

DELETED SCENE #3

ALTERNATE FIRST MORNING WITH ALLARA

(Chapter 16, in which Chris wakes up in Lael the day after his crossing, originally had Allara and her men riding back to Glen Arden on horseback rather than travelling to Réon Couteau via the skycar. In this version, Chris still believed Lael was a dream, even after meeting Allara.)

CHRIS GROPED THROUGH the darkness of the hall to his bedroom, flopped facedown on the bed—

—and shivered. A draft hit him, cold against his damp body. He fumbled for the blankets and found a handful of sand instead. And, just like that, he was swallowed up in the dream again.

His heart started whumping, and he closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe out slowly. This time, at least, he had an idea about how to wake up. If things went like they had yesterday, then all he had to do was fall back asleep in the dream. He kept his eyes closed, trying to breathe slowly, trying not to think at all. But it was no use. He wasn't sleepy. And besides that, he was freezing, the sun was burning the backs of his eyelids, and somebody was making a ridiculous amount of noise, clattering and shouting.

"Better get him up." Crea Quinnon's throaty growl separated itself from the commotion. "We've got two hours yet to reach the Virere station."

"I hate to wake him," Allara said. "What is he dreaming, I wonder? What it's like in the other world? What happens there?"

"Same thing as happens here. Rich and poor, war and peace, this

world and that. It's all a balance, isn't it? A balance we can't control. So wake him up and never mind what he's dreaming about. What happens on the other side is his own concern."

Footsteps approached, and Chris tensed. So much for going to sleep—or waking up—or whichever it was. He rolled onto his side and squinted up at the Searcher.

Silhouetted by the sun, with her face in the shadows, she stopped short. "You're awake."

"No, I'm asleep. But let's not quibble about it."

He started to push himself up, but pain jagged through his body, starting with the gash in shoulder and slashing down his back, arms, and legs. He felt as if she and her minions had run their horses back and forth over the top of him during the night. He had slept on his stomach, and his back, exposed to the morning air, was covered with a heavy layer of dew. The moisture was still visible as tiny translucent beads on the wide leather cuffs of his boots.

The Searcher's hands found her hips. "Where's your bedroll?"

He waved in the general direction where the wounded soldier had been sacked out the night before. "That guy who was hurt needed it more than I did."

He eased himself into a sitting position and looked around. The sunlight glittered through the trees, casting the leaves and the moss in emerald tones. Somewhere behind him, the river burred. The smell of fresh water and wet earth mingled with the smoke from a small campfire several yards away.

Beyond that, the Guardsmen saddled horses and dismantled the Searcher's tent. Osin, the man to whom he'd given his blanket, lay in a litter secured behind one of the horses.

Chris sat all the way up. "He's not dead, is he?"

"He's fine." Allara tromped forward to stand in front of him. "Unlike you. Sleeping cold all night. You're too stiff to move."

He glared up at her. "I move just fine." He pushed himself to his feet just to prove it and, through sheer force of will, managed to keep the pain that twisted through his body from showing in his face. Suddenly, he wished he'd fought past the need to sleep back home in Chicago. Even the torture of avoiding desperately needed rest was better than this.

A flicker of concern flared in her eyes as he stood, but her face was stone—or more like ice. Back home, Brooke would have been all over him, demanding he stay in bed, plying him with chicken noodle soup and Tylenol. But if the likes of Allara Katadin, princess of Lael, was impressed with his show of bravado, she didn't look it.

"I hope you can ride," she said. "It will be mid-afternoon before we reach Glen Arden—and that's *if* we can catch the mid-morning skycar before it leaves Virere Ford."

"You could always leave me here." He said it without really hoping she would.

"No, I couldn't." She lifted her chin. "I let you sleep as long as I could, so you'll have to break your fast while you ride."

On the far side of the camp, Quinnon circled a finger over his head. "Five minutes." He led his gray and Allara's black across the camp toward them. His good eye surveyed Chris's damp clothing and stiff stride, but he made no comment. "River's that way. Do what you need to do and get back here."

A smart comeback seemed in order, but Chris was clean out. He offered a half-hearted salute and staggered down the bank to the river. The cold water didn't do much to warm him up, but it quenched his thirst and gave him an excuse to walk around for a few minutes, stretching his muscles.

By the time he climbed back to the surface, everyone was mounted. Allara and Quinnon waited in the sunlight at the edge of the meadow, looking back at him. Garek, the Guardsman he had spoken to the night before, held out the reins of a riderless horse. Chris mounted without too much trouble and returned the man's nod.

"Here." Garek handed him a hunk of cold sausage the size of his fist and a matching wedge of some kind of flaky white cheese.

"We've got a lot of ground to cover this morning," Quinnon said. "Let's move out!"