

The Meeting

SHE now paused beside a large fallen tree, stilling her racing heartbeat so that she might listen better. Not with her ears—for he was very quiet when he moved—but with her ‘Sight’. She knew precisely where and when he had stopped to rest, in the clearing which was just beyond this next stand of trees. Yet she was unconcerned about being heard, for her own steps were silent on the soft floor of the forest.

Listening, she could hear him packing something into his knapsack, and then rising to his feet. Ever more quietly now, she crept another few feet forward. A light sheen covered her tawny skin, yet it had little to do with exertion, for she was barely aware of the effort tracking him required. Instead, it was the unnerving sense of *dé·jà vu* which had excited her senses. Of a sudden, the traveler seemed less of a stranger, and she could not, for the life of her, begin to explain *that!* Expelling a breath she had not realized she was holding, she stepped out to where she could receive her first glimpse of this man who had sought her so diligently. She watched as he made ready to depart. His back was to her, thus she was afforded an unobstructed view of his sturdily built frame. She had no fear of him, despite his obvious advantage in size; she could sense that he meant her no harm. And her own skills as a warrior were more than a match for *any* man.

The time had come. Her answers lie just ahead.

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HE was unable to explain it. He had not heard a sound, yet he no longer felt alone, and although he had sensed none of the danger which had preceded the arrival of the Queen’s warriors, he had survived thus far by taking no chances, and

would not start now. He had learned to trust his instincts.

Casually lifting his pack, he strolled off into the deeper brush, then several yards into the forest, suddenly decided to double back to determine if his intuition had been correct.

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His follower had paused in the clearing which he had left scant moments before. She had intended to wait until he moved, then follow, circle around, and confront him as he entered the next clearing. Yet she had instead been halted by the strong impression of him she was now receiving from being so near to him and, standing still, allowed it to course through her as she wondered at the odd familiarity. If only she could determine why...

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'She is as beautiful as ever.' He thought to himself as he now watched *her* in the clearing, having circled around along the same path through the trees which—unknown to him—she herself had intended to intercept him upon. She wore what he remembered was one of her customary garments—a short *'Maraci'*; it left one shoulder and most of her midriff bare, covering only what was absolutely required (and the bottom portion doing barely this!); her only concession to her status being the golden band, embossed with the seal of Nubia, which held her long tresses back from her face. She had never been one for the more traditional Royal garments, he remembered that too, with a smile. Even without it, however, Tyelah could never be, in his eyes, mistaken for anything other than the Queen she was.

Awed, he contemplated how best to make his presence known to her—without frightening her—as it was obvious she

had come because her troops had been unable to find him. This thought amused him, causing him to unwittingly chuckle lightly.

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Tyelah, hearing even this small sound, remained perfectly still. So, he had come behind her. She was not by any means concerned—although she understood now how he had eluded her guards. Did he laugh at her expense? The idea of this produced a flash of anger, and caused her to determine that, without question, it was time that this game came to an end.

Without turning, she entered his thoughts and asked the question,

‘Why do you seek me?’

He heard the query, yet as on that day long ago, when she had first made him aware of her gift, he was startled by the fact this thought had come to his *inner* hearing—rather than his outer ear. The larger surprise, however, was that despite the fact that she seemed to know of his presence, she appeared not to know of his identity.

Why, he wondered with bafflement, if she knew that he had come to the Kingdom of Nubia seeking *her* in particular, did she not know that, even now, he sought to make good on his vow, made so many years ago? Of its own volition, her name leapt to his lips.

“Tyelah.”

Turning about, she studied his face—which she had been unable to see before—and in the instant that her eyes locked with his, though she could not explain it, the entire forest seemed to stand still, and she knew a tilting of reality which

rendered her temporarily speechless.

She had come to the conclusion of her search. Yet why, she asked herself, did it feel as though she had come to the beginning of a *different* sort of journey?

None of this showed in the stare that she gave him however—she hoped—as she at last spoke aloud.

“You have not answered my query, bold one.” A reference to the fact that he offered no gesture of respect—despite the obvious recognition in his gaze. She went on quietly, “Again, why have you sought me?” He of course understood the statement concerning his nearness, and lack of a proper greeting. Yet he could not help but to ask himself yet again why she questioned.

What was *this*? If she truly did not recognize him, then why was *she* seeking *him*, out here in the forest—and alone? Yet she seemed to genuinely await a response, thus he spoke now with a touch of wryness, which let on nothing of his confusion.

“Your Majesty. I seem to have forgotten my manners. I pray, however, that you will find favor enough in your humble servant that I might be forgiven.” Without taking his eyes from her own, he proceeded to bow to one knee before her. Secretly amused, Tyelah managed nonetheless to carry a certain haughtiness in her tone as she responded.

“I shall reserve such pardon for now, as you seem after all to be aware of my identity, and shall instead provide you with the opportunity to answer my query before I am able to lose patience with you. And explain, while you are about it, *your* identity and your reasons for being here.”

It was true then. She had no recognition of their

acquaintance. Ever the more baffled, yet secretly resolving in his heart to *rectify* this lapse in memory as quickly as possible, he replied softly, “I am Devaleh Knaye, Lord of Ronia. I come seeking an audience before your esteemed throne.” Tyelah’s reply was skeptical.

“You skulk about in my forest; elude my warriors, only to now inform *me* that you request an audience?” Her tone was stern, yet a small smile played about the corners of her mouth.

Suddenly deciding that she rather liked this ruffian in dignified dress, and thus deciding upon a bit of boldness of her own (although she could not for the life of her determine why she should desire to!), she tilted her head in a manner he found most becoming and went on to ask,

“Very well then. Pray tell me, Devaleh Knaye, Lord of Ronia, what cause have we to seem acquainted? Such is not possible, no?”

Here was his awaited-for opening. Choosing his words carefully, though he could not help his own answering smile, he told her

“There *is* good cause, Milady. I am Nubian by birth. As a young man, I served in your father’s army until the great war.” At mention of this, he noted the flash of something painful in her eyes and recalled that he, currently, was wearing the colors of the kingdom responsible for it. He went on, before she could change her mind about wanting to hear his tale. “I was taken prisoner by the Ronians, and enslaved by their king. Before that war, however, you and I were friends. We met whenever possible, speaking of whatever came to mind.” He gave her a look “We had much to discuss, then. Do you not remember, Tyelah?”

The sound of her name on his lips was doing odd things

to her, and she required a moment to consider this before deciding to answer him honestly.

“Even in Ronia, you would have heard of my father’s demise from the injury he received during that war.” she saw his regretful nod, drew a calming breath, and went on quietly “I was in such a state over this loss that I quite became ill myself. Were it not for...” she began to say Kusta, then amended to

“To cope with my trauma, it is believed that I forced all memory of the event, and the time leading up to it, from my mind. Yet,” here her stare became penetrating “I have been given an accounting of that interval, and, no mention was made of you.” She waited, not at all expecting his response.

“Of course no mention was made of me!” he grated harshly “Why should any mention *me*? I was only a lowly soldier! A step above the servants!” Seeing her look and immediately contrite, he turned away from her briefly, struggling to control himself and the frustration for the expectations which had forced them to keep their love for one another a secret. Turning back to her now, he softened his voice,

“Forgive me, Tyelah. I am being impolite. It is only that, we were so close...” here he raised his gaze to meet her own, and again she felt that shifting of her equilibrium, for she could sense such a depth of feeling from him as he continued, “...it pains me to think of that time being expunged, when it has sustained *my* sanity for this past decade.” Tyelah knew that the pain of that loss was reflected in her own eyes, yet parried calmly (in an effort to control an odd feeling of her own);

“You spin a quite unlikely yarn, Ronian. With what cause would I hold placing even one iota of faith in such a tale?”

That suddenly, he knew what he must do. What *they* must do, if there was to be any hope of the future he wished for them.

Stepping closer to her he lowered his voice to a near whisper.

“It would seem there is only this recourse, Milady.” She adamantly refused to consider the certain—this time—sensation of *déjà vu* which coursed through her at *this*, instead maintaining her intent focus upon him as he went on softly; “I am aware of your Ability. The memories you have buried are here,” he touched her forehead “...and the proof of them is here.” He touched his own “Allow me to assist you in removing the barrier. Use it... find the truth for yourself see for yourself the truth of my words, and know the power of what we shared.” Tyelah simply stared at him for a long moment.

He was right, she admitted to herself. If he possessed the knowledge, it would be a simple matter for her to retrieve it. Yet, of a sudden experiencing for the first time in her life a fear of the unknown, she questioned the sagacity of *unleashing* those memories. Did she truly desire to know? And, if his tale turned out to be genuine, would it free her Soul from the prison of sadness which she had suffered all these years? Or, plunge her once more into its depths? The thought of returning to that bleakness gave her pause.

But she *had* to know.

Determined of a sudden, she nodded, once, and then took a still hesitant step towards him, searching his gaze silently. Finally closing her eyes without speaking again, she allowed her breathing to slow, to deepen. She easily settled within herself and now opened her mind to latch upon his own again resolutely, allowing the power of the *Tzari* to overtake them both. Her Energy drifted into his, and his breathing slowed as well as the connection was completed. With him, she drifted back...back to the day when, at seventeen, she had secreted out of the castle in order to catch a glimpse of the newly inducted warriors as they were put through their paces.

She saw herself standing somewhere in front of him, and experienced again the rush of sensation of secret delight which had flowed through her upon recognizing his presence. Turning to face him. Inwardly amused at the obvious appreciation upon his face. In his eyes.

** “You are even more beautiful than I imagined!”*

Devaleh gasped; the awe in his voice unmistakable. She stood not more than a few feet in front of him, regal in her bearing, budding into young womanhood, brash in defiance of the very protocol which could get him executed for merely being here, in her presence, alone or otherwise.

Her hazel eyes regarded him solemnly, with no fear. She could sense that he meant her no harm. And besides, she was thinking that he had much to appreciate as well. Already of considerable height—although she could tell that he was younger than he seemed—his lean, richly dark body rippled with the finely honed muscles he had earned upon the training field. His hands were strong-looking...and, he had the nicest smile.

Although he would not know of this, she had known of his scrutiny on that day he had been awarded internship. Her curiosity concerning him had been piqued then, yet she had not given this much further thought —until she recognized his continued interest in moments when he had been able to cast a glance at her. Reminded again of his comment, she crossed her arms over her budding bosom, then took a step towards him. When he instinctively backed away, she took another, meeting his eyes directly and saying softly,

“You are quite bold, Sir. I am future Queen, and yet you stand in my presence?”

Devaleh experienced a moment of panic. As he raised his

eyes to hers with the intended apology, however, he quickly saw the light of merriment in them. She was having a jest at his expense! Emboldened by her good humor, he now took the forward step, saying impulsively,

“Does being a Princess mean that I am not to notice you are beautiful?”

This earned him a full smile, in his opinion more radiant than the Nubian Sun, which warmed his heart and considerably brightened his day. Tyelah, enjoying this little game, now playfully assumed her most Royal manner.

“You are not only bold, but impertinent as well!” Her tone remained light, yet Devaleh sobered immediately and, going to one knee before her, spoke humbly.

“Your forgiveness Highness... I have no wish to seem neither impertinent nor insolent.” Thinking this a good moment to retreat, he went on haltingly, *“If it please, Milady, I should return to my regiment.”* This time when he raised his eyes, she stood directly before him, bringing the distance between them to mere inches... Close.

“And,” she intoned with a different quality in her voice, *“...if it should not please me?”* She realized that she had caused him a bit of discomfort, and tried to make amends for her seeming severity *“You need not go. Truly. I was having a bit of amusement, yet I am enjoying speaking with you. I find you...interesting. Besides...”* here the playful light returned to her eyes *“...I wish to hear why you have been seeking my appearances about the Palace grounds.”* She smiled a bit, seeing that her awareness of this baffled him slightly.

He was, indeed, surprised by her knowledge of his interest, and pondered briefly how to reply. Then, deciding that there would never be an opportunity such as this again, decided

to toss caution to the wind, smiled handsomely, and told her with meaning,

“Because, I have wondered...and was hoping...” Looking into his eyes, Tyelah did not need the power of her ‘Sight’ to infer the completion of this sentence. Yet she asked anyway.

“What were you, ah...hoping?” A shiver ran through her at the look that he gave her as he stepped forward to close the remaining distance between them, the desire to taste her mouth in his eyes. And, though she had no true idea of what being kissed would feel like, she was more than aware of the fact that he fully intended to do so, and, that she wished it to be so.

*When finally, his lips touched hers, very lightly, the thought flashed through her mind that her father would kill her if he knew. **This** caused her to giggle, and, Devaleh, raising his head slightly to gaze down at her, asked with a confused smile,*

“Does my kiss amuse Milady, then?” She began to shake her head to assure him that this certainly was not what she had been experiencing—the kiss had actually been quite nice—yet before she could she detected a blur of movement off to his side. Her eyes went wide, and she cried out

“NO!”

Knowing that this, obviously, was not in response to his query, even as he noted that her gaze was far over his shoulder— behind him— Devaleh was immediately alarmed. And even realizing with dismay that it was already too late, he nonetheless spun about hurriedly.

He had, he chided himself harshly, known the dangers of being alone with the Princess, and most surely had known far better than to take such a liberty as to touch her, in any manner! Now, idiot that he was, he would pay for his folly with

his life! Kusta would kill him for his rashness, and spare him no mercy for his youth!

The enraged giant, his eyes burning with murderous intent, faced him and without a word gripped him about the neck, lifting him fully off of the ground. He struggled, yet to no avail, for in the next instant he was flung across the yard, crashing heavily upon the ground; where he lay, all training forgotten, awaiting the slice of the sword which Kusta was drawing from his side even in that moment.

When, to his surprise, the expected piercing did not come, he risked raising his head slightly, only to have his gaze fall upon Tyelah, who had quickly placed herself between him and her Keeper. Outraged, she stood, hands on her softly rounded hips, glaring up at Kusta as she snapped

“What are you doing?”

“My Duty, Highness.” was the guard’s calm reply. She continued to eye him angrily.

“You intend to kill him!”

“As would be fitting, Princess.” He was undaunted in the face of her ire, instead his eyes raked over Devaleh with disgust “You know nothing of this boy, HE is a nothing!” He paused thoughtfully; chiding her “You deliberately misled me, so that you might sneak away.” (She had told him that she was going to nap for awhile.) “Now, I find you here, in the presence of this mongrel!! Surely, you did not arrange this??” Stung by the accusation of impropriety, she gasped out

“How DARE you?!”

“I dare, Little One.” He retorted softly, standing spear straight before her. He was every bit the warrior, every bit the

protector, and, to Devaleh—who had not risen from his place on the ground—every bit the ready executioner! “It is my Duty.”

Despite his terror, however, he found himself quite impressed with Tyelah, who obviously had no intention of backing down either. She straightened her back, regained her Royal bearing, and with a toss of her head, lowered her own voice to match his tone as she replied,

“Do not forget to whom you speak, Guard. I am no longer a child, and I would remind you that your ‘Duty’ is to protect me, not tell me what I am to do. As you could clearly see, I was in no danger. Thus, you may return to your other ‘Duties’!” She did not seem surprised when he made no motion to leave. Instead, with a certain regality of his own, he replied,

“Aye, Princess, as you say, I was not trained to be your parent. Yet, that does not excuse what I witnessed here. This commoner was **kissing** you, for the sake of the Fates! The King, I think, would hardly be pleased, were he to learn of such.”

Even Devaleh, from where he lay across the yard, could see that the guard had made a terrible mistake with this ploy. Fire flashed briefly into her eyes, then, suddenly, it was gone. She sighed with bored decisiveness. “Very well, Kusta. I shall return to my suite.” Her gaze shifted

“Yet, allow me to be perfectly clear. Devaleh, (who was again surprised by her knowledge of his name) “...is to be regarded as my friend. You are never to harm him again, in any manner. Furthermore...” her tone took on a hard edge,

“I would suggest that in future you bear in mind that I am every bit my father’s child. And, while we are about the subject of your ‘Duty’, Lieutenant-Major Obe, you would do well to remember that it is supposed to be to Me. I shall be Queen someday...and my memory is quite sound.” When he did

not reply, she spun on her heel and strode away, coming to a halt before Devaleh and holding out her hand to him, waiting for him to accept it before helping him to his feet.

“You are not injured?” When he shook his head, she took his arm, leading him several feet away from where Kusta stood. “No further harm shall befall you.” Although he greatly appreciated her rescue, and defense, he recognized the madness of what he had done, and quickly spoke up, loudly enough for Kusta to hear.

“Princess, I am most grateful for your tolerance. Yet I must apologize for my forwardness. I have nothing to offer one so esteemed as you. You are, after all, the future Queen of Nubia.” She tilted her head in that manner again, then replied for his ears only,

“Perhaps. Yet, does this prevent my knowing whom I choose to befriend?” The look she gave him melted his heart.

*Already in love with her, he realized that he was setting his sights on heartbreak, for he knew he could never have her. He knew as well that Kusta would merrily break his neck and, should her father find out, he would order his neck **separated!***

None of it mattered, however, for he was lost. If her friendship was all she offered, he would gladly accept. After a quick glance at Kusta—who glared back at him murderously—he turned back to her with a soft smile, replying,

“Surely not, Princess.”

“Excellent!” she exclaimed, her good spirits restored. She then made a face, slanting her eyes in Kusta’s direction as she finished with a conspirator’s smile “I had best go now, and you must return to your regiment.” Her voice dropped playfully “Before you get into trouble.” To this, Devaleh would have

laughed right aloud, were it not for Kusta's closeness. Instead, he smiled at her with feeling, as she continued, "I will send word when we are able to meet again."

Standing on tiptoe, she lightly kissed his cheek. A gesture which he realized was in defiance of Kusta, and one which elated and worried him all at once. As she strode away, he endured another of Kusta's withering glares, which made him swallow nervously, before the formidable guard turned away as well. Standing there alone, Devaleh wondered what was in store for him and the future Queen of Nubia.

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Over the course of the following year, Tyelah reveled in the attention she received from Devaleh. They spent as much time together as his training and her lessons would allow.

Unfortunately, during this same year, there had been several skirmishes between their Kingdom and its nearest enemy, Wassi. In truth, it would not have gone on as long as it did, had Wassi not sought the aid of the Ronians—Nubia's most formidable enemy Kingdom. Thus by now it had escalated into a full-fledged engagement, and all troops not needed to defend Sheridan—where nearly all of Nubia's subjects had been gathered for safety—had been called to join the battles on the borders.

When the orders came, Devaleh and Tyelah wept together at the idea of being separated. On their last eve together, they sat upon a hilltop overlooking the countryside. Even Kusta—who had been forced to stand silently away as what he had feared most had manifested—could not begrudge them these last moments, and looked on compassionately as they quietly spoke words of undying love for each other.

Devaleh, with pain in his voice, held Tyelah's hand as he spoke to her heart,

"I fear that this may be the last time I am able to hold you in this manner. By the time I return, you will likely be Wed. You are of age now, and I doubt that your father would entertain seriously a bid from me."

"Oh Dev." she used her pet name for him "Do not speak so! My father will listen to me. He must!" She threw herself into his arms tearfully "When he returns, I will speak to him of us." This did not sit well with him at all.

"Tylee...darling, I would love nothing more than to have our love recognized openly. Yet, you are aware that to do such a thing would mean not only my death, but that of your guard, for keeping our secret. I love you, yet we both knew in the beginning that there was no future for us."

There was determination in her now dry eyes, which locked upon his as she spoke with a steadier tone. "Swear to me. Swear that, no matter what, you will return to me. Then, trust me with all else." Drawing her to him, he lowered his voice to a caressing note.

"I trust you with my very life, Tylee. Though I question the sanity of this plot of yours...I yet will vow it. Never forget my love for you, darling Tyelah, and only death will prevent my return to your arms. Will you, if possible, wait for me?"

"I shall wait until death, Dev. None shall turn me from this vow." Their gazes held for several minutes, and he could see that her intent was true. In that moment, he desired to kiss her desperately. Yet he had not done so again since the day that Kusta caught them at it, and dared not do so now, even when he was uncertain that he would survive long enough to make good on his vow of return.

*Had he known, then, that it would be separation, rather than death, which kept him from her arms, he might have taken the risk. **

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She came back to the present as the memory faded, to be replaced by her own confused thoughts. Pain, loss, anger, fear, confusion...elation. All vied to find their place within her mind.

Watching the play of emotions on her beautiful features, Devaleh could sense the effect the memories were having upon her, and in the interest of hoping to settle matters so that they could move on, he again decided to take matters into his own hands. Stepping forward, he slipped one hand around to the base of her neck, the other about her slender waist, and gently drew her to him.

She had been looking at him, and even had her eyes been firmly shut she could have sensed his intent as easily as she had that first time.

He was going to kiss her, for the first time since that day in the courtyard.

He bowed his head...

And, although she placed her own hands against his chest, she did not withdraw, or resist. It was, she realized, as though she had been waiting for this moment all these years. Not fearing, not knowing why, but simply waiting. Nearly trance-like, she allowed her lips to part slightly in anticipation of what, for nearly a decade, she had been missing.

It was soft. Oh! So very soft...

And fleeting! For in that moment it ended. Opening her

eyes, Tyelah saw why...

Devaleh had dreamt of this moment on many nights. Nights when he had cried himself to sleep for the loss of his love, of his freedom, of his home. Believing that, somehow, he would have the return of them all. Now, it was as though he had, truly, come *home*, and he savored the sweetness of her lips. To his astonishment, however, he found that rather than moving forward—as he had intended—to take her further into his arms, he was somehow moving *backwards*, quickly!

Immediately, he knew...

KUSTA! This time, however, he was prepared for the throw, landing lightly and immediately rolling to his feet to face his adversary.

Kusta! Tyelah saw him in the instant he grabbed Devaleh.

She had ordered him not to follow her. Had stated firmly that she did not require his assistance to find the stranger. And yet, she was not altogether surprised to see that he had disregarded her assertion. Old Duties died hard, and, for her lifelong companion, they did NOT die!

Devaleh was no longer afraid of him, yet was reluctant to engage him, understanding that the man's concern was simply the well-being of his Queen. Fortunately, (he prayed) in that moment there was a flash of recognition in the giant's eyes. Then, although his mouth curled derisively, he relaxed slightly, even as he acknowledged cuttingly.

"I might have known. So, you are alive."

"Very much so." Devaleh returned calmly. Kusta got no further, however, for Tyelah quickly inserted herself between the two men, speaking to her Keeper sternly

“I believed, Sir Obe, that I was clear in my intent for you to remain at the Palace,”

“Yes, Majesty.” was his brief reply. “But I followed for your safety Milady...as always. I did not recognize him. I could not stand away and take no action.” He indicated Devaleh; who yet held his tongue to see how Tyelah would handle this elevated Guard who, in his opinion, obviously received FAR too much headway to do as he chose. But he turned his attention back as Kusta was going on; “And still, even such recognition matters not. He is yet a *peasant*. He had no right to take such liberties with you. You are *Queen* now, and must better observe matters of propriety.”

Although she sensed Devaleh’s annoyance with the term ‘peasant’, she did not glance around at him. Her attention focused instead on her Guardian, and his last statement, which had immediately annoyed **her**. Cutting off his further reproof, she replied with a reprimand of her own.

“I am most well aware of my place as Queen, Kusta. And you ought to have a care to remember it...as well as your *own*. The foremost issue here is not whether Lord Knaye was taking liberties, but rather that you would have no means by which to know this...had you followed my directive, and remained at Hummingbird Palace.”

A chastened Kusta acknowledged the truth of this with the turning of his gaze from her. Softening a bit at his repentant look, she continued in a kinder tone, “I appreciate your protectiveness of me Kusta. Yet I, too, now know who he is...*and*...I have regained memories which had been lost to me before.” she noted a flash of something in his eyes, as though he were remembering something himself, yet decided not to press it just then, continuing instead,

“As to the kiss...well, my friend, it seems we have traveled this path before...and no use will come of revisiting the subject. Thus, we shall attempt clarity once more.” She took a step forward, looking up into his eyes—which were again fixed upon her in attention—her own gaze determined as she instructed, “Hear your queen well...*this* time, Kusta. You are not to *touch* him again. Ever. Unless you are certain, absolutely *positive*, that he means me harm. Actual *danger*, Kusta, not your concern for my morality. I am understood, yes?”

Knowing that there was no option—in this mood, Tyelah was prone to be uncompromising—Kusta lowered himself entirely to his knees, replying humbly, “As ever, My Queen, I bend to your Will.” After a moment, she nodded with satisfaction, saying ever the more quietly,

“Then *this* matter, at least, is settled.”

Turning to Devaleh, who was now relaxed against a tree, observing their exchange with interest, she favored him with a smile meant only for him as she queried,

“Lord Devaleh, would you do me the honor of being my guest for supper this eve?” He did not answer immediately, taking in her stance, and the way she held her feet slightly apart, the stray locks of her hair, which kept rebelliously falling into her face, stirred him immeasurably ... and recalling their brief kiss, while thinking to himself that what *he* wished to dine upon was not fit for Kusta’s ears! Therefore, his only comment aloud was,

“Milady, it would do *me* the utmost honor to partake of *any* sustenance in your pleasurable company.” Tyelah, knowing of his thoughts moments before, laughed aloud.

“As I stated before, you are quite bold!” She replied meaningfully but quietly, gifting him with a full smile, and a

glance which told him plainly that she thought him as *handsome* as he was bold.

Then, again facing her faithful Keeper (and coming to a decision for which she entirely no basis) ...she now commanded, "As you are here, you may assist Lord Devaleh with his belongings. I am returning to the Palace. I trust that your mount is nearby?" This assumption was based upon the fact that he had arrived so soon after she herself, and it was confirmed when Kusta replied with a brief nod,

"Aye, Majesty. He is near." She nodded as well, yet he did not see, as he had turned to begin gathering Devaleh's gear. Both men paused when, from out of the brush emerged a brown and white stallion. He had, Devaleh concluded, obviously responded to a silent signal from Tyelah.

It was a magnificent beast, well suited to Kusta's size and weight. Thus it was with mild surprise that he watched *her* swing easily onto the steed's back, grasping its mane in her hands to swing it about towards Sheridan. Then she paused, and, glancing over her shoulder at him, said lightly,

"I shall see you at supper. Welcome home, Dev."

He watched with pleasure as she rode away, then, turning to retrieve his other pack, found Kusta watching *him*. Lifting an eyebrow in query, he waited.

"Obviously," Kusta began "You were doing well for yourself in Ronia. Why have you returned?"

"I am Nubian, and this is my home." Devaleh replied easily. The guard gave him a skeptical look, his entire being radiating with pessimism, and he realized that nothing he said would be believed. Still, with a sigh, he attempted nonetheless to impart the reason for his determination to return to Tyelah.

Moving forward, he came to a halt directly in front of Kusta as he went on.

“Hear me Kusta. I am aware of your devotion to her Majesty. Yet I am equally as certain that you are aware that I have loved Tyelah a good portion of my life. I love her now, and if she will allow, I wish to have her love me again.”

Kusta made no reply at first. Then, the skepticism which had been present before was now evident in his tone as he answered coldly.

“You simply could not have left her *be*.” It was not a question, so Devaleh did not answer. “You are **not** worthy of her.”

Devaleh sighed again. “Perhaps.” he agreed. “Yet I am here. And we shall allow *Tyelah* to determine for herself whether she feels the same.” He smiled with out humor “She extracted a vow from me a decade ago, that day on the hillside. I have now honored it. Obviously, despite the lost memories, some part of her has allowed her to keep her own, to wait for me.”

Kusta made a sound to go along with the look he gave Devaleh as he retorted, “You return with one goal, and it has *nothing* to do with love! I say that you...” He stopped speaking abruptly, tilting his head as though he were listening to something Devaleh could not hear. After a moment, he turned away without continuing, as though forgetting Devaleh was even present. Curious as to this odd behavior, Devaleh prompted him to complete his statement.

“You were saying?” Kusta gave him a scathing glare.

“Her Majesty does not enjoy delay. We will go.” Devaleh, realizing then what must have occurred, smiled to

himself as he hefted his bag and started off in the direction which the other man had gone without a backwards glance.

Tyelah had entered his mind, heard whatever it was he had begun to say, and ordered him to return to her, post haste.

Catching up to him without effort, he fell silently in beside him as he made his way to the place he had longed to see all these years. All along the way, his thoughts stayed upon the lovely Ruler of this beautiful land.