

Courtesy Preview: Chapter One
The Wrekening by Jayel Gibson
Synergy Books September 2006
ISBN: 978-1933538303



Within the glen the three lay hidden. The first was a young woman of little over twenty summers, long and lithe and deceptively delicate. Her long hair was glistening copper and her skin a pale ivory, but it was her eyes that often drew stares, for they were as golden as the topaz star and their depth and brilliance called to mind those of a hunting cat. In a scabbard across her back rested a long sword and on the ground beside her lay a slender walking stick.

She heard her companion call inside her mind and rolled her eyes at his warning. He lay to her right, a little over half a dragon's length away. He was just under nine spans and broad in chest and shoulders with muscles well defined from practice with the double-headed battle axe he now held lightly in his hands. His skin was tanned, as if from long hours in the sun, and his fair hair gave him a rather rakish look as it fell across his forehead. The woman often teased that he had cut it with a dull dagger. He watched the approaching threat with a set of mismatched eyes, one the dark turquoise of the pools within the ice fields, the other deep green, as if stolen from the forests.

Both wore the soft tanned leathers that spoke of better days and nobler nights than this campsite in the glen.

As the woman rose and stood among the trees watching the strangers approach, she checked her weapons and drew the crossbow from her belt, nocking a bolt and raising it to meet the chest of the first of the trespassers. Just before she dropped the veil and let the arrow fly she sent Talin a silent request.

"Be sure one remains alive."

As the arrow struck the first man's heart the others scattered, seeking cover. Talin's axe flashed, dropping three men in swift succession as Cwen shot the bolts that sent two more to meet their death.

The third man who lay concealed beneath the leaves was neither a friend to Talin and Cwen nor a member of the group they were rapidly thinning. He slid into position behind the trespassers and sent his lance through the back of the man closest to him. Drawing his short sword he dispatched another two before retrieving the lance and dropping back amid the trees. His eyes were the pale green of a new leaf and his face angular and handsome. His dark hair lay bound at his neck and fell between his shoulders. His leathers were old and worn, though not soiled or frayed.

"Talin, does one live?" Cwen called from where she collected her walking stick.

"Aye, but with no thanks to you. Why must you kill everything?"

"Did not my father ever tell you? I am a very angry young woman," Cwen said, using her most convincing impression of her father's voice and laughing at Talin's look of irritation.

"If you wish to question him you had best do it quickly before he bleeds out. His arm hangs by a thread, which means my axe requires sharpening." Looking at his axe, he rubbed his thumb across the blades.

"Next time if you want one alive, save him yourself." Talin raised an eyebrow and looked down at the dying man. "You will soon wish I had killed you sir, for she does not take kindly to those who poach in her woods, even though they are not really her woods."

"You know I never miss, Talin. It is not possible for me to save one." Cwen knelt by the man who bled onto the ground and touched her staff against his wound.

"Did you kill the Equus?" Cwen asked, pushing harder against the wound.

"Aye," the man gasped in pain, "We did not know you owned the woods."

"I do not own the woods, but I do call the Equus kin. Are there others near, others of your creed?"

But the man was dead and of no further use, which brought a flash of anger as Cwen looked up at Talin.

"Do not look at me! I kept him alive."

"Not long enough," Cwen snapped.

Reaching out, Talin touched her arm, sending his thoughts, *"The one called Caen lies in the woods a dragon's length to the south, and do not..."*

Cwen whirled and looked in the direction he had indicated, causing Talin to give a deep sigh.

"What good does it do me to speak it silently when you always give away the advantage?" he added aloud.

Striding with angry purpose toward the trees that lay to the south Cwen held her crossbow ready and swung her stick in a large arc before her. As the stick struck Caen through the leaves he howled and she released the bolt, catching him as he rolled away, pinning him to the ground.

"I thought you never missed," Talin said behind her.

Lowering her eyes to the man who lay with the arrow clasped in his fist as he tried to pull it out, she replied, "I did not miss. But he did move very quickly for a dead man."

She knelt beside the injured man and stared at him with confused curiosity.

"Have I not instructed you not to track me, Caen?"

"Aye, many times," he answered through gritted teeth.

"Then why do you insist on doing it?" Examining the damage the arrow had done, she slapped Caen's hand away from the shaft and quickly broke off the quills.

"Hold him," she directed Talin and watched as he grabbed Caen's shoulders and forced them against the ground. Grabbing the shaft, she leaned her weight on it, causing Caen to bellow in pain. Her eyes met Talin's and she watched as he jerked Caen up off the ground, leaving the arrow behind and a neat hole through Caen's shoulder.

"I should fill the wound with earthen fungus and watch it turn black and secrete foul smelling pus," Cwen muttered.

"But you will not because...?" Talin asked with wry amusement.

Her lips twitched and she admitted, "Because he avoided death by my bow."

"Ah, so you admit you missed."

"Nay, 'twas a maladjustment in the quills, that is all. I never miss."

Drawing a willow bark poultice from her satchel she lifted Caen's vest and placed it on the wound.

"It will heal. If you do not follow me again you may live."

Reaching out with his good hand Caen grabbed Cwen's arm and pulled her close, causing Talin to raise his axe.

Shaking his head, Caen whispered, "It is good to know I shall live, Cwen."

Jerking her arm away, she hissed as she rose, "If you ever touch me again I shall cut off your hands." Spinning, she strode off toward her camp, knowing Talin would be close behind her.