

# Fall, Falling, Fallen

*by Karalynn Lee*

On the day the prince was to arrive, all the women were aflutter because it was said he sought a bride. Melea was too busy to care—she was looking for a dog that had strayed. "Misbegotten cur," she sighed as she made her way through the browning grasses outside the city, although of course Shiri—the missing dog—wasn't. The hound was of faultless pedigree—Melea had chosen the parents herself, and Shiri's bloodline was nearly as noble as Melea's.

Her people valued such fine hounds. They were peerless hunters, and with autumn nigh and the gazelles soon to migrate into their lands, they could ill afford to lose one. But Melea would have gone after her even if Shiri had been lame and useless for tracking game. She'd raised her as a pup. Others might mock her sentimentality, but it was what made her so good in the kennels, however unsuited a place that might be for the lord of Jenne's daughter.

It also let her escape the flurry of preparations in Jenne, to the aroma of fresh earth and the cool lash of the wind. The ground was still damp from last night's rain, and she followed the trail of pawprints into a grove. Then she stopped.

A man knelt beside a pair of horses, tousling Shiri's ears while she wagged her tail. When he glanced up at her, his eyes were a warm, intelligent brown. "She must be yours," he said, releasing Shiri.

The hound immediately came to her and Melea patted her and scolded her—"For shame, Shiri, running away as though you feared the prince's coming!"—but kept her eyes on the stranger. He had an open face, as pleasing to look at for its friendly expression as for its strong, well-formed features.

"Thank you. I'm Melea," she said, smiling her thanks at

the man.

He stood up, tall and lean and confident, and she noticed for the first time that he wore gold cuffs on each wrist inscribed with the royal symbol.

This was Prince Kaen.

Belatedly, she set her hand over her heart. "My lord prince, I didn't realize who you were." How was she supposed to know his identity when he was kneeling in a grove of trees? He was supposed to be in Jenne, delighting the array of women planning to win his heart. "Did you lose your way?" she asked cautiously.

He laughed. She liked the sound of it, full-hearted not mocking in the least. "No, my brother and I stepped away from our escort so he could do a spot of hunting before we entered your city."

She shivered at the mention of his brother. She had heard of the prince's hunter, raised alongside him even though he wasn't even human. He was one of the wolf-born, a fearsome warrior race created by the sorcerers in the age when they had ruled and devastated the realms. The Law of Century had outlawed all sorcery, but the wolf-born remained, even more dangerous now that their masters were gone. "Never

rouse the wolf's hunger," her people warned.

This wolf-born had a master—the prince. So he hunted outlaws instead of innocents, but Melea still dreaded how he might bring down his quarry.

"He hunts a beast, not a man," he said gently, obviously reading her fear.

She didn't find this much more reassuring. What if Shiri had encountered the wolf-born?

As though sensing her distress, the dog licked Melea's hand and looked up at her with soulful eyes. Melea smiled down at her and ran her hand over Shiri's head.

"She's a fine animal," the prince said.

"I bred her myself," she said shyly.

He laughed again.

"I know," she said, "a lord's daughter shouldn't deal with beasts—"

He held up a hand to forestall her, although mirth still crinkled his eyes. "No, that's not why I laughed. My lady mother spoke of your impeccable breeding. I thought she was speaking of your own ancestry, not your eye for dogs."

She stared at him. "Your lady mother spoke of me?"

"She researched the lineage of every well-born woman

within a hundred miles," he said dryly. "Her findings took two days to recite."

"But you remembered me." Her pulse quickened.

"You stood out because she knew nothing else about you. All the others had a wearisome list of accomplishments and virtues. You've led a quiet life, Melea. It makes you mysterious."

"There's not much to know," she demurred. She wondered what those virtues she apparently did not possess were. Weren't they supposed to be well looked upon? But the prince sounded as though he found them boring.

"I've already found out one thing about you," he said with a grin. "I know you like dogs. That's a mark in your favor."

"Because you care for them too?"

He hesitated. "Yes, among other animals as well," he said carefully, and she wondered at his phrasing. He saw her uncertainty and said wryly, "That's not much of a trade of information, is it? Here—as much as I like hounds, I never hunted much. I was always listening to the bards' stories instead."

He waited expectantly, and she searched for some tidbit

about herself that would amuse him. "I always play the harp instead of dancing."

"The last lady I tried to serenade promptly ran away," he said. "Who was it you didn't want to dance with?"

His perception surprised her into a laugh. "Teren. He's kind, but always so slow and deliberate." She dared her own question. "You *are* hunting, aren't you?" For someone to wed and bear him an heir.

"Yes," he said. He studied her with a mischievous glint in his eye. "So did you run away from the city, like Shiri, because you feared the prince's coming?"

She felt heat climb her cheeks, although his grin told her he was teasing her. "No, my lord prince."

"Call me Kaen," he said.

"Kaen," she repeated, his name coming with surprising ease to her lips. "I hadn't a thought for you, in all honesty. I was too worried about fetching this miscreant here."

If anything, his grin grew broader. "How refreshing," he said.

She didn't know how to respond to that, and was saved from the need by the approach of someone else.

The man who entered the grove didn't look like one of

her people at all, a telltale sign of how he must have come from some far-flung corner of the sorcerers' empires. His hair was gold, his skin browned by sun but nowhere near as dark as hers or Kaen's. But even louder than his foreign features was the way that muscled body moved, all restless predator. Melea could easily see the wolf in him. She wanted to do nothing that would draw his attention.

"No game?" Kaen asked him.

"The run was enough," the wolf-born said briefly. "Who's this?"

"Melea, the daughter of Jenne's lord." Kaen turned to her with a smile, as though he were truly delighted to introduce them to each other. "Melea, this is my foster-brother, Ryuan."

"My lord." Melea bent her head in respectful greeting.

Ryuan gave her a long, measuring look, as though she were a potential threat to be evaluated. Or prey he might deign to take.

She knew dogs, and if one had possessed the same wildness she felt in this man, no matter how tightly wound, she wouldn't have hesitated to put it down. This was the lord's hunter, though, so she lowered her gaze and tried to will

herself into insignificance.

"It's good of your father to host us," Ryuan said. His words were rote and dismissive, as though she had failed to prove herself interesting. She was glad of it.

"You're welcome in any season, my lords."

"We should rejoin our escort so we can actually reach Jenne and take advantage of the lord's hospitality," Kaen said. "Melea, I'll see you there?"

There was a note in his voice that made her think her answer mattered. "Yes, my lord prince," she said, formal in the presence of the wolf-born, but she smiled at him, and he smiled back, and the morning changed as surely and inexorably as the turning of summer.

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She stood beside her father as he welcomed the prince to his city. She wouldn't meet his eyes for fear of the flush that she knew his gaze would bring, and the feelings she would have to acknowledge. Once the festivities began, she didn't even seek out the harp, just tried to keep as many people between herself and him. It was easy, with the number of women who wanted to present themselves to him.



A few days of that dance wearied her, though. The next night, she slipped away to the kennels. No one would come looking for her, not when it had begun drizzling outside. Melea shut the door on the rain and took a moment to breathe in the familiar smell of the dogs before calming the more anxious ones.

Shiri was glad to see her, even wet as she was, and Melea sat down by her, running her fingers through her fur. Shiri laid her head on Melea's leg, ready to listen.

"I like it here in Jenne," she told the solemn hound. "I don't want to leave. And I don't want to be princess." What had Kaen said? She'd led a quiet life, and it was one she wanted to keep.

Perhaps it was presumptuous of her to assume that the choice was hers, as they'd shared but one short conversation. But speaking to him had felt like looking into clear water: transparent and beautiful all the same. And she knew that even setting her palm upon its surface would set off ripples.

Rain pattered on the roof in a near-hum, almost meditative in quality. Melea let it lull her thoughts into a pleasant blankness, and didn't realize that she'd slipped into slumber until a familiar voice woke her.

"I thought you might be here."

She looked up. "Kaen!" Then more stiffly, seeing who was behind him, "My lord Ryuan."

To her relief, Kaen said, "See, I've found her now. No need to keep hovering over me."

"We're in an unfamiliar city," Ryuan said.

"Ryu."

The wolf-born sighed and stalked out of the kennels. Melea sighed too, only realizing she'd done so out loud when Kaen looked at her with his mouth quirked.

"I'm sorry," she said, dismayed that her relief had been so obvious, but he only gave her a rueful smile.

"I'd hoped you two would get along better," he said, sitting down next to her. The water droplets in his hair fascinated her. "You were kinder to Shiri in the grove, for all that your words to her were a rebuke."

"He's wolf-born, Kaen," she said. "Not a dog." So that was why her affection for dogs had drawn his attention.

"He's my brother," he said simply.

She couldn't help but admire his loyalty. But in Ryuan she saw a wild beast leashed to a master who happened to be a good man, and that spoke more of Kaen than Ryuan.

"I have two older sisters," she offered, trying to ease the conversation along another path.

"Yes, they made a point of introducing themselves. Among many other women."

Melea smiled at his dry tone. "But you came out here." And for all that she had been avoiding him, she couldn't help feeling a warmth in her breast at the thought that he'd sought her out.

"Perhaps I was looking for Shiri," he said, making her laugh. "She and I became great friends before you came along, you know. Where is she, by the way?"

She raised a hand to her mouth. "Oh, no. Did you leave the entrance to the kennels open?" She already knew the answer, and she ran to the gaping door. There was no sight of Shiri. The kennels were close to the outer edge of Jenne and the hound would have run straight out of the city, familiar with the route from previous escapes. "I have to go after her," she said, knowing it was foolish to venture out into a storm in the dark for the sake of a dog.

But Kaen only said, "I know. I'll come with you."

She was glad of his company as they struggled through the downpour. Their cloaks were whipped away by the gales,

and the rain jabbed her skin with needle-sharpness. But even the shadowy sight of him moving steadily onward through the elements heartened her to do the same.

"Will she go to the same grove, do you think?" he shouted over the din of the storm.

She nodded. Shiri had found something there once, and might expect to do so again.

The winds rose to a howl, and he had to bend close to her ear to be heard. His breath warmed her skin. "Your dog must be mad, to prefer this over the kennels," he said.

She was trembling, and not from the cold at all. She focused on his words. "She only wants freedom," she said. "I can't blame her."

It was too dark to see, but she knew he was smiling. No scorn for how forgiving she was of Shiri's antics.

They reached the grove and found Shiri huddling miserably by the base of a tree. Melea lifted the sodden hound into her arms. "Kaen's right," Melea told her, "you're mad. And so am I, to follow you."

*"Move!"* Kaen's arms closed around her and Shiri and hauled them out of the grove with such force that they tumbled into the mud.

Lightning arced down onto one of the trees and lit the world. In that white-hot illumination, time seemed to still.

Then the tree exploded. Kaen flung out his hand, and those deadly wooden shards were flung to either side of them. The grove was ablaze now, and he dragged her up so that she could stumble away, clutching a barking Shiri to her.

He urged them under the a baobab's branches. The tree still had enough foliage that it sheltered them from the worst of the storm. "We're safe here for now," he said. "Be ready to run if I warn you."

But her legs wouldn't hold her. Melea sank to the ground and kept stroking her palm over Shiri's back again and again until her hands stopped shaking. Then she summoned her voice. "What happened?"

He was silent for some time. Finally he said, "It was my turn to tell you something about myself, wasn't it? I have weather-ken."

She raised her head stared at him as he suddenly turned into a stranger. He was admitting to sorcery. She'd heard of folk who had small abilities, like summoning birds or light—harmless things. But to command the weather was no minor gift. It was what she imagined the ancient sorcerers had done,

in their ravaging of the world. The tales spoke of earthquakes and whirlwinds. They had twisted nature wherever they could. They'd created the wolf-born.

Kaen watched her as though he feared missing a moment's sight of her. It was the first time she'd seen sadness touch his expressive face. He was waiting for her to turn away from him, she realized.

"Thank you for saving me," she said. "And Shiri. I won't tell anyone." She couldn't imagine the furor that would result if it became known that the prince was a sorcerer.

He still looked forlorn. Those weren't the right words, but she didn't know how to find them.

The rain kept falling relentlessly. It would be foolish to fight their way through the storm, not when it raged this heavily. "I hope it ends soon," she said with an anxious look skyward. It was strange for the wet season to last so long.

"It won't," Kaen said. His voice was quiet but certain. "Not for a long while. I can feel the clouds high above, and they all carry rain."

"All night, you think?"

"Many nights and days. It will stop from time to time, but each storm will be followed by another."

If the dry season didn't come, the gazelles would have no reason to leave the desert and come to the lands around Jenne. Their crops would rot in the ground, and homes could flood.

"Can you change it?" she found herself asking.

"I don't know," he said. "Just now—that was the only time I ever used my power. All my life I've been able to sense the winds, but I never bent them to my will before. It would break the Law of Century."

For once, a sorcerer could do good, but would not. She bit her lip in frustration, but he kept talking.

"I can't help what I am. But I can control what I do. Once I use sorcery, what else will I use it for?"

"To help your people."

"And what if I can't help everyone? How would I choose? What if helping one person harmed another?"

She knew he was right. It was not a line to cross lightly, back and forth. How could such power not be misused, when used at all? "Then why did you help me?"

"Right then," he said, "you were more important than any law."

Melea felt as though the lightning had struck her after

all.

How could she blame him for saving her?

He wouldn't deliberately use his powers. That kept him from being a sorcerer. Yet he was vulnerable to a sentimentality that had brought him into the stormy dark to recover a dog, and save her life. That transformed him into a man.

She knew what he needed to hear from her then. "I don't fear you," she said. "If the sorcerers of old had had hearts like yours, there never would have been need for the Law of Century. But I understand why there is need, and why you uphold it."

He gave a long sigh of relief as his legs folded and he sat by her. "Thank you," he said. "I'm sorry about your people."

"Just the warning of the floods is enough," she said. "We'll prepare as best we can." Her people were strong. They would survive.

She leaned against his shoulder and felt his warmth infuse her.

After some time, the sky began to lighten. She could make out details of the landscape now, and if she but turned her head, of Kaen's face.



"There's a break in the rain coming," he said. "We should go back."

She gathered herself to her feet. "We shouldn't be seen returning together," she said reluctantly.

He let out a heavy sigh. "I know. I'll head in first. But before I do, I want to tell you that I'll be going back to the capital tomorrow. I don't want to be trapped on this side of the river by the rains."

How could her heart ache so for a man she'd known for such a short time?

"Come with me."

"Kaen, I can't."

"Come as my bride." He tangled her fingers in his. "Melea, I know this is sudden, but I think I've fallen in love with you."

She caught her breath. "It's too soon. I don't know how I feel about you yet"—a lie, his words were singing in her heart and she wanted to give them voice—"and I have to stay and help my people through the floods." He flooded her senses. Who would help her?

From the brief struggle on his face she knew he wished he could end the rains right then, or otherwise persuade her.

Then he sighed and released her hands. "You will always be welcome in the capital," he said. "In any season. I'll show you the royal kennels, and we can hide there while we trade questions and answers. There need be no more than that."

She knew then how a falcon felt when it was released to fly. This man, prince though he was, would give her freedom instead of commands. And he might be a sorcerer, but he had given her life instead of any of the dark ruin that old tales warned of.

Impulsively, she leaned forward and kissed him.

She surprised him. He was still at first, and then his lips began to move softly against hers, a caress more than anything else. When they finally pulled away from each other, she could still feel his mouth upon hers, a gentle imprint of warmth.

His eyes were still bright with astonishment. "How will I stand to eat, when it'll take the taste of you away?"

"You must keep your strength," she said, "until I come."

He heard the promise in her words. "I'll see you there, then."

"Yes," she breathed.

He touched her cheek lightly, then gave her that smile that was like a second sunrise before turning away. She watched him go.

Shiri nosed at her. Melea stroked her head. "Yes, Shiri," she said, not taking her eyes off Kaen's back. "You found him first." Already she felt bereft of him. How would she survive the longer distance between Jenne and the capital?

So autumn would arrive late this year. But the rains would stop eventually, and the gazelles would come, and she would come to him and tell him that she, too, had fallen.

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## About the Author

Karalynn's childhood pets included no dogs, only goldfish and tadpole shrimp (three-eyed hermaphroditic cannibalistic crustaceans). The number of the latter dwindled rapidly for some reason. She now lives in Northern California sans animal companionship.

More of her writing can be found at her website:

<http://karalynnlee.com>



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