

Hunter's Oath

By Michelle West

Chapter One

25th day of Corvil, 396 AA King's City, Breodanir

A near-skeletal boy peered out from around a shadowed corner. His face was the color of winter; white, muddied by the dark hollows of wide eyes. Those eyes examined the thin crowd in the lower city streets.

Only one there caught his attention—a man dressed in audacious furs and bangles, with a thick, new purse attached to his wrist and a belt heavy with winter supplies girding him round his midsection. His cap alone would fetch a good price and guarantee food and shelter besides.

The boy was hungry and tired. That he was cold as well had ceased to bother him; the winter had been harsh enough that the icy bite of nearing spring felt something akin to warm. It had been a very bad season.

It would be worse still if he didn't go back to the den armed with some display of money or barter goods. Marcus, self-proclaimed den leader, had already made that perfectly clear; the bruises still showed on the boy's face. Fear set him to shivering and the cold joined in. A ragged cough that would not be ignored scraped at his throat. He needed a warm place to stay, and soon. Twice this winter he had seen cold kill.

The rich man stopped every so often to tsk-tsk at the state of the buildings. His purse bounced and jangled, even at this distance. The young boy swallowed nervously. He would have already made his mark, but for the dogs. Not even the most ignorant of children could claim not to know what their presence meant.

One of these dogs stayed at its master's heels, lifting its proud, wide head. Its eyes, circled on both sides by patches of black, darted back and forth, but it didn't stray far. The other dog, a bitch by the look of it, was a little more testy, but its fur was clean and it was an almost even gray. Its low-throated growl could be heard when anyone approached. These were no city dogs, rough and mangy after winter's scavenging. They were obviously well fed—on what, the boy didn't care to speculate. But their jaws, their teeth...

Stephen, the boy thought, as his hands shook, he's a Hunter Lord. Find someone else.

But he'd looked; Luck knew it well and had obviously seen fit to curse him.

There was no one else that was even likely, and if he waited in the shadows like a dithering rat, he'd lose his entrance ticket and—he coughed, retching—any chance for a meal this day.

Hunger and cold decided him. He moved forward, his worn shoes squelching in the slush. Thin shoulders came up, as did his chin. Seen this way, he was a stick of a lad, but not uncomely, and not particularly dangerous. Only poor—and that, in the King's City, was danger enough.

Soredon, Lord Elseth, smiled softly at the sound of light steps. It was about time; how long did the urchin think to keep him out in this dismal weather? Corvil was a chill month; one to be avoided if at all possible.

Maritt growled and began to swivel her head. Her jaws were open, and her teeth, cleaner than the snow, were also whiter.

Easy, easy, Maritt. Stay at heel. Stay calm.

She heard his Hunter's command and shifted on her hind legs. Her growl didn't really diminish, and Soredon sighed, shaking the purse he carried with renewed vigor in an attempt to drown out Maritt's voice. It was his own fault, and he knew it. Maritt was his prize bitch, and he coddled her overmuch.

Ah, well. At least Corwel was behaving. Absently, he dropped one gloved hand to rest upon the alaunt's broad head. Corwel was young yet, but still the best dog that Elseth had ever produced. He tousled those flopped ears with genuine pride and pleasure.

Good. The boy was behind him, sauntering gently forward. Lord Elseth carefully positioned his broad back and began the inner search for the Hunter's trance. He was experienced enough to have earned the rank of Master Hunter at the King's pleasure. The trance came quickly and easily, fitting him better than these awkward, fine clothes. The crisp bite of the air grew keener still; the colors of the street faded into sharp, clean outlines. Everywhere, life ground to a slower, subtler movement.

He reached out from the trance, found Maritt's eyes, and looked carefully through them, feeling the back-ground thrum of her deep-throated growl as if it came from his own chest.

The boy approached his back slowly. Through Maritt's vision, he examined the young thief. The boy was all bones and sallow skin, with a thatch of pale hair that might be paler still when less filthy. Lack of height and weight made his age hard to guess, but Lord Elseth was certain he was somewhere between seven and nine. A good age; one that suited the Hunter Lord's purpose fully. But would the little thief continue to linger in the half-melted, filthy snow, or would he at last make his

move?

Please, Lady Luck, smile on me now. I've seen enough of your frowns for this ten-day.

Her answer was beneficent and sudden.

The boy darted, like a pale shadow, flickering at his side. He saw the gray flash of what once might have passed for a dagger and lifted his wrist in a snap of motion, carrying the purse strings easily out of the boy's reach. His turn was so smooth and deft that the child's knife didn't have time to stop its motion.

With a smile that was all white teeth, Lord Elseth grabbed the boy's wrist and hauled him off his feet.

“What have we here?”

He'd moved so quickly that Stephen still wasn't sure when the broad, fur-covered back had suddenly changed into the man's front—but he didn't like it. Thievery had its own penalty in the King's City—and the punishment was far worse when the victim was one of the Hunter Lords or Ladies. Hunger and fear were forgotten now, as was breathing; he saw instead the shadow of the knife at his thumbs. If he'd had the chance, he might have taken a swing with his dagger—but it was the dagger hand that the Lord held, and the Lord showed no signs of loosing his grip.

He swallowed a deep breath, lost it to coughing, and choked. His wrist was firmly trapped in the larger man's hand. Think, damn it. Think. He cleared his throat. “You've got no call to hold me, sir. I was just—”

“I know well what you were doing, whelp. And it has its price. Come along; your thieving days are over.”

Stephen struggled as the tips of his toes brushed the ground. He kicked out with his feet and found the ribs of the large black-and-white dog. It snarled and snapped to the side, avoiding its target by turning at the last second.

“That's enough,” Lord Elseth said, his voice remarkably similar in tone to that of the dog's. “You will be still.”

Gulping, Stephen nodded, and found the flat of his feet. What he did next was born of instinct and terror—but it was also unexpected. His small jaw found the inside of the Hunter Lord's wrist and clamped down.

The Hunter Lord cursed and pulled back, and for a moment, Stephen was free. It was all that he needed. He had had to become good at running. In a blur he was gone into the sanctuary of the alleyways and warrens that he knew so well.

Blood dripped down to the snow, mingling with dirt and water to become another

murky patch of ground. Soredon smiled and shook his head. He bound his wrist carefully; it took him only seconds.

“Well, Corwel, Maritt. What shall we do?”

Maritt was straining at the invisible leash that held her at his side.

Lord Elseth reached down. From the left side of his belt, he lifted a silver-mouthed horn. He held it to his lips, feeling the chill press of metal and the thrum of the silent demands the dogs made. Ah, he had chosen well, even though it had taken too much time. The child had spirit and not a little cunning.

The long, loud lowing of the horn announced the Hunt in the King's City, Twice it blew long, and a third time, short. Corwel waited until the last note had died and then placed his nose to the ground. His tail, short and stumpy though it was, began to crisscross the air. “Yes, Corwel. Find him.”

Stephen heard the horn. It cut across the sound of his feet and the horrible rasp of his breath. He had not heard its like before, but now that he had he would never forget it.

They followed by scent. He knew this because he always remembered the old stories, even when he no longer believed in them. He hoped that this part, at least, was true; nothing else had been.

Hunter dogs ran fast, and they were smarter than most normal dogs, but Stephen was certain he knew these alleys and buildings better than they knew their kennels and forests. His life depended on it.

His breath was quick and sharp with cold. He wanted to look over his shoulder, but he knew it would slow him down; that much he'd learned over the last year of running.

Please, Lady, smile. Let it work. I'll make my offerings. Please.

He made a sharp right past the building that was called the Stonemason's, cutting it close enough that he could use the wall as a balance while he pivoted.

If the dogs followed by scent, he was going to give them something to smell.

Soredon ran, keeping pace with his dogs. He was deep into the Hunter's trance and running came easily to him now. The boy, like any animal that knew it was being pursued, didn't flee along a straight path. It was another good sign; fear didn't make the boy stupid.

There was no question at all in Lord Elseth's mind that the boy was afraid.

Stephen lost time to the doubled doors of Benny's Tavern; they were tall and heavy enough to take the damage of a good sized brawl. His hands were shaking

because he'd balled them into fists that were too tight, but he still managed to pull the doors open. Sunlight streamed in at his back, making a silhouette of his height and girth.

“Hey!”

He wasn't allowed into the tavern, but he moved quickly enough so that no one had time to stop him as he rushed into—and through—the sparse crowd. It was early yet, but lunch would soon be served, and the regular patrons had already filled the air with a steady stream of smoke, sweat, and salty language.

“HEY, YOU! STOP!” The bartender's bellow carried with an ease that spoke of too much experience. Next would come the slam of the wooden counter top as it was raised too quickly, and the heavy-soled tread of a large, angry man.

Stephen missed it all. He bolted past the last of the bar's patrons and into the kitchens. If the smell of this place didn't stymie the dogs, nothing would. It probably wasn't cleaned more than twice a year, and at that, only when Benny's mother visited.

The kitchens, of course, weren't empty.

“Hey!”

Stephen dodged a ladle—Benny's wife wasn't quite as slow and large as Benny was—ducked under the lunge of Benny's oldest son, and avoided sliding on a piece of something that had probably once been bread. He didn't even pause at the wood stove, although he almost smiled at the fleeting warmth.

The kitchen door exited into another alley. Stephen managed to yank it open and get through it before Benny's son caught up with him. Then his feet hit the snow and his lungs filled with clean, cold air.

Let them figure that out.

He had no intention of waiting to see whether or not they could. He ran.

Lord Elseth rarely cursed; his Lady found vulgar language ignorant and acutely embarrassing—and she ex-acted a high price for the latter. Nonetheless, he had just enough time to do so before his dogs leaped up at the closed doors of the tavern, growling.

Through the trance, the boy's scent passed from Corwel to Lord Elseth; it was strong and distinct. *Corwel, Maritt—away from the door. Come.*

Corwel obeyed gracefully, Maritt with a growl. But they both came to stand by his side, fur bristling, eyes trained on the closed doors.

Stay.

With a grimace of distaste, Lord Elseth pulled open a single door, and attempted

to blend into the ambience of Benny's Tavern. Silence radiated outward from him like a wave as each and every patron in the large, beamed room stopped to stare at this newest customer.

“Good day to you, sir,” Benny said. His voice, pitched out of long habit to travel over a crowded, noisy room, was uncomfortably loud. He ran out from behind the counter, wiping his hands almost fastidiously on his large, heavy apron. “Is there anything at all that I can do for you?”

Soredon was a tall man; Benny was short and somewhat rounder. It was not because of height alone that Lord Elseth looked down. “Yes.” He reached into the pouch that jangled so obviously at his belt and pulled out a gold coin that bore the impression of a stag's antlers astride the King's Crown.

Benny reached for it, and Soredon snapped his open hand into a large, gloved fist. “I'm following a young thief. Slip of a boy, pale hair. I believe he came in here.”

“Couldn't have,” Benny said promptly. “No kids're allowed.” He looked pointedly at the gloved hand.

Soredon growled. It was a feral sound, not a human one, and Benny took a step back as he realized—for the first time—that he faced a Hunter Lord.

“Uh, that is, no kids can come in and stay, your lord-ship.” The bartender ran a hand over his forehead and tried not to look at the fist that held a small fortune. “He ran out through the kitchen.”

“Good.” Lord Elseth opened his palm and tossed the coin into the air.

Benny was still scrabbling for it when the dogs came in through the door Soredon held open.

Stephen ran, holding his side as the cramps started. Let Luck only smile, and he'd never thieve again. He thought, for a moment, that she'd heard his prayers and had chosen to grant them. For a moment. Then a new sound started, worse than the horn. The dogs were baying.

He thought of their teeth, and had no doubt as to which would give first: his skin or their jaws. The alleys that towered above him in faceless, near windowless walls, became distant, unfriendly terrain. He searched in vain for stairs, for anything that would take his feet off the ground and give the dogs another pause.

The baying grew louder and closer, filling his ears completely, obscuring his shallow breaths. He bounded around a corner, sliding in the muddied snow. His hands scraped a wall and came away splinter-filled and bleeding as he continued to run.

The alleys opened up as he crossed a deserted street. Buildings flashed by, and he recognized them: The Tern, its board flapping in the breeze; the butchers', the one baker's. He hesitated a moment in front of the butchers' and caught a glimpse of the bitch as she rounded the corner down the street.

There was only one place to go. His teeth bit through his lower lip as he put on a burst of speed—probably the last that was left him. The fear of the dogs was greater than the fear of Marcus and his retribution.

There. Ahead, in a nook that the restructuring a century ago had created, stood the door to the den. As always, it was closed. He ran at it full tilt, skidding at the last moment to give a first knock with his entire body.

A flap of wood, at an eye level that cleared his head by at least a foot, scraped open. Above the bridge of an oft broken nose, two dark eyes squinted in the sunlight.

“Marcus, it's me! Let me in!” Stephen began to bang frantically at the wood; the dogs were closing fast.

“What've you brought for me?”

“Marcus, please! I need to get in—they're coming!”

The flap shut. Stephen stood in the silence for a heart-beat before the dogs started again. He was shaking and gasping as he looked from side to side. There wasn't any place else to run; the den had been chosen because it stood in the middle of an alley that had no escape to either side.

He lifted his hand to strike again, and then let it drop. Steadying himself, he turned, his dagger shaking as much as his thin arms did. He would have to face them. Maybe, if he was careful, he could injure the dogs enough to get away.

The large black and white bounded around the corner and lifted its broad, triangular head. It came to a stop but didn't take its eyes from its quarry. At its heels came the bitch. The Hunter Lord could not be far behind.

If he'd had food, he might have tried to bribe the dogs, or at least distract them. It was an idea. But he wouldn't be in this situation if he'd had anything to eat, and he suspected that the dogs ate well enough so they wouldn't even look at the scraps he could throw them.

He crouched, holding the knife out as if it were a shield. Why hadn't the dogs come forward?

As if in answer, the Hunter Lord joined them, following the same trail that both Stephen and the dogs had left in their hurried race through the snow; he wasn't even breathing heavily. His cap was gone now, although he didn't appear to be carrying it. All he held in his hand was the horn that had sounded the chase. The

dogs moved apart, and he came to stand between them, placing one hand on either of their heads. The bitch bridled at the feel of the hard, cold horn but stayed her ground anyway.

Everywhere there was silence.

Stephen met the eyes of the Hunter Lord; they were brown to his blue, and narrowed as if in thought. He waited, wordless, until the waiting itself was as fine a torturer as the running had been.

“Don't—don't you move!” He waved his dagger, swordlike, through the air in front of his face. “I'm telling you, stay where you are! I don't want to hurt you!”

“Oh, indeed,” the Lord replied. “I can assure you, my boy, that you needn't fear that. And I have no wish to harm you; you've led a fine chase. Better than I would have guessed. Come. Cease this nonsense. We have far to go.” The hand that wore the thick, cloth gauntlet rose. “Come.”

Stephen backed into the door, shaking his head firmly from side to side. How stupid did this Hunter Lord think he was? “I ain't going nowhere. Go away, or I'll have to use this.” He waved the knife wildly, loosing a startled cry as the door gave way behind him.

Before he could react, he was jerked off the ground by the back of his collar. His dagger went tumbling into the snow. He didn't have to look back to know who held him.

“Well, fine sir,” Marcus said, raising Stephen higher. “It seems that you've had trouble in our fair city streets.”

“Let the boy go,” the Hunter Lord replied. “I have no business with you.”

“Don't you just?” Marcus looked down at Stephen, noted the creeping purple tinge to his skin, and slammed him to his feet. “Well, I've got your thief, at no small risk to myself. I think that's worth something.” The convivial smile Marcus wore was so out of place on his face that the Hunter Lord couldn't even manage a similar expression. Lip curling, he said, “Let the boy go.”

“Not from around here, are you?”

“No.” The one word made clear what the Lord thought of that.

“Well, maybe I'll explain a few rules of the King's City. This,” he shook Stephen, who was too stunned to struggle, “is a thief.”

“I'm aware of that.”

“I,” once again he used Stephen as punctuation, “am the man who caught him.”

The black and white answered with a low, warning growl.

“In my books that makes me the one who gets the reward. But I ain't a greedy man. I'll share it with you.”

“Marcus—please...” Stephen's voice was a rasping choke.

“Shut up.” No open handed slap, this. When Marcus' hand drew back, it was bloodied.

Lord Elseth stared hard at Marcus for a moment. When he moved his mouth, it formed no words, and the lift of his lips was no smile. “Corwel.” The Lord took a step back. “Yours.”

He lifted the horn to his lips.

The dogs sprang, their feet covering the short distance as if they needed no ground to run on. Marcus' eyes grew wide, and with a loud cry, he threw Stephen at them. He ran into the old building, yelling as if they had already reached him.

Corwel's voice joined his in the music of hunter and hunted. Without pause, he followed through the open door.

The Hunter Lord ignored the sounds that came out of the building. Quietly, he walked over to the huddled bundle of youth that lay at Maritt's feet.

No, Maritt, he sent softly. Go and join Corwel.

She needed no other word. Like the breeze, she passed them by, leaving almost no trace.

The Lord knelt, unmindful of the snow that immediately began to melt into his knees. He reached out with one large hand, saw the horn that it held, and stopped to return it to his belt.

Stephen was too tired, too weak, to offer any more resistance. He lay on his side, his face covered by hands that showed red. What Marcus had done had taken the last of his spirit and guttered it. It had been stupid to come here. But even if Marcus wouldn't let him in, he didn't have to—didn't have to...

Lord Elseth reached down gently and drew Stephen's hands away from his face. “Come, boy. Let me see it.”

His lips were already swelling. Very gingerly, Lord Elseth probed at the bruised jaw. Stephen gasped.

“It may be dislocated. Can you walk?”

Nodding, Stephen tried to rise. His eyes were dark, their blue lost, as he glanced furtively up at the larger man.

“We don't go to the Justice-born, lad. We go to the Mother-born. There's a temple not far from the lower city. I'll make the offering.” Lord Elseth rose and put his hands under Stephen's arms. He set the boy on his feet, saw that he wobbled dangerously, and lifted him up instead.

The child weighed almost nothing.

“Boy?”

Stephen shook his head, flailing weakly, although he had almost no strength for it. Then he sank into the furs that surrounded the Lord. They were soft, and so very, very warm.

“Dogs?” He muttered, an edge of fear in the solitary word. His lids were already too heavy and he missed the expression on the Hunter Lord's face, which was just as well.

“They'll be along soon. When they've finished here.”

The silver mists rolled in over the scene like fog across the lowlands. She sat in an inn half a continent away, in Everani, a fishing village down coast of Averalaan, her palms cupped around a glowing, crystalline sphere.

At her back, she heard the whispers: seer-born. She did not disillusion them; it gave her privacy for the moment, and besides, it was not altogether untrue. But she was more, and different, than simply talent-born.

Stephen of Elseth, she thought, as she pushed strands of hair back into the privacy of her hood. *You're so young. We don't meet yet.* But she knew where she was, and more important, knew when she was.

The mists obscured the young boy completely before she looked away. She was Evayne a'Nolan, and quite alone. She straightened her shoulders, took a deep breath, and rose. It was time for work now, not for dalliance, and she had lost precious minutes watching.

And remembering.