

A Turn of Light

Marrowdell

Night's Edge ~ Book One

by

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One

Jenn Nalynn dug her toes deeper into the sweet meadow grass and scowled at the river sparkling in the distance. For good measure, she scowled at the golden fields spread between the crags that cradled Marrowdell in sunkissed arms, then at the blue arch of sky that dared be dotted by clouds whiter than the daisies nodding shoulder-high around her. Even the small village nestled by the river had taken on a glow, its crude wooden structures burnished rich bronze. Home. She scowled at it too, so fiercely her eyebrows almost met.

A cage was a cage.

Eighteen days from now, not counting today, she'd turn nineteen. Adult at last, with all that meant. Freedom. Choice. Adventure! She'd urged the summer to end, excepting the daisies, eager to start her travels. Wasn't it cooperating? Just yesterday, Old Jupp had complained fall was in a hurry. His joints could tell. Everyone agreed the weather couldn't make its mind up this year, so best be ready for an early change. Sure enough, today purple asters, with eyes of gold, bloomed like a royal cloak all around her.

All for naught.

Because her dear, doting father wanted her married before she left home.

Jenn sighed and dropped her gaze to the flowers spilling over her lap. Someone thought she needed cheering up. "Thanks," she mumbled, though the last thing she wanted right now was to make daisy crowns. Her fingers fretted at a stem; it snapped instead of split.

She plucked petals instead. "Go." *pluck* "Stay." *pluck* "Go." *pluck* "Stay." *pluck* Petals began to fly like snow and an approaching butterfly thought better of coming close. "Go. Stay. What do you think?"

Given the little meadow where the girl sat was home to nothing larger than butterflies, single-minded bees, and the occasional indiscreet mouse, it would seem unlikely she expected an answer. But this wasn't any meadow; this was hers. Too close to the old trees. Too close to the Bone Hills. Too close to sunset's first, deepest shadows. Night's Edge, the settlers called it and no one else came here.

Which made it hers. For as long as she could remember, Jenn had come to Night's Edge as often as chores and her father allowed. From harvest till planting, she'd run across the fallow fields, past the empty farm, to where her meadow waited within its shelter of dark pines. Now, at summer's end, with ripe grain bending the stalks, she walked the longer way within the cool shade of the Tinkers Road, or rode, if she could borrow Wainn Uthoff's pony. How didn't matter, so long as she could be here.

Where she was never alone.

Sure enough, a voice softer than the petals in her hand warmed her ear. "Go home? Stay home? Both. Sunset's close, Dearest Heart. It's time you left."

Jenn's round cheeks flushed and her eyes flashed rebellion. "It's too soon. I don't want to go home. Not yet." She flung the petals into the air.

The air shimmered. *Snap, snap*. The petals disappeared. "You must leave before the sun touches the Bone Hills. I shouldn't need to remind you."

The note of aggrieved, if tolerant, patience was a perfect match for her aunt's, today's reason Jenn had fled to the meadow. Something about hems. Or had it been husbands? Her aunt's speeches on proper deportment and dignity blurred to a sameness on rainy days, let alone when the sun peeked in the windows and birds sang. She hadn't paid proper attention, Jenn thought contritely. Instead, she'd squirmed until her aunt threw up her hands in atypical frustration and shooed her away.

Had the point been to hem a husband or husband a hem?

Was one behemmed or behusbanded?

Jenn laughed. The sparkling sound brought up the nose of a curious digger, crowned with a moist dab of soil. Nearer the forest, a rabbit paused, ears flat back to listen for the swoop of an early-hunting owl, and found the strength to jump into the safety of a thorn bush.

While on the Northward Road, a weary stranger lifted his head and caught the scent of sunwarmed pine.

"You shouldn't mock what keeps you safe."

She'd laughed at her own silliness, not in disrespect, well, not exactly. Jenn dumped the remaining flowers from her lap, and drew up her knees. Her skirt, the one with the hem she wasn't supposed to drag in damp grass, presumably in case of husbands, she tucked snugly around her ankles to discourage curious ants. "I've rules enough at home, Wisp," she complained. "I don't need

more from you. Night's the same here as anywhere else." Except for being forbidden to her, like the rest of the world. "I'd like to stay --"

"No. No. No!" The shimmering spot beside her on the hill began to whirl, the long rays of late afternoon sun picking out confused motes of dust caught by its frenzy, yellow pollen spiralling up in streaks of gold. "You can't. You mustn't!" The little whirlwind swept up the ruined flowers and spun them into chains. "Go or it will be dark!"

Dark? Her lips twitched. "I'd never finish my outside chores if I worried about the dark. Besides, there's a lovely full moon tonight. Really, you make no sense at all, Wisp."

Neither did husbands. Jenn's small round chin jutted in rebellion. Her father knew full well she was free to leave Marrowdell. He'd -- to be fair, he hadn't said she could go at nineteen, but he hadn't said she couldn't, had he? What he had said, far too often this summer and again at breakfast, was that fall was the season favoured by the Ancestors for weddings, and how happy he'd be when she and her older sister took husbands.

What possible use would a husband be? There wasn't a filled set of pants in the village interested in anything outside the valley.

Making them fools. There was so very much outside. Marrowdell might be in the back pocket of beyond, but Master Uthoff was as good a teacher as any in Rhoth and they had books. Books that spoke of innumerable wonders. Oceans and plains. Creatures with legs like trees and mines that dove to the heart of the earth. Jenn's curiosity stole the rest from her sleep, her peace when awake.

Outside must be what she longed for so desperately. This summer, as the light of each day faded, she felt emptier than the day before, as if she slowly starved from the lack of ... what? She didn't know, only that it wasn't here. She'd know it, when she found it. It had to be among the wonders she dreamed about.

It had to be.

Which led back to husbands, her father, and her visiting aunt. Her aunt's stories of life in Auyo, the great capital of Rhoth, made her longing worse. Chandeliers and peaches. Parties and dances!

Her aunt, who carried her campaign to salvage the manners of her widowed brother's so-neglected daughters to the supper table, regardless of its impact on anyone's digestion.

Meaning shoes.

“I won’t mind being late for supper,” Jenn announced with great sincerity, digging her bare happy toes deeper into the sod. “Let me stay just a little longer. Please?”

The pollen stilled, a column of dust leaning towards earth. A flower-scented whisper caressed her cheek. “If you answer not to law, Dearest Heart, answer friendship. Go home now. For me. Because I ask it. I wish you safe.”

“That’s not fair --”

“Neither is abandoning your father and sister to fend for themselves. Hurry to save them. Dearest Heart. Good Heart.”

Good-hearted Jenn. That’s what everyone said of her -- usually before asking a favour. The bane of her life, she decided, vowing to work on being strong-minded.

Tomorrow.

Jenn gently brushed the line of ants from her skirt, lifting the hem by handfuls to check for stains. “I hope you know --” She paused, lips parted.

There, in the shadow of her skirt.

The tip of a claw.

Not like a hawk’s or chicken’s. Not like any of the bear’s claws hung above Uncle Horst’s fireplace.

This was a blade of ancient bone, as long as her longest finger. The underside of its elegant, deadly curve was serrated, as if the needle-like tip was insufficient threat.

One glimpse, then it lifted into the light and was gone.

“ -- what I’ll have to put up with,” Jenn finished as she stood.

Over the years, there’d been other shadows, other glimpses. A tuft of wiry hair, curled like the end of a beard. Paired tendrils of what might have been steam -- or breath. A patch of textured cloth or skin that had reminded her of woven chain, but tighter, smoother, as fine as the best linen. Now a claw.

Wisp didn’t want to be seen, that much she understood. If she reacted to a glimpse, he’d shred grass and sulk.

She couldn’t imagine a shape that fit the glimpses, let alone how Wisp kept the rest of himself from sight. Nothing in Marrowdell -- and nothing in any book she’d read -- held such a being.

He might let her see the whole of him one day. She sighed inwardly. Might. One day. The world kept its best secrets from her and demanded she wait and wait and wait.

It wasn't fair.

"I'll go home before sunset," Jenn said, resigned for now. "If I didn't, Aunt Sybb would fuss."

"Dear Heart." A contrite breeze tickled the fringe of pale hair on her forehead. "Your aunt means well."

She did. Their father's sister was neither hardy nor young, but every year she undertook a pilgrimage to Marrowdell for the summer, bringing dry goods and cloth for dresses, impractical shoes for her nieces and a pair of her husband's barely worn boots for her brother, books and biscuits and delicious hard candy. Best of all, she brought stories of life in the great cities, for Sybb Mahavar's impeccably Rhothan marriage had saved her from the politics that sent so many of Mellynne heritage to the north woods.

She and her coach would head south again after Jenn's birthday. Her coach of black and gilt, that smelled inside of leather and lavender. When they were little, Jenn and Peggs had played in it, closing the doors and pretending they traveled along Avyo's magnificent cobbled streets, waving at imaginary passersby out the windows.

"That's it!" Jenn pushed her hair back. "You're brilliant, Wisp!"

"I am." The breeze flipped her bangs forward again, then paused as if confused. "Why am I?"

"I don't know why I didn't think of it before. Aunt Sybb has lots of room. They have a huge house -- bigger than all the homes of Marrowdell put together. All I have to do -- all we have to do --" she couldn't leave her sister to take over all the chores "-- is climb in her coach and hide --"

The breeze went from tickle to grit-heavy shove. "What's wrong with you?" Jenn caught her balance, coughing, eyes wide. She hadn't meant it. She'd been daydreaming out loud.

"Go home." A breath in her ear. "Stay home." Another.

Then, so feather soft she might have imagined it, save for the uneasy stir of fine hair along her neck, "Never leave."

"I won't spend the rest of my life here, not for my father and not for you!" Jenn tossed back her head, braid thumping her shoulder, and stomped away through the meadow, skirt gathered in

her hands and uncaring where she stepped. Though, somehow, her feet missed both asters and ants.

She wouldn't come back tomorrow, she fumed. Or the next day. Or next. Let the opinionated wind play with mice and bees. Serve him right.

She hadn't been serious. Now she was.

No matter what anyone planned for her, she'd find a way to leave Marrowdell and see the world.

She would.

~ Oh, that went well. ~ From above.

Sarcasm from his peers wasn't safe to ignore. The being Jenn Nalynn knew as Wisp shrugged his shoulders, which were in no sense like hers, and made his slow way to the shelter of the old trees and what laid beyond. ~ She'll be back. ~

~ And if not? ~ A different speaker, from below. They cared not for the pretty meadow, nor did they waste effort to bend its fragrant air into words. ~ What then? ~ From behind. They circled him, mocked his care-filled steps with their grace and speed and power, buffeted him with wind. They didn't dare touch him. Power, he still had.

From above. ~ Will you fail? ~

They'd crossed hoping for trouble; his penance, their amusement. Once word spread of the girl's outburst, would there be bodies pressed against bodies for their next meeting? Had they nothing better to do?

He'd supply a pestilence to keep them occupied, a whimsical something with pus and a fearsome itch, but those whose opinions did matter would know. Know, and likely visit it on him threefold.

Instead, Wisp shrugged what weren't shoulders once more. ~ She'll be back. ~

He would miss her, however long frustration kept her from the meadow this time. She'd grown dear to him, goodness and bright expectation being rare in his life. Something he hoped no one discovered, or that life would swiftly become a greater misery.

Of course, should Jenn Nalynn, turn-born and forever cursed, try to leave the valley, his would be the first teeth in her throat.

He would regret that most of all.