek turned on her and flung her to the ground, his figure blurring as though on the verge of transformation. He had no chance to follow through though, for Dosn was on him in an instant, moving quicker than Ninilcwen would have thought possible for his size. One thick, hairy, heavily muscled arm snaked out and caught Brek by the throat, lifting him off the ground. Nerikka scrambled to her feet and tried to put herself between the two men but Dosn was as immobile as a statue, focussed on diverting enough of Brek's attention with his chokehold to keep the pack leader from shifting. Feet dangling, Brek clawed at the iron grip that held him for a few sickening moments, then seemed to gather himself together and shifted to wolf form, thick neck breaking Dosn's hold as he snarled and clamped onto the big man's forearm with his teeth. Smooth as water, Dosn hunched and morphed into a full bear. Then there was only black and grey fur as the two snapped and bit and whirled around each other.

Rosenth was gripping Ninilcwen's arm. "What do we do?"

Ninilcwen shook her head, more angry than worried. "We can't interfere now. When they fall back to lick their wounds maybe we can talk some sense into them. You know as well as I do this has been in the air for weeks."

"We can't afford this now, Nin. We can't afford another injury."

"Then let's hope they finish this quickly or deadly."

Rosenth blinked at her in shock, but Ninilcwen was in no mood to play compassionate missionary. If Brek got himself killed she would consider it good riddance. Packleader or not, he was the cause of more grief than all the others put together.