

U Chapter One

Way into the west, beyond the Wilds and almost to the sea, there once lay a strange and secret wood, and in it dwelt a strange and secret folk that people call Yul Kinta. If you've never heard of them, I'm not surprised. They kept to themselves, being much too proud to mix with mortal folk like you and me.

The proudest of them all was Lord Urolf, their ruler.

Urolf was only just of age when he came into power, which no one expected. Being immortal, Yul Kinta rarely die, except by accident or in a fight. When they finally tire of their woodland—Aelyth-Kintalyn—they up and take off into what they call An Telfahn, or In Between, a wondrous magic region where countless dream worlds float by for the asking, bright bubbles in the void.

One day, when Urolf was still small, Lord Althlafor, his father, awoke and found he'd grown bored with his domain: with the endless round of dawn and dusk, with hunting and feasting and singing and telling people what to do. Not one to waste time, Lord Althlafor called

his folk together that same day and declared that he was leaving for An Telfahn. Any wishing to go with him would have to be ready to go at once. This came as a shock to all, for while Yul Kinta could leave for An Telfahn any time they wished, it was unheard of that a ruler left his domain before his successor was ready to take his place. They soon got over it, though, for Yul Kinta overlords—or ladies—tended to do what they pleased regardless of what folk thought and Lord Althlafor was no exception. Once they collected themselves, a goodly number, including the Lady Fayance, Urolf's mother, joined him and off they went.

As heir to the domain, Urolf was left behind under the care of Thrulvar, his father's younger brother, who promised to raise Urolf and teach him all a ruling lord should know. (A younger son, Feyrwarl, also remained. But being not nearly so important as Urolf he was left to grow up as he pleased.) Now all this may seem cruel to you, for we humans think ill of folk who abandon their children like that. But these were Yul Kinta, and their ways were right different from ours.

Thrulvar, who loved to tell people what to do, had a great time, ruling Aelyth-Kintalyn as Lord Althlafor never had. That one had much preferred feasting and the joys of the hunt to sitting in council and making up rules and minding people's business. But Thrulvar would warm the seat of justice well into the night, poring over rules of covenant and custom. If parties brought before him some family feud, he would go at it terrier-style, gnawing on the finer points until both sides were so weary that they'd often reconcile, sorry that they'd ever squabbled in the first place. Oh, yes, Thrulvar liked to govern, and did so with such relish that some began to fear that Urolf might never come into his own.

But much as he loved being Lord Regent, Thrulvar faithfully upheld his promise to raise Urolf as that domain's next ruler. Perhaps too faithfully, for Urolf, serious enough by nature, turned out to be as strict and strait as Thrulvar, and, nurtured by the milk of pride, even ruthless and arrogant into the bargain. Not that there was anyone to challenge him. With Feyrwarl keeping to himself, there was only Vala, his second cousin. Much of an age they were and very alike in looks: black curly

hair, gray eyes, straight nose, firm mouth, and tall! You'd take them for brother and sister. But Vala was smarter than Urolf, and wiser, too, even then. More: she'd been born with special gifts. She could see deep into your mind and heart, more so than any regular Yul Kinta. And she could see your future.

Urolf relied on her a lot, especially when Thrulvar's hand grew heavy. But when he didn't like her advice he got huffy and sent her packing. Vala well learned how to bite her tongue while in his company.

When Urolf finally came of age, his uncle duly stepped down and pronounced him chief lord of Aelyth-Kintalyn. (Even then, Thrulvar still did much of the work, young Urolf having no more liking than his father for that hard justice seat.) Thus things ran on, until the day Thrulvar called Urolf into private council.

"Urolf, my boy," he said. "It's time to take a wife."

"Wife?"

"Of course, you'll choose the Lady Vala."

"Vala!"

Thrulvar looked sharp. "Everyone is expecting it."

"Why?"

"Why? Is she not the highest ranking lady in the clan? And beautiful and wise besides? And do you not already spend so much time in her company? Folk aren't blind, you know. Well?"

Urolf just stood there, shaking his head, saying not a word.

Thrulvar frowned. "You do not wish to wed?"

"Oh, I do. I suppose."

The frown deepened. "So why not Vala? I thought you liked her."

"I like her well, better than any. But as a sister."

"Mmm." Thrulvar nodded, uncreasing some. "Then seek out someone else. I'm sure there'll be no lack of choice."

The very next day, Urolf sent out a proclamation announcing his search for a bride.

And did that set clan tongues a-wagging.

"Looking for a wife? What's wrong with Lady Vala?"

“Urolf asked her. And she refused him.”

“Not so. Vala will never wed. That’s the price she pays for her gifts.”

“She’s too clever for him, and it shows. He can’t stand that!”

Whatever the reason, when they saw that the field was really open, all the ladies of the clan who were of an age and as yet unspoken for dressed up and made their bid for Urolf’s favor. The boldest—and the most ambitious—was Lady Raiven. Devious, sharp of wit and features, she got herself seated near Urolf at feasts and claimed more dances with him afterwards. She was so sure of winning Urolf over that she had her maids stitching her bridal veil, and with the Lord Regent’s evident approval.

“Next to Vala your best choice is Raiven,” Thrulvar urged, when it became apparent that Urolf was dragging his heels. “She is comely and her mind is sharp.”

“Too sharp for my taste. I would have a more restful wife.”

“Then choose the Lady Deyra. She’s as fair as Raiven, and much more amenable.”

“Too amenable. She makes me yawn.”

So it went, Thrulvar urging ladies upon Urolf, and Urolf refusing every one. In the end, Urolf ran to Vala.

“It’s all right for Thrulvar,” Urolf grumbled. “He’s never had to marry. This is a serious matter. Whatever my choice, I will be judged by it. And I will be stuck with it forever.” He glanced up, caught the spark in Vala’s eye. “I don’t find it at all amusing.”

Vala sighed. “All this hemming and hawing. One would think you were buying a horse. When you meet the right one, there’ll be no choice.”

“No choice?” he said sharply. “It is my lordly right.”

“As you say.” She turned from him and going over to her small table harp, ran her fingers up and down the strings.

Urolf’s eyes narrowed. Beside the harp lay a plain copper bowl that she used for soothsaying. Looking from Vala to bowl and back again, he frowned. “You sound as if you’ve seen something. Have you?”

Vala shook her head. "I haven't even looked."

"Then what's all this about having no choice?"

"It takes no special vision to see that."

"Oh? Explain."

Vala shook her head, wisely keeping to herself what Urolf would not wish to hear: that when that something crossed his path it would make a mockery of this parade of would-be brides. Yet having caught his glance toward her bowl, she picked it up and held it out. "You are welcome to see for yourself what is to be."

For a moment, it seemed that he'd refuse, as he'd always done before. Then "Very well," he said, and sat down.

Vala filled the bowl with water and set it before him. "Cup your hands," she said, sitting beside him. "Now lower them into the bowl."

Urolf did so and together they waited. For a while, nothing happened. Then all at once the water in his hands began to glow with a golden radiance. Urolf was so surprised that he almost snatched them away, would have, if Vala hadn't reached in and stopped him.

Shadows swirled, forming, reforming, like swiftly moving cloud. A dark shape, emerged, a head? An uncertain glimpse of a pale face under the shadow of a hood, large, dark eyes, soft, appealing.

"Agh!" Urolf jerked his hands apart.

The light vanished, the image with it.

He leapt up. "I'll have none of this! I alone command my choices."

q q q

Now I'll wager that you guessed what that missing something was in Urolf's search for a wife. In case you didn't I'll give you a clue: it comes to most of us sometime in our lives, and when it does, for good or ill, nothing is ever again the same. It can make us either happy or sad; it can fulfill our lives or ruin them. And it often has a way of tripping up proud folk, Yul Kinta and mortal men alike.

Urolf was no exception.

Right in the middle of choosing a bride, he really did decide to buy a

horse. Not just any horse, mind, but a cíto, a magical, immortal horse, a one-in-a-million-years horse, just the horse for a magical immortal lord.

It was big, and black, a fierce stallion with the cíto's silver ring mark on its brow. Caught out on the far eastern plains by wild horse herders, it was awaiting Urolf's pleasure.

When news of its capture reached Urolf, he was so excited and proud at the prospect of owning such a rare animal he insisted on making that long and hazardous trek halfway across the world to get it for himself.

Thrulvar did not like the idea at all. "My lord, the Wilds are dangerous. What if anything untoward should happen? Fierce creatures roam the wastes. Then there are the Lakelands where men rule. They are crude and barbarous and low. It is not fitting for the Lord of Aelyth-Kintalyn to risk any kind of confrontation with such."

Urolf set his shoulders square. "If I cannot deal with hazards out there, how fit am I to rule this place? I shall go, and bring the cíto home."

"Well, if you must, take me with you. I have sometime traveled those ways, I at least know something of the dangers."

"And have my people say I'm still a yearling? Don't worry: I'll take my best knights, my most skillful scouts and we shall move through those places without a breath to betray our passing. Meanwhile, you stay here and mind things until my return."

The next day, Urolf set out with a party of two score and do you know if you'd passed them along the way you'd never have suspected, so quiet they were, and watchful, and cunning. Besides, they and their horses wore coverings of shimmering gray cloth woven with many magic spells that made those wearers well-nigh invisible.

Across the Wilds they went, without mishap, then over the Sidlith Mountains, shunning our Lakeland cities of Medgar, Dune, Hornholm, and intending to dodge our capital, Pen'langoth. They were crossing Long Valley, heading east for Long River, when they saw in the distance a party of riders moving south down the valley road, looking set to cross their path. At Urolf's signal, they halted, drew their cloaks about them, and waited for the party to pass.

It was in fact Lord Leochtor and the Lady Nasidda of the Lakes, going home to Pen'langoth from a state visit to the Queen of Quend.

He certainly had a grand retinue, as befitted such an important personage on such an important occasion. First came the outriders, spying the way ahead, not that there was much to look out for, there upon their own lake road within a day's ride of home. Next came the escort, lords and ladies-in-waiting, then, lastly, a squad of mounted guards.

There rode Leochtor in the middle on a high-stepping roan. Of course, Urolf didn't know then that it was Leochtor, but it was clear from the man's bearing that this was a human of great high rank and standing. On either side of Leochtor rode two hooded figures, ladies, judging by their fine white palfreys and gold-tasseled sidesaddles.

As the party drew abreast, one of the ladies turned her head Urolf's way and at the sight of her face he came up in the saddle. Pale skin, deep, dark eyes, dark hair spilling out from under the hood. At his sudden movement, his horse started. All heads now turned his way and this time Urolf did indeed exclaim aloud—for the two ladies' faces were like as two cherries on one twig!

Leochtor's guard advanced, swords drawn. With a scraping of steel, Urolf's knights threw back their mantles and drew their swords to meet the challenge, but, eyes still on the ladies, Urolf raised a hand, slipping off his hood. "By what right do you challenge travelers on their chosen path?"

The horse captain's blade came up in stern salute. "Leochtor, Lord of the Lakes, demands to know who draws arms against him within his borders. In my lord's name put up your swords and declare yourselves or die."

Chapter Two

At the challenge, Urolf stiffened, and for a moment it seemed as though there might be a fight, but looking past the guard, he called out “Lord Urolf of Aelyth-Kintalyn greets Lord Leochtor of the Lakelands and bids him a civil good day.” No request for permission to cross Leochtor’s domain, no account of where he was going, or on what business he was engaged. Now this was rude as Urolf well knew, and Leochtor could quite easily have risen to the slight. But he for his part well knew what a secretive and prideful folk Yul Kinta were, and he was so intrigued to meet some that he merely raised his hand in salute and nudged his horse forward. “You have journeyed far, my good Lord Urolf. If you so desire, you are right welcome to ride back with us to Scandibar to feast and rest awhile.”

Normally, Urolf would have refused this invitation to visit Pen’langoth’s lake citadel, but glancing to the ladies on either side of Leochtor, he paused. The nearer one eyed him, taking his measure, and in that moment Urolf recalled his fleeting vision: pale face, dark hair

spilling out from under the hood. Those eyes, though, were not soft at all, or appealing, but shrewd, even challenging. No, not the eyes in his vision. Now Urolf looked to Leochtor's other, farther companion and there they were, for a moment full on him. Then she turned away, pulling down her hood.

Urolf nodded. "Mmmm. We accept your gracious invitation."

As Urolf rode up to take his place beside Leochtor, the lake lord gestured to the lady at his right. "Lord Urolf, this is Nasidda, my wife."

Nasidda dipped her head, eyes still on him.

Saluting in Yul Kinta fashion, Urolf clasped his hands to his chest. "My lady."

"And this," Leochtor went on, gesturing now to the companion on his left, "is Leana, my wife's sister."

Lee-ah-nuh. Urolf closed his eyes, savoring the sound. Then once again, he saluted. "My lady."

Leana bowed her head, making her dark eyes seem larger, even mysterious under the shadow of her hood. Now whether it was that look, or the slow blush that once again suffused her face, or some magic dust drifting on the wind, in that moment, as Vala had predicted, Urolf lost all power of choice—and the wit to know it.

Riding between Leochtor and Leana, Urolf conversed with the one while wholly focussed on the silent other. After exchanging some pleasantries with Leochtor, Urolf leaned toward Leana. "May I ask, my lady, do you also visit Scandibar?"

A quick turn of the head, a meeting of the eyes, then Leana viewed the way ahead again, giving Urolf nothing save the side of her hood.

"No, my lord. Scandibar is my home." A young voice, high and clear.

"Leana has lived there this year past, since their mother died," Leochtor cut in, to Urolf's great vexation. Urolf, being Yul Kinta and well used to absent parents, didn't think to ask about the father, but Leochtor went on anyway. "Sad to say, their father died long ago, so Leana is now alone in the world except for Nasidda and me. Since it is considered unseemly for an unwed maid to live by herself, she left the

family estate on our advice and came to us.”

“Tell me, my lady,” Urolf said, turning again to Leana. “What can you find to do in a lake citadel?”

“Leana loves music.” Leochtor again before Leana could draw breath. “She plays the harp beautifully. And dances well.”

Leana smiled. “I also walk—not far though, or I would end up in the lake.”

Urolf smiled back in token of her small jest. “I love to walk, especially in my woods. Perhaps we could tread them together some day.”

q q q

Urolf stayed the night in Scandibar, then the next, and the next. Days stretched into weeks. Unable to take his leave, he hunted in Leochtor’s forests for both fox and deer. At night, he sat beside Leana feasting at High Table while bards sang, jugglers juggled, and conjurors performed their cunning tricks. After the feasting, he retired with Leochtor and a favored few to the lake lord’s private salon. There, at Leochtor’s request, Leana sat and played her harp. Urolf watched Leana at that massive silver instrument, admiring her shapely arms, her supple fingers, thinking how delicate, yet how strong to pull such full rich sounds from such a big contraption. He then resolved, quite without thinking, to have his smiths create such a harp for Leana, only of solid gold and much more intricately fashioned than any by mere human hand. . . .

q q q

Thus he lingered in Leochtor’s halls and what a stir he made, for no Yul Kinta had ever before been entertained in Scandibar. Curbing his customary brisk arrogance, he charmed them all with compliments and courtly eloquence, showing off his knowledge of the Common tongue, on his best behavior to impress Leana and win her favor.

Impress her he did. She, who rarely left Pen’langoth, had never met such a man. Not that she lacked suitors! But these were all Lakeland hopefuls who came and went like beans from the selfsame pod.

Though custom prevented their ever being alone together and barred

her from professing her liking for him outright, Leana managed to convey to Urolf by encouraging looks and an occasional touch how much his company pleased her.

Leana told of her childhood, of loving parents and grief at losing them. “I envy you, my lord, that your parents will remain with you forever.”

“Then you waste your envy, my lady, for both my parents have passed on.”

Leana looked to him, startled, thinking him to mean that they had died. She longed to ask him how, their race being immortal, but something in the way he said it made her bite her tongue. From then on, though, she felt an extra bond with him, orphaned as they both were, to her mind, at least.

Who knows how long Urolf might have stayed there had not his chief scout one bright morning brought him upright with a bump. “My lord, we should have crossed the Wilds homeward three days since. Lord Thrulvar will soon be wondering what has happened to delay us.”

For a moment, Urolf looked fit to explode, but then he sighed. “You are right, Golvar. We shall return to Aelyth-Kintalyn tomorrow.”

“We shall not be fetching the cíto, my lord?”

Urolf frowned. “Cíto? Oh. The cíto. I ... shall come back for it presently.”

He went to find Leochtor.

“My lord. I must go home tomorrow. But before I leave, I would speak on a weighty matter.” He walked to the window. “I would make the lady Leana to wife. What say you?”

Leochtor eyed Urolf gravely. “Nay, you must ask Leana. I suspect,” he added, cocking his eye, “that her response will be quite favorable. But,” he went on, serious again, “there are other matters to consider.”

“Such as?”

“There are many humans—and Yul Kinta also, I would imagine—who might not look well on such a bonding.”

Urolf held his tongue now, all too aware of what Thrulvar would say

of this intended match.

“There are suitors who have already asked for Leana’s hand, and are awaiting her response. Treaties of trade and land that rest on that.”

“But my people—”

“Then there is the matter of her dowry. Without general consent, Leana would not be awarded one—”

“That will not be necessary—”

“—without which she could not, would not marry you, so great would be her shame.”

Uroolf paced back and forth, in a fury at being so spoken to by this mortal yet unable to betray his anger by even an eyeblink. At last he stopped still. “After Leana says yes, what then?”

Leochtor nodded briskly. “Then we move to win folk over. If we move with all speed, a marriage might take place—”

“When?”

A pause. “Two years.”

“Two years!”

“It is our custom with all important marriages. Also, since Lakeland brides are wed at home, the marriage must take place here.”

“*Here!* That is not—”

“You can always have a second wedding in your woodlands. But even if you go to her now and she accepts you—”

Uroolf’s eyes flashed. *If!*

“—there can be no official talk of it for, I’d say, at least a year.”

Uroolf clenched his fists, rage surging through again. Such gross insult! These petty humans to treat a Yul Kinta so, nay, their very ruler!

Then he thought of Leana and once more held his tongue

Letting forth a hard, deep breath, he clasped his hands.

“I’ll go to find Leana now.”