

Nyssa



Daniel LaFavers

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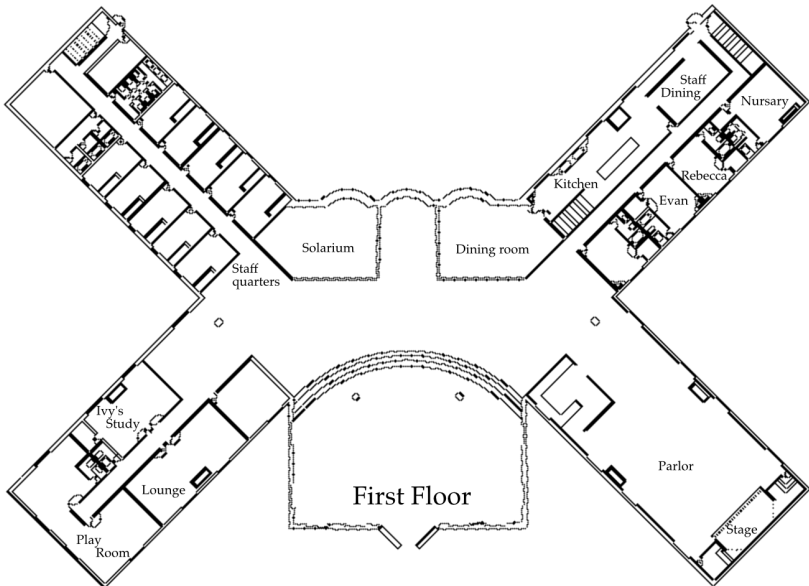
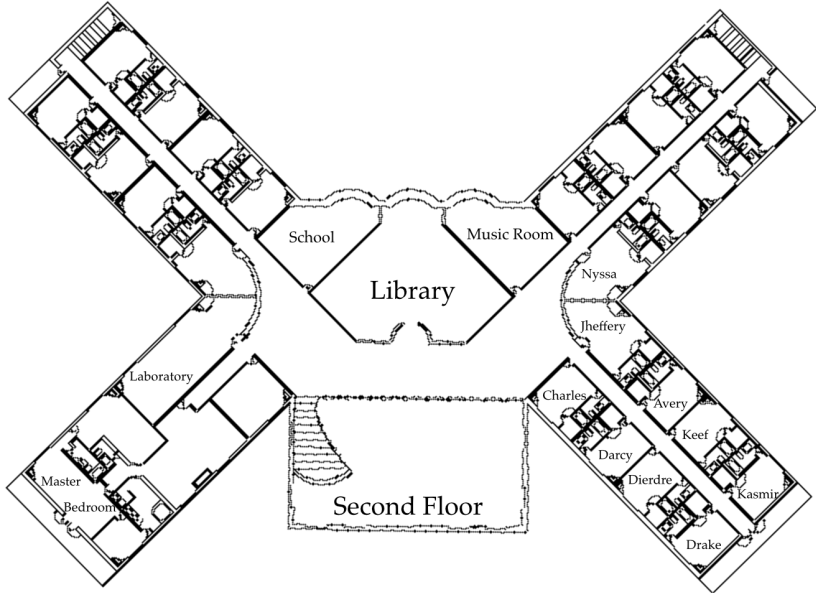
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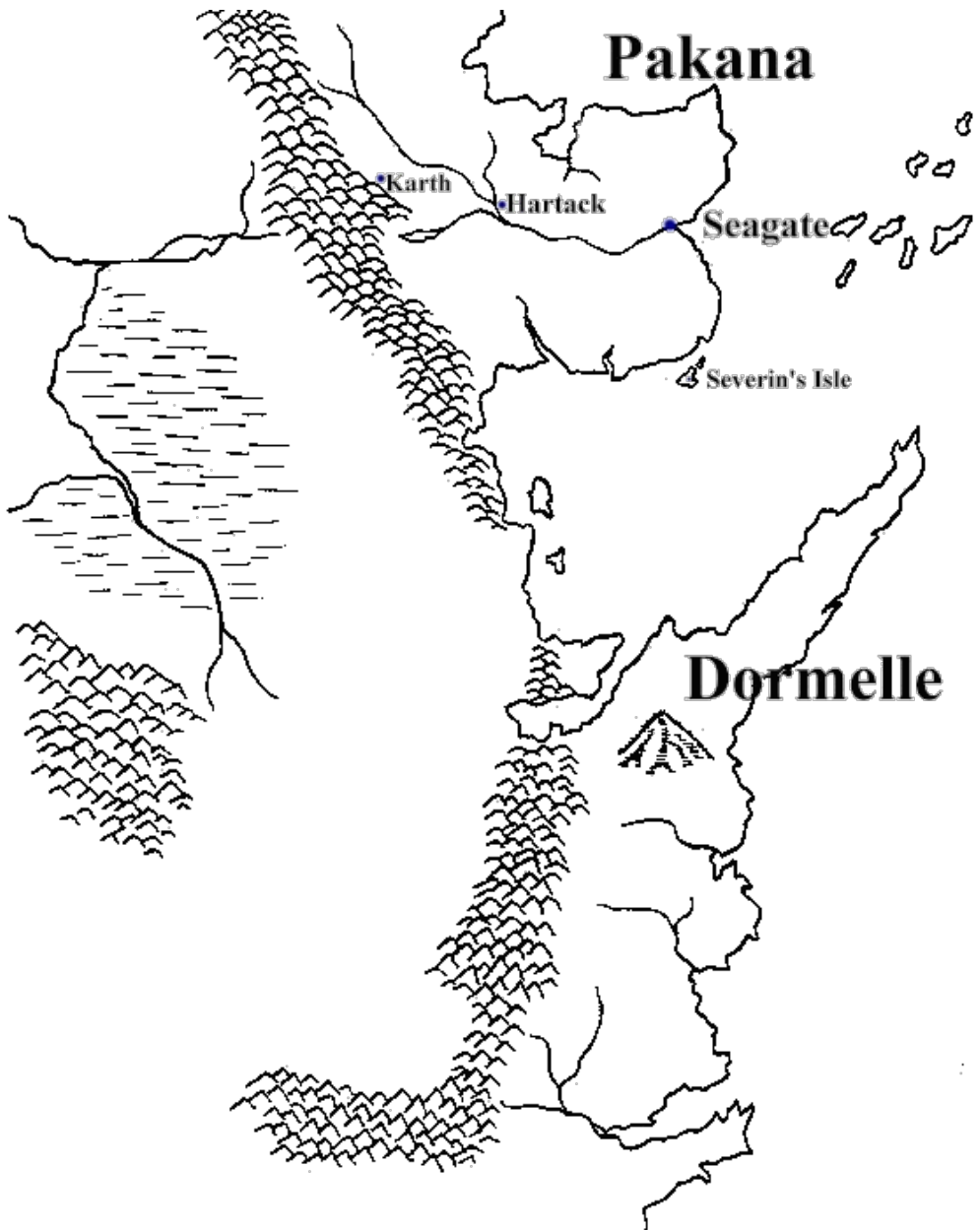
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By Daniel LaFavers.

ARRENKYLE MANOR HOUSE



MAP OF L'THENIA



A FIGHTER'S WARNING

*Darkness lies upon the soul
Of he who quests with selfish goals
To steal from deep the riches old
The magic powers and hoards of gold
Forgetting his honor which is his trade
For simple wealth brought home by his blade
He must cover the land and journey the sea
To go afar and truly be
Free of mind and strong of will
Ready to die and ready to kill
For that which he knows to be proper*

*A deed is not done a word is not said
That fails to define the path he has lead
From every kind word to the most evil sin
From the very first loss to the most recent win
A fighter's no more than the things he has done
Not the kings whom he knows or the riches he's won
To travel the world its breadth and its length
He must find honor knowledge dignity and strength
Or else be a pawn no will of his own
Belonging to money or a king on a throne
Until he controls his fear*

*But what is a quest with out riches won
Without glory of battle in the new morning's dawn
Yet more there must be in the warrior's eyes
If he's to know his true self on the day that he dies
For glory there is in the riches within
Found only through struggle again again
Through battles lost and lessons learned
And blows to the head that were painfully earned
To remind him well his place in not set
And his one greatest challenge is yet to be met
To master the world from within*

CHAPTERS

Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	12
Chapter Three	24
Chapter Four	38
Chapter Five	50
Chapter Six	64
Chapter Seven	73
Chapter Eight	86
Chapter Nine	98
Chapter Ten	108
Chapter Eleven	117
Chapter Twelve	132
Chapter Thirteen	144
Chapter Fourteen	152
Chapter Fifteen	164
Chapter Sixteen	177
Chapter Seventeen	191
Chapter Eighteen	203
Chapter Nineteen	216
Chapter Twenty	231
Chapter Twenty One	244
Chapter Twenty Two	259
Chapter Twenty Three	271

CHAPTER ONE

I used to wake up shivering all the time when I was young because we had to conserve our wood to make sure it would last us through the harsh Seagate winter. It wasn't too bad when we went to bed because we always put some wood in the stove at night. Without that wood, it would have been hard to go to sleep, and by morning, the chill was so bad I could hardly wait to get up and do my chores just to keep from freezing.

The softness and warmth of my bed at Arrenkyle Manor reminded me of the old threadbare sheets, the stiff cots, and the distant pain of a childhood lost in the happy sad courtyard of the Seagate girls' orphanage.

I was born at the age of seven from that stoic, cold womb into a life of warm love which for many years felt like a dream that would disappear when I opened my eyes, just as it always used to.

As I drifted awake, I tried to remember Andrea as I last saw her on the day my sweet papa gave me new life. I knew that as soon as I opened my eyes, the image of my old friend would fade as quickly as the morning mist outside, so I kept my eyes tightly closed and snuggled deeper into my pillow until I could almost hear the sound of our rocks as they bounced along the stone walkway where we used to play Alley Scratch.

Andrea and I saw him at the same time. It was late one summer day, after school but before the evening meal, and everyone was trying to stay cool in the shade of the few trees in the small yard of the orphanage. Some of the younger girls were picking flowers with Miss Lothrop, and others were playing Alley Scratch or jumping rope. Andrea and I were sitting back to back, resting against each other by the honeysuckle hedge that ran along the side of the yard. We were talking about how nice it would be to ride on a sailing ship.

He came out the back door talking with Mother Shanker.

He seemed so tall and elegant in his long, black robe. Beside him stood the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was wearing dark green pants that flowed like a gown, a matching vest, and a blouse with lacy cuffs, one of which brushed against the hilt of a short sword.

CHAPTER ONE

The whole yard shared the same excited hush that always overtook the girls whenever someone came to look us over, but I was tired of the whole game. Most of the time they only came because the girls' orphanage was on the way to the boys' home down the street. Most people did not want to pay a thousand silver pieces for a girl when they could buy a boy to help in their craft or their field for the same price. I had given up a long time ago on the whole affair and figured that when I finally reached thirteen and could get out on my own I would go straight to the wharf and make my life out on the sea.

"Did you see her hair?" Andrea whispered to me over her shoulder.

The lady had braided a bright, silky blue cloth in with her dark brown hair, which flowed down almost to her waist. I wondered how something like that would look in my own hair, which was long and black, or in Andrea's sandy blond curls.

"It's nice, I guess."

"Just nice? Those are diamonds!"

Then I noticed that the clasp holding her hair above the braid looked like it was made with gold and big diamonds. I wasn't sure because I had never seen real gold or diamonds before.

"So they're diamonds. I'll have plenty of diamonds someday. I'll even have my own ship with a crew and you can be my first mate and we'll travel all over and buy all sorts of beautiful things."

"What about the sea pirates?"

"They don't scare me. I'll hire a hundred fighters and a hundred wizards to protect us. If they try to get close, I'll burn their ship and cut off their heads."

"Nyssa, you're bad."

"No, I'm not. I'm practical."

Around the yard the other girls were still playing, but I could tell they were all nervously hoping for a home away from the chores and simple food of the orphanage. I was used to it. I didn't care.

"There they go," said Andrea.

I looked over in time to see Mother Shanker following them back inside.

"They probably saw Donna's ugly face and decided to buy a son instead," Andrea said quietly.

"How could they tell the difference?"

I don't know why Donna and I never got along. Maybe I didn't like the way she always talked about finding a family with a dog

CHAPTER ONE

and a little brother, which I found pathetically weak and self deluding. Maybe it was because she was older and always tried to tell me I was wrong in math, which I wasn't. Perhaps we just needed to make friends and enemies to build a semblance of a real world into the tiny courtyard in which we were trapped every day.

We locked our arms and stood up together, back to back, and then went over to where Lisa and Donna were finishing a game of Alley Scratch. Donna was swinging her arm a few times before tossing her rock ahead, aiming between the sticks that were laid out as markers. The rock skipped once, tumbled between the sticks, and then rolled out.

"Did you see those two?" Andrea said to Lisa.

"That woman looked odd."

"No, she didn't," I answered quickly. "How could you say that? She was beautiful."

"I don't know," Lisa said, shrugging her shoulders. "Mysterious. Different."

"Maybe," I added, "but that doesn't make her odd."

"Don't you know anything? It's because she's an elf," said Donna in the tone of voice she liked to use when she was pointing out something that made her feel superior.

"You missed," I reminded her.

"Shut up, dragon breath," she said as she hopped the marks, picked up her rock, and hopped back on the other foot.

"Dragon breath?" I asked her, standing akimbo on the home line.

"Nyssa," Andrea called out cautiously to me.

"I wonder why they came and looked at us," wondered Lisa out loud, trying to diffuse the tiresome bickering that Donna and I always managed to get around to.

"Get out of my way, Nyssa."

She looked quite silly standing there on one foot, waiting to round off on the home line, her round freckled face frowning under her short, reddish hair.

"Dragon breath?" I asked again. "Is that the best you can do? You called me dragon breath yesterday, I think. I at least try to be original. Like yesterday, when I called you a gutter slime licker. I wouldn't even think of using it again. I would come up with something like, say, basilisk head, or troll face, or maybe smelly shadow tramp."

"Nyssa," Andrea pleaded again.

CHAPTER ONE

"How about just getting out of my way?"

"How about taking it back?"

"Fine. I take it back."

"Good."

I smiled and stepped out of her way. "Come on, Andi, let's scratch our own field."

I was willing to let it drop there, having won my small battle, when I felt her toss rock hit me in the back.

I turned around.

"Oops," she said, holding her hand up to her mouth in a caricature of mock penitence.

I stopped walking, closed my eyes, and listened to a yellow bird sing his happy song. Then I turned and walked back to Donna. Somehow we had always managed to get along without our encounters going beyond a few simple, angry words. Besides, she had three years and a few inches on me. That had always helped me to keep things as civil as possible, but, at that moment, I felt the strong leftover tension of having someone interrupt our afternoon. Even though I liked to pretend that I didn't care about someone coming to adopt one of us, I couldn't help but let that possibility remind me that it most likely would never happen, and I would be stuck here with stupid, arrogant Donna for another three years until she was of age.

"Sowwy, Nyssa," she said in a horrid baby voice.

I looked up into her gloating face that ached to be slapped. So I slapped it. That's all I meant to do, but after I had done it, the pile of all her little insults and condescensions finally collapsed, rekindling my anger, and I punched her in the stomach. We fell onto the grass and wrestled, biting and kicking, punching and hitting.

I was surprised that I seemed to be gaining an upper hand, and then all too soon, Miss Lothrop was pulling me off of her.

"What's this about?" she demanded. By now, all the other girls had gathered around us.

"She threw her toss rock at me and pretended it was a mistake!"

"Nyssa called me a shadow tramp," Donna managed to say through her blubbing tears. I couldn't figure out why she was crying. I couldn't have hurt her that bad. Maybe the whole scene was just too emotional for her. It was kind of pathetic. Since she seemed the more upset, Miss Lothrop must have figured it was all my fault.

CHAPTER ONE

"Nyssa," she said, shaking me by the arm. "How could you embarrass us all like this when we have guests?"

That made my earlier indifference about them return and I answered, "I don't care. No one ever buys us anyway."

For some reason, that made Donna's blubbery red face cry even harder.

I was getting tired of the whole affair and I wanted to go away with Andrea and sulk for a while.

"I'm sorry, Miss Lothrop. I'm sorry, Donna."

"Shut up, dragon breath."

I looked at Andrea, shrugged, and rolled my eyes.

"Come on, Andi. I'm tired of this."

When I turned to leave, I felt Miss Lothrop's wiry fingers grab me roughly by the arm as she said, "I don't think so, little miss!" She also had Donna by the arm and she led the two of us to the back door and up the shallow brick steps into the house.

"The both of you are going to bed this instant and there will be no supper for either of you!"

"That's one good thing," I answered bitterly. "I should have started hitting her long ago. Goodness knows she deserved it." Those last words came out more like a shrill scream than the sarcastic defiance that I had intended.

Miss Lothrop stopped in the hall and knelt in front of me, holding me firmly by the shoulders as she scolded, "Nyssa! That's enough. I don't want to hear another word from you the rest of the evening."

I started to say something but she cut me off.

"Don't make me get a switch!"

I tried to pull away from her but she held onto me. Finally, I screamed, "Let go of me. I'll walk on my own." I pulled myself almost free but then I slipped and she dug her sharp fingernails into my arm as my feet went out from under me.

"I said not another word, Nyssa, and I meant it!"

She gave me a sharp slap to my side.

I gritted my teeth and managed to hold my tongue while I stood up. Then she stood and walked us quickly to the sleeping room through the dark back hallway with the squeaky hollow floor and the stale smell of oil lamps.

Once inside the room I walked heavily, arms crossed and teeth clenched, to my cot and sat down, facing away from Miss Lothrop

CHAPTER ONE

and Donna. I waited, sitting tightly until I heard the door close as Miss Lothrop left.

I nurtured my anger without even knowing why. I encouraged it to fester its way into the core of my thoughts until it nestled deep inside my body and became a void that made me feel hollow, like a clay statue. I wasn't mad at anyone or anything in particular. Not Donna, really, or Miss Lothrop. I'm not even sure it was anger I was feeling. It was the familiar sensation that always came from pushing aside the hurt and loneliness and fear until I was blank inside.

Then, unexpectedly, I heard the door open again.

Mother Shanker's heavy footsteps came to the foot of my bed and I heard her always mellow voice behind me.

"Come with me, Nyssa."

I stood with arms folded and followed her. I figured I was in for some floor scrubbing or some other punishment, so I resigned myself to it. If I had to work in the kitchen, I could at least steal a few bites of a potato or something.

She led me to her office and when I entered she closed the door behind me, leaving me in the room with the man in black and the beautiful green-clad woman.

I kept my arms crossed, leaned against the door, and looked at them. Then I looked down and tried to make myself even more empty. It didn't work. I felt a tingle of hope trying to break in.

"Your name is Nyssa?" the man said with a kind, full voice.

"Yes, sir," I said to the floor.

"Did Miss Shanker tell you why we wanted to talk with you?"

"No."

"My wife and I want to have a family, but we cannot have our own children. My wife is an elf. Do you know what that is?"

"I'm not stupid," I answered quietly, examining my feet.

"No, of course not. I'm sorry."

I waited, afraid to look at him. It was quiet for a long time and I felt the pressure of their eyes on me. Still he didn't say anything, so I asked, "Can I go now?"

Instead of answering, he came over, knelt in front of me, put his index finger gently under my chin, and lifted my head up. I bit down hard on my back teeth when our eyes met.

"Yes. You may go if you wish, or you may come to our home and live with us and our new son, Jheffery."

I was numb. The realization that he was serious and that I was only a nod away from winning the dream that I had never allowed

CHAPTER ONE

myself to really want took away my tongue. I felt trapped. I felt free. Already, at that moment, I could feel what it would be like to have the orphanage be nothing but a memory. I felt myself move across that line, just like hopping across the last scratch, ending the game. I heard the sound of my breathing as I took deeper and deeper breaths.

I closed my eyes.

And then, eleven years later, I opened them again to see my beautiful and expensive room, filled with so many fine trappings, just as my hollow soul had been filled with the love of my tender father, the caring wisdom of my mother, and the happiness of all the other children that came after me.

I rolled over onto the cool sheets and stared at the ceiling. I missed Papa terribly and wished he didn't have to be away so much. I missed the times we spent together when I was younger. With eleven children, I hardly ever had time alone with him.

I threw the covers aside and walked sleepily into my bathroom, where I took a quick, warm shower. I dried off and then stepped around to my closet, from which I selected warm socks, a full-length wool skirt, and a light sweater. I twisted my hair up and stuck it with a wooden comb and then got dressed and went down the back stairs to the kitchen.

The shutters were still closed, letting only a few stray shafts of light through. Anna was sitting at the long wooden prep table, looking very tired. I went over and put my hand on her shoulder. "Couldn't sleep again?"

She was carrying Papa's twelfth child, which was only a couple of weeks away from being born, and hadn't slept well for the past few nights. I liked Anna and I knew I would miss her after she had the baby, but that's the way it had to be. If she stayed around to see the child, even for a few days, it would be even harder for her. So, like all the young women before her who had brought us the other children, she would be sent home the day after she bore the next Arrenkyle.

She shook her head and pushed a lock of her strawberry blond hair behind her ear.

"Let me get you some cider," I said.

"Thanks, Nyssa, but I don't want any right now. He's shifted again. I think I can get some sleep," she said, patting her abdomen. "Can you give me a hand up?"

CHAPTER ONE

She turned in her seat and set her feet apart in front of her and when I came over, she let me take her hands in mine. She rested that way with her eyes closed and her head forward for a moment. Then she stood up with my help. She thanked me with a sweet smile that had to work its way through her exhaustion, pushed her hair behind her ear again, and then stepped slowly toward the back stairs.

When I turned and took the cork from the cider jug, I thought about how she was only three years older than I was. I wanted to have my own children someday. I could hardly imagine myself otherwise, but I was no closer to having my own family than I had been at seven, dreaming about riding the seas. Besides, I had my father's children to take care of. Our nanny, Rebecca, did most of the hard work, especially with the younger ones. Mother was always available and loving, but I was their teacher, their friend. They came to me when they were sad or upset. If they had done something wrong, they always came to me because they all knew that my punishments were the least severe.

I love them all more than I can say, but they're different from me. Even though they all have different mothers — except for the twins, of course — Papa is their real father. It didn't bother Jheffery that much, because he was only five when he was adopted. He never understood when I tried to talk with him about it. Mother didn't like for me to bring it up, so I kept it inside, caring for his children almost as if they were my own.

It would have been easier if he had not been away so much. I felt less foreign when he was with us. Jheffery was always closer to Mother and hardly noticed if Papa was here or not. But I felt it. He had been away so much, but what could I do? They needed me. He needed me. The world needed him.

I poured myself half a glass of cider and took it with me out the back door and along the narrow brick walkway through the misty, glowing morning to the garden. Edgar kept the grounds so nice. It seemed almost garish, considering the trouble on the Continent. So many people were suffering because of the crops dying from drought in the north or the floods in the south. After almost fifteen years, Pakana still had not fully adapted to the changes in the weather that were caused when the High Druid was killed.

I stepped into the gazebo and looked over our beautiful estate as I leaned against a thick wooden post and smelled the sweet scent of the Alayas blooms carried by the wind. Down the hill was the large pond with a pier and two small rowboats at one end and three

CHAPTER ONE

willow trees at the other, casting their long shadows across the water. Beyond that were two rows of large elm trees with wide, spreading branches that formed a natural canopy leading back to the house.

It was so beautiful, so grand, and yet still I felt an emptiness inside, which made me feel terribly guilty. I took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh while I allowed my familiar melancholy to settle into my spirit, making me feel far away and cloudy.

Why did he have to be away so much? Too much work. His work is important, and so is my papa. I had to get used to sharing him with the other children and his work, which often took him into obsession. In the past months, he had become like a stranger to me, polite but distant, but if he could help the people, then I knew he must.

I sighed again and then jumped as I felt the small sting of a pebble hitting my rear.

I quickly turned and saw the little eyes of Kasimir and Drake peeking over the opposite edge of the gazebo. Kasimir's face, topped with the straight bangs of his sandy blond hair over a thin, lightly freckled nose, held an expression of barely repressed laughter. Beside him, Drake's brown curly hair punctuated the look of shocked surprise between his baby round cheeks. They ducked back down and ran away.

I took a small stone of amber from my belt and spoke the words to summon a Statue spell, and within seconds they were both frozen in their tracks.

I walked across the moist grass and stood in front of them for a moment to let them think about their situation. Normally, I wouldn't use something against them that was designed as an offensive attack for battle, but it was like a reflex. Papa had trained me well.

When I canceled the spell, Kasimir started to run away again but decided against it. Drake simply fell to the ground and began crying. It is a horrible and frightening thing to be held so firmly that you can't even blink.

I picked him up and held him, patting his back.

"Shhh, now. It's over. You're okay."

I reached out my free hand to Kasimir and he surrendered his slingshot.

We went back to the house and into the kitchen through the back door. Sera and the other servants were there getting ready to make

CHAPTER ONE

breakfast. I put down Drake and told them, "Upstairs, both of you, and stay in your rooms until breakfast time."

"What's this?" came Mother's voice from the dining room doors. Jheffery was with her. They were ready to do some morning drills and exercises.

"Bring them here, Nyssa."

I turned to them and saw their pitiful expressions of disappointment. They knew that they had come very close to getting away with their prank. I followed them into the dining room, where Mother took over the situation.

She motioned for the two boys to approach her.

"Kasimir, why did Nyssa take away your slingshot?" she asked in a firm voice that echoed against the high ceiling.

"I hit her with a pebble," he answered, with well-practiced remorse.

"On purpose?"

"Well, I didn't really mean to hit her. I wanted to scare her a little bit."

"Kasimir, your slingshot is a weapon. It must never be used against another person as a joke. That's the kind of joke that could get you killed some day. It's like my sword. I always wear it, but I remove it from its sheath only when it needs to be used."

Then she quickly drew her short sword, pulled Kasimir around, and smacked him sharply on the behind with its flat side.

She put her sword back and said, "Both of you upstairs, as Nyssa said. Then after breakfast, Kasimir, I want you to make sure you have no more such accidents. You will practice hitting a brick from twenty paces. You will continue until you have hit the same brick one hundred times. Drake, you will fetch his shots for him. Understood?"

"Yes, Mother," they both answered quietly.

"Avery will make sure you count correctly. He's pretty good with a slingshot, so maybe he will give you some help."

She leaned forward and hugged them both warmly and then sent them on upstairs.

"Nyssa," Mother said, turning to me, "I think you should pay your father a visit at the academy and remind him that he hasn't been home for almost three weeks."

"Oh, yes. I'd like that."

CHAPTER ONE

"I know that you miss him, dear, as do I. His work is very important to all L'thenia, but surely he can spend a few days home with us once in a while."

"I hope so."

She turned to Jheffery and asked crisply, "Are you ready?"

"You bet," he answered. Then to me Jheffery said, "Dierdre was looking for you a moment ago."

As they were on their way out through the kitchen, Avery, the next oldest after Jheffery and the first child born by a surrogate mother, came in through the main dining room doors.

"Hey, Avery," Jheffery called to him from the other doorway. "Guess what you'll be doing all afternoon."

"What do you mean?"

They all left to work out together, leaving me alone in the empty room. I sat down at the window seat and watched them walking away to the west field until they were out of view. They always seemed to have so much fun.

I drew my feet up into the chair and rested my head back, free for the moment from Kasimir and his endless games, only to be interrupted by the sound of little Dierdre shuffling quietly into the room, crying again.

CHAPTER TWO

Dierdre stood in the doorway in her nightie and bare feet, tears on her cheeks, her fine hair in sloppy disarray around her face. She ran over to me, slapping her little feet against the hardwood floor, and started to climb into my lap. I picked her up and set her on her feet in front of me.

“Compose yourself,” I said, holding my hands on her shoulders. “Take your time.”

Dierdre was a problem for us. After five boys, the whole house was pleased to finally have a little girl to take care of, and we all tended to indulge her more than we did the boys. We were all guilty of letting her be softer and less independent, except Mother, of course, who treated her with the same loving firm hand that she had used for thousands of years rearing human children.

All the other children were bold and independent in their own way, including Darcy, Dierdre’s twin brother, but it was difficult to get Dierdre to assert herself in even simple ways. Darcy ended up fighting his sister’s battles most of the time. He was protective and loyal to a fault when it came to Dierdre, and she seemed forever in his shadow, never far away.

Mother always thought that this, and the pampering she received, was what made Dierdre into such a mousy, inhibited little girl. That’s part of it, I’m sure, but I noticed something else. Papa was polite with her, but cold, almost bitter at times, and in a way I don’t think the others would have noticed. They don’t know Papa the way I do.

I remember one time last year, when she and Darcy were just over four years old. Papa was telling us a story in the family lounge. Dierdre was getting sleepy and kept trying to climb onto his lap. If it had been any of the other young children, he probably would have picked him up and kept talking, but he kept putting her down and gently pushing her away. He finally picked her up, gave her to me, and then finished his story while Dierdre listened from my lap.

She was never good enough for him. He held us all to very high standards, but for poor Dierdre, he gave far more suggestions for improvement than praise.

CHAPTER TWO

It made me feel horrible because I felt that it had something to do with me. Of course Papa wasn't able to know me when I was her age. Did he feel guilty giving her the attention he wasn't able to give me? Did he feel that showing affection to his second daughter would betray his first? He wasn't like that with the other children.

I told Mother once that I thought he was awfully harsh with Dierdre, but she thought that it would do her good since everyone else babied her so. I couldn't bring myself to ask him about it directly.

When she calmed down I picked her up, held her in my lap, and told her, "Now we can talk. I like when you can come to me and discuss a problem calmly and plainly. So, what's troubling my kid sister?"

"I don't want you to go away."

"What do you mean? I'm not going away."

"Mommy said you were going to go see Father. I don't want you to go 'cause you won't come back either."

"Oh, Dierdre. We're both coming back. In fact, the reason I'm going to visit him is to tell him he needs to come home to see us all."

"You said you would be away for a long time."

"No. Not this time. Today I'm just going to visit Father and I will come right back. Then tomorrow I'm going to visit Adrian so she can help me with my magic, but that's only for four or five days. That's not a long time."

"I just don't want you to go," she said as she nuzzled her head on my shoulder.

I stood and carried her out of the dining room and across to the wide, curved stairway in the spacious foyer at the front of the house, saying, "Father is busy with his work and needs to be away so he can help other people. When I visit Adrian, that will be for something different and I won't be away long at all."

"When is Father coming back?"

"Well, I hope he will come back today, for a while at least. Now, hurry up and get dressed. Don't be late."

She raised her arm high to reach the hand rail and started slowly up the stairs.

I picked her up again, this time holding her around her waist, and carried her the rest of the way up, much to her delight. She giggled as she bounced in my grasp until I set her down at the top.

"Hurry, hurry," I told her.

She ran on down the hall to her room, still giggling.

CHAPTER TWO

I started back down the stairs but heard Keef playing in the music room so I decided to stop in and listen. He was working on a simple warmup piece with a single-note melody countered by a low harmony. He found hidden beauty even in that simple exercise. I went into the music room and crossed to the piano, which sat in front of the large bay window overlooking the rear grounds. The early sun shone on the keys from behind him, giving him a glowing aura around the fringe of his hair and his arms as they danced effortlessly through the exercise.

When the other children paired up to play and study, Keef was often left out. Kasimir was the closest to him in age, but the farthest away in interests. Keef and Avery got along very well, but lately Avery was training with Jheffery. I don't think Keef minded that much. His partner was his music.

He smiled good morning to me and began playing his arrangement of an elven song of greeting that Mother had taught him. At eight he was as good as I ever would be.

Then behind us I heard Sera announce, "Breakfast is served, Miss."

I nodded to her and she left.

"I'm going to check on the twins," I told him. "Don't be long."

Darcy wasn't in his room. I found him in Dierdre's room with her looking out her window. He was dressed, but Dierdre was still in her nightgown.

"Dierdre Arrenkyle, I told you to get dressed."

"We're looking at the golems," she said.

"Right now, sister. Move it. Breakfast is on the table."

She still didn't move away from the window so I went to her, turned her around, and said, very calmly, "Get dressed right now, or stay here and miss breakfast and lunch altogether."

She considered the choices but finally decided to get dressed. She ran into her closet while I joined Darcy at the window, putting my arm around him.

"What are we looking at?"

He pointed past the pond to the Alayas trees where Sharbra and the two twelve-foot-tall iron golems were standing with someone on horseback just inside the invisible wall.

The golems were part of the many security precautions that Papa kept around the house. Our grounds were completely surrounded by thick walls of stone twenty feet tall which had been

CHAPTER TWO

made invisible. All the windows on the first floor were also thick, invisible stone walls.

The Alayas trees, with their hanging vines bearing pink and white flowers and small, sweet fruit, native to the Elf Kingdoms, had been altered by a friend of Papa's to be carnivorous. They lured their prey with sweet fruit and then their vines closed in, wrapping around the intruder and pulling him into the center trunk, which held a chamber where he would be quickly crushed and digested. The entire family and staff always wear a spell, cast upon them by Papa or by me, that causes the trees to ignore us, letting us harvest their fruit or simply walk among them.

The iron golems patrol constantly and are designed to detain any intruders from human to fire dragon that get past the first defenses. Plus, there were wards and spells all around to trap trespassers and alert us of anything unusual. Sharbra, who had served for years in the Pakana Legion and was expert in the ways of thieves and assassins, demons and dragons, lived with us to make sure all the security defenses were kept in top shape.

After a few moments I saw the golems walk away in opposite directions, back to their patrols, as Sharbra led the visitor's horse around the lake toward the house.

"Are you dressed, Dierdre?" I called out toward the closet, anxious to get downstairs to see who was coming. She came out with a dark green summer dress trimmed with brown and gold at the sleeves and hem. I went to her dresser, picked up a brush, and calmed her fine blond hair into a ponytail, which I tied with a yellow ribbon.

"You look very nice, Dierdre. That's a good outfit you selected."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

From the window, Darcy called out, "It's a fighter woman."

"Get your shoes on and then both of you go down to breakfast."

I left them and went down the hall to Kasimir's room, where I found him sitting on the floor at the foot of his bed holding his slingshot and looking bored and sad.

"Time for breakfast," I said.

He got up and started toward the door with a huge frown.

"Leave the slingshot. You can come up and get it after breakfast."

He took a deep breath and let it out angrily as he tossed the slingshot onto the bed.

CHAPTER TWO

He turned and stepped heavily out the door. I put my hand on his shoulder and allowed him to get away with his demonstration of frustration, which neither Rebecca nor Mother would have tolerated.

I let him go and stopped at Drake's room. Drake was playing with his mage doll, which was apparently engaged in a dramatic attack against one of his shoes, no doubt playing the part of a dragon or griffon.

"Breakfast, Sweetie," I called out to him.

The mage finished the battle with a powerful explosion that sent the shoe flying into the air with a growl. Drake stood up and made the mage fly through the air to join him on his way for breakfast.

"Make sure he stays off the table," I reminded him.

"I will."

We were halfway down the front stairs when I saw Sharbra and the fighter woman come in the front door.

The light from the high, narrow windows beside the door highlighted her auburn hair when she lifted back her delicately embroidered hood to reveal the square jaw, sharp nose, quiet, patient eyes, and pointed ears of the elven folk. She unfastened the large emerald clasp of her riding cloak, which she removed with an unhurried flourish and handed over to Sharbra. It was a work of art that had no doubt taken thirty years or more to make, but she handled it as if it were a common fabric instead of the sturdy, beautiful elven weave depicting thousands of years of history and honor of her family.

She wore the dark blue and green colors of Mother's family, the Del-Gesius clan. Her blouse was trim and functional, yet elegant, edged with intricate lace and embroidered with spun gold. Above that she wore studded leather armor, casually unfastened, its sides falling open to reveal the lattice of metal fibers that lined the interior.

On her left hip hung a rapier in a silver scabbard that held gold inlays naming the sword in elven characters. At its side was a matching short sword with a blue and green velvet hilt like its larger twin. On her right hung two throwing daggers, a long knife, and a money pouch, no doubt filled mostly with gold pieces and a few platinum. Her trousers were dark forest green but were mostly hidden by the leather leg armor that hung on both sides from a belt and protected the outer thigh, where it was fastened to the knee-high boots.

She was as deadly as she was beautiful.

CHAPTER TWO

Her hair was braided and wrapped into a spiral held in place at the back of her head by a thick silver clasp which she removed, letting her long braids fall behind her. She was Mother's only elven daughter, a young five hundred years old and as good a fighter as I knew, except perhaps for Mother herself, even though Mother was more of a marauder and prowler than fighter.

Sharbra said to me, "May I present Sindee Del-Gesius, Miss."

I thanked him as Drake and I descended to the bottom of the stairs, and he left the three of us alone.

I was only ten the last time I had seen Sindee, and she remained as magnificent as I remembered her: petite, elegant, unhurried in even the simplest ways. I saw Mother's beauty in her, but unlike Mother, who had been around humans much of her life, Sindee still spoke with the lilting rhythm of the elven language.

"Is it you, Nyssa?" she asked, reaching her hands out to me.

"It's me," I answered, feeling ten years old again.

"Already a beautiful woman."

She had seen her mother live through almost a dozen human families, but she still seemed surprised at how quickly we grew.

"And Jheffery?" she asked.

"Yes, and eight others. This is Drake. Drake, your half sister, Sindee."

"How do you do, Sindee," he said, bowing to her.

"I am well, thank you. Merishona gooto, Drake-isha," she said, greeting him in her native language.

"And we're expecting a new child any day," I added.

"Oh, my goodness," she said with genuine surprise before she recovered her aplomb and said, "Yes, Mother said there were would be many other children. You must be very happy."

"And busy. Will you join us for breakfast?"

"I would enjoy that. Ve' eloshati. Thank you."

I turned to lead her to the dining room and saw four curious little faces looking at us from around the corner behind the front stairs.

"Come on out, all of you."

They came forward and politely bowed to the guest, whom none of them had ever met.

I introduced Sindee to her other half brothers and sister by age: Keef, Kasimir, Darcy, and Dierdre. Then I added, "Avery is with Jheffery and Mother. Charles and Evan are probably with Rebecca in the nursery."

CHAPTER TWO

At that moment, Mother came around the stairs with Jheffery and Avery.

“Merishona gooto, Sindee-dolo,” she said to her daughter, greeting her with the more familiar tense. They exchanged more greetings, but I didn’t follow much of it. I spoke what Mother called Dothal, quiet Elvish, spoken by elves in their Shelisl stage, when they spend centuries sitting quietly in their homes doing nothing more complex than tending a garden or singing legend songs. Bashel, or quick Elvish, tended to be used more by elves in Fantl when they wandered away from the Elf Kingdoms seeking adventure or simply a change of scenery. Bashel was much more verbally complex, while Dothal relied more on intonation, expression, and body language. Dothal was like the deep channel of the Elvish language, more formal and archaic, whereas Bashel took on new words for new experiences and was adapted into various dialects.

They spoke for just a minute or two. When humans have been apart for so many years, a reunion is a special occasion. With elves, who live for several thousand years, it’s a trivial matter.

Mother introduced Jheffery and Avery to Sindee, and then we all went into the dining hall. Sindee sat at Mother’s right, where Jheffery usually sits. Jheffery took the opposite end of the table in Father’s seat, next to me.

When everyone was seated and the servants began bringing out the fruit plates and honey bread, Sindee began the next discussion without any further ceremony.

“In the five years since the gathering began, the human merchants have changed their policy toward us no less than seven times — perhaps even more when I’ve been away. It is so much impossible to sustain an agreement with them. Their inability, or perhaps not wanting, to follow through on many promises and agreements has quite damaged the trust between us, even when we take into account their nature.”

“Sindee,” Mother began in exactly the same friendly, encouraging tone that had reassured and corrected me in the past. “In times like this, we must remember that the swiftness of the humans is an asset. When a disaster like this strikes, they alter their entire way of life, their whole civilization if necessary, in time for the next crisis while we are still trying to understand the first.”

“This is true, and if we could simply observe them to settle into their new paths, we would gladly stay out of their way and allow

CHAPTER TWO

them to repair their lands, but we need them and their trade. We are forced to deal with them on their terms and at their pace. We can almost not follow their political fighting that brings one duke after another claiming trading rights, each with his own ideas of proper relations with us.”

“Yes, that is not surprising, after all.”

“Can you come back to help us settle the new treaties?”

“Well, Sindee, I’m afraid that I have no influence on these matters. Certainly you should know that. Right now, I’m rearing this family. You know that Estus is studying alternatives himself, and I can assure you that he will offer his support to the elves in any way possible.”

As they continued to talk about the politics of crisis management and its lattice of negotiations, I saw in my memory the night that I learned of the beginning of the Barren Years and the way that my very own dear, tender father had helped bring them about.

Papa and I were traveling through the early towns and villages of the Damned Kingdom, helping the new settlers in small ways that for Papa were trivial, but which often provided livelihood to the new pioneers. I was eleven, and at that time Papa was still a magnificent and strange figure to me. When we were alone on the road, he was just Papa, the sweet, loving father who rode beside me telling stories, making me laugh and feel special and warm. But when we entered a village, he seemed to transform into a powerful and wonderful man, the magic man. He would help the settlers find water, mend their buildings, make them a bridge. So many of their needs were simple, and even I could invoke the wands for some of the simpler spells like Mend Fabric or Sharpen Blade.

Very often he would cast a spell of his own design which healed wounds and purged sickness. It had been a handy spell when he was adventuring with Uncle P’Tantis and the others, and for these early settlers it sadly was needed quite frequently.

One evening after we had finished healing and mending and such for a small town, we made camp and started a fire at the edge of the forest.

Papa sat for some time, looking sad. Usually he would have been studying his spells or charging wands for me to use in the next town, but that night he was occupied with some troubling internal dialogue.

I busied myself around our camp, laying out our bedrolls and brushing our horses while he sat leaning against a large tree. Finally

CHAPTER TWO

I sat beside him and put my head against his arm and asked, "What's wrong, Papa? You look so sad."

He put his arm around me and held me close.

"Nyssa, my sweet, I'm so glad you're with me. You are my new life as I walk among my old. You are the light beyond all this darkness, all this pain."

"What pain, Papa? I don't understand."

"Nor should you."

"I don't like when you're sad, Papa. It makes me feel lonely."

"Lonely?"

"Like you're not here. Like you're somewhere sad and I can't see you."

"I'm here, Nyssa. I'm here now."

"But you're also there, where it's sad."

"Yes," he answered in a whisper.

"Where is it, the place that makes you sad?"

"In the past."

He didn't say anything for a while. Then he pulled me onto his lap and I lay against him with my eyes closed, feeling the vibration of his voice in his chest.

"I wasn't always a master magician working in a laboratory on research and theoretical applications. For many years, I traveled with P'Tantis Jaguar, before he became Duke of the Damned Kingdom. We associated with kings, traveled all over the world, fought beside and against some of the most powerful creatures, and became far wealthier than I ever expected.

"When Karl Pakana died, the new Karl was to be selected by a contest. I don't know if you remember any of that. You were only four years old. Our group was chosen by Amanda, who was just the mayor of Seagate at the time. All the lands of the Pakana Kingdom â€" Chun, Pash-nie, Hartak, Seagate â€" selected champions.

"The contest was to find an item of power. After many months of adventure, full of tales told much better by P'Tantis than myself, we recovered Starsheen, one of the twelve swords of Edikee, which empowers its bearer to see into the near future. It's not quite that simple, but that's a fair description.

"Now, the winner was to be determined by the High Druid, who was expected by everyone to be impartial. However, his interests went beyond our secular battle for control of Pakana. He was aligned with the New Gods and when he selected the victor, it was the interests of his New Gods, rather than Pakana, which he favored.

CHAPTER TWO

“So P’Tantis, to avenge Amanda and the Gods the True Order, and for his own personal vengeance, I suppose, decided to assassinate the High Druid. I was not there for the final blow, because I was, well, injured, but I would have fought with P’Tantis to the end and my part was far from insignificant.

“When the Great Druid was killed, something terrible happened which we did not expect. His intimate link with the fabric of the forces of the natural world were severed. The skies grew dark and cold and the world shook and shook and shook. I did not see this myself because I was near death. When Burn brought me back, Amanda had emerged to claim power over the Human Kingdoms, the New Gods had lost their coveted opportunity to increase their power, and the world’s natural rhythm was terribly upset. Summers become hotter and winters colder, dry areas like the Damned Kingdom became flooded, fertile lands in the North dried up, and the sun rode a different path. Many rivers changed course, leaving cities landlocked and isolated. Land fit to plow was far away and, while many farmers moved south, many hungry people stayed behind.

“Amanda then granted wishes to those who helped bring her to power. P’Tantis was given the Damned Kingdom to tame, which he did with our help. Others were granted their desires.”

“What wish did she grant you, Papa?”

“I was not given the opportunity to make a request.”

“Why not?”

I waited for an answer, but he didn’t say anything. After a long time, I looked up to him to see if he had fallen asleep or something. He hadn’t, so I asked again.

He smiled at me and said very matter-of-factly, “Because I was dead.”

I sat up and looked at him with shock. I knew of only one time that his life had been stopped. Soon after Jheffery and I were taken to our new home, Papa traveled with P’Tantis to control a resurgence of the trolls. P’Tantis came to our home and told Mother what happened and she had him take her, Jheffery, and myself to Burn’s Temple in Seagate.

Burn was devout and very well practiced in her art. Plus, the Gods favored Papa’s group because they had prevented their rivals, the New Gods, from gaining the power they wanted. Still, there was a small chance that it wouldn’t work and that he would be gone forever.

CHAPTER TWO

I still remember the cold bitterness I felt when I stood with Mother in the dim, torchlit chamber and saw my papa lying still on the cold slab of the altar. Jheffery had no way of understanding what was going on and only knew that Father was very sick. He was kept out of the room so that he would not disrupt the procedure in any way. Mother insisted on being there when Burn performed the ritual of resurrection, and I was afraid to be away from her, so we stood with the rest of the group around the altar.

It was cold, for it was in the middle of winter. I was wearing a fur-lined cloak and hood but still shivered, more from fear and anger than from the cold.

Remembering that day is like remembering a dream for me. When the ritual was finished, Papa jerked suddenly and horribly, tried to sit up, and screamed from the pain of his wounds. Burn immediately began a chant of healing while P'Tantis cast Papa's Thaumatiatric Spell of Healing. I was completely frozen except for the trembling that shook me and choked my breath.

When the chanting and spell casting were done, he called out for me in a whisper. I was feeling so angry thinking he might leave that I didn't go at first. When he looked at me, I was finally able to cry. I ran to him and climbed onto the altar with his help and lay in his weak embrace, crying, "Don't go, Poppy. Don't leave me."

He was telling me that the episode I had witnessed was not the first for him.

"Oh, Papa," I cried.

"Quiet now," he said, stroking my hair with his gentle hand as we sat in the dancing shimmer of our campfire. "I'm all right now. I'm all right and I can try to put some things right."

I reached my hand up to his face and put my hand on his cheek, imagining how horrible and cold and dry it would be if Burn's prayers had not worked.

He took my hand in his, kissed my fingers, and told me again that it would be all right. I fell asleep in his lap, in his embrace, afraid that he would die if I left him for even a second.

He spent years working to put things right. He personally trained and employed magicians to transport goods when necessary, but even they could not keep up. He continued making the rounds of the new towns and villages, helping them gain a foothold against the harsh conditions of the Damned Kingdom.

CHAPTER TWO

Eventually, he began selecting young men and women from the towns to study with him so they could continue to supply their community with the spells upon which they had come to depend.

This training and the demand for more magicians to transport goods and to help protect shipments was the beginning of the Damned Kingdom Magic Academy. Adrian, who was my mentor and teacher, was one of the first of these traveling wizards.

Even after three busy years, there were still too few magicians and too many hungry people. This is why Papa was busy developing a magical transporter device that could be operated by non-magicians. The Merchants' and Travelers' Guilds were getting better at adapting to the new trade routes, but much of it was over land and often entire caravans of supplies or food were intercepted by pirates and rogues. The Pakana Legionnaires traveled with some of the merchants when they could, but the pirates were becoming increasingly more bold and powerful. The merchants who bothered to brave the long road South through the mountainous country to trade with the dwarves understandably expected to be paid highly. Few went on through the mountains to Dormelle to trade with the elves.

"Most of those who do come to us," Sindee was saying, "have more than likely stolen the goods from a legitimate merchant. Del-Gesius, like the other families, has harvested nearly all the hanging Geth'el from all our trees. The Jherrel wheat dies as often as not in the arid heat."

"It will pass, Sindee," Mother said with quiet reassurance. "The trees will provide. Stop trying to keep up with their turbulent melee of machinations, daughter. If they're too unreasonable, just steal what they have. Now there I can help."

"I'm afraid it's not quite that simple, Mother."

"Of course it is, Sindee-dolo."

Mother was like that sometimes.

CHAPTER THREE

Mother's and Sindee's conversation soon drifted to the familiar topics of friends and family, but, of course, much of that world was far away in time, distance, and culture. I had visited Dormelle several times, but even though my visits spanned several years, they were a frozen instant of time in the minds of my mother's family.

One summer I ran into Garmon, one of my countless uncles, and he said, "I've been looking for you. Are you ready for our game of Jenna Net?" as if I had been away only an afternoon instead of more than two years.

It was quite difficult for me to picture Mother living with different families, although I knew that she had been married to more than ten human men. Perhaps it was selfish of me, but I thought of Mother as belonging only to us, and Sindee, of course.

Luckily, Mother didn't let her conversation take breakfast into the evening, or next week, as it might have in Dormelle, and excused us all.

I corralled the troops upstairs to school, except for Kasimir and Drake, who had to serve out their punishment under Avery's guard.

Normally, Jheffery and I took opposite corners. I taught mathematics and grammar while he taught history, drawing, and botany. Father had prepared most of the lessons himself back when he did most of the teaching. Over the years, we have all helped improve the lessons and the books.

Our school was very informal, and all the children spent as much time teaching as they did learning. Keef now did most of the music instruction. Jheffery was perfecting his fighting skills with help from Sharbra and Mother, and Avery was learning from all of them. Drake was beginning to show an interest in magic, so I began showing him how to draw some of the rune letters used in writing spells. Avery was quite helpful keeping Kasimir entertained with word games or algebra while I worked with someone else. Even Kasimir could be a good teacher when it suited him. He was a quite a good storyteller.

With the smaller group, Keef had Jheffery to himself, and I sat down with the twins.

CHAPTER THREE

"Yesterday we talked about finding half of a number. Darcy, what is half of six?"

"Three."

"So, half of sixty is what?"

"Thirty."

"And Dierdre, what's half of six hundred?"

"Three hundred."

"Who knows half of forty?"

They both answered, "Twenty."

"Remember you can put them together. What's half of six hundred and forty?"

Darcy answered, "Three hundred twenty?"

"That's right. Dierdre, what's half of forty-six?"

"Um. Twenty-three?"

"Yes. Now a hard one. Who knows half of fifty-eight? Do them one at a time."

Dierdre was first to answer this time.

"Twenty-nine because fifty is one of those middle ones, between four and six."

"That's right. Half of forty is twenty and half of sixty is thirty, so the number between that is twenty-five. Then half of eight makes twenty-nine."

After a couple more drills, I told them, "Now that you know how to divide a number by two, you also know how to multiply it by five. Just take half of the number and add a zero. Try sixty-four times five."

Drake answered immediately, "Three hundred twenty. Is that right?"

"It sure is. Dierdre, what is six hundred forty-two times five?"

"Hmm. Three hundred twenty-one — then put a zero — three thousand, two hundred and ten."

"What's half of three hundred seventy-six?"

I heard them whispering, almost in unison, "one fifty — one eighty-five — one eighty-eight."

"Three hundred seventy-six times five?"

"One thousand, eight hundred and eighty!" they both answered excitedly.

"Are we really doing multiplies?" Dierdre asked.

"You really are. You can also multiply by fifty if you want by adding another zero. I want you to take turns thinking of a number

CHAPTER THREE

between one and one thousand. Say the number, let the other divide it in half, and then multiply it by five yourself. Okay?"

I left them and went over to the window, from where I could see the others by the vegetable garden. Kasimir took aim, shot, and missed the brick.

"How many has he hit?" I called down to Avery.

"Only four so far."

"And he's missed an awful lot," Drake said, as he chased after the errant shot.

"Shut up, Drake," Kasimir retorted angrily.

Avery cautioned him, saying, "Push that anger out of the way, little brother. You can't aim right when you're mad."

Drake brought him the shot. This time, Avery sat behind him and told him something. He took aim and shot, and I saw the brick fall over.

Kasimir turned and yelled up at the window, "Five."

Avery patted him on the back and then went to reset the brick.

Jheffery looked over and asked, "How's he doing?"

I turned away from the window and walked over to their table. "It's going to be a long afternoon. Maybe you could relieve Avery after a while."

"Sure."

I sat at the table next to Keef and said to Jheffery, "Mother asked me to visit Papa and tell him he should come home for a while. Can you look after the twins? When they get tired of math, let them draw or something."

"Will do. Have fun, Nyssa."

"Thanks."

I went back to Dierdre and Darcy, kissed them both on the cheek, and said, "I'll be back in a few hours."

"May I go?"

"May I go, too?"

"No and no. You can see your father this evening."

I left them and went to my room to get ready.

I understood their excitement. It was very rare that any of us got to go anywhere, even to the market on the coast. Our estate, nestled beneath the mountains of Severin's Isle, provided most of what we needed. Now and then Sharbra would take Sera to the wharf to buy supplies or fresh seafood, but we didn't get to go along very often.

I went to the closet and found a long, green skirt with its matching jacket and a white silk blouse and laid them across the bed.

CHAPTER THREE

I sat down at my dressing table and started brushing out my hair. I always felt that I should look my best when visiting the Academy. If someone recognized me as the daughter of the founding and master regent, I owed it to my father to look my best. However, the fact that the school was always bustling with handsome young novices and students was not lost on me.

I began carefully working my hair into an elven weave, starting from the top with a small handful of hair. I split this into three parts, did the first weave, added a small section of hair from the right strand, and wove the right strand to the center. Then I repeated this on the left side, adding more hair and crossing it to the center. I continued braiding and adding hair until the weave extended down to my neck, where I gathered the rest of my hair together with a wide green ribbon.

Then I changed into the green and white outfit, put on knee-high suede boots, and sat back at the dressing table and donned a conservative amount of lip color and perfume. I fussed a bit more with my hair, tested my smile, and finally felt presentable. I transferred my magic book and supplies to my nice leather pack and tossed it onto my left shoulder.

Next, I went down the hall to Papa's laboratory to get a Transportation wand. I was not far enough advanced to control the structure of the Transport spell directly, so I had to use a wand that held the spell's form and force that could be released after summoning the Magical State. On the wall next to the window was a cabinet filled with dozens of square bins, each holding two or three wands for a particular spell. There were easily sixty or more different spells in wand form. This collection, in supplies and time, would cost a buyer more than two years of average Seagate wages, but this was a tiny collection compared to the one Papa kept at the Academy, which was always being increased by students who helped pay for their training by charging wands. The holdings at the Magicians' Guild in Seagate had a thousand times more than that.

I took out one of the Transportation wands and looked it over. I recognized some symbols that were different than the traditional spell and figured that it was a recent variant that Papa had developed from his research. I put it in my pack and went down the back stairs to the kitchen, where I found Rebecca holding Charles. He was busy fussing and squirming around in her arms trying to get down.

CHAPTER THREE

I went over to them, put my hand on his head, and said, "Don't argue with Nanny Beck, brother. What's wrong?"

"I want to go outside," he answered with a severe pout. "With Kas."

Rebecca told me, "I was reading to him and Evan in the solarium when he saw Kasimir out the window. He thinks they're playing games."

I reached out and took Charles from her and stood him on the counter in front of me.

"It doesn't matter what anyone else is doing, Charles Arrenkyle. You know full well what you are supposed to be doing."

He looked up at me and said, with only slightly less pout in his voice, "Pretty hair."

I smiled and looked over to Rebecca.

"You're trying to sweet-talk me, aren't you? It won't work. You cannot go out until later. If you promise to behave, maybe Nanny Beck will read to you on the patio."

He reached his hand out to my cheek and said, "Where are your ear jewels?"

"Oh, my goodness," I exclaimed. "I almost forgot jewelry."

I picked him up from the counter and handed him to Rebecca, saying, "Be good."

I rushed back upstairs and put on a black velvet choker with an emerald pendant and matching earrings, which had emerald stones that dangled on tiny silver chains.

When I returned, Rebecca was on her way back to the solarium.

"Nyssa, remind your father that there has been no name chosen yet."

"I'm sure he'll come back when it's time. He hasn't missed the birth of any of his children yet."

"Have fun, dear. You look stunning."

"Thanks. I will."

I went to the front parlor and waited for Mother to recognize me.

"I'm leaving now. I'll be back soon."

"Be careful, Nyssa."

Sindee turned around and said, "Merishona alvena, Nyssa-dolo."

"Alvena, Sindee-dolena."

I bent down to kiss Sindee on the cheek and then left them and went to the transport platform.

CHAPTER THREE

The platform held a special beacon wand that helped close the spell and coordinate any simultaneous arrivals while the locations were pulled together. Transporting without a closure beacon required more energy and could be dangerous because a misalignment would cause the magician to appear high or even in the ground, which is why places that attract magicians usually supply transport platforms with closure beacons. Of course, Papa's beacon could be replaced with a wand that canceled any incoming spells rather than closing them. Someone could still try to transport in unassisted, but they would have to overcome the additional spells, and Papa's familiarity with collocation and related technology made that all but impossible.

Although not necessary, it became customary to exit from the platform as well. Actually, one stood next to it. Standing on the platform itself was strict taboo. If someone were playing around there when a wizard tried to transport in, the spell would not only fail, but the life of the magician would be endangered.

I took out the wand, pictured in my mind the transport platform at the Damned Kingdom Magic Academy, and began quietly chanting the incantation of summoning. As I read the runes to release the spell, the image in my mind became fixed and more vivid. When the stored spell took over, I felt the pleasant giddiness as the power of the spell enveloped me and channeled through my mind. I began to hear distant sounds and feel the warmer air of the Damned Kingdom. The wand brought the vision of my destination from just a picture in my mind to a smoky scene before my eyes as the two locations were strained to unnatural juxtaposition by the forces of the spell that I was releasing. For just a moment, I was standing both in our foyer at Arrenkyle Manor and on the transport platform of the Academy. The spell closed and I quickly stepped aside.

The transport platform of the Damned Kingdom Magic Academy was on the second floor at the center of a circular room some fifteen feet in diameter and was raised on a stepped dais surrounded by six granite posts set about eight feet apart along the circumference. The walls, except for the entrances on either side, were covered with tapestries of forest green and gold, the Arrenkyle family colors. The posts stood six feet tall and were topped with large crystal spheres. They served to remind casual passersby to stay clear. The platform itself was made from gray basalt stone with an

CHAPTER THREE

inlay of shiny black obsidian in the shape of the emblem of the Magicians' Guild.

I stepped off of the raised dais and crossed the room on the narrow carpet to the promenade that overlooked the spacious front atrium of the library.

To the right of the wide hallway was a waist-high stone railing with thick, round balusters, little Doric columns mirroring the tall pillars that divided the rail into sections and ascended another twenty feet to the top of the chamber. Each tall pillar was paired with another along the left wall, and between these were the heavy wooden doors to the lecture arena. The tall windows across the atrium let in the early afternoon sun, painting the dark hardwood floor below with a regiment of slanted shadows.

The library was filled with the quiet bustling of students going to classes or studying together. Whenever I visited the Academy, I felt a longing to live here and study with the other students, but I was needed at home as teacher and friend to my father's children. Besides, I had been taught by my father, a genuine master scholar of the Art who taught me style, art, and purpose as well as function and invocation. He preferred that I be taught in the traditional manner of studying one-on-one with a master magician. Later, after I was well past the fundamentals, he sent me to Adrian Blackwing, one of his earliest students, who took over as my master when Papa decided to expand the school and was too busy to coach me himself.

The school grew quickly in those early years. After Papa had traveled around the towns and villages for a couple of years, he had a handful of young men and women who agreed to come with him to learn the Art. Many of the villages had come to rely on Papa's regular visits, and the chance to have their own resident magician encouraged many towns to send a bright young man or woman for training.

Papa's school started in the back of an armory store. The students traveled from all over the Damned Kingdom into Hell's Heart, the largest and capital city of the new territory, and Papa taught them together as a class. It was quite unorthodox to teach magic in groups like this, but the students didn't know that. He taught them to read and copy spells, how to focus their intent, and how to summon and control the Magical State with words and the proper mental image. Very soon they were casting the types of useful spells that were needed back home. They returned home and more students came. Papa taught them as well. From each group, a

CHAPTER THREE

few would stay to learn more. Soon, he had a group of eight to ten dedicated followers studying the foundations of advanced magic. Adrian, Grayling, Ashenda, Pock, Jennings, and Dorana were all there at the beginning. As soon as was possible, he had them take over the instruction of the novices and he toured the country again finding more students, whom he sent back to Hell's Heart.

In two years' time, he moved from the armory to his own building on the northeast edge of town and his school quickly earned a reputation as the place to get a useful skill that promised security in the uncertain frontier. Papa was also smart enough to realize that not everyone that applied could be trained as a magician. Some who came to the school couldn't even read. So instead of turning them away, he quickly formed a curriculum offering everything from magic to blacksmithing. This would have angered the other guilds if he had tried to do this in an older, more established city. In fact, he did have some complaints at first, particularly from the Carpenters' Guild, which already had quite a presence in the area. Still, the guilds turned down many more applicants than they were able to accept. They weren't designed to handle such volume, but Papa could. He never turned away a student. If students couldn't pay, they were expected to stay after their initial vocational training to help new students or apply their new skills for the school. A student who learned masonry could help build a new room. Even before the young men and women could apply their new skills, they could help out with the numerous chores needed to keep the enterprise functioning. There were always extra hands available for anything from peeling potatoes to planting flowers. The more students that came, Papa realized, the more resources he had to expand the school.

"Train one," he would say, "and that one can train five others. And they can each train five others." That was as true for weaving or singing or writing as it was for magic.

His new building quickly became four, and soon that wasn't enough. The city was growing, as were so many new towns in the Damned Kingdom. Folks were looking for a new start to help them through the Barren Years.

Papa found a location about thirty miles northeast of Hell's Heart and built what is now the Damned Kingdom Magic Academy.

Once the school was going, Papa was home much of the time. He even spent the whole summer with us in Dormelle when I was fifteen, but then he began building the University, and shortly after

CHAPTER THREE

that he began organizing a network of his new mages to transport material goods or to ride with Merchants' Guild caravans and he was away again. He tried to visit us weekly, and he did most of the time, but visiting once a week still meant that he was visiting, not really a part of the family.

And then, just last year, the Merchants' Guild began funding his research into advanced device magic, which formed the foundation for his recent research and experimentation with automatic transportation, and which he was no doubt working on at that very minute.

I made my way down the wide stairway, past the many tables filled with busy students, and out to the hot, humid Damned Kingdom afternoon. Thick, low clouds rolled anxiously across the sky, dragging a determined wind along with them.

I followed the brick walkway around the front of the library and then cut through the center grove of willow trees to the nearby Scholars' Quarters. The grove was full of students trying to enjoy the blustery, hot summer day. No one recognized me or even noticed me, as far as I could tell.

The Scholars' Quarters were twenty large houses built for the families of the resident master scholars, but only six were occupied by actual scholars at that time. The rest were rented out to students that could afford to pay the excessive rent that Papa charged. One was reserved for P'Tantis, who used the residence as part hideout, part vacation home.

I passed all of these and went to the grand Founder's Estate, Papa's home away from home. We called it Academy Manor.

The house sits well back from the carriage path behind a tall iron gate, which is always magically locked. Only special wand-keys with the proper counter spell, one of Papa's early experiments in self-directed magic, will open the gate. Only family, Sharbra, and the academy caretaker who tended the grounds and took care of the dogs carried such keys.

I unlocked the gate and followed the brick path around the small rose garden and on up to the house. The dogs greeted me when I got up to the porch, and they each wanted a personal scratch on the head. I assured Winston, Ranger, and Griffon that they were all good dogs, very good dogs, and let them huddle around me for a little while before I went inside.

I looked in Papa's study, but he wasn't there. A quick tour showed me that the house was empty. In the kitchen I saw that the

CHAPTER THREE

breakfast table had been set for two. He was probably working with a colleague this morning, or perhaps late last night. I considered waiting for him, but since he wasn't expecting me, it was hard to say when he would be back. I decided to try his laboratory back at the library, so I locked up, went out through the front gate, and headed back to the main building. I looked back, in case Papa was working outside for some reason, but there was only a small servant girl tending a flower garden at the side of the house.

I went up to the fifth floor to Papa's laboratory. When I opened the door, the first thing I saw was a large book floating across the room. It approached a bookshelf where it turned itself upright and settled onto the top shelf. On a table, papers were shuffling around, arranging themselves into neat piles. In the sink, cups and mortars were washing themselves, and in the middle of the room, a broom was stirring up a cloud of dust.

"Papa?" I called out, trying to find him among the many tables and bookshelves.

"He's not here," a voice answered.

I turned and saw a young man with a white novice tunic as he stood up from a table at the far end of the room.

"I don't know when he'll be back," the young man said as he continued toward me. "He's meeting with someone from the Merchants' Guild downstairs."

When he got close, he looked me up and down, smiled, and tossed his head to the side, flinging his shoulder-length hair from in front of his face. He extended his hand to me and said, "I'm Tamar Kalidon."

"Greetings," I answered, extending my hand.

"You must be Nyssa Arrenkyle," he said. "You're just like your father described. I can cancel these spells if you like. I'm just straightening up a bit."

"No, that's fine. Leave them. Do you think he'll be back soon?"

"Hard to say. He didn't seem pleased to be interrupted when the gentleman came to talk to him. Your father thinks he may have found the breakthrough in the power retention and he was in the middle of planning some experiments."

"What kind of breakthrough?"

"Well, until now he's been working on determining whether or not a stand-alone transporter device that will do what the Merchants need is even possible as a stable technology. Yesterday we come across a paper on a variation of an Invisibility spell that went back to

CHAPTER THREE

some of the foundation principles, but it also held the key for retaining the magic aura on a device with only logarithmic power decay by phasing the third level ergon field, whatever that is. He thinks he can reduce the power drain to almost nothing through some kind of regeneration from an orthogonal stream. He tells me that we're no longer dealing with only a theoretical possibility. Master Arrenkyle says that he knew it all along, but having the proof will help."

"So you know all about his research?"

"Well, in a way. He took me on as an apprentice about six weeks ago, as he probably told you."

"No, he didn't."

"Oh. Well, he needed someone to help him track down references here and at the Guild in Seagate."

"Apprentice?" I asked. "Is he training you as well?"

"Well, sure he is, but mostly he shows me his own techniques and other stuff for the project. He says that explaining it to someone always helps fix it in his own mind. Plus, I pick up on things pretty quick so I can help him read through old manuscripts and notes to look for things."

"You must be looking at pretty advanced material. Most of his research is very obscure and unconventional. I have trouble following all but the basics. Have you been studying Magic long?"

"No, not too long. About a year. I'm still working on the basic reticulation forms. I sort of get things from both ends."

He laughed and shrugged and said, "I hear the words and I think I'm understanding, then, like a fish in a dungeon, I get totally lost. I know a lot of whats about things, because he tells me and I say, 'Sure, okay,' but I'm really in a cloud about the whys and wheres and just about everything else. You can teach a dog to shake hands, but that don't mean he's gonna pay on the bet. I tell you, when I started, I was amazed that I could summon fire through my hands with just my voice and a piece of dry wood, but that's not hardly half a scale off a dragon's back compared to what can be done."

"You should read the thesis paper of Duroth Yertholian. It may still be a little advanced for you, but you could get most of the content even by skipping over the technical material. It was written over six hundred years ago and is still one of the major foundation works. It suggests that there flatly is no upper bound to magic. The

CHAPTER THREE

only limit, he wrote, is the life span of humans and their ability, in that time, to gain wisdom and experience.”

“Fascinating. I suppose elven wizards can get pretty advanced.”

“Oh, goodness yes, but they practice in a different channel of the energies, usually. Humans deal with higher energies that would cause severe problems with an elf over the span of even a few hundred years. That’s one of the problems that Yertholian addresses. When elves practice human magic, they can become very, very powerful, but it’s very dangerous for them.”

“Goodness. There’s so much to know.”

Then he gestured toward a table and added, “Hey, do you want to sit down? I shouldn’t keep you standing here. We could talk and pass the time until your father returns.”

“Well, I suppose, but if he’s not back soon, I may go looking for him.”

“That’s fine.”

I sat down at the head of a long table covered with books and notes. Tamar sat across the corner to my right.

“I hope I can find him today. I’m supposed to remind him that he hasn’t selected a name for his new baby.”

“A baby? He’s going to be a father again? I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, this will be his eleventh.”

“His, eleventh? Embers aflame, you must have a robust mother! Oh my goodness, that was so rude of me. I didn’t mean anything by that.”

I had to laugh at the mixture of surprise and embarrassment that came across his face.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. My mother is quite robust, but not in the way you meant.”

“I just had no idea he had such a large family.”

“Well, there’s Jheffery and me. We were adopted about eleven years ago. Avery is nine — well, almost ten, actually. Keef is eight and a wonderful musician. Kasimir is seven, and if he’s lucky he may one day be eight. Drake will be six in a few weeks. Dierdre and Darcy are the twins, five years old. Charles is four. Evan, two, is the baby, but not for long.”

“It must be wonderful having a family like that. I’ve been on my own one way or another for so long, I don’t know how I’d take to all those people around.”

“I’ve always lived with people all around me. I think I’d die if I had to live alone, without the children.”

CHAPTER THREE

Tamar started to answer, but before he could say anything, Papa came through the door, followed by an elegantly dressed man whom I recognized as Nikolas Mannerah, a Master of the Merchants' Guild.

Tamar turned his attention to his spells and put the broom and dishes to rest.

"I didn't mean to question your integrity or motives," Mannerah was saying. "No one knows better than I the contributions you have made for our members. However, if there is any way that you could deliver the device sooner, you absolutely must find it. It doesn't need to be all polished and fancy. We need whatever you have now. I cannot stress enough the impact this tragedy has had."

"Yes, Mister Mannerah," Papa answered quietly. "I am absolutely aware of the impact that the lost ship has had on your institution. I also know that Empress Amanda holds the Guild responsible for the goods that were lost and for any hardship that their loss may cause. I am also aware that she feels that you have been making promises that are beyond the Guild's ability to uphold and is threatening to direct the Legionnaires to take over transport and sale of all Merchants' Guild stock."

"Yes. That's why you must hurry."

"As I have already told you, this is not brickwork. You cannot add more masons to speed up the job. It takes as long as it takes and I assure you again that you will know the instant that I do when I have a prototype that you can test. Must I remind you that we have not even established with certainty that what we are looking for can even exist? Nevertheless, I shall not rest until I find the answers you need.

"For now, I suggest that you expend your energy dealing with this situation in a useful manner instead of whining to me about the tenuous nature of your standing in the Guild, taking me away from the work I am already doing for you.

"And to be precise, I'm not doing this for you, Mannerah. I'm doing it for all the people it can help. I can do that just as easily if you are removed from office."

"Frankly, Estus, I don't care if you're doing it for the people, the glory, the money, or some harpy's left tit. Just get it done."

"Good day, Mister Mannerah."

"I'll be in touch, wizard. Good day yourself."

After Mannerah left, Papa shook his head and walked past us saying, "Tamar, did you get the supplies together that I needed?"

"I did."

CHAPTER THREE

"Papa?" I called to him.

He turned, and suddenly his sullen features fell into the familiar smile that I had missed for so long. He came to me and hugged me warmly.

"It's good to see you, daughter. Is everything well at home?"

It was well hidden, but his casual demeanor was covering some kind of anger. He was too smooth, too still, and his eyes betrayed a gripping tension.

"Yes, Papa, but Mother thinks you need a vacation. Sindee dropped by, and you have not even chosen a name for the baby. Can you possibly get away, even for a day?"

He looked past me for a moment, thinking, and answered, "Of course I'll be there."

I looked again into his troubled eyes and asked, "Papa, are you okay? Is something wrong?"

He chuckled softly and said, "No. Of course not," but then his humor faded.

"Come home, Papa. You need to be home."

"You go. I'll be there later."

"Soon, Papa."

"As soon as I can."

CHAPTER FOUR

When I got home, I went up to my room, dropped my backpack onto the bed, sat down at my dressing table, and looked in the mirror. Who was that looking back at me? Where did she come from?

I missed Andrea. I missed playing Alley Scratch, the kind voice of Mother Shanker, and the dark hallway that smelled of burning tallow. I wanted to sit once again back to back with my best friend in the shade of the honeysuckle hedge. I wanted to close my eyes, lean my head against hers, and tell her my thoughts in the glow of the deep trust that we shared. I felt that if I could just tell someone, I would see how childish my frustration was, but unspoken, it settled like a frost on a still morning.

I untied the ribbon and began undoing the elven weave from my hair while the stranger in the mirror frowned with me, sharing this irrational melancholy. I picked up my hairbrush. It was one of the first things Papa gave to me. I brushed out my hair and took off my jewelry.

I had expected to spend the entire afternoon with Papa, just like old times. I expected him to fill the space in me that came from missing him, but he didn't really care. I couldn't quite identify anything in particular that he did that made me feel uncomfortable. It wasn't so much what he did, but what he didn't do. Perhaps I had expected too much. I hadn't seen him for nearly two weeks, and I thought that he would be as excited to see me as I was to be with him, but instead, I felt like an intrusion into his new world of research.

After he promised to come home, he left me to review some notes at a table near the end of the room.

Tamar said to me, "Well, I need to get going. I'm helping teach a couple young fellows how to ride. Maybe I'll see you later?"

"Perhaps, Tamar. Good day for now."

"Day and a half back."

Then he called out to Papa, "I'll be back in a couple of hours, Master Arrenkyle."

Papa raised his hand in acknowledgment, but didn't look up.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Tamar left and closed the door behind him, the room seemed suddenly too quiet.

I waited there a moment, watching my father. He was leaning forward with his palms pressed upon the table as he gazed through his notes. He stood there among all the books and equipment, alone and quiet in his huge laboratory on the fifth floor at the center of his university. At that moment, I saw him as the grand wizard he always became when we went into the small towns to mend the houses and heal the animals and children. He was always two people to me. My papa was sweet and gentle and warm, and whenever I heard about the great and powerful Estus Arrenkyle, it was like hearing about someone else, some distant and magnificent person from history. But there he stood, twenty feet away, glaring at his notes.

I walked toward him, hearing my footsteps and the loud rustling of my skirt. When I reached his table, I stood across from him, resting my hands on the back of a wooden chair.

He looked up at me and said, "You should go home, Nyssa."

"I thought we would go to Academy Manor and have lunch or something."

"No. Look, Nyssa, I know everyone would like me to be home. I will be there as soon as I can get away, but I do have affairs here that I must settle. Tell everyone I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"No, there isn't," he answered sharply. Then he paused. His eyes relaxed and his lips tried to smile as he added gently, "But thank you for offering. I wish you could."

He started collecting the papers on the table into a single pile. I began helping him and he took the papers from me with a curt "Thank you."

"Okay, Papa. I'll see you tonight, then?"

"Mm-hmm," he grunted, without looking up.

"So, goodbye."

"Yes, goodbye, Nyssa," he answered, again without looking up.

I took out the transport wand and began the Summoning. Soon the laboratory faded into a silver dusk that was whisked away by the image and then the reality of the transport platform at home.

I stood for a moment, looking down at my feet. I wasn't quite sure what to make of his behavior. Perhaps he was still angry with Nikolas Mannerah. He was under so much stress. Having to be called away from important work, especially after exchanging

CHAPTER FOUR

loaded words with the man who controlled his funding, certainly would make anyone a little tense.

I hurried upstairs to my room and closed the door behind me. After I combed out my hair I went into the bathroom to wash off my silly face.

I began running water to fill the basin. The sound of the splashing water reminded me how special my father was. Not everyone could build such a beautiful home on an exotic island downstream from a fresh mountain lake, construct a reservoir, and make stones of continual heat so that we would always have hot running water.

I looked at myself in the mirror and wondered if I looked like my biological mother. Did she have long black hair like mine? What color were her eyes? Mother, of course, was timeless and had an elegant and regal beauty, which I knew I would inherit only by careful emulation and practice. Even with all I had learned from her, I knew that I would never achieve the level of sophistication and style she had perfected hundreds of years ago.

Thinking about my biological parents always made me feel uncomfortable, even a little guilty. Such thoughts were always discouraged in our family, especially by Mother. Whenever the hired women delivered a baby to us, they were always sent away the very next day. The children were never allowed to ask about them, but they at least had some hope of learning about their birth mothers if they wanted or needed because records were kept, and they all knew that Papa was their real father. I saw so much of Papa in Drake sometimes that I envied my little brother. For Jheffery and me, there was no such anchor and there never would be. Jheffery didn't seem to care much, but these thoughts had always slept in the corners of my mind.

There was a memory that I held selfishly to myself until it was really nothing more than the memory of a memory. It was mostly a sensation of a dark blue twilight sky and a small campfire as I fell asleep on someone's lap. I had always thought that the lap belonged to my biological father. It didn't really matter to me if it was a genuine memory or a forgotten dream. It made me feel secure having some kernel of a concrete heritage.

That memory also held me close to my new family. It was a reminder of how something so near could fade into an empty yesterday. I could imagine nothing more horrible, more frightening

CHAPTER FOUR

than to be separated from the family I loved after losing my first family, whoever they were.

I turned off the faucet, lowered a washcloth into the water, and washed my face back to the same old Nyssa. It was pointless to be jealous of the students at the Academy. My place was here, in the security of my father's home fortress with his hot running water.

I pulled up the stopper and watched the water swirl away and then went out to my closet and replaced my nice clothes with a familiar cotton housedress.

I found everyone outside, huddled around Kasimir as he was still shooting at his brick. Mother and Sindee were there. Sindee was holding Evan while Charles was running around by her feet. Jheffery and Avery were kneeling on either side of Kasimir as he took aim. I heard the ping of his stone against the brick and everyone cheered. I walked up beside Rebecca and heard Drake call out, "Eighty-seven."

He reset the brick and brought Kasimir's shot back.

Rebecca told me, "Anna started mild labor just after you left."

"Actual labor or just teasers?"

"I expect she'll deliver our new baby by suppertime, but it's nothing to worry about. She's doing well."

"Is somebody with her?"

"Sera's with her."

Dierdre saw me and ran over from Darcy and Keef. I picked her up and we watched Kasimir aim again. Everyone grew quiet. He squinted one eye, breathed in, held his breath, waited a second or two, and let the shot fly. Again the brick fell over.

"Eighty-eight."

There was applause and cheers. I heard Sindee say, "Festoshi, Kasimirâ€"dolo," using the word that meant an accomplishment of great honor.

Drake reset the brick again and took the shot back to his brother.

Dierdre asked me, "Is Father home?"

I shook my head no and said, "He'll be home later."

"When?"

"I don't know, sweetie."

"Why didn't he come home now?"

"He had some things to do, but he'll be here soon."

"He always has something more important to do."

"Eighty-nine!"

Applause.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Good job, brother!" Keef called out.

"Eleven more," Mother said.

"I know how you feel, Dierdre."

I put my head against hers and we watched Kasimir miss his next shot.

"My arm's getting tired, Mommy."

"Perhaps you should rest it for a while."

"Can I stop yet?"

"You can stop after you hit the brick eleven more times."

Before he could complain any more, she turned and said something to Sindee. Avery and Jheffery both huddled around him, no doubt advising him to stop whining and concentrate. They rubbed his arm and shoulders a bit and he took aim again.

"Kasimir's very good, isn't he?" Dierdre said quietly.

"Yes, I suppose he is by now."

"Ninety!"

She raised her head from mine and clapped with the others. Then she said, "I wish I could shoot like that or something."

I kissed her on the cheek and put my head against hers once again.

We watched again as Kasimir pulled back the shot and held his position, aiming.

"Rebecca, Lady Arrenkyle!"

We all turned to see Sera running from the kitchen door.

"Come quick," she called out. "Anna's having her baby."

Rebecca ran toward the house. Mother said, "Ten more," then followed after them.

"Another baby," Dierdre said, as if she were saying, "Another rainy day."

Sindee picked up Charles and carried the two children over to me.

"I am so much excited, Nyssa."

In the culture of the extended elven families, babies came only once every couple decades or so. A smaller family might wait more than a century to greet a new child.

"It must seem so strange to you that we have babies so often."

"But it is wonderful. You are blessed."

"You know, don't you, that this isn't how human families usually do it?"

"Of course. Mother would love to give another child, but not for many years."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Ninety-one!" Drake called out.

"When will you carry a baby, Nyssa? Soon, I am sure."

I smiled and blushed a little bit.

"Maybe soon the way elves see it, but not for quite a few years."

"Of course. Then I will hold your baby and sing to her. This I much enjoy."

"I'll look forward to that."

"Now I will take these two and tell them about the lazy fa'thril until they nap."

"Ninety-two."

"There you go," Jheffery encouraged him. "Let's see you get the next eight in a row."

Charles started squirming and fussing so I said, "Do you want me to take him?"

"Oh, no. He's just being a baby. A fussy, impatient human baby."

"I'm not a baby," he protested.

"I guess he wants to hear your story."

"Yes."

Sindee leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. Then she kissed Dierdre and went into the house.

"Ninety-three!"

"Way to go, champ!" Jheffery called out with grand enthusiasm.

I put my head once again against Dierdre's and went back to watching the boys.

"I love you, Dierdre. Has anyone told you that lately? I do. You're a very special and good person and I love you for that. You're my sister. Maybe the baby will be another girl and there will be another girl."

"That would be nice, I guess."

"You don't sound very excited about the baby."

"Another baby," she said again.

"There's going to be a lot more babies still, if I know Mother."

"I know."

"Ninety-four!"

"Good eye, brother," Avery said, rubbing Kasimir's shoulders some more.

"He'll be here. I'm going in now. Do you want to watch Kasimir finish or come in with me?"

"With you."

I walked back to the house. A quick look back showed that Kasimir missed the next shot, but Keef, Darcy, Drake, Avery, and

CHAPTER FOUR

Jheffery all cheered him on and reminded him what a great shooter he was.

I took Dierdre to the nursery and sat next to Sindee with Dierdre on my lap.

“So the very next day,” Sindee was saying, “the little fa’thril pup climbed out to the very edge of the branch and perched. He said, ‘I’m not going to fly anymore. I’m not going to climb, and I’m certainly not going to sing.’ He sat there all day and into the night, resting and daydreaming. He saw all the other young pups from his pack sailing from tree to tree, gathering Geth’el vines and weaving their nests, but the lazy fa’thril yawned and said, ‘I don’t need to build. I can sleep in branches or visit my friends. After all, I’m a very likable fa’thril and someone will let me share a nest whenever I need.’”

Suddenly, Mother came running into the room. “Nyssa, bring your magic.” Her hair had come loose, her sleeves were rolled up, and I could see blood on her arms. She didn’t wait for me but rushed back upstairs.

I felt a ripple of fear and uncertainty run through me, freezing me in place. Dierdre was looking up at me with fear and confusion.

I heard Anna scream from all the way down there.

I swung Dierdre down to the floor and suddenly found myself halfway up the front stairs before I started thinking again. My backpack was still on the bed. I ran to my room, grabbed it, and ran down the hall.

Anna was holding onto the brass headboard and had already bent the thick horizontal bar across the top. She was rolling from side to side and panting horribly. Mother was holding onto her shoulders, trying to keep her still.

Rebecca was kneeling on the bed by the woman’s feet and was yelling to her, “Anna, you’ve got to stop pushing, honey, right now.”

Anna was delivering a footling breech. One foot was visible and Anna had already torn slightly.

Her contraction stopped and Rebecca maneuvered the baby’s leg, trying to rotate the child to present the other leg.

I grabbed my pouch and belt out of the backpack and threw the pack aside. I felt my heart beating rapidly as my fingers found a pinch of mold for Papa’s Healing spell. I wished he were home. Anna was probably damaged even more inside, but if I healed her now, it might constrict the baby. I knew I had to wait.

CHAPTER FOUR

She began another contraction and her face contorted into a silent scream. This time the other foot became visible and Rebecca tugged on it, bringing the leg out. She held them together as the baby was delivered out to its abdomen. It was another girl.

Rebecca held the baby's feet with her right hand and with the left began to gently pull out a length of the umbilical cord, which had wrapped around to the back of the baby. Then she pushed on Anna's abdomen to determine the position of the arms and waited for the next contraction.

"Nyssa, bring me a towel."

I stepped around the bed, picked up a clean towel, and gave it to Rebecca. She wrapped it around the baby and put her hands on its hips.

"Come on, Anna. We need another push here."

We waited a few seconds with no push.

"Anna? Can you push for me?"

Anna's breath quickened and she didn't have to push on her own, for the next contraction came very strongly. Rebecca pulled down on the baby's torso. When a shoulder became visible, she lifted the baby up and to the side so the arm had room to free itself. Then she grabbed the baby's feet and put the towel aside as the second shoulder and arm emerged along with a piercing outcry from Anna.

Rebecca held the baby face down. The contraction stopped.

"She's not stretched, Ivy. With her labor coming early and then delivering feet first, she's tight as a drum."

"What do you mean?" I asked, "I thought everything was going to be okay."

I moved back to the other side of the bed and waited nervously in the thick silence.

The next contraction began, but the baby didn't move.

Rebecca held the feet up to position the head in the birth canal.

Anna breathed in gasps and cried out as the small tear grew, bringing a bright red stream of blood onto the sheets. Still, the head didn't emerge. The umbilical cord, now pinned by the baby girl's neck, became constricted.

"Push, Anna."

Anna opened her eyes; they showed a glassy detachment from the fear and pain she was feeling.

"Push!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The sheet below was becoming soaked in a puddle of blood from Anna's injury, which would very likely become even worse before this was through. The head still didn't seem to have moved. Rebecca tried to work the head out but the contraction stopped and Anna fell back against Mother, worn out and frightened.

This was like some nightmare hallucination. As Rebecca moved the baby gently around, the tiny girl's hands dragged through the pool of blood. Mother continued to support Anna's shoulders and hold her head.

"Anna, do not stop pushing!" Rebecca cried out.

The baby jerked in Rebecca's hands.

"She's trying to breathe. Anna, push now, or your baby is going to die!"

Anna tried, the poor darling. She tried so very hard, despite the agony from her birth wound and the knowledge that pushing would make it even worse, but the baby, now suffocating, didn't move.

"Ivy, give me your dagger."

I felt as if my feet were nailed to the floor. I still held the magical material in my hand, and I was ready to begin healing the brave young woman.

I saw the baby's legs kick again as Rebecca positioned the knife on Anna's wound, preparing to cut it wider. The thought was beyond horror: to be trapped in the doorway to life, choked by the very body that had lovingly nurtured and grown you. That image burned itself strongly in my mind. I felt constricted myself, as if I were trapped.

"Stop!" I called out, cursing myself for not thinking sooner.

My fingers felt three sizes too large as I fumbled with the drawstring and felt around inside the pouch.

Anna tried to turn away and Rebecca yelled, "Hold her down. Nyssa, grab her leg!"

I knelt on the floor, dropped my belt, and turned the bag upside down. Finally, my fingers were able to grasp a small cotton ball. I stood up and began chanting to summon a Shrink spell. I reached past Rebecca and laid my hand upon my tiny sister's back just as I spoke the final word. The material was absorbed into the structure of the spell, and the baby shrank to half her size. She came out crying in a high pitch that sounded almost like a bird's song.

The umbilical cord had not reduced with her except at the very end where it was connected to her little purple tummy. She was still covered with fluid and some of her biological mother's blood, but

CHAPTER FOUR

even so, I could see a thick crown of strawberry blond hair on her miniature head. I focused on the image of the spell as it reflected in my mind and twisted it to cancel its effects, returning my new little sister to normal.

“Yes, Nyssa. Good.” Rebecca said.

Then she pinched off the umbilical cord, cut it, and took the crying baby over to the washbasin on the table to clean out her mouth and nose.

Mother was cradling Anna, who was holding her hands low over her abdomen.

“Bring over some pillows, Nyssa, and then begin the Healing spells,” Mother said quietly.

I walked to the other side of the room and picked up the pillows that had been thrown aside. Then Anna began moaning again.

Mother pressed her hand onto the woman’s abdomen and then looked up to Rebecca. “Twins. And the other one is coming quick.”

Rebecca looked over her shoulder from the table where she was finishing wrapping up the first baby. “She can’t. If she delivers now, it’ll rip her in two.” She hurriedly wrapped the baby girl and set her in the bassinet and then went back to her position in front of Anna, who let out another horrid scream with a voice that was almost gone.

More blood flowed onto the sheet. I dropped to the floor again and looked through the pile.

“That’s good, Anna. Don’t push. Nyssa, we don’t have much time,” Rebecca insisted.

I picked up the clump of mold, tore off a small piece, and cast the first Healing spell. I saw her wound begin to knit back together. After the second spell, I could see no evidence of the tear, but still I cast two more to make sure any internal damage was repaired. Papa could have done it all with one spell.

Rebecca rubbed Anna’s legs. “Just a couple of good pushes and you can rest.”

Mother moved completely onto the bed and sat behind Anna, propping her up and holding her hands.

Anna was breathing hard and was obviously exhausted. I went over to the washbasin, dipped a rag in the water, and took it to Mother, who wiped off Anna’s face.

“Thank you, Nyssa. It’s okay, Anna. We can take a little break here.”

CHAPTER FOUR

They waited for a few moments. Mother continued to stroke Anna's hair and caress her cheek. Rebecca supported her legs in a comfortable birthing position. I sat on the bed next to her and rubbed her legs softly.

We waited that way, patiently. I think we would gladly have waited for hours in that same position if necessary while Anna rested with her eyes closed.

After only a couple more short moments, Anna inhaled and gritted her teeth. Mother quickly reached down and took hold of her free hand, interlocking their fingers.

"That's a good girl," Rebecca said. "Let it happen."

Anna began panting quickly and then grunted and pushed. I saw Mother wince just a little as her hands were crushed in Anna's grip, but she didn't do anything to distract her.

"That's good, Anna. Real good. Give it a good push. Get it out of there."

The head started to appear, presenting normally this time. The contraction stopped and the second baby recessed back into the birth canal.

"A couple more just like that, Anna."

We waited again, comforting Anna, waiting with her. The next contraction came and I watched as the baby's head slowly became visible again, pushing its way into the world. Soon Rebecca was supporting its head and I saw the face of the child.

"I see a shoulder," Rebecca prompted. "Come on, Anna. Another good push."

Anna started taking short breaths but progressed to deeper and deeper breaths until she gasped in a lungful and held it for her last big push.

Only a tiny whine escaped from her when the baby's shoulders pushed out. Then the rest of the body slipped out quickly and easily into Nanny Rebecca's gentle hands. She wiped the baby's face and then patted him strongly on the side and rubbed his chest, but he resisted that first breath.

"This one's a boy. Wake up, baby," Rebecca said. She rubbed him a little more vigorously but ended up having to smack him sharply on the legs. That shocked him — both his eyes and his mouth opened and he let out a healthy scream.

Mother came around and tended to the afterbirth while Rebecca cut the boy's cord and took him to the table to be cleaned up. Anna was laying back clutching a pillow to her breast with her eyes closed.

CHAPTER FOUR

I knelt on the floor, gathered up my supplies, and took them over to my backpack, which I had thrown across the room. Then I went back to the bed, sat down, and put my hand on Anna's shoulder. I leaned down and asked, "Do you need anything, Anna?"

She was still for a moment. Then she shook her head gently, releasing tears that flowed from her closed eyes onto her round cheeks.

I stroked her head while the others continued working with the boy and with her. Then Rebecca took the babies out of the room. Mother never let the biological mothers have a chance to bond with the child. It seemed cruel to immediately take the baby that they had carried for the past nine months, but Mother said that it was more cruel to let them get attached to the baby and then have to leave it.

Mother carried over the basin and a rag to help Anna get cleaned up.

"Nyssa, send up Sera. We need new sheets and fresh traveling clothes."

I bent down and kissed Anna on the cheek and then got up, picked up my backpack, and left, closing the door behind me.

Rebecca was in the hallway, waiting for me. I looked into the bassinet and saw the two tiny miracles.

"I'm very proud of you, Nyssa."

"I was so scared, Rebecca."

"We all were. I'm very glad you were here, Nyssa."

She put her arm around me and said, "I want you to hold her."

She set the bassinet down, picked up the girl, and let me cradle her on my left arm. I stroked her head and listened to her tiny breaths. Her clear eyes stared upward at me, not really seeing me but perhaps sensing me.

Rebecca picked up the boy and said, "Let's introduce them to their family."

There was a crowd of family and staff in the downstairs hallway.

"It all turned out okay," I announced. "Anna is well, and we have a girl and a boy."

"Just like us," Darcy said.

As they were all crowding around looking at the new babies, I saw Papa arrive on the transport platform.

CHAPTER FIVE

Papa walked up quietly behind the rest of the group and said playfully, "Whose baby is that?"

Dierdre ran to him and put her arms up.

He picked her up and she told him, "Look, Father. Two babies. Like me and Darcy."

"Twins? How wonderful."

Kasimir tugged on his robe and said, "I shot the brick a hundred times."

"How's the work coming along, Dad?" Jheffery asked.

"Quite good, actually."

"Daddy, I shot the brick a hundred times."

"What are their names?" Dierdre wanted to know.

"We haven't decided yet."

"Sindee is here too, Father," Avery interjected into the melee of greeting. "I'll go get her."

"Daddy, guess what," Kasimir demanded, still tugging Papa's robe.

Jheffery said, "There's more trouble with the Merchants. Sindee thought Mother could help."

"I like the names Doris and David. That way we're all Ds."

"Daddy!"

He knelt down to listen to Kasimir.

"I hit the brick. I did it a hundred times."

"How wonderful. I'm very proud."

Darcy wanted to know, "Did you bring us something home this time, Father?"

He stood and answered, "I'm afraid not."

"Or maybe Linda and Larry."

Sindee followed Avery back from the nursery carrying Charles and Evan. Sera came out with them and went up the back stairs. Sindee squeezed past me and said, "Merishona gooto, Estus-isha."

"Greetings, Sindee," he answered.

"Sindee showed me a new game," Darcy announced loudly.

Papa put Dierdre down and then she and Darcy started asking Jheffery to play basilisk tag outside. Avery and Drake, for some

CHAPTER FIVE

inexplicable reason, started taking turns punching each other in the arm. Keef even contributed to the frenzy by reaching around Sindee to tickle Evan to make him laugh and squeal.

I held my tiny baby sister close to me and stood away from the commotion. It seemed very strange to me that everyone turned their attention away from their new brother and sister so quickly. Upstairs, Anna was still resting from the terrible ordeal we had all gone through, and nobody cared. Like Dierdre had said, it was just another baby.

Rebecca came to me and said, "Let me take her, Nyssa, so they can rest."

She had the boy on one arm and reached the other out to me.

"I want to hold her, please. A little longer?"

I wanted Papa to see. I wanted him to be proud of me for saving her little life.

"Not too long. No more than a few minutes."

I waited while Papa and Sindee talked about the nothings of her three-week journey by horse and how different everything would be when we could transport anywhere.

Jheffery finally told Avery to take the younger kids into the kitchen for some cookies, and then he drifted the conversation to some of the battles Sindee had been in, discussing technique and strategy.

Evan started crying and Papa took him from Sindee.

She offered to show Jheffery some elven warm-up exercises, and when they left, Papa finally noticed me standing by the wall. He brought Evan over to me and said, "He's sopping wet."

He put Evan out for me to take, but I didn't. Instead I held my new sister closer to me. He put Evan against me, trying to drop him into my arms.

"Nyssa, take him. He's all wet."

"Look at her, Papa. Isn't she beautiful?"

"You shouldn't be carrying her around. Here, take them both back to the nursery."

"I was there when she was born, Papa. It was remarkable."

"Nyssa, pay attention. He's going to ruin my robe."

I looked up. Poor Evan was crying and kicking his legs while Papa held him at arm's length, as if his son were a rotten cabbage or something.

Normally, I would have just taken him, but there was something about that image that felt very wrong to me. It brought a kind of

CHAPTER FIVE

clarity to the feelings I had been struggling with lately. It was as if Papa's family had become just another place for him to visit. The children were treating him the way they treated Duke P'Tantis during his rare and special visits. I wanted Papa to take care of Evan. I wanted him to want to do it. I couldn't take him, and I couldn't bear to watch Papa hold his own son with such disgust and impatience. I felt him drifting away from us and I suddenly felt scared.

"I can't, Papa. I have to go."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Papa."

I turned and walked back to the nursery and put the girl down next to her brother. I heard Evan crying as Papa brought him in and gave him to Sera's niece, Crysta, who had come to work for us earlier that summer. I hurried out of the room and ran up the back stairs.

I heard Papa calling after me, but I went quickly to my room and locked the door.

A moment later I heard him knock angrily and demand, "Nyssa, come out of there. What was that all about?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Go away, please."

"Talk about what?"

I sat on the bed and imagined that he would apologize for not being there and for being rude to me this afternoon and for treating me like a wet nurse instead of his daughter.

I remembered another time when I was twelve, near the end of summer when he was going back to the Damned Kingdom, without me that time. I ran up to my room and locked it, much as I had just done. When he found the door locked on that far away day, he called out to me gently, saying, "Nyssa, my sweet, please come out."

I didn't want to see him. I was afraid that he would go away and get hurt again and I wanted to get it over with so I could mourn his absence and the adventures I would miss. I pulled the covers over my head. By dinnertime he would be gone. I imagined him walking away, saying goodbye to everyone else, and then disappearing, leaving a Papa-shaped hole in the air.

I felt something on the bed.

I pulled the covers down and saw a small wildcat sitting on the other pillow.

"Don't be afraid," the cat said.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Why not?" It seemed perfectly normal to be afraid of a talking wildcat, but I had seen many strange things since moving from the girls' home.

"I'm a friend of your father's."

He stood up and walked gently toward me, the way cats do. He purred loudly and nudged me with his head until I petted him.

"Your father is very upset that you won't give him a decent goodbye."

The cat lay down next to me, and I put my arm around him.

"He should take me with him."

"You know he's not doing this to make you angry or sad, but because he thinks it's best for you."

"I know, but he's wrong."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. You must trust him, Nyssa. He loves you very much and will always do what he feels is best for you."

I didn't know what to say.

"Go to him, Nyssa. If you hurry, you might catch him before he leaves."

The cat got up and sat beside me.

"Go to him, Nyssa. Don't make him travel that hard land tasting every day the bitterness of your denial."

"It's too late."

"Not if you hurry."

He jumped off the bed and ran to the window and jumped out.

I thought of Papa riding alone and feeling sad because I didn't send him off with good wishes.

I ran to the door and opened it.

"Papa!"

He was right there. I ran into his embrace, and he picked me up and held me close. He carried me downstairs and I said goodbye with everyone else.

He never mentioned the episode in the bedroom. As I got older and learned the craft, I recognized how he had used various spells to transform himself and quickly move around. It was a wonderful and special thing he did for me that day.

This time he wasn't knocking gently. He was pounding the door with his fist.

"Nyssa, damn it. Open the door!" he yelled as he pounded his fist, rattling the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

Maybe I should have let him in, but I found a selfish pleasure at him knocking on my door, asking me to let him in after he had shut me out. I felt there was a bit of justice in that.

He knocked loudly again and said, "I know you're upset. Were you at the Academy house today? Damn it, girl, answer me!"

I wanted him to stay, but not as he was. How could he disappear for weeks at a time and expect me to share my fears and feelings just because he yelled at me to do so? I knew my mood would pass. I just needed to be alone for a while.

"It's nothing, Papa. I'm just tired. That's all. I'm fine. Please go."

I saw the lock move from the Open spell he must have thrown. The door swung back and he came in saying, "Nyssa? Why did you run off like that?"

I stepped forward and yanked the door open as my troubled thoughts transformed into anger.

"Get out of here! How dare you come in here like that!"

The words pounded silently within my head: don't make me say it, Papa. Just go.

He didn't. He tried to put his hand on my shoulder, but I knocked it away.

"Do you think I'm still a little girl and that you can just walk in here whenever you feel like it?"

"Nyssa, I don't understand."

"Of course not. It's not like you pay attention to what goes on around here anymore."

I heard myself speaking the bitter words that had haunted me but which, until now, I had managed to keep in the dungeons of my mind where evil and angry thoughts should be banished until they wither and die. These thoughts had not gone away, even though I tried to be good and let compassion and patience rule my heart. They kept coming back to me, making me afraid, making me feel alone.

"What's got into you, Nyssa? I'm sorry I'm late, okay? I'm sorry, and I'm here now. I didn't know I had to clear my comings and goings with you."

I waited, not answering.

"Why did you act that way downstairs? You were going to say something. What?"

I waited some more, looking out the window, ashamed to meet his eyes.

"Answer me!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Hearing my words made me feel as childish as I must have sounded.

"You're away all the time. There was a problem with Anna's birth. It turned out okay, but just barely. You could have helped. Today, when I visited, I thought..."

My voice trailed off but he finished for me.

"Is that all? You thought I could just drop everything and have a Nyssa party day? Well, surprise, Nyssa. I can't carry you around on my hip everywhere I go. One minute you tell me you're all grown up, and the next you act like this. That kind of silly pouting is something I would expect from Dierdre."

"Don't do that, Papa. I hate it when you do that."

"Do what?"

"I am not Dierdre. I am not five years old. Don't try to twist my words around like that. You know what I meant."

"They're your words."

I didn't answer him.

"Well, I don't know what your problem is, but I don't have time for this."

"Listen to yourself," I pleaded. "I shouldn't be surprised. Just sweep it away. You don't have time. You haven't had time for a long time."

We were both quiet for an uncomfortable amount of time, standing apart, angry, with our harsh words hanging like a fog between us. I think we were waiting for it to lift, but it didn't. It stayed there, souring the air.

Then he turned abruptly and started to leave, but at the door he stopped, turned around, and walked back to me and said, "Don't you ever try to tell me what I do and don't care about. Do you hear me? You have no idea what I care about and it's not your place to worry about it. Leave it alone."

"She almost died, Papa, because you weren't here."

"No!" he yelled. "I cannot be everywhere for everyone. You were here. You took care of her because that is what a magician does. Do you think you've been training all these years just to put on shows and float around the house? Do you think I could work at the Academy unless I knew you were here in case one of the kids got hurt? But you don't see that. You want me to entertain you and hold your hand and tell you what a good little girl you are just for doing what you're supposed to do."

"Yes! Don't you have time for even that?"

CHAPTER FIVE

"Nyssa, have you noticed these other children running around? You're not my only responsibility."

"Oh, those are your children? The ones I take care of? The ones I teach, and kiss good night? The ones who come to me when they're upset or scared? I've seen them. I see them a lot more than you do. And yes, I take care of them if they get hurt. I change their diapers and I punish or hug them when they need it, and when one of my brothers or sisters is hurting inside, or is sad, I have never told any of them to go away, I don't have the time."

He started to answer me, but stopped himself. He put his hand to his mouth and then ran it up to his forehead and massaged his brow. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. I looked at him. I saw his face and shoulders and I noticed how thin he had become lately. Tired. He looked so much older than the spry, merry traveler that I used to know.

I turned away, walked slowly to the window, and sat down on the large, bench-like sill.

"You can go now," I said, talking softly to the evening air.

I heard him walk to the door, but again he stopped.

I looked over at him. He stood in the shadows of the low sun that shone through the window and lit half my room in a deep glow. Light from the hallway came through the half-opened door and he stood between them, a dark silhouette, a shadow in the shape of my father.

"I really don't need this from you now, Nyssa."

I looked away, out to the evening sky, hearing the night birds sing and the crickets buzz, feeling the wind carry the moist, cool scent of the sea.

"It's been especially difficult lately."

A sturdy wind rustled the leaves, making them hiss, bringing me the sweet, tangy scent of the evergreens and the Alayas bloom, carried by the sea air through a sky that had turned that magical orange and purple shade of twilight.

"Something I didn't count on."

"There's always something else," I told the crickets. "Something more important."

The clouds reflected the low sun and burned with orange fire. I saw one of the golems walk through the trees along the perimeter of the grounds, just inside the invisible wall, the wall that kept bad things out and us safe from the world, the wall that was built from Papa's fear and his knowledge of the evils of the world. We all

CHAPTER FIVE

huddled safely behind his walls every day and he was still building them, alone in his laboratory, new walls to keep away the fires, the famine, the disasters that afflicted so many others.

There was a knock on the door and Mother stepped in.

"I should have known you would be up here. Nyssa, may I steal him away from you?"

"I'll see you at supper, Papa."

"They're so precious. Have you seen them?"

"Not yet."

"I suppose Nyssa told you all about how she helped with Anna's breach."

"Enough. I understand she did what needed to be done."

"That she did."

Mother took him by the hand and led him away, leaving me alone with the crickets and the twilight. I sat there for quite some time while I watched the sky fade to violet darkness. The wind picked up a bit and brought cool air into my room. On another night, I might have cast a fly spell and soared through the night air, chasing fireflies. That night I had no such desire. I let the room grow darker without opening the light cabinet. The light from the crystal glow globe seeped out where the sliding door no longer fit snugly in its track, sending a familiar shaft of blue-white light against the ceiling. I picked up a throw pillow and held it to me as I tried to convince myself that our angry words would easily fade. I felt bad about fighting with him. It felt so strange, but he was right. I couldn't expect him to take care of me the way he used to. I think part of my anger came from realizing that there was something else I wanted besides to spend time with him. It was very much like I had forgotten to do something very important and I felt a nagging restlessness to finish it, even though there was nothing to do, nothing to wait for. The feeling hung there, dragging my cheeks into a quiet frown.

I took a deep breath and exhaled explosively. That helped some. The golem walked by again, marching relentlessly, tirelessly, protecting us all.

As much as I felt an urgency to do something, anything, I didn't really want to do anything but sit and brood. So often, we play little fantasies in our head, complete with sights, smells, and conversation. If I were studying, or reading to one of the kids, or just thinking about what I was going to do the next day, I would not

CHAPTER FIVE

have heard the silence or the merry voices that floated out to the faded, purple night to rest upon my lonesome ears.

I could hear the sound of my own breathing. It seemed so loud. I heard the faint ringing in my ears from the blood rushing through my temples. In the hollow of my melancholy, the crickets sounded different, as did the laughter and ruckus of the children, as if a different part of me were hearing them, a more primitive part of me, the part that hears sounds as we're falling asleep, the guardian of our dreams. That part of me felt what I needed even as it mocked my despair and laughed at my self-pity.

I had learned long ago to punch such emotions in the gut when they tried to creep out from behind the dark shadows of my life, so I abruptly stood up, tossed the pillow aside, and walked out into the relative brightness of the hallway to escape my pathetic mood.

I stopped at Anna's room.

It was already empty and cleaned up. I entered and stood in the middle of the darkening room that seemed unnaturally still. Anna was probably resting in one of the staff rooms downstairs, doing whatever one does after giving birth to twins, never to see them again as your own. I thought for a moment that I would visit her, but what could I say? Don't cry? I'm sorry? What does it feel like to have such emptiness in your womb and in your soul on the same day? Don't you know that they will wonder about you and miss you? As hard as it may be, it was her decision to make and she and was going to be well paid, much more than she expected since she gave us two. She would be gone early tomorrow, just like all the others, and the babies would be here, never to know her.

With my head filled with disjoint and reluctant sadness, I returned to my room, closed the door, and slid the light cabinet open. I went to the closet and selected one of my favorite gowns, the dark blue one with flowers and magic symbols embroidered with fine orange thread at the hem and sleeves, a gift from Papa on my sixteenth birthday. I added a necklace of sapphires and emeralds, but after putting on my white shoes, I traded it for a simple string of baby pearls.

I didn't quite know what to do with my hair. I didn't want to weave it up again, but I also didn't want to let it fall all over the place. I gathered it back from my forehead and ears and tied a quick ribbon around it for a ponytail. Then I twisted it and carefully coiled it into a bun and pulled the end through the center, making a knot that would hold at least through dinner.

CHAPTER FIVE

I would have to face him and pretend that nothing had happened.

After a conscious effort to put away my frown, I stood up from my dressing table and went out to the hall and down the front stairs. When I got to the dining room, I found that I was one of the last to arrive. I walked around the table and took my seat at the end, next to Drake.

Mother and Papa always sit at opposite ends of the table. I sit at the end closer to the kitchen, to Papa's right, and Jheffery sits at the other end to the right of Mother's seat. Drake sits next to me, then Keef, Charles, and Rebecca with baby Evan, who sits in a high chair on Mother's left. Following around the table, to Jheffery's right, are Dierdre, Darcy, Kasimir, and Avery, who sits across from me. Tonight there was an extra place between Jheffery and Mother for Sindee.

All were present except for Jheffery, Avery, Sindee, and Father. I took a piece of honey bread while we waited for them. Soon, Avery, Jheffery, and Sindee came in, laughing quietly. They separated and took their places at the table. Jheffery held Sindee's chair and then took his seat next to her.

"Good evening, Avery. What's the joke?" I asked.

He glanced at Jheffery, who turned away and pretended to examine his silverware.

"Just fighter stuff, sis, you know," said Avery as he sat down.

"Well, I'm not sure I would know, not being a member of that guild."

Sindee spoke up and confessed, "I'm afraid I told to them a little story about your first experience with leaf gliding in Dormelle."

"Oh."

"What's that?" Kasimir asked, on behalf of all the curious little faces around the table.

"It's a thing some of the more daring elves do." Sindee explained. "They climb up the branches of the Ecentilla trees and find a large leaf. Do you know about the Ecentilla trees?"

"It's where the elves live," Drake offered.

"That's right. They're much bigger than any tree you have ever seen, and their leaves are as big as this table. Well, almost. And they're shaped like this."

She held out her hand with the thumb and little fingers extended out to the side.

"These are like wings," she said, wiggling her thumb and little finger.

CHAPTER FIVE

"You can sit in the leaf and guide it as it falls, soaring like a bird, almost."

Then Kasimir said, "Did Nyssa do that?"

"Yes, but with Uncle Garmon. She rode on his back as he climbed way up and found a large leaf. Do you remember that, Nyssa?"

"I certainly do. The leaf felt so soft, like velvet. I sat down and my heart was pounding and I was shaking all over, but he sat down behind me, put his arms around my waist, and asked if I was ready. Well, I wasn't quite sure what we were going to do. He had asked if I wanted to do something fun and I said yes. So, when he said, 'Are you ready', I said, 'For what?' He took out his sword and cut the stem and we fell and fell and I screamed."

Sindee continued, saying, "Mother and I were visiting with an elder grandfather when we saw them dropping high above. I think our entire family heard Nyssa scream. Of course we weren't alarmed, because Garmon was holding the wing parts down, which is what you do when you want to descend fast. They dropped some more and finally Garmon let go of the sides. They caught the air and he soared around for a while," she started to laugh again, "but Nyssa kept screaming and screaming."

Then Mother added, "And screaming and screaming," making everyone else at the table laugh with them. "He must have circled the tree five or six times and every time we would hear Nyssa's little voice grow louder and louder. Then they would pass and in a few minutes, here she came again. It was a very piercing, loud scream, I do remember."

"I don't remember screaming," I pointed out. I didn't intend that to be funny, but it apparently was.

Sindee took over, saying, "He finally glided in and landed on the front courtyard platform, where everyone was gathering for supper. He skidded to a stop and Nyssa sat there screaming, 'Papa, Papa!'"

I didn't find the story particularly amusing, but my family certainly did.

"At supper, Mother introduced her by saying, 'And this one you have all met already, or at least heard.'"

"Why didn't you just cast a Float spell?" asked Drake.

"That was before I could conjure."

Then Jheffery said, "Garmon offered me a ride, but the way Nyssa had hollered, I thought it hurt or something so I ran away

CHAPTER FIVE

from him.”

Avery said, “Besides that, Nyssa, was it fun?”

I shook my head no.

No one spoke for a couple of minutes as we waited for our father to arrive. He hadn’t been home for a couple of weeks, so this would be a special dinner.

“Keef,” I said, looking past Drake, “were you able to help Drake with his minor key arrangement that he’s been working on?”

Keef looked down at Drake and said to him, “Tell her, brother.”

Drake then turned to me and said, “It’s all done. Keef did most of the countermelody, but I did all the primary harmonies. He said I did very well.”

“That’s very good. I can hardly wait to hear it.”

A couple minutes later, Papa finally came through the dining room doors and took his place next to me.

He looked down the table, smiled, and said, “It’s sure nice to be back for a regular meal. I’m sorry I held things up.”

“Wonderful,” Mother said as she rang the small bell.

The girls brought out the evening meal and began serving. Tonight they served one of Papa’s favorite meals: thick vegetable stew and breaded shark steak with a lemon sauce, served with a tart thistle wine. This probably meant that there would be blueberry cheesecake and sugared almonds for desert.

“Exquisite,” he proclaimed. “I’ve been living on the school’s cafeteria which, while sustaining, lacks the finesse of your kitchen, Ivy.”

Of course Mother had no more to do with the kitchen than Papa, but she accepted the compliment.

“How is your training going, Jheffery?” he asked.

“Okay, I guess. Sharbra says I’m a natural, but it gets boring always doing drills and exercises with straw dummies.”

“Better straw dummies than a superior swordsman trying to run you through.”

“That’s what Sharbra says, especially whenever I start making mistakes, but he also says I’ll learn more if I see some real action.”

“Believe me, Jheffery, real action isn’t all the glamour you might think. It’s quite different when you have to look a man in the eye as you’re slicing the life from his body, and worse yet if he’s cutting your own heart out.”

“But I don’t have to do that. Duke P’Tantis said that some of the trolls are regrouping in the Damned Kingdom, and he might need a

CHAPTER FIVE

hearty group to go clean them out again.”

“Not until Sharbra, your mother, and P’Tantis think you’re good enough.”

“I almost am.”

“Tell that to the troll as he’s munching on your bloody stumps, son.”

“Gentlemen,” Mother interrupted, “must you discuss bloody stumps at the table?”

“Of course not, dear. We just prefer it,” replied Papa, to the amusement of the family.

We continued eating as he spoke to each of his children in turn around the table, starting with Avery. They all got to tell them the latest thing they had learned or done. Kasimir bragged again about hitting the brick one hundred times, but when Papa asked him why he was doing that, he didn’t answer.

“I heard it was punishment for hitting Nyssa with your slingshot. Is that true?”

“Yes, Father,” he answered very quietly.

“Kasimir, I can’t believe you would attack a defenseless young woman. What a brute. Next time, if you want to start some trouble, pick on someone who really knows how to take care of herself, like your mother.”

The thought made Kasimir turn almost white.

“Or Sindee,” Mother suggested, extending both Kasimir’s discomfort and everyone else’s amusement.

He discussed flowers with Darcy, who had helped Edgar replant the lilies. Then he heard the same story from Dierdre, who had also helped. Drake and Keef told him of the piece they were working on and then he asked me, “And is there anything new with you, Nyssa?”

“Tomorrow I’m going back to see Adrian. I’ve been working on the foundations of some meta-reflexive spells, and I think I’m going to have her help me with the matter phase group.”

“Ah, Nyssa,” he began. “I meant to tell you this earlier. I would rather not have you train with Adrian anymore.”

“What? Why not?”

“I’m just not comfortable having you work with her anymore.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to get into this here. I have my reasons.”

“But you selected Adrian for me. You said she was the best.”

“She was the best for you then, but not any longer.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I met his eyes. They stared back at me unwaveringly. I felt the weight of his determined gaze, but kept looking at him as I said, "Who, then?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll find someone for you."

I stared down at my plate in disbelief.

"What about tomorrow?" I said, not looking up.

"I'll think about it."

"As you wish, Papa," I said for the benefit of the family, but inside I was furious.

Mother rescued me from having to say anything more. "Perhaps now would be a good time to let your father share his good news."

"Ah, yes," he began excitedly. "Yesterday, we finally were able to prove that the power retention problem can be solved by applying a phased spherical ergon field over the platinum etchings. This slows the leakage of the elementals to a logarithmic instead of a geometric loss. What that means is that we now know that we can actually build a working transporter." He paused a moment to take a bite from his shark steak and then continued. "Next week, we are going to start building our first working prototype."

"Will you be gone a lot again, Father?" asked Avery.

"I'm afraid so, but, if you promise to feed me like this, I would be a fool not to come home on the weekends."

"How long do you think it will take to build?" asked Mother.

"Several weeks, I think, to ensure stability against probabilistic fluctuations. Then there must be extensive testing. I'm not going to release it and then have one of them send someone's child into an Etheric Fold."

He sat back and smiled.

"Children, you are going to witness the birth of a new world. It will be hard at first, but believe me, a new era is coming. The world is going to change forever. We'll see the end of hunger, pirates, fighting over land." He paused and a look of distant determination beamed from his eyes. "All sorts of foul-hearted people will be swept away and their powers will be taken from them. It will be a brand-new world and I'm going to give it to you, to everyone. Bring on dessert!"

I wore a fake smile and tried to feel the excitement that Papa brought out in everyone else, but I didn't share their feelings. All I felt was him slipping farther and farther away from us into the depths of his obsession.

CHAPTER SIX

After supper, I slipped away from the dining room and went out through the large front doors.

It was night and the sky was filled with stars and the chilly sea air. My head was filled with childish self-pity and anger. I felt split in two. One of me was angry at being left alone and not acknowledged, and the other realized how childish the first was being.

The front of the Arrenkyle Manor home overlooks a large semi-circular brick courtyard with benches and a hedge that runs along the circumference. A flowering Jenna tree bent its colorful blue and yellow flowering branches over the benches to my right, but its colors were faded in the ghostly gray shades of night.

I crossed the courtyard and descended the wide stone staircase into the moon shadow below. I sat on the bottom step around to the side so I couldn't be seen from the top and listened to the gentle sigh of the wind in the elm trees ahead. I hummed a tune quietly to myself and let the cool night air surround me and carry my soft melody away.

When I felt a hand on my shoulder, I lurched forward and felt a jolt of shock ping through my whole body, leaving me with goosebumps while Jheffery sat there laughing.

"I'm sorry, Nyssa. I've been practicing my shadow walking."

I collected myself and sat back down next to him.

"It's a cold night," I said. "We shouldn't stay out long."

"Yeah. The wind's picking up."

"Feels like it."

I looked up at the stars.

"Nyssa?"

"Hmm?"

"We could talk all night about the weather, like strangers who are trying to pass the time."

"Okay," I answered, not really paying attention.

"Or you could tell me what's bothering you."

"Why?"

"So something is bothering you."

"Maybe."

CHAPTER SIX

"Listen to her. 'Maybe,' she says. I don't want to pry into this if it's, like, deeply personal or profoundly private or something like that. Is it?"

I didn't say anything.

"Is it wonderfully sordid? Tell me!"

"The day I have something sordid to report, I'll probably find myself speechless. What about you? Do you have any sordid tales?"

"More than you, apparently, but we're not talking about me."

"I am. You tell me something, and I'll tell you what's bothering me."

"Let me think. Bargaining with information is very different than bargaining with gold. It's hard to determine the relative values, you see."

"It's up to you. You're the one with the question."

He looked over one shoulder and then the other shoulder before he leaned close to me and said, "I'm engaged in a secret dalliance with Crysta."

"Goodness, Jheffery. You can't do that. If Mother finds out, she will fire that girl, and I don't want to think of what she would do to you! Besides," and this time I looked over my shoulders, "you can't..." I paused again.

"Can't what?" he asked, amused at my hesitation.

"You can't court her."

"Of course not. I have no intention to court her. It's more a game than a tryst, stealing secret kisses, exchanging coy glances. That's all."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Couple months."

"Jheffery, love is not a game."

"Can be."

"What if she falls in love with you? What if she already has?"

"I don't think so," he answered with a knowing chuckle.

"Goodness above, brother. What's to be done with you?"

"Can you blame me? It's so horribly boring and dull and safe here. Don't tell me you haven't noticed the young men Edgar brings in once a month to help with the heavier work. Don't tell me you haven't thought about it."

"Well, sure, I've noticed them. I mean, I've seen them working."

"Maybe I could, say, talk to one of them for you. Arrange a little liaison?"

"No."

CHAPTER SIX

“Hey, Nathan, my sister was wondering if you would meet her for...”

“No!”

“...a little innocent...”

“Jeffery!”

“...tongue dance?”

“Oh, now you’re just being common.”

“I suppose so.”

“Just drop it, please.”

He sat back, took a deep breath, and said, “It sure is getting a bit windy, wouldn’t you say?”

I didn’t answer him.

After a long moment, he said, “Mom said you and Father were arguing. Do you want to talk about it?”

I didn’t know how to start. I felt silly, especially now.

“I was just upset that Papa is taking us all for granted.”

I looked over to him, expecting a cute remark or something, but he just nodded, listening, waiting for me to go on.

“He’s supposed to be here. He’s supposed to be the father of this family, not just a visitor, which is all he is these days. Why does he keep making babies if he doesn’t want to help care for them? No. He leaves that to me, and to Rebecca, and to everyone else. What if I wanted to go somewhere? What if I want to leave for a while? I can’t. I have to be here to be their mother.”

“Their mother?”

“That’s the way it feels sometimes. I know Mother is here and she doesn’t neglect them, but she’s always so... I don’t know.”

“What?”

“I’m trying to think of a word.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Precise. She’s always so precise with them.”

“Okay. So?”

“I just feel that I have to be here, too. To give them something else. Something human, I suppose, because Papa’s never here.”

“I don’t really see that you need to do that, Nyssa, but if you feel that way, I think it’s very generous and sweet. But you don’t have to do it. You’re not their mother.”

“I just think he should be here more.”

“For them, Nyssa, or for you?”

I couldn’t answer him.

“That’s what I thought,” he replied.

CHAPTER SIX

Then he continued, saying, "Nyssa, I'm not trying to be mean, but you've got to stop thinking of yourself as Daddy's Little Princess all the time. It's not doing you any good. You're more than Estus Arrenkyle's daughter. You're smart, talented, pretty, kind. Are you sure you don't want me to set something up?"

"No, thank you!"

"Okay. So is that basically what this is about, or is there another layer, something sinister beyond this?"

"No, that's all of it."

"Well, then." He reached behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, rubbed some of the tension out of my neck, and then leaned in and said, "Considering the relative worth of our exchange of information, I think you owe me a secret, sister."

Then he stood and started up the stairs.

"Are you coming in or do you want to pout some more?"

"I don't suppose you could at least try to be a little sensitive?"

He extended his hand down to me and said, "I'll try. Let's go on in."

"No," I answered, turning away. "I want to pout."

He came back down the steps, stood behind me, put his hands under my arms, and lifted me up.

"Not on my watch. We're missing the stories Sindee is surely telling by now."

When we got to the top of the stairs, I said, "Thank you, Jheffery."

"Just remember that you owe me."

"Well, I'm not going to go cavorting with the staff, so don't wait for that."

"I don't cavort. I may flirt, I may dally, and I might even trifle now and then, but cavorting? Me?"

When we got to the door, I said, "I don't think I'm going to join you."

He stopped and looked at me.

"I'm not going to pout. All right, here's your secret. Papa told me he didn't want me to train with Adrian, but he didn't actually say not to."

"I thought he did."

"No. He said he would think about it, and he didn't say anything about visiting, only training. So I'm going to go find Adrian and ask her why."

CHAPTER SIX

Maybe I wanted to prove something to Jheffery, or to myself. I'm not sure, but I felt that I had to do this, especially after what he had said to me.

"Is that a good enough secret?"

He didn't say anything at first. I think he was wondering whether or not he should try to talk me out of it. Eventually, he said, "Oh, I think so."

"Cover for me?"

"You be careful."

"You're the best."

I kissed him on the cheek and then went in with him. He crossed the foyer and headed off toward the front parlor while I ran up the front stairs and went to my room. I was afraid that if I waited too long, reason would prevail, and I didn't want it to. I quickly tied my component belt around my waist and put my pack onto my shoulders. My summoning chant released the spell. I felt the power working through me and then it was done. I stood for the second time that day on the transporter platform of the Damned Kingdom Magic Academy.

It was dark and silent. I stepped slowly through the empty halls and down to the main library floor that was lit only by the large lantern torches that burned in each of the four corners. I moved through the center of the grand atrium, passing a small group near one lantern, carrying on a lesson or discussion. I went out the front doors into the cold wind that surged by with impatient force. Unless Adrian had a late lesson or some work to do, I knew where she would be.

I took a bat wing out of my pouch and cast a Fly spell. If I had to fight the wind anyway, I might as well save my breath and not rush through all the alleys and pathways. The Fly spell took hold and I willed myself up the side of the library and then flew over the center grove, staying just above the trees. I flew into the roaring wind across the grove and over the riding field and the amphitheater to Merchants' Square. I skimmed past the tops of the buildings and came to the two-story brick structure that housed the blacksmith shop, a stable, and on the second floor, the Brimstone Lounge.

I coasted in and landed in the street as two students were coming from the entrance. There were not many places that a young woman flying from the sky would be met with complete indifference, but my father's Magic Academy was certainly one of

CHAPTER SIX

them. There were always people flying around, changing into any manner of beast, or summoning fire or lightning.

They offered a polite “Good evening,” which I returned.

I opened the door and ducked in out of the relentless wind into the tiny vestibule at the bottom of the narrow wooden stairway that led up to the lounge. The strong smell of burning coal embers from the day’s blacksmith work still filled the air as I hurried up the creaking steps toward the boisterous clamor of the bar.

When I reached the landing at the top of the stairs, I turned to my right and opened the heavy oak door to enter the lounge. Ahead of me and to my left, the long bar ran almost the entire length of the room. In front of that and to my right, there were tables scattered between thick rafters. Ahead of me, across the room, a large fireplace supplied the bar’s heat and light, adding the smell of burning oak and cedar to the already thick aroma of ale and the coal furnace, whose wide chimney rose through the center of the room.

“Hey there, Miss Arrenkyle.”

I turned to the bar in response to the gruff but friendly voice of the blacksmith who tended bar in the evenings and was always kind enough to remember me, even though I hardly ever visited his bar.

“Good evening, Kaleb.”

“Looks like you need something warm. I’ve got coffee and hot tea.”

“Tea, please.”

I sat at the stool at the far end, away from the others, and when he brought my tea I asked, “Is Adrian Blackwing here?”

He nodded his head in her direction.

“Thank you,” I said as I got up.

When I tried to pay him, he pushed back my six coppers and said, “Get the next one after you’ve chased off your chill.”

I thanked him, picked up my change and headed to the far corner. When I stepped around the coal chimney, I saw her there with what looked to be mostly novice wizards. I worked my way around and found a seat at a shadowy table behind her, where I sat down to drink my tea while I waited for a moment to steal her away from her performance.

She was wearing a black cloak, as usual, with the gold and red Blackwing family crest on the left sleeve and the Magicians’ Guild emblem on the right. Against custom and, some would say, good taste, she still wore her fighter’s sword and knives. Adrian, like so many other adventurers, inspired a sense of awe within me. She was

CHAPTER SIX

very casual and gregarious, friendly and open, but could turn instantly fierce and deadly. She had been a fighter before crossing trades to learn Magic with my father in the early days.

I remember when I first saw her. She had been quite badly wounded two days before we arrived at a small village. She and others had been attacked by trolls while escorting travelers through the still-wild woods of the Damned Kingdom. As soon as we entered the town, we were rushed to a cabin where she lay, still in her battle dress, with the blood-soaked bandages that she had managed to make after her escape.

She was very weak but her eyes were still bright and aware. She told the story of her battle with the trolls as Papa cut away the bandages and healed her wounds. I remember wanting so much to be like her: strong, confident, and brave.

We stayed in that village a couple more days because they needed Papa to help Stone Shape some parts for their water mill. I stayed with Adrian much of the time and loved the way that she always spoke to me as if I were an equal, not an awkward eleven-year-old.

When she came to study with Papa and then became a friend of our family, she became like a sister to me, telling me things about fighting, or boys, or the world, with simple candor and without hesitation. I loved her for that and for everything else she did to help Papa realize his dreams.

Those at the table with her fell to a hush as she neared the end of her tale.

“The devils all did Reinard slayâ€”Beneath the moon of Grakin’s dayâ€”He knelt before a body thinâ€”With scars and welts and worms within

“For such were pawns of Grakin godsâ€”Such undead men and demon dogsâ€”He took from him a key and chainâ€”And walked away, despite his pain

“Then toward the East did Reinard goâ€”Through swarms of locus and driving snowâ€”Through desert sands and waters deepâ€”No time for food, no time for sleep

“A day and three he wandered freeâ€”No rest or food, so strong was he. â€”Then in the night, ere all was lostâ€”He found the idol, Gilgamenkost

“He climbed the base and looked aroundâ€”Did they know that he had foundâ€”Their source of power, their source of prideâ€”Their treasure of honor they tried to hide?

CHAPTER SIX

"He placed his hands on the idol's eyeâ€"As firestorms formed within the skyâ€"He yanked and pried till the eye came outâ€"Then swarms of spiders flew all about

"They dived and stung and webbed his headâ€"He waved his arm — they all fell deadâ€"Then one by one, took seven moreâ€"The slaves of Grakin declared their war

"To save their god, the spider kingâ€"Whose eyes were plucked by a small human beingâ€"Before they could hit, before they could fightâ€"He gathered his prize and ran off in the night

"He brought the gems home, the spider god's eyesâ€"The eight stones of Grakin, my grandfather's prizeâ€"Brought home to the Guild, to which they belongâ€"A deed to be told in words and in song.

"He then went home and put on his robeâ€"To rest from the battle that saved the whole globe. â€"He put up his feet and lit up his pipeâ€"And rested right there â€"til the red berries turned ripe."

Those around Adrian's table beat their hands on the table in a form of quiet applause.

"Tell the one about the time you and Reinard stormed Black Dove's obsidian fortress," urged one young man at the table.

"Or the one about Deneb and the stable girl," prompted another.

"That," said Adrian sharply to the last speaker, "my dear friend Grayling, was never intended to be released publicly. I was far too drunk that night."

"How about telling us how Reinard defeated the Snow Goblins?" suggested another man.

I finished the last of my hot tea and then got up and went toward the table.

Grayling saw me and said, "Nyssa? I thought Adrian said you wouldn't be coming by after all."

"Oh?"

Adrian said to him, "I guess I was mistaken." Then to me she said, "Pull up a chair."

When I sat, I saw Adrian look over to Grayling with a tiny nod. He took the cue and said, "Well, Nyssa, I'm afraid I must be rude and leave you already." He stood and bowed slightly in my direction.

"Good evening, Grayling. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I look forward to it."

CHAPTER SIX

When he left, the others at the table took the opportunity to be on their way, and after an exchange of well wishes around the table, I was finally sitting alone with Adrian.

"I think I would like to sit by the fire," I said.

We took a small table directly in front of the large, open hearth.

"Didn't your father tell you not to come?"

"I suppose so."

"I wish you had listened."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Why?”

Adrian was never one to waste words. She answered directly with a gentle but serious tone.

“I’m no longer going to work with your father. I resigned my position at the Academy. I’ll be leaving in a few days.”

“Adrian, why? Why did you do that? Were you going to just leave and hope that I didn’t notice? I don’t understand.”

Adrian didn’t answer at first. Kaleb was walking by, and she asked him for two dragontooth ales and another hot tea for me. When he left, she asked, “Nyssa, how much do you know about your father’s work?”

“I don’t know much about his theories, but he’s working with some new types of magic to build a transporter device that can be operated by anyone.”

“But you probably don’t know why.”

“Of course I do. It’s to get food and supplies where they’re needed without the bandits and pirates always robbing the caravans. The best farmland is now much farther south and they just can’t keep up. People are starving. They need this.”

“It’s not that simple, I’m afraid. Things like this never are. Who’s funding his research?”

“The Merchants’ Guild.”

“Why would they be helping to develop a device that would make their entire shipping industry obsolete?”

“It’s just another form of shipping. They would control it.”

“But why not just build more roads, open up a couple sea ports in the south?”

“Adrian, just tell me what you’re saying.”

“Nyssa, be very careful with what I’m going to tell you. There are many people in the Merchants’ Guild, even high officials, who don’t know this.”

“Okay.”

Before she continued, Adrian cast a Sense Magic spell, in case someone was listening by magical means.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The ales and tea arrived, and when we were alone again, she continued.

"The reason there is so much trouble with shipping is that somebody wants there to be trouble. They're making a market for the transporter. Many of the bandits and pirates are hired by the Merchants' Guild itself to reroute or stop a shipment, worsening the conditions in the cities just so the new device will have to be used."

"It's not even built yet."

"It will be, and by then there will be such hardships that it will take over all shipping overnight."

"Adrian, people are dying. Families are abandoning their lands and moving to the cities because their crops have been failing for the past few years. Is all of that unnecessary?"

"No, Nyssa. There would still be trouble. Killing the High Druid sickened the world tremendously, and there would still be plenty of hardship no matter what, but some help that could have been given has been denied."

"Why, Adrian? Why are they doing this?"

"Nyssa, you must remember that you already know much more about what happened. Most people don't know that the droughts and flooding were caused by the death of the High Druid. Most people believe that it's the result of a war between the Gods. Of course that's only partly true. Most that do know think that our Duke was put on this earth to destroy it. My understanding is that he didn't expect his actions to have such extreme effects."

"I know Papa didn't. That's why he traveled all over trying to help people."

"That's right. They thought it was nothing more than a political coup to place Amanda as the Karl of Pakana. When they did that, Pakana and Tarkna joined their kingdoms and Listrith, once ruler of Tarkna, now officially holds only a prominent social position. However, Listrith still controls the Triples."

"I think I've heard that term before."

"I wouldn't be surprised. What do you know about them?"

"Not much. They're magicians of some kind."

"Each Triple is a member of the Merchants' Guild, a graduate of Listrith's School of Magic, and a Human Supremacist. They're using this opportunity to increase their power."

"How? By hurting innocent people? By making children go hungry? That makes them strong?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

"No, Nyssa! Look beyond your emotional, knee-jerk reaction and see the bigger picture. First they'll open transport centers and everyone will want to go there, but to buy anything, they will first have to deposit their gold, silver, and copper coins with them. They will be given transport credits which they must then use to buy the goods. People will take money out of the banks and deposit it in the transport centers. Then, when several large depositors withdraw their funds from the banks, claiming that the banks are insolvent, many other people will withdraw their money and take it right to the Merchants' Guild. If it doesn't ruin the other banks, it will hurt them badly."

"How do you know this, Adrian?"

"My grandfather, Reinard, is one of the large depositors who will all withdraw their funds on the same day to strike the final blow. And, Nyssa, so is your father."

"Adrian, are you saying that my father is a Human Supremacist?"

"No, Nyssa. He has other reasons for being involved." She paused for a long moment then said, "The Triples painted it up as a marvelous financial opportunity. Of course they didn't point out the implications of the investments, but if you see both sides, as I do, both the banking and the magical research, it falls together, and I don't want to be a part of it."

"Why doesn't he stop? He can stop it. He doesn't have to work for them."

"Then children go hungry and the bandits keep stealing supplies to be held or sold on the black market. It's a tough game."

"Adrian, I don't know what to think. Are you sure? Why would he do this? I can't believe he would be part of all this."

"Think, Nyssa. He is not just a magician or the father of your family. Your father participated in an event that dramatically changed this world, and he's going to do it again."

She stood up to go and I rose and threw my arms around her in a sad embrace.

"I don't want you to go."

"I wish I could tell you more, Nyssa. I'm not leaving our friendship, just my position here, but I will be working against your father's efforts, so I have to go."

"Can I go back to your room with you and help you pack or something?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I'm already moved out. My grandfather's staying at my place. He's going to take over some of my work until someone permanent can be found. All that's left is for me to ride away into the night. Go home, Nyssa. Go to sleep and put it out of your mind. If you trust me at all, go home now."

Then she kissed my cheek and left me alone at the table by the fire. I watched her all the way to the door, waiting for her to turn back one more time, but she didn't. She went through the heavy door and it closed behind her.

I turned back and stared through the flickering orange flames that washed my anxiety with burning indifference. I felt so alone. How long could I go on feeling so empty and useless? I wanted so much for someone else to understand how I was feeling inside, to at least try to understand how desperately I wanted something more. I wanted sympathy, a kind ear, but there was no one. Not only was my Papa not with me, even when we were together, but now he was even more like a stranger to me.

Again, like so many times before, I started to push away my feelings, to turn and look the other way, leaving the fear and sadness behind me where I couldn't see it. Why did I feel responsible for everything? Why did I have to be the one to take care of everyone else when there was no one to hold me and make everything better for me the way I did for Dierdre and the other children?

I faced the fire and closed my eyes, feeling the heat on my cheeks, feeling the weight of my body pressing on the wooden chair. I'd been in a cage my whole life, letting no one in, trusting no one with my love, keeping the world out and my feelings inside, deep inside. I loved my family, but I never really let them in, not the way I should have.

I had let Papa in, and then he outgrew me even though I still needed him. I had let Adrian in, but she was always busy with her own affairs and now she had chosen them over me. Jheffery couldn't understand, or didn't want to. Mother would think me weak for feeling this way. At least that's how it felt to me. I had been so strong for so long, feeling alone and isolated even amidst so much love and family.

"I can't do this very much longer," came the words in a silent whisper.

I wanted to be seven again, but this time with my real family and not in some cold orphanage that taught me to turn off my feelings. At least, I wanted to be with my papa the way it used to be

CHAPTER SEVEN

when he chased away the dragons and trolls and I felt safe and special.

Who was that man who filled little Nyssa's head with hope and fire? Where did he go, and why was he still chasing the world instead of taking care of me? Why did he pick me if he was going to get tired of being my papa? I wished that he had left me alone in the first place. Who knows where I might be now instead of feeling so alone, wondering how I was going to keep pretending that I was happy? I had to be strong for everyone else, and I hated that. What else was there to do? As usual, I could count only on myself. I pulled my cheeks back, forcing a fake smile as I put my sadness back in its box and locked it away out of sight.

I opened my eyes and looked around the bar, which was nearly empty now. Kaleb was wiping down the tables. His back was to me so I decided to leave quickly, hoping I wouldn't have to speak to him or anyone else.

I hurried over to the door, descended the dark, narrow staircase, and then walked out into the windy night.

I took the Transport wand and held it in my hand, feeling its heaviness, sensing the aura of its magical potential, but I could barely stand the thought of going back home. Going back would be like a slave locking up her own shackles after being free, not that I was ever free. I decided to spend the night at Academy Manor and to not worry about whether or not anyone would worry about me.

After hearing Adrian explain the things my father was doing I thought again about Anna and the other women whose wombs he had prostituted for children that he was too busy to care for, and now it seemed so wrong, so selfish. I knew that when I returned home there would still be only me to salve my sorrows. Home seemed like a very far-away and strange place.

I knew I was being irrational. Maybe I could confide in Rebecca, or even Sindee, but it was the way of the Arrenkyle family to stand strong and confident. Other times in the past when I had tried to explain how I was starting to feel overwhelmed, everyone told me, "I can't help you with that, Nyssa. You'll have to work that out for yourself." What if I didn't want to be strong all the time? What if I wanted someone to help me? It wasn't our way. It wasn't Mother's way.

Papa was always so very strong. Whenever I think about how hard things are for me, I think of the weight that he bears. When he looks around and sees a nation nearly ruined by his hand or another

CHAPTER SEVEN

family trying to make a new start in the wilderness of the Damned Kingdom, he must feel even more alone. So why did he shut me out?

As I reached the end of Market Road, I saw the library over the trees. All around me was the evidence of his strength. How could I be so pitifully weak and selfish? How could I go on feeling so alone and empty inside? I had everything a young woman could ever want. I had a wonderful, if somewhat unconventional, family. I was well fed when others were hungry. I didn't want for pretty clothes or money. I could travel anywhere. I was loved and cared for.

I wanted to believe that what Adrian had told me was wrong, or a lie, but I didn't, really. It wouldn't make much difference anyway. I knew that I would eventually have to go back home, back to doing the same thing every day, feeling restless, pretending not to know what Adrian had revealed to me, caring for the children.

I approached the library. It loomed large and dark before me, the edifice of my father's dreams, the evidence of his strength. I stood in its moon shadow, seeing its black silhouette against the dark night.

Instead of moving on, I entered one of the doors at the end and walked along the stone floor of the corridor that was lit by thin wires strung back and forth across the roof and upon which had been cast Glow spells. I climbed the stairs up to my father's laboratory on the fifth floor.

There were no Glow lanterns in his lab, only a single oil lamp burning dimly on a table by his desk, which he had apparently forgotten to blow out. I picked up the small lamp and sat at the desk. Inside one of the drawers I found material related to his research and messages sent back and forth to Nikolas Mannerah and others. There were pay stubs for Tamar, receipts, supply lists, and several notebooks covering the details of his various experiments for the past few months. One drawer held reports regarding the financial accounts of the Academy itself that showed several large transfers paid to the central bank in Seagate.

When I saw those, I felt a chill. Here it was. Not just talk, but evidence. It was real. After he made his machine, he would reclaim those massive deposits and help ruin the Seagate banks and the life savings of many families. What had he become that he could do this? Had he always been this way and I had just never been able to see it?

How could the father that I loved as my own do this? I believed him when he said he wanted to help all those people. Were those just words? Were his seemingly altruistic travels in the Damned

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kingdom just a ploy to further his wealth and power? I felt betrayed and sick to my stomach. I closed the ledger book and put it back in its drawer and then blew out the lamp.

I felt myself rise quickly into the air. I knocked over the chair before I had the presence of mind to put my hands above me to keep from banging my head into the ceiling. I quickly plucked a thorn from my belt and began the mental preparations for a Wizard Dart spell as I saw Tamar step into the dim moonlight near the window. He lit a torch on the wall, adding light to the moon shades, and then he quickly picked up a bow.

"Don't move! I know how to use this," he said.

For about two seconds, I considered my options. I probably could have cast a Ricochet spell before he let the arrow go, but my Dart spell was already forming. I could have tried canceling the Float spell, but he might have shot me. What I finally did was yell, "Tamar, don't shoot. It's me, Nyssa. Nyssa Arrenkyle."

He lowered his bow and squinted his eyes up to me. He must have been sleeping. He was wearing only loose cotton trousers that hung low on his hips.

Still holding onto his bow, he reached over, took the torch from its holder, and walked a little closer, looking up at me.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, if you stop looking up my dress and let me down, I'll tell you."

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry, Miss Arrenkyle," he answered as I began to descend to the floor. When I was halfway down, the spell broke and I dropped about four feet to the ground. I landed on my feet but fell forward. He put the bow down and came over to help me up.

"I'm not hurt."

"I'm sorry for doing that, Nyssa," he said as he helped me up. "I heard someone rummaging around and I thought it was Mannerah again."

"Oh, don't apologize. You did very well. I'm sure if I had been a thief you would have handled the situation very well."

Actually, I was embarrassed at being caught so easily by a junior magician.

"Well, then, Nyssa, can I help you find something?"

I needed to buy some time, so I sat down at one of the tables and said, "Do you want to get a shirt?"

"Oh, goodness. I'm sorry."

CHAPTER SEVEN

As he was walking to the other side of the room where he had been sleeping, I asked, "Did you say Nikolas Mannerah was here earlier?"

"After you and Master Arrenkyle left, I found him poking around up here in the lab."

"Did you know who he was?"

"Oh, sure. He comes around about once every two weeks or so to meet with your father, but this time he seemed nervous and accused us of hiding the transporter device."

He put on a loose shirt and came back to take a seat across from me. His long hair was in sleepy disarray and his eyelids were still a bit heavy.

"I told him we weren't hiding anything. I even showed him some of our notes, which I'm sure he didn't understand. I talked to him a while and he calmed down a bit. Then he apologized and left. He seemed harmless enough."

"Did he say anything else?"

"No," Tamar answered, just before a yawn overtook him. "Just that if we were lying to him or dealing with someone else that the Guild would be very upset. I'm sure they would be."

"Of course. So then he left?"

"Yeah. He went out the front to his fancy carriage and hurried back to town. When you came in, I thought he had come back to look around or had sent a thief. That's why I stayed here tonight. I hope your father won't mind."

"I'm sure he won't."

I paused, unsure what to say next.

Then I heard myself ask, "Tamar, what do you know about the Triples?"

"The what?"

"Triples? Have you heard that term before?"

"No."

"I was just talking to Adrian Blackwing. Do you know her?"

"A little. She teaches here."

"She used to. She quit today. She's been my mentor and a friend of the family, one of Papa's first students. She helped him build the Academy, and tonight she's leaving. She's probably gone already."

He didn't answer, but waited patiently for me to continue.

In quiet tones, I asked him, "What if I ask you to keep a secret for me? Don't tell anyone, not even my father. I don't want him to know that I know, or that you do."

CHAPTER SEVEN

His face became very serious as he considered.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I can't tell you unless you promise that it will be our secret. She told me to be careful with this, but if Papa trusts you, I think I can, and I can't talk to my father. Maybe you know something about it, too."

"I don't think I can promise to keep it secret unless I know what it is."

"I've got to talk to someone and I don't know what to do."

"If it was told to you in confidence, maybe you shouldn't say anything."

"Stop it, Tamar! Just say yes."

He reached across the table and took hold of my hand. "I can promise that I will help you, whatever the problem is. Anything."

I was surprised to find myself suddenly touched by his sincerity and warmth. Orange light from the single torch danced shadows along the edge of his face and untamed hair. We held our gaze a moment or three longer than I normally would have.

"What if you think the best way to help me would be to tell my father?"

"What's wrong, Nyssa?"

"Answer me!"

"If I thought you were in danger, I suppose I would have to."

I pulled my hand away.

"I don't even know if it's important. Maybe I should just forget it."

"Well, it is important, obviously."

"How would you know?"

Tamar looked as if he were going to yell something back at me, but he caught himself. "I'm sorry," he said gently. "I'm not in a position to know whether or not it's important."

What if Papa was going to get himself hurt again? After all he'd been through, why didn't he just relax and spend more time with his family?

"Maybe I'm worrying too much. I'm sure he knows what he's doing."

On those last words, my voice choked a little and I cleared my throat and decided not to let it happen again.

I thought again of all the things Adrian had told me. Now my self-pity was changing into genuine concern about Papa and I felt

CHAPTER SEVEN

emotion welling up. I wanted to push it away, and I didn't want to. Tamar came around the table and sat next to me.

"I'm not going to cry," I informed him.

He reached out and touched my hair, inviting me to rest against his shoulder. I resisted at first, determined to hold myself in check, but he was offering me a special gift. In the past, when I had sought such comfort, I had always been told to be strong, to deal with it myself, as if my doubts and fears were inconsequential, only a distraction. I know it was because Mother wants us all to be strong, and you don't get to be strong by having your crying fits condoned, or so Mother thought.

I felt his hand on my hair, a gentle, comforting touch.

I leaned into him and let him hold me as I let my nervous tension, my fear, my anxieties drain. My head rested on his chest and I felt his chin touching the top of my head. I felt secure and accepted. I didn't care anymore whether or not I cried, but my body was not used to this and my emotion was forced out in heavy, awkward breaths. I felt ashamed, but his hands on my back and arms reassured me. His embrace was warm and comfortable.

Finally, after I had mostly calmed down, I looked up at him and said, "I'm so sorry about that. I should just go home. You'd probably just ask my father all about it anyway for my own good. I should go."

I started to pull away, but he didn't let me out of his embrace just yet. He reached out his index finger and put it on my lips.

"First, I won't tell your father you were here tonight. Second, my offer to help still stands, and third, I promise, unconditionally, that whatever your secret is, I will tell no one, especially your father, without first telling you that I think it's necessary."

Then he took his hand away.

I put my head back down and let him hold me some more.

"That's the best I can do. I'm sorry."

"I can only imagine what terrible thing you must think I have done."

"Well, a couple things did cross my mind, but I really don't know much about you, except what your father tells me. He talks about you a lot, actually. I don't think there's any problem that he wouldn't stop the world to help you with. I thought for a moment there was some trouble with the new baby."

"No, the babies are fine," I answered as I finally sat back away from him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

He wiped away my reluctant tears with his back of his index finger. I closed my eyes and let him.

"Twins. A boy and a girl. I have another baby sister now."

"That's wonderful."

I took a deep breath and decided to just say it.

"Adrian told me that my father is working for a group called the Triples, and they want to replace the banking system with one based on his new transporter. I came here to look around for some more information, and I found that he's been making large deposits to Seagate banks. That's one thing that Adrian said they would do. I know I shouldn't get into Father's business, but I'm afraid for him. They're just using him. He's so trusting and vulnerable."

"It's hard to think of your father as vulnerable in any way," Tamar said, laughing.

"Maybe I'm just too curious for my own good. I went through his personal things like a thief, and not a very good one either. That's not like me."

"I probably shouldn't be encouraging you, then, but what you say does make me wonder about some of the things that have been going on here, like the boxes of paper credits, the coded messages that I sometimes carry to various businesses in Seagate, and something your father said when it was so terribly hot last week. He said that as bad as the weather was, it was good for business. When I asked him what business, he was really evasive, as if he felt he shouldn't have said it."

"So what do we do now?"

"I don't see that we need to do anything. Nyssa, if this is true, it's big. It's bigger than you and it's a mountain mile bigger than me."

"But you don't understand. He may not be able to do anything about it. They may be making him do it. We may need to help him."

"Nyssa, it's their business."

"You really don't understand, do you? A lot of people don't know this, but I thought you did. All this bad weather is their fault. The Duke and my father and the others who were with them killed the High Druid so Amanda could become the new Karl. That's how he became the Duke, not just by taming the Damned Kingdom as most people think.

"Do you remember hearing about the time of Black Dove? It was the Duke who finally destroyed her. And the platinum depression ten years ago? That was because the Duke and my father devalued

CHAPTER SEVEN

platinum by hoarding hundreds of pounds of it from some other world. Duke P'Tantis has spoken with the Gods themselves, and he and my father have journeyed down to the depths of Hell and back. They don't see the world as you and I see it. To them, to my father, to that man you have spent so many hours with, the world is a thing to be manipulated however they see fit, and always my family gets hurt somehow. My father has been through things that are so horrible he can't even discuss them, but the Duke will, and the things he has told me, all with his casual attitude, have made me want to cry and vomit and scream all at the same time. It's not because he's mean, but to him those things are ordinary, just another problem to deal with to get whatever he's set his mind to. And I think about the hurt I've seen in my papa's eyes! Now it's happening again. Papa's become involved with these Triples and they want to warp his desire, his need to help everyone, into a plot to advance their power.

"There's this world, Tamar, that most people live in, surrounded by their walls, their city, the limits of their knowledge, and then there's this other world, a world where one single man can change the fate of the entire planet, a world in which everything that exists to you and me is just another part of something more interesting. It's as if all the people of the world are busy bumping into one another and arguing about their little lives on a vast plane, and my father and his friends are standing on a tall mountain from which they can see everything and do anything.

"Just by being his daughter and by being around these people I can't help but be on that mountain, but they don't let me see everything. If anything, what Adrian told me showed me how little I do know."

"Well, Nyssa, it sounds to me that you're more upset about not being let in on what your father is doing than you are that he might get hurt."

"I just feel so helpless. I can see enough to know that he may be in danger, but I can't see enough to be able to help him."

"And you want me to help you? You tell me that your father can crush the whole planet with his teeth and then ask me to get in his way? Not to mention that your father has always treated me kindly and has never given me any reason to cross him. He has been a supportive, patient teacher, and I can't tell you what an honor it is to work with him. What would you have me do?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

“You can tell me I’m just being a silly girl and that I should leave these matters alone. You can tell my father what I’ve said and he may just tell me himself the extent of what’s going on. You can try to convince me to stay out of it and just wait, or you could help me find out more, but I promise I won’t get in the way. Just tell me what else you know and help me find out what I can.”

Again he reached out and ran his hand along my hair.

“Go home, Nyssa.”

“I can’t.”

“I didn’t figure it would be that easy.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tamar looked at me, then away, then back to me again.

He stood up and walked away from the table, picked up the bow and arrow that he had left on the floor, and put them by the bed. Then he sat down and looked at me from the shadows across the long, hollow chamber. His voice was soft and distant when he spoke from just outside the ring of light, and yet it filled the stillness of the room.

“I can’t help you, Nyssa.”

I waited for him to continue, but heard only silence. I waited a bit more, and as I started to speak, I heard him continue.

“How can you expect me to consider interfering? I don’t even want to know anything more about it.”

“Tamar, I can’t do this alone.”

“Then don’t do it.”

“Tamar, what are you not telling me? Do you know something?”

“What I know is that I like it here, and if you go messing around with things that you don’t understand and weren’t meant to understand, all you’re going to do is make a mess for everyone.”

“You do know something!”

“I know a lot of things,” he retorted loudly. Then he continued in more even tones, saying, “I know a lot of things that someone like you wouldn’t understand.”

“Someone like what?”

“What good would it do to explain it to you?”

With that, he lay back down onto the bed with his back to me.

“Answer me! Just what do you think I am?” I demanded, rising from my chair.

“Put the torch out when you leave,” was his muffled reply.

My first impulse was to march over there and slap him hard on his shoulder for speaking to me that way, so that’s exactly what I did, but he ignored me completely. I stood at the side of his bed and watched his arrogant back rise and fall slowly with his shallow breaths.

“Well?”

He turned farther away from me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I don't think it's very nice to say something like that and just turn away."

He turned around suddenly and sat up. For just a moment I thought he was going to apologize to me but instead, he put his hand to his head, as if to massage a throbbing headache, and pleaded, "Blazes afire! Just leave me alone!" He turned and fell once again onto the bed and this time pulled the sheet over his head.

His outburst left me in shocked silence. I stood there, in the darkness, in the quiet, in my father's laboratory, and fumed. I should have just left, but I told myself that it wouldn't do to let hired help behave that way, so I shook him by the shoulder and said, "Get up. I'm not done talking to you."

He groaned and stretched out his legs and complained into his pillow, "She's still here."

"Stop doing that!" I commanded harshly.

"Or what?"

"I don't know. Just stop it!"

He began laughing into his pillow, quietly at first, and then louder.

He turned over and said, "I can't stay mad at you. You're too pathetic."

His position was ideal for my hand to cut a direct path to his face, stinging his smile away.

He turned his head back to me and caught my gaze in his. I could see the flickering of the dim torch dancing in his eyes.

"You are some piece of work, Nyssa Arrenkyle. Sit down."

I didn't.

"Please," he insisted.

I sat on the very edge of the bed. He sat up and scooted back so he could lean against the wall.

"Listen, Nyssa, I don't know what put this into your head, but get it out. Go home. So what if you've got nothing better to do but sit around and count your money all day? Not everyone has nannies and silk diapers and servants to wipe their chins and comb their hair. Maybe to you, in your faraway castle, this business seems full of intrigue and adventure and you're just busting to play some big games. But listen, sweetheart, this is not a game. It's my life, and I have worked too hard to get here. I haven't had everything handed to me. Unlike you, I know what it's like to be poor and alone. I've had plenty of adventure, and let me tell you, it's no fun. It's no damn fun at all."

CHAPTER EIGHT

After a couple heartbeats of silence, he continued with a firm voice, "I frankly don't care why your father is doing this. I don't care if he's got some sinister plan. I trust him. I respect him, and I will not take any action against him just so you can turn his work into some childish game of hide and seek. So just go home and let your nanny tuck you into bed."

I don't know what hurt more: that he was partly right or that he was so completely wrong about everything. Either way, he took all the fight out of me.

I stood up and took two steps away from his bed.

I heard him lie back down and pull the covers over himself again.

"Not that you would care, or anything," I began, speaking softly to the windows. "But I do know what it's like to be poor and alone. Being alone is what this is all about."

I turned around and expected to see his silent back once again, but he was on his side looking at me.

"I can't believe I let you see me cry." I walked quickly to the door and said, "Put out your own torch," just before I slammed the door behind me and rushed downstairs.

I walked instead of facing the decision of whether or not to just give up and go home. I followed the path around the center grove again, and this time I kept going to the road that led to Academy Manor. I decided to go ahead and stay here for the night. Maybe I would be able to face my father in the morning. Selfishness is not a proper ingredient for a conversation and I felt as if selfishness was all I had.

At least I could rely on myself. Maybe someday I would be able to make Jheffery, or Mother, or even Papa understand how I felt. If I understood myself, it would make things easier. I mustered up at least a facade of contentment. Maybe all happiness is a facade, just something we make up to fool ourselves. Maybe the only difference between someone truly happy and someone like me, searching for happiness while wearing only a false mask, is the degree to which we accept our self-made illusions as real. Maybe there is no real happiness or sadness, but only fantasies that we build for ourselves. Jheffery is happy because he knows he's happy. Dierdre is always confused and upset about something because that's the world that she builds. How else could I explain feeling alone while surrounded by so many people who loved and cared for me? But if my

CHAPTER EIGHT

melancholy were just an illusion, and fulfillment another, why did I choose one fantasy over another?

I passed all the other houses in the diffuse glow of drifting, moonlit fog and made my way through the gate of Academy Manor. When I went up to the house, I heard Ranger barking as he ran toward me.

“Down, Ranger,” I called out.

He stopped but didn’t lie down. He shook his head and sniffed the air until he believed it was me.

“Come on, buddy,” I said, holding out my hand to him.

He came over and yawned right in front of me and then went up lazily to the porch and lay down, wagging his tail gently.

I followed him up the steps, scratched his head, and whispered, “Sorry for waking you up.”

He looked up at me and licked at my hand and then put his head on his paws and closed his eyes.

The walk in the cool night air had lifted my spirits some, but when I entered the dark house, apathy and bitterness descended upon me once again. I didn’t want to go home. I didn’t want to go to sleep. I didn’t want to cry. I didn’t want to push my emotions away as I had always done. I was tired and drained and confused and I didn’t want to even bother feeling my feelings, so they fell inside me like rotten fruit, blackened and worthless, stinking up my insides.

I stood motionless and silent in the foyer and looked around at the room that was lit only by a stray moonbeam or two. I just didn’t care anymore. I knew I would have to go back home later and pretend that this night had never happened. I knew that I would put it all aside, smile, tickle the babies, chat with Sindee, help with lessons, and get over it, building up the fantasy of feeling fine. But tomorrow was still a long way off and right now I felt lost in the eye of my make-believe storm.

I laughed at myself for taking my apathy so seriously and tossed my backpack and belt into a chair before going up the stairs to get some dry clothes out of my room. I approached the door but stopped before opening it because I thought I heard something. After a moment, I convinced myself that I did actually hear a small voice come from the room.

“Papa?” said the little voice again.

I put my hand on the knob and turned it slowly, and then I remembered that I had left all my magical supplies downstairs.

I opened the door a little bit and looked in.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The room was lit by the dancing yellow glow of a night candle. A young girl, maybe six or seven years old, wrapped warmly in my sheets and blanket, sat up in my bed, rubbed her eyes, and said, "You came back home, Poppy."

I stepped inside and reached over to uncover the light globe just as she looked up.

When she saw me, she let out a piercing scream and turned away, got caught up in the sheets, and fell out of the far side of the bed.

When I walked around to the other side, I saw her crawling under the bed. I bent down and got a quick look at her pretty little face covered with a mask of cold panic before she crawled out and ran crying from the room. I went to follow her and heard her run and stumble down the stairs with another penetrating shriek, but by the time I was out to the hallway, she was already gone. I practically jumped down the stairs, but I didn't see her anywhere. I heard the back door open and I rushed to the kitchen to follow. When I stepped out onto the back porch, I saw her running, flanked by Winston and Griffon, toward the two Alayas trees.

"Stop!" I yelled out loudly. "Not that way."

I ran after them, hoping I could reach them before the vines of the Alayas trees picked her up and crushed her, but she ran right through the hanging vines untouched and hid behind the trunk.

Dan: You switch from many trees to one tree here. Can you make this clearer in the last sentence? I suggest something like "the trunk of the biggest tree" or something. —Stephanie

I finally reached the edge of the tree and stopped, bewildered by the scene before me. The dogs were circling her and she kept screaming, "Attack! Attack!" between horrible, wrenching sobs.

The dogs were agitated and confused by all this and Griffon and Ranger kept running between the little girl and me, trying to bring me into the protection of the tree while Winston stayed with her.

Her eyes pleaded to me. In desperation she screamed, "Attack!" one final time and then said in a voice so frail and choked with fear that I could barely understand, "Don't hurt me. Don't take me away."

"Ranger, Griffon, perimeter. Now," I commanded.

They took off barking, intent on finding and tearing apart whatever enemy had intruded.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I looked back to her frightened eyes and felt sick inside. I knelt on the ground and said, "Oh, sweetheart, no. I won't hurt you. Winston won't let anybody hurt you."

I stepped through the sparse curtain of vine and sat on the ground, but her dark eyes, almost hidden in a pool of shadows, told me she did not believe me.

"My name is Nyssa. I'm Estus Arrenkyle's daughter. I won't hurt you, I promise. You know about the trees. They'll hurt anyone who doesn't have the special spell. It's not hurting me, is it? The dogs know me. I'm a friend."

She watched me from behind Winston and managed to summon a hint of brave composure.

"Oh, baby, it's going to be all right."

Papa. She called him Papa.

"Stay there with Winston. I won't come any closer. I just want to talk. I know you're afraid. It's okay that you're afraid, because you don't know me and you don't know that I really am who I say. So stay there with Winston."

I waited for a moment for her to calm down some more and then asked, "Will you tell me your name?"

"Miranda Drake."

"You don't have to be afraid, Miranda. Is it okay if we talk? I need you to help me."

"I don't know," she answered.

"Do you live here?"

She nodded yes.

"For how long?"

"A while."

"How long? A year?"

"No. Not that long. A few weeks, I s'pose."

All my self-inflicted pity and sense of alienation faded from me and I became absorbed with this bizarre scene. It was otherwise an ordinary night, and yet I felt an urgency, a sharp intensity about this scene that rested beneath the cool breeze, the blanket of fog, the pale moonlight, and the happy buzz of the crickets and night birds.

"Who is your papa?"

"I'm not s'posed to tell."

"Where is he now?"

"He has to go away sometimes to make things or study."

"Is that where he is now?"

Again, she nodded yes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Where's your mommy?"

"Mommy's dead."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry. Can you remember her name? What was she called?"

"I called her Mama."

Something fell into place. Brittany Drake. Brittany was one of our servants long ago. She quit to return home to Seagate and now I knew why. She was carrying Papa's bastard child. All the other women had been hired by mother, for the specific purpose of giving us children. It must have been an affair, because I knew she would never have agreed to a union between Papa and one of the staff.

"Then I had to live in the girls' home but I told 'em, 'I got a papa. I want to stay with him.' But they didn't believe me. Then I showed them my hair ribbons that he gived me and they found my papa and he brung me here, but I can't say he's my papa because if the bad people find out, they might take me away. So I do serving and cleaning, like Mama, so nobody knows. You can't tell either, okay?"

"No, Miranda. Nobody will take you away. Who are the bad people?"

"I don't know, but they might take me, Papa says, so I'm scared when he's gone."

He had been hiding this poor child here, treating her as a servant, keeping her a secret from his family, lying to her, lying to us, scaring her, manipulating everyone, just like he was manipulating the economy, if what Adrian said turned out to be true.

How many other things that he made me believe in were just more manipulations? Why was it that everything he did was shrouded in deceit and lies and false representations? Was his goodness and love just another fantasy that I wanted to believe in?

No. I knew him and he wasn't that way. He did want to help. Maybe he had to do those things. I didn't know, however, why he had to fill this little girl's head so full of fear and dread and keep her hidden as if she were the one responsible for the misfortunes and indecencies that now controlled her life.

The other dogs returned from patrolling and lay beside me, panting.

"All clear," I told them. "Good dogs. My good doggies."

I rubbed their heads and patted them on their backs.

"Come, Winston," I commanded.

CHAPTER EIGHT

He came over to me, and I told him what a good job he had done.

Miranda watched me for a long moment, but she didn't come out.

"Did he even tell you about his other children?"

"On the island?"

"Yes. Severin's Island. I'm Nyssa. Did he ever tell you about me?"

She nodded yes.

"Have you ever met Tamar? He's got long hair and works with your father."

"Tamar plays riddles with me. He's funny."

"Do you want me to bring him here so you won't have to be afraid?"

"I'm not afraid," she insisted.

"Do you want to come pet the dogs? They helped you and protected you. You can tell them how that makes you feel."

She got up and walked over to us barefoot on the slippery, dew-moist grass. She was still tentative at first, but after she petted Winston and he licked at her face, she relaxed and even laughed a little bit.

"Good doggies", she told them all just before she yawned.

"I think we should go back to bed," I told her.

I stood up and walked with her back to the house, followed by our three wonderful dogs. I took her upstairs back to my room — or, rather, her room now — and lifted her up onto the bed. She crawled over to the pillows and I pulled the sheet and blanket over her and said, "Go back to sleep and in the morning, we'll go see Tamar and play riddles or something."

"Okay."

"Do you need anything?"

"No."

"Well, I'll see you in the morning."

I left her to sleep, hopefully in peace. I felt the beginnings of deep fury and betrayal for having lost the papa that I once knew and for having found the manipulative and cruel man who now stood in his place. I felt alone all over again. I stepped lightly out of the room and pulled the door almost closed behind me and then went downstairs to the kitchen.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I didn't know for sure what time it was, but it must have been around one or one-thirty in the morning. I cracked open the light door, letting the Glow lantern shine slanted against the far wall.

It was so quiet, again, finally. I sat and rested my head in the palms of my hands with my elbows on the table and my eyes covered. I felt weak and jittery all over and my stomach was jumping with uneasy tension. Adrian's words came back to me and I tried to enter the cloud of this new reality. Or was I coming out of a cloud of lies and political misdirection? I wanted it to go away. I still had so much that I wanted to do in my life before having to worry about things like this, but like a sleeping dragon, who might rest quietly for dozens or even hundreds of years, silent and almost forgotten, knowledge like this can run wild when it is awakened, frightening and controlling whoever comes in its way. My father the dragon, with his secret fire and his project and his bastard child, put my stomach into an uneasy churn despite my even breaths and the lies that I told myself. It couldn't be true, I thought, but even though I tried walking back into that fog of ignorance, I couldn't help but know what I knew: the shipwreck, his consuming project, Duke Damned Kingdom, my father on an altar, my sister asleep upstairs.

I lay my head on the table and pushed those things aside into a noisy, dark corner of my mind where they thrashed together like an angry ocean, drowning me.

When I felt a hand on my shoulder, I awoke with a sudden disorientation, thinking I was in the kitchen back on Severin's Island. I turned my heavy eyes to Jheffery, who was asking, "What are you doing here, Nyssa? Is everything all right?"

Papa was standing behind him, looking calm but serious. He knew that I had talked to Adrian. He knew that I knew about Miranda. He could see right through me and I felt as fragile as thin glass.

I saw through him as well. Things were more clear to me now than they had been for a very long time.

"She's coming home with us," I said.

Papa laughed and answered with a smile, "So, you met Miranda. She is a sweet thing, but her mother might not appreciate us stealing her away."

"Who's Miranda?" Jheffery wanted to know.

"Miranda Blake. She's the daughter of Kristen Blake, the art teacher who lives in the house next door. She's away studying some of the ruins in the southern DK. Miranda's supposed to stay home,

CHAPTER EIGHT

but she comes over here sometimes. Goodness, Nyssa, you must have scared her silly, coming into the house late at night." He went over to the cupboard and took out a cup which he filled with cider.

"By the way," he asked casually, "why did you come here last night? We were worried. Jheffery here's probably disappointed that there are no trolls involved."

"I wanted to talk to Adrian."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "Then you probably heard the stories she's been telling."

He sat across from me, took my hand, and said gently, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this so suddenly and directly, but Adrian is not well."

"What do you mean?"

Before she came to me to learn Magic with us, she was -" I don't want to frighten you, Nyssa - she was, well, let's say very badly treated by someone. It affected her, kept her on edge all the time. She was always distrustful. I guess she was afraid that someone else would do things to her that this other person did. She's been hiding from ghosts for a long time and she finally convinced herself that she was the victim of some grand plot. I tried to help her, Nyssa, I really did, but the more I tried to help, to explain to her, the more afraid she became until she was convinced that I was in on it too. It's sad. That's why I didn't want you to train with her anymore. I should have explained more to you last night. I'm sorry. I had a lot on my mind. Forgive me?"

He put his hand over mine.

I didn't know. It still felt wrong.

"But last night..." I started.

"Yes?"

"When I walked by, she said, 'Papa.'"

"She probably thought it was me."

"Why would she call you Papa?"

"Her father died sometime last year. I let her call me Papa when she comes over. Her father was always Daddy to her so she calls me Papa."

"But you're not her father?"

"It makes her happy, and the poor thing needs some security with her father gone and her mother traveling so much. No harm done."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"But no. Wait a minute," I heard myself sounding desperate and angry. "She said that her mother was dead."

"Not dead, just gone much of the time."

"And she was afraid of people taking her away, and she was so afraid."

"Well, what do you expect? She doesn't know you, and you woke her up in the middle of the night. The poor thing."

"But she said she stayed at the orphanage, and that she got out because you were her father."

"That's sweet. Ever since I told her about you and how I took you from the girls' home, she plays make-believe."

I took a moment to summon a wave of reckless courage, or was it carelessness, and said, "She's Brittany's daughter, isn't she?"

"Brittany who? No, I told you she's Kristen Blake's daughter."

"Jheffery, you remember Brittany. She ran the kitchen until Sera came," I said.

"Brittany Drake?"

I nodded yes. Even as I said the words, I knew they sounded silly and empty against the backdrop of Papa's explanations. "She's your daughter, isn't she, Papa? You and Brittany..." I couldn't even finish.

Papa leaned back and began laughing, "You mean you thought that Miranda was my love child? Well, you got the name almost right. Oh, Nyssa, what a night you must have had. Wait till I tell your mom. Let's take Miranda next door and then let's get on home ourselves. Breakfast must be ready by now."

He stood up and held his hand out to me. I took it, and when I stood up he gave me a tender, gentle hug and said, "Don't go running off like this. You had us very worried."

Then he headed toward the stairs and said, "Except him. He was looking for a fight."

When he was gone, I said to Jheffery, "Did you know any of this about Adrian?"

"I had a feeling about her. It's a shame. She could really hurt the school."

"But did you ever hear her talk about that type of thing?"

"She was always telling stories. I guess it was all some kind of fantasy world to her."

"No, Jheffery. She really is a good fighter. I mean really good."

"Like I said, it's a shame."

"He's lying."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What’s wrong with you, Nyssa?”

“What’s wrong with me is that he’s lying.”

I walked out of the kitchen and looked up the stairs. My feet desperately wanted to carry me out of the house, to run fast away so that I could think and try to believe my papa. I did want to believe him. Maybe I did.

CHAPTER NINE

Jheffery came over to me and said, "Nyssa, I don't understand why you're doing this. I mean, I think I know, but I'm not sure. I just don't want to see you do or say something you might regret."

I turned to him angrily and said in a raspy whisper, "So why am I doing this?"

He glanced up the stairs and then led me away into the front room, where he said, "You and Father have always had a, well, special connection."

What was he getting at? I glared at him silently until he continued.

"He used to take you everywhere, teach you the lessons in the Art himself. Now you're left out. You're not at his side all the time so you think there's something wrong, but maybe, Nyssa, you're just seeing this because you want there to be some grand adventure."

"Is that how you see it?"

"Well, yes. He wanted me to talk to you about it. He's just worried about you. He's got a point. If you keep running off like this, you really could get hurt."

"He talked to you then? These are his words?"

"He explained to me what you're feeling. I know. I feel that way too sometimes."

"Feel what? What do you mean?"

"Like you're old enough to handle anything and just looking to test the skills you've been working on for so long. Let's face it, we've got a special family. We're surrounded by masters in all the various crafts and it's only natural to want to put ourselves to the test, but if we go chasing our imaginations, we could hurt ourselves and others."

I wanted to be angry with him. I was, I suppose, but I also understood that there was truth in what he said.

"But what if it's not just my imagination?"

He lowered his voice and said, very firmly and directly, "Then there's even more reason for staying out of it."

I looked past him and saw Papa at the top of the stairs holding Miranda's hand. She was just the girl next door, by his story, the

CHAPTER NINE

young, sad little girl who lost her father and enjoyed visiting the kind neighbor man. Then, without seeing them differently with my eyes, the scene switched, like a drawing of cubes that look as if their corners are pointing toward you one second and away from you the next. This time I saw the bastard daughter and the lying, manipulative father, filling her head full of fears and stories to help protect himself.

The scene switched again, and I felt that I had been wrong-headed and stubborn and had let my imagination reign over reason. As they started down the stairs, my perception switched yet again and I saw father and daughter, sharing a hidden past.

I felt as if I were approaching a forked road. The two perceptions continued to wobble disturbingly, and I hated that I had to decide which of the two realities to live in.

I let the world jump back and forth while they came down the stairs. Papa was saying something to Jheffery about the new baby, but I didn't really hear him. I was busy trying to deal with the pretense of deciding which truth to believe even as I knew how I really felt.

They got to the bottom of the stairs and headed into the kitchen. I followed them, feeling my heart begin to beat anxiously. I stopped and let them banter some more about family, something about Kasimir's studies. I stood back and felt as if I had somehow stepped out of the scene, as if I were seeing it through a dream and not with my own eyes.

Right or wrong, I knew what I knew. I backed out of the room, picked up my belt and pack, and went to the front door. When I heard Jheffery call out to me, I hurried the last four or five steps and pulled the door open. I ran down the brick walkway and through the gate. I looked back over my shoulder and saw Jheffery running after me and Papa standing at the doorway holding Miranda. I knew that if Jheffery got ahold of me I would be helpless against his training and strength.

I turned and kept running away from the house as fast as I could. Jheffery was chasing behind me, calling my name, demanding that I stop, but it was wrong, completely wrong.

This wasn't even my family. My family was somewhere lost forever. I had a father, a real father somewhere, and a mother and maybe even brothers and sisters, but how could I have ever thought that this bizarre collection could be my family? It felt suddenly so wrong, so weird to have an elven mother, a mansion full of children,

CHAPTER NINE

illegitimate by normal standards, living among golems and spells with a man who nearly destroyed the world and now wanted to remake it in his image. Fears, feelings, and doubts that I had kept hidden from myself for so long fell upon me and urged me forward, away.

Jheffery grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop.

"Let me go," I pleaded.

"Shhh, calm down," he said, holding me to calm me down and keep me captive.

I tried pushing him away from me and in doing that, I felt as if I were pushing all of my strange Arrenkyle life away from me, as if I were coming out of another dream, a dream where I had pretended to be an Arrenkyle, a dream that was quite nice until I started to wake up and see that most of it was only a facade built by a man I called Father and loved as such even though it was all a lie, a convenient game we all played, pretending that I was really his daughter and not just some girl that he paid for at the orphanage. I saw then that just as I so happily let myself believe that I was an Arrenkyle, I had also let myself believe in all the other illusions that Estus Arrenkyle wove. With the unraveling of his story about the poor little girl next door, it seemed as if the last eleven years of my life began to unravel as well, leaving me naked, without even a dream to live in.

Jheffery was trying to calm me down, trying to understand and forgive, but he was still dreaming the dream from which I had awakened and which he didn't and couldn't understand. I savagely raised my knee, just as he had taught me himself. That shocked him and took his attention away from me just long enough for me to pull away from him.

"I'm sorry, Jheffery," I cried emotionally. I meant it.

I felt as if I were running away forever and that I would never see him again. I was sorry that I couldn't explain what I felt, and I was sorry to leave him behind in the dream.

I turned and ran again but I was not fast enough to evade his trained grasp.

I turned and pleaded, "Stay out of this, Jheffery. It's not between us."

He let go and I stepped back, putting my arms up between us.

"What's going on?" he asked, so tenderly. Sweet Jheffery.

My breathing, already heavy from running, was shaking as I said, "I have to know. I have to know if it's all a dream, all these

CHAPTER NINE

years. If it's all been a lie. I have to get away."

Again he reached for me, as if to embrace me, but this time took hold of my arm and before I knew it he was holding me in a painful arm lock. It wasn't his fault, really, just his training.

"Please, let me go. I have to go."

"Sorry, Nyssa," he replied sincerely as he led me back to the house, back to Papa who still was watching us from the porch, still holding Miranda. I looked away from him.

"Don't, Jheffery. Please."

He took me back through the gate and toward the house, back into the fog of my father's dream.

When we got close, I heard Papa begin speaking the words of a Trance spell as he held a small vial of wine.

I fought and scratched at Jheffery, screaming, "Papa, no," as I tried to pull out of Jheffery's grasp. "Leave my mind alone," I screamed at him.

The dogs barked and ran all around us. Griffon was jumping up and down behind Jheffery, who almost stepped on him. In that short instant that Jheffery was a little off balance, looking behind him, I pushed hard on his shoulders. He could have taken a large step back and stepped on Griffon, but instead, he turned around and fell away. I ran up the stairs to my father.

He put his hands out to grab me as his voice kept the perfect rhythm of the spell. I slapped the vial out of his hands and felt a tingle of the ambient energy as the structure of his casting fell away and the summoned energy dissipated away from him.

There was a short moment when everyone was standing still, as if we could wait, breathe, relax, and let the awful moment pass. Winston ran up to the porch and sat down between us. Ranger barked.

I moved to go inside, knowing that there were still fierce words to be spoken and hating myself for wanting to speak them. I told myself that honesty was more important than kindness in that situation, even though Mother always told us never to speak from anger. Anger was all I had left to me. As I stepped through the door, Papa reached out to grab me again and the pretense of calm was shattered by another flare of fury. I ducked into the door and locked it behind me. I then ran upstairs to my room, dragged and pushed the bed against the door, and then stood in the corner and began the long rhythmic chant to summon the Shape Shift spell as I held a small ball of wax from my pouch. The energies flowed into me and

CHAPTER NINE

formed a channel connecting me with the necessary glamour streams. I watched the door pound into the bed and heard Papa's voice twisted into a cry of desperate outrage, calling my name.

I formed an image in my mind and then merged it into the magic conduit and felt myself change into the form I had chosen, a small white duck. I stumbled toward the window and tried to push myself along with my hands, but I managed only to extend my wings to the side. I pushed down and back and caught a bit of air. I took another step and beat my wings down again, and this time I got enough air to get off the ground. I kept beating my wings as I zoomed out through the window and climbed quickly up above the trees. I remembered to stop thinking about flying and just fly, to let the knowledge in the spell carry me as Adrian had taught.

I turned and flew low and fast over the grove trees until I got near the library and then I flew over it and kept climbing high above the trees, leaving the campus, my papa, my brother and sister, and all other things Arrenkyle behind me. I kept flying away, not looking back, feeling numb and alone until there were no roads or towns. I turned off thinking and watched the trees and clouds and felt my muscles beating rhythmically, catching the wind, carrying me into a new dream.

I must have flown for over two hours through the arid morning sky. I felt that I was leaving for good and that never again would I sleep in my fine sheets, taste our tangy thistle wine, hear Kasimir's jocular excuses or Dierdre's dramatic whining. I knew that I would never see the babies grow up and that I would never again hear the simple melodies dancing off of Keef's fingers.

The last few years were drifting away from me, and yet it was still so real, because it was real. I still loved them all so much and I couldn't help that my heart would be forever chained to the word, the love, the way of life that is Arrenkyle, but they were there and I was here, flying alone under the clouds, so far away.

I began thinking that I wanted to rest, but all I saw was the thick canopy of foliage below so I kept going, carried forward as much by my reckless determination as by my pretty white wings. I kept flying because I didn't have any idea of what I was going to do next or how I could undo what I had done. My decision followed behind me, brushing my tail feathers with hopeless remorse. It was done.

So on I flew, not thinking, hardly feeling, barely caring what would happen to me next. Finally, my duck senses found an opening down to my right. I circled lower with my wings held out to my

CHAPTER NINE

side, floating, circling down and down until I could see the pond below me. I flapped to slow myself and then let my feet down and stepped into the water, splashing just a little bit. I sat there and floated for a moment while I surveyed the perimeter of the small pond. I reared back and shook my wings dry before paddling myself over to the edge of the water. When I reached the sandy bank, I waddled over to the shade by the low-hanging branches of a wild apple tree and changed back to my own form.

I sat down and crossed my legs, rested my chin on my fists, my elbows on my knees, and my sorrow on my well practiced void of apathy. I sighed deeply. Then my eyes closed, my hands opened to cover my face, and I began weeping silently, alone in the wilderness of the Damned Kingdom.

I felt like a fool.

I was a fool.

With teary eyes, I reached around and took my backpack from behind me and set it on the ground to my side. I pulled the main flap back and took out the Transport wand and held it in my lap. Of course I couldn't stay here, but the question in my mind was where to go next. The answer was with me even as the question formed. I knew I would go to Seagate and visit the orphanage. It was the only other home I had ever known and I needed to be there.

"Why are you doing this?" I demanded of myself out loud. Why here? Why now? If I were anyone else giving advice, I would have reminded myself that I could not run away from my problems, that I should go home and work it out. I couldn't do that because my papa was there, and I knew that by spell or logic, he would eventually convince me to stop worrying about issues that were not mine to worry about. I didn't want that. I knew what I knew. For better or worse, Adrian had lifted the covers of my father's world.

I heard the snap of a twig behind me followed by some rustling. I turned and saw nothing, but I decided that it would be unwise to stay here for very long so I stood up, slung the pack over my shoulder, and began summoning the magic to release the spell as I held in my mind the image of the transporter platform at the Seagate Magicians' Guild.

After I arrived, I focused my mind upon the magic of the wand and found it exhausted. All of its stored spells had been used. It was now nothing more than an ornate piece of iron and it would stay that way until melted down and recharged. I stepped from the

CHAPTER NINE

platform, walked past the guard station, and entered the heart of the Guild.

The Seagate Magicians' Guild was one of the two primary centers of Magic research and history, the other being the School of Magic in Tarkna, which was run by Listrith. Although my father was a member of the Seagate Guild and not the Tarkna School of Magic, his research used more of the Tarkna School's newer techniques than the traditional Magic of the Seagate Guild. Now I knew that this was because the Triples were involved. Papa's Academy in the Damned Kingdom offered a mix of the old and new methodologies, but I still had many years of study before the two styles would make any difference to me.

The Seagate Guild building was very old and excessively elegant with many fine touches. It was almost as elegant in some rooms as an elven ballroom. It was very woody and grand, full of tapestries and murals carved into the doors and highlighted with gold and platinum. The hallways were all wide and arched. The floors were covered with thick rugs. It was very different from the Damned Kingdom Magic Academy which, while elegant, didn't have the benefit of centuries of craftsmanship and wealthy benefactors.

I made my way out to the grand lobby, with its marble floor and pillars supporting four levels of the rotunda, and hurried out onto the front steps to the guard house that was the only opening through the very thick, very tall invisible wall which surrounded the Guild and which was known to non-magicians in the city only as some powerfully strong, mysterious force.

I approached a cab that was waiting at the corner. The driver started to help me up into the carriage, but I stopped him and asked, "Do you know where the girls' orphanage is?"

"Not in particular, madam, but I do believe it's on the north rim of the city, a fair piece from here."

I took out a twenty-copper piece and thanked him for his help and information. I then called upon the energy of the Shape Shift spell, which was still in effect, to change myself into a crow. I flew down the road and then climbed until I could see to the hills along the north side of the city.

The magnificent city was spread out below me. This city, where I spent so much of my time and wove so many of my dreams, where I awoke every morning and slept every night for my first seven years, was such a stranger to me. Except for the orphanage, a couple of the streets around it, and the Magicians' Guild, it was all foreign to me. I

CHAPTER NINE

used to wonder what was happening around the city, in the shadow sector, or down by the docks. There was a tower on one of the buildings that we could see from the back yard. I used to wish that I could run away and climb up the tower to get away from Miss Lothrop and see what was happening beyond our little world. There it was below me, its splendid, bustling soul ready for me to fly down and take it all in.

The city of my childhood imaginations was much different than the one over whose streets and buildings I flew. This was not a thriving, healthy city. The streets were mostly bare as people hid from the blazing heat of the early afternoon sun. Many of the houses and shops were boarded up, abandoned. Many were marked with signs which I recognized from Mother's teachings as thieves' call, marking an area or particular building as their plucking ground.

I passed over one narrow road and saw a mass of people waiting in line at a bakery. There was a crowd around two men and I guessed that they had been fighting. A couple of city guards were there trying to convince everyone to go about their business.

I flew down and landed on a window sill above the bakery. The people were being let in one at a time and leaving with a half loaf of bread each. They probably were paying much more than they paid for a full loaf this same time last year since the Triples were hoarding food.

A rock flew past my head and bounced off the shutters behind me. Without even thinking, I took to the air and escaped over the roof of the building across the road as another rock just missed me.

Was it so bad that they needed to eat wild birds? The sky did seem awfully empty, actually, and where were the alley cats and dogs? Were they killed and eaten years ago when the northern farmlands finally dried up? It was unnatural for a city this size to be so silent: no children playing, no dogs barking, no street vendors calling out their wares.

I flew toward the north mountains and saw the tower. It wasn't a bell tower, as I had always imagined it was, just a platform that at one time probably held strategic significance for someone. In another few minutes, I was perched on its roof looking down into the back yard where Andrea and I dreamed our way around the world and where I played more games of Alley Scratch than I would ever care to count.

It was filled with girls, but they weren't playing games. They were working in a large garden that now took up most of the yard.

CHAPTER NINE

We used to help Miss Lothrop care for a flower garden, but this was no such diversion. This was a vegetable garden grown out of necessity. There must have been thirty or more girls weeding and picking beans and pulling up carrots and leeks.

The irony of my position, perched upon the very tower that I had imagined climbing so many times, was quickly overshadowed by my sense of painful kinship with these lost, abandoned girls. They all still wore the same simple homespun cotton dresses that I knew so well. I knew that in this hot sun, they would be scratching the backs of the girls' necks.

I flew down to a tall wooden fence that had replaced the honeysuckle hedge.

They worked silently. They must have been tired in that horrible, hot sun, but if they didn't harvest the food, there would be none on their table that night. I wondered how they got water for their garden when all around was arid. Then I saw a large basin with Magic symbols on it.

"Oh, look," one of the girls said, noticing me, "a bird!"

She got up from her knees and dropped another tuber into her sack, wiped her forehead with a dirty, sweat-soaked arm, and looked at me. She had a little round face, ringed with light brown hair that was falling out from the braided headband that she wore.

A couple other girls came running to her side but she turned around and shushed them, afraid they might scare me away.

"I think it's hungry," she said.

"What does it eat?"

"I don't know. Bugs and stuff, I suppose. Don't scare it away."

She ran over to the house by the back door and came back with her hands cupped together and knelt down close to the fence.

"Be careful, Nancy," another girl said. "Don't let it peck you."

"He won't do that," she insisted with complete faith.

She opened her hands and let a fuzzy caterpillar crawl out of her hands and then looked up at me.

I couldn't resist playing along, so I flapped down next to her and looked at the woolly worm. I wanted to eat that worm about as much as Nancy did. I looked at it, nudged it with my beak, and then backed away and shook my head, which made the girls giggle. By now there were about six or seven girls crowded around.

"Don't you want the worm?"

I looked at her and shook my head side to side.

"He understands you!" one of them said.

CHAPTER NINE

“Don’t be silly,” Nancy answered. She offered her hand for me to perch on, so I walked over to her and carefully put my claws around her fingers. She lifted me up and petted me softly.

The other girls gathered around closely and all wanted to stroke my head and touch my feathers.

Then I heard a booming voice call out, “What’s going on over there?”

Some of the girls scattered back to the garden, but a few stayed.

When I saw the owner of the loud, brash voice, my first thought was that she probably hadn’t smiled for twenty years, but on second glance, she hardly looked that old. She was stocky and solid, with thick arms and wide shoulders. Her hair was pulled straight back and tied behind her head, enhancing the roundness of her jowls, and she suffered from some pox that abused her face with red, bumpy marks.

Nancy held me up and said, “Look, Miss Donna, it’s a bird.”

It was the same Donna. The same girl who had pestered and teased me and fought with me year after year in this same yard was now looking down at me from above, blocking out the sun.

“Get rid of that filthy thing. It’s full of ticks.”

“No, he’s not,” Nancy insisted.

I didn’t want to get the girl in any trouble so I tried to fly away, but before I could, I felt Donna’s big hands clamp around my wings, holding me tight.

“I’ll get rid of this rat with wings. Cook it up in tonight’s stew. You get back to work.”

“No, Miss Donna, don’t hurt him,” Nancy pleaded.

Donna turned and raised her arm as if to backhand the girl and said, “Did I tell you to follow me?”

“Don’t hurt him,” she again pleaded.

This time Donna snapped down her hand down and smacked Nancy sharply on her arm and then pointed her stubby finger and said, “Don’t you talk back to me, little girl.”

She was holding me in her other hand, but when I bit into the fleshy part behind her thumb, she let go long enough for me to fly away.

“You and your wild pets,” Donna barked as she started walking toward Nancy with her hand raised. I turned back and distracted Donna by diving and flapping in her face until she ran back to the house in a flurry of wails, gyrations, and the laughter of all the girls.

CHAPTER TEN

I flew to the roof and perched there for a moment. I don't think I could say what I had expected to find there, but the feelings of relief and homecoming that I had hoped to find did not make themselves apparent. I was there. I knew that tree, the walkway where we played Scratch, narrower and darker than I remembered, but I wasn't really there, not like I was when I was young. It was no longer a part of me and that was a thing I could not change just by taking my body to the familiar back yard. I felt there was nothing for me there, which meant that there was nothing for me anywhere, since I just knew I couldn't go home. However, I still wanted to find out about Miranda.

I thought of just flying down to the front door, changing back into my own form and asking about her directly, but I knew that no one would tell me anything unless I gave a significant bribe. I could change to an older woman or man and pretend to be interested in adopting one of the girls, but I didn't see how I would work Miranda into the discussion. There was really only one way to do this.

I flew down to the side of the house and through the basement window. The wet, earthy smell brought me closer, as if I finally moved into the scene instead of just looking at it. It had not changed at all. The wide barrel was sitting where it always did and the bath stools were stacked against the damp, stone wall. The thick, dirty floor joists above and the smells, the atmosphere made me feel as if I had been here just yesterday. All the years in the splendid Arrenkyle Manor house melted away and flowed into the river of many dreams. I almost expected to find myself back as a little girl only to discover that I had imagined it all.

Of course, it wasn't a dream. Not completely, at least.

I flew to the bin where the dirty clothes were kept until wash day and grabbed a small dress in my claws. It was faded and thread bare in some spots. I took the dress under the stairs and turned into Nyssa long enough to take two silver pieces out of my pack. I put my pack back onto my shoulders then imagined what Dierdre might look like in a couple years. I changed myself into that form and put

CHAPTER TEN

on the small, cotton dress, once again feeling the rough cloth on my shoulders.

I rubbed dirt on my arms, legs, and face and shook my hands through my hair to tangle it up a bit. I made myself skinnier and added some scratches and small bruises and a scab on my left knee by imagining those features as I refocused the ambient spell energy and summoned the incantation of alteration in my mind.

When I walked out from under the stairs, the basement seemed even more familiar. Standing there as a seven year old girl, wearing that dress, I felt almost comfortable, but at the same time, I wanted to run away as fast as I could. I pushed both of those feelings aside and went up the wooden steps to the back hallway.

The same smoky, pungent tallow was burning in the lamps along the hallway. To my left was the bedroom and to my right, just around the corner, was the kitchen, which was where I went next.

Three of the older girls were preparing the afternoon meal which was most likely just bread and stew. I sneaked in quietly and stood against the wall and watched them work.

"Oh, I know," one of them said. "I'd steer clear of her the rest of the day."

"I wish I'd seen it."

"What are you talking about," the third one asked.

"Didn't you hear?"

"Nancy coaxed a crow into the yard and when Miss Donna scared it away, it flew up almost pecked her eyes out."

"No!"

"Oh, yes."

"Did you see it?"

"No, Jenna told me."

"But poor Nancy got the worst of it," the second girl said. "After it flew away, Miss Donna went back out and told her it was her fault for playing with lice infested crows instead of doing her work. She gave her a switching right there in the back yard."

One of the girls turned around to start a fire in the hearth and saw me.

I began to cry quietly as might be expected of a little lost girl in this situation.

"Oh, shh. It's okay. Alexa, come here."

Both of the other girls came over.

"How did you get in here?" the oldest girl asked.

I didn't answer.

CHAPTER TEN

She knelt down in front of me and asked, "What's your name, sweetie?"

I held out my hand and showed her the two silver pieces and said, "He told me to give you this an' I don't gotta steal no more."

It was customary when a girl was left at the orphanage to donate some money, whether it was a family who had to abandon the child or a Legionnaire who rounded up homeless kids from the street.

"Who brought you here?" she said, taking the money from me.

"He said you gonna give me hot food and I don't gotta sleep in the alley no more."

Alexa turned to one of the other girls and said, "Go tell Miss Lothrop."

She left and Alexa asked, "You got a mommy or daddy?"

I shook my head no and said, "Tommy help took care of me on the Winter, but he ain't here for a whole week."

"Was Tommy your brother?"

"No. He help took care of me."

"Where is he now?"

I shrugged my shoulders and hoped they accepted my story, which was common enough when I was here, and would probably be even more common now.

Alexa stood up and offered her hand to me, which I took.

"Well, whoever it was told you right. No more stealing. And we'll get you some food here in a bit."

Then she led me to the office, knocked then entered.

"What is it?"

"Another girl. Someone left her."

"I see. Leave us."

She was just the same, only older. I didn't see any sign of Mrs. Shanker, but she was pretty old back then. Miss Lothrop was probably running the house now with Donna helping her. Alexa left me standing there in front of the worn, painted desk and closed the door behind her.

Miss Lothrop kept on working for a few moments and then looked up and said.

"What's your name?"

"Katharine."

"Well you listen here, Katharine. This is where you are going to live until you reach the age of thirteen. While you are here, you will obey the rules. For now that means that you will do what I say. I know your life has been hard. Well, everyone's life here is hard so

CHAPTER TEN

don't go thinking you're anything special. You need to get washed up. I'm sure you haven't bathed properly all summer. This home is the best chance you have, so keep to the rules or you'll be back on the streets. Remember that."

She glared at me until I looked away and then she said, "Do you understand?"

I nodded yes.

"Yes, Miss Lothrop," she corrected me. I found that I still hated her condescending, petty tone.

"Yes, Miss Throwup," I answered. I managed to use our secret name for her without even a hint of humor or hesitation.

"Lothrop! Low - Throp. Say it."

"Lowthroop."

"Lothrop!"

"Lo... Loth..."

"Throp! Lothrop!"

"Ummm. Lo..."

"Oh dear heaven in the sun, is there something wrong with you girl?"

"No, Miss Lothrop."

"Well, we'll soon know about that. Go and get yourself clean. You stink like a barnyard. Alexa!"

I couldn't believe that she would be so blatantly cruel to a young girl coming off the streets. I wanted to tell her what a heartless witch she was sometimes and that the girls would be better off taking care of themselves. It was hard enough living like this without her careless put downs and bitter heart.

Alexa came in and offered me her hand, but I didn't take it. I was remembering all the other little things she had said to keep us girls down over the years.

"You take that back," I said.

"Come on, sweetie," Alexa said as she reached down and took my hand.

I shook her off and said again, "Take it back. That was a very mean thing to say. I do not stink, and if I do it's not my fault."

Miss Lothrop got up from her chair, came around her desk, and said, "You listen here, little miss mouth, you'll do as I say or you'll find yourself out hungry next winter all alone with more stink than a pack of dead trolls. Now get along."

She stared at me but this time I didn't look away.

CHAPTER TEN

Finally, after almost a full minute of this silent standoff, I screamed, "Take it back!!" with genuine anger, remembering that she used to be kind, in a way, but her put downs and condescensions were constant. I always wanted her to like me. I tried so hard, but unless you were one of her favorites, like Donna or Lisa and some others, she only found fault and treated you like an ignorant animal.

She just kept looking at me.

"It's because you're a weak, bitter old woman who can only feel good by making us feel smaller and more helpless than we already are. I feel sorry for you and your empty heart."

She stepped forward and swung her hand down to slap me across the face but I knocked her hand away and pointed my finger up at her and yelled, "Don't you ever hit me again."

"What's going on in here?" came Donna's throaty voice from the doorway.

I reached up and took Alexa's hand and she started to leave, but Donna held her up and said, "No. I said what's going on."

"Let them go, Donna," Miss Lothrop said.

She stepped aside and Alexa led me quickly down the hall to the large bedroom. I stopped at the doorway and watched her move slowly through the humid haze and slanted sunbeams while her footsteps and the crackling, squeaky floor echoed lightly around the flimsy cots and cracked plaster walls. She was so much like some of the older girls that were here eleven years ago, helpful and confident, nurturing and supportive when all else was rules and chores and wondering if life would ever be right again. What a shame that all these girls had to endure Donna, who was bitter and uncomfortable with herself when I was here and must be even more lost and angry now.

It's a terrible thing to grow into a larger world, to learn and know and understand things and to then be bound by them, unable to be simply happy, always looking for the next success, the next challenge or discovery. When I was last in this room, my only thoughts were filled with anxious excitement for the new world that the tall man in the black robe would bring to me. Now that I had them, and my dreams truly had been answered, I found myself almost wishing that I could have stayed here in the quiet company of other girls like myself, who understood and knew me. I wished that it was I and not Donna who had stayed here.

I wondered if I would have been as bitter, as pained as she. No. Donna was locked inside a very small box, and she didn't even

CHAPTER TEN

know there was a way out. It had always been that way with her. All Andrea and I talked about was getting out, discovering the world, while Donna simply ridiculed us for our hopes.

"Katharine?" Alexa called out to me. "Come here, honey."

I looked up through the lazy afternoon haze and saw that she had taken fresh clothes out from the cabinet.

One of the other kitchen girls came in with a pot of warm water for me to wash with and set it on one of the shelves in the cabinet. She also had a stem full with ripe, purple grapes which she gave to me.

Alexa picked me up and sat me on the little half wall that separated the cots from the dressing area then lifted the dirty dress over my head. She dipped a rag into the warm water and helped wash my scratches and scabs and all the dirt that I had put on my arms and face.

"Don't worry about Miss Lothrop. She's not so bad."

"I think I know one of the girls here."

"Oh, really? How wonderful. Who is she?"

"Miranda Drake. When her mama died, they said she was brought here."

"Oh, Katharine. I'm sorry. She's not here anymore."

"Did someone adopt her already?"

"No, it was her father."

"She had a daddy?"

"I suppose so."

Alexa lifted me down and helped me into the fresh clothes while she told me, "She was always telling everyone that she had a papa and she didn't have to stay here. She was always going to run away and find him. One time she did leave and was gone for two days, but a baker brought her back after he caught her stealing a muffin."

She sat me back on the wall and began brushing my hair.

"What happened to her? How did he find out that she was here?"

"Well, the woman that brought Miranda here was the Lady of the house where her mother worked. She came by to donate some old shoes, blankets, and such that her church collected. Miranda ran to her, grabbed her, and begged her to take her to her father."

"Did you see all this?"

"All the girls did. It was so sad. The Lady said that there was a man who visited once in a while, a wizard of some sort. She left promising that she would check into it. None of us thought she

CHAPTER TEN

would actually do anything, even if her story was true, but in just a few days, he came by.”

“What was his name?”

“Oh, I’m sure I don’t remember.”

“Estus Arrenkyle? I think I remember a wizard visiting now and then, but I didn’t know he was her father.”

“Arrenkyle sounds familiar.”

“Maybe he’ll come back and adopt me.”

“Oh, honey, I don’t think so. They’re both a long way away. Best not worry about it. I think Miranda’s happy now. I know I’d like to be so lucky. You know what he did?”

I shook my head no.

“When he saw how hard it was for us here, he got our garden started. He made us a magic water well for the garden and it’s been such a help. We get almost six full buckets a day from it. Imagine someone that rich and powerful just taking you away. It’s one in a million. Best not to think about it, right Katharine?”

“I s’pose.”

She finished brushing out my hair and before she could say anything else, I gave her a big hug. She picked me up and hugged me back and I said, “I’m so glad I came here. You’re a very special person. You’ve got to take care of these girls the way Miss Lothrop and Donna can’t.”

She set me down and then knelt in front of me, holding my hands.

“What do you mean?”

“I wish I could take you all with me.”

She looked at me with confused concern.

I hugged her again around the neck, kissed her cheek and then ran away. I heard her calling and running after me. I ran past the basement door and the kitchen then turned and ran right past the front office, and through the forbidden parlor to the front foyer. I pulled the latch on the front door and opened it, ringing the bell that it hit as it opened.

I turned and saw Alexa leave the chase to Donna who came out of the office saying, “Get back in here. You girls are not allowed in the front of the house.”

“Shut up, Dragon breath,” I yelled back just before I stepped out onto the porch.

By the time she got to the front door, all she saw as a black crow perched on the porch fence. I flew back and did what birds

CHAPTER TEN

sometimes do, adding another mark to Donna's face before flying away down the street.

I felt better than I had since I first ran away to find Adrian.

So now I knew. What I had heard under the Alayas trees in last night's moonscene was correct, and the lie Papa had told me this morning was a direct attempt to twist and confuse my thoughts.

I knew everything, but as I felt the heavy air under my wings and saw the city, my old city, below me, accessible and open, I no longer cared. It's not really that I didn't care, I suppose, but that the truth, laid out in front of me, no longer hiding behind my father's deceptions or my fears of it, became smaller.

Instead of seeming so far away and dangerous and inaccessible, the fact that my father was working in secret to bring about massive social and economic changes with his invention seemed obvious and trivial. I simply wanted to know more about it. I thought that if I went back and explained everything I had done and what I knew, he might tell me more and even let me help him as I used to when we visited the villages, but more likely he would feel that I needed to be lied to and kept quiet. I only wanted to know why. Why did he have to be trapped inside a cage of his own lies? Why did I have to care so much?

That morning I had done everything wrong. I was confrontational instead of understanding and helpful. I should have waited until we were alone and said, "Papa, I know all about Miranda and I'll help you. You can trust me." Instead, I got scared and acted like a selfish little brat.

I wondered how much of this Mother knew. She probably knew some of his secret plans, but I was sure she didn't know about Miranda because she would have had her home with us long ago if she did.

It was strange to understand my father in this way. He seemed transformed into yet a third image. There was the mighty magician, founder of the Academy, known by so many. Then there was my papa, strong and all knowing, caring, and true. Now I saw him dealing with uncertainty, loneliness, and even fear, just like a regular person.

I flew back toward the Magicians' Guild, toward the four tall spires that rose majestically above the skyline. When I got closer, I saw that there was a small crowd of about thirty or forty people gathered along the front walk. I circled once and saw that there was

CHAPTER TEN

a smallish man with a long black beard standing on a barrel addressing the angry crowd.

I flew across the street, found an isolated alcove by a stone mason's shop where I released the Shape Shift spell and became Nyssa.

When I crossed the street, I saw the dwarf and the anger in his eyes as he shouted from his barrel.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“And vegetables?” he cried, throwing his arms up in a grand shrug.

“No!” the crowd answered.

“And fish?”

“No!”

“And is there even any grain for our horses?”

“No!”

“And do they tell us why? Well, I will. Not only are those evil traders hoarding our food, they’re paying the witches in here to spoil everyone’s crop. You all know it’s not supposed to be this hot. It’s unnatural isn’t it? I tell you it’s their doing.”

He turned and pointed to the Guild building.

“They fly around in the form of demons and they make the milk turn sour in your sow’s body. They blow the rains away, leaving us with dust, and they spoil the fruit that hangs on our trees. Remember that whenever their devil chants touch food in any way, it’s poisoned. Poisoned! Beware the wizard’s words for their power comes from a demon’s eye. There is no goodness in their hearts and their power fouls all it touches.

“It’s an evil plague and they’re doing it on purpose. Does anyone else have the courage to even whisper the truth, much less proclaim it here for you? I’ll tell you something else. They’re not only going to try to kill all the dwarves and the elves and dragons and giants. These traders are going to try to make slaves of their own kind. That’s you, my friends.

“They are going to try to trick you into giving them all your gold. They think that if you’re hungry enough, you’ll pay whatever price they ask. And when they ask you to take your gold from under your pillow, or out of the bank and give it to them, to pay for their poisoned food, will you do it?”

“No!” came the predictable answer of the crowd.

“I hope not, because then they’ll use your money to raise armies against you. They’ll pay one man to kill his neighbor and offer food in exchange for loyalty. They’ll kill my kind for meat and set the rest

CHAPTER ELEVEN

of you fighting over my poor bones and those of my wife and my darling children, Knapp and Trinkä.

"I beg of you, don't let them kill my babies because you can be sure that yours will be next when they tell you they don't have enough food to feed more than one child for every family."

To one side, the crowd parted as a couple city guards approached the speaker's barrel.

"What's all this, then?" one of them asked.

"Leave me be, good officer. These poor people need to hear the truth."

"The truth is you're causing trouble on my street."

"There's going to be more trouble than me if those traders and dirty wizards enslave all of us."

"We'll just have to handle that when it comes," suggested the other guard.

The first guard didn't bother with any more words. He reached up to grab the dwarf, but the stout, little man jumped down and ran through the crowd shouting, "Tell all, tell all. Share the truth – till the demons fall."

Without its leader, the crowd quickly broke up. I wandered on down the street thinking of the things he had said and how some of them seemed, if not true, somehow related to the truth. Suddenly someone bumped me from behind and before I could even turn around, my pack was missing. The thief ran past me and through the dissipating audience. I held my right arm out straight, plucked a thorn from my belt, and spoke the summoning for a Wizard Dart spell and sent the small missiles from my finger to the fleeing man. They flew unerringly through the confused crowd, zipping around one man's head and between the legs of an old woman, knocking the thief to the ground.

Instead of being happy that I stopped a thief, everyone turned around and glared at me with shocked looks of fear and disbelief. The old woman raised a crooked finger and screamed, "Witch!! Witch!!"

The guards came running over. One knelt down and grabbed the young man in what looked like a very uncomfortable arm hold. The other said gruffly to me, "You best get inside, wizard. You're not much welcome with this bunch."

How strange, I thought, that the old superstitions had returned once again. I thought that people no longer associated the science of conjuring with the degenerate forms practiced hundreds of years

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ago. When people are desperate, as everyone in this city must have been, reason is easily replaced, especially if such garbage is preached by a charismatic old dwarf on a barrel.

The guards walked with me to the front gate but instead of going in, I turned and glared at the few stragglers who had decided to follow us.

“Are you not going in, miss?”

I laughed gently in a way that I hoped effused arrogance and contempt, but what I felt was more like disappointment.

“No,” I answered. “Not just yet, but thank you.”

“As you wish.”

They led the thief away and I followed along the circular walk that surrounded the Guild, running my hand along the hedge that separated the walk from the invisible wall. After a little while longer I looked back and found that they had all decided to leave me alone, but I reminded myself that if I were walking anywhere else other than in the literal shadow of the oldest and largest collection of master magicians in the whole world, the situation might not have gone so easily. As it was, I turned back around and didn't give the dwarf's demonstration another thought.

“What now?” I asked myself silently.

Of course I would go back home. No matter what Papa did or had ever done, that was still my home, with my wonderful mother, my brothers and sisters and everything else I knew. So he had lied. So he would lie again. So be it. I still loved him, even if I had nothing to say to him just now. I had this awful feeling that I would never really be close with my father the way I used to be. I would be polite, and we would care for each other, but something had happened. Something unspoken and awkward would always be with us.

Still, I needed to go home, and I had used the last Transport charge to run away here instead of going back where I belonged.

At the side of the Guild, behind a small grassy yard, was the little magic shop. The small room nestled under the spires and balconies of the southern face of the Guild building and provided adventurers with all sorts of magical devices and spells from packs of stink pellets and ever-sharp blades to elven cloaks of true seeing.

The hedge and invisible wall slanted toward the face of the little shop and ran on around to the back. The path led right to the door on which was a flyer announcing the items to be sold at the weekly auction: a wand of paralyzation, a water breathing ring, a package of five griffin quills, a used and slightly damaged leather armor jacket,

CHAPTER ELEVEN

a used backpack, two fire crystals, an amulet of beauty, and a magic pen. Nothing there I couldn't do without.

Inside to the left, along the wall covered in slats of cherry wood, was a rack of various cloaks and light armor. To the right, on the same wall as the door, just under the large round window, was a cedar cabinet filled with components. I examined my belt and pouch then picked up a couple oil flasks, some bat wings, a few small lodestones, a small package of glass beads, and a ribbon holding six long thorns.

Opposite the door was a six foot high counter behind which sat the slender blond woman who minded the shop, Teelan, I think her name was. I set the components on the counter but she didn't look up from the book she was reading.

Along the right wall were cases filled with expensive magic daggers, swords, sashes, helmets, and lots of rings. The top of the cases held various non-magical items such as pipes, tobacco, hats, canteens.

In the middle of the room were some shelves with a few boots, folded robes, packs, rope, and a rack of writing supplies. I picked up a pen, a booklet of folded parchment and set them on the counter with the components and said, "I need a Transport wand."

The woman did not react in any way.

"Excuse me," I tried again. "I need a wand."

Again nothing.

I finally remembered the protocol and set ten silver pieces onto the counter.

Teelan looked up and said, "Good afternoon. Is this all?"

"No. I also need a Transport wand."

She counted the other items then disappeared behind the counter for a moment. When she returned, she laid the wand, in a very fine case, next to them and said, "That's thirty eight silvers and fourteen coppers for these, plus five thousand gold for the wand."

I stopped counting my handful of silver pieces and said with shocked disbelief, "Five thousand gold pieces?"

The wand and the other items I had selected all discreetly disappeared from view.

"That's right. Do you have platinum, or an account, I hope?"

"No! That's... That's..." more money than most of these city folk would make in a year, but I didn't say anything.

"Do you want the wand or not?"

"Yes, but, five thousand gold. Are you sure?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I don't know. Let me check."

She looked up toward the ceiling as if in deep thought then tapped her finger against her chin while she furrowed her brow.

Then she looked down at her book and began reading again, ignoring me.

I counted out the thirty eight silvers and fourteen coppers and laid them on the counter.

"I'll just take the supplies then," I said, trying to forgive her impertinence. Again she just sat there, as if she were alone in the room.

"You've got my money. Give me my things!"

She turned a page.

Words which questioned her honor, lineage, and species rested just behind my lips, threatening to escape, but I held them in place by clenching my teeth together tightly as I counted out ten more silvers.

When I put them on the counter, she pushed the items I had selected toward the edge of the tall counter where I could reach them. I took them one by one and put them into my pouch then turned and left before the words spoke themselves despite my efforts.

When I stepped outside, my petty anger was replaced by a matter of deeper concern. I was stranded. It would take days flying back as an eagle, or even as a red dragon. I was also hungry and tired so I retraced my steps back to the check-in gate. The guards nodded as I walked by. They were mostly for show since the spells that protected the grounds would not have allowed me to pass unless I had been processed as an initiate.

I had become quite accustomed to free access to magnificent, high level spells since I first learned to read the enchanted runes of the Craft, and it hardly occurred to me how rare that was. Not only could my father make a wand for pretty much any spell he wanted, or obtain any desired material or magic parchment, he had been experimenting with Transport spells for the past two years and had most likely made more Transport wands than any other magician. He kept his piled up in cabinets, not stored in ruby studded, silver canisters.

I went up the grand stone steps and through the mighty oak doors of the Guild's front entrance while I swallowed the angry bitterness of my predicament. My decisions and actions had brought me here. It was a bit strange that these actions had both liberated

CHAPTER ELEVEN

and stranded me, but I was in no mood to appreciate the irony. It wasn't so much that I wanted to be home, although I was now feeling a bit impatient to get back. I feared that if I thought for too long, I might decide not to. Mostly, I was angry that I couldn't go home, or anywhere else for that matter. All I could do was stomp steadfastly through the ornate halls and up the marble steps to the free dorm wing on the fourth floor. I took a key from the rack and went down the narrow hallway to room number eight, which turned out to be only slightly larger than my walk-in closet at home. It a narrow bed and just enough room for a tiny table and chair. Light was coming in through a small round window that was partially covered by the dorm wall, which must have been built much later than the outside wall.

I had been conjuring pretty heavily that day and I could feel myself drifting away from the Magical State. I was anxious to get some sleep to refresh my magical capacity and to hide away from all my worries, even though it was still early evening.

I closed the door behind me, dropped my pack on the table then threw my clothes over the back of the wooden chair and crawled onto the stiff down mattress. Many thoughts competed for my attention as I lay there, eyes closed, feeling the rough fabric on my cheek, smelling the goose down and the stale air mixed with the scent of the musty room. I saw again in my mind last night when I discovered Miranda and this morning when I ran out of the house and yelled at Jheffery. I also saw Adrian, a haloed silhouette, sitting between the fire and me, telling me things I shouldn't have to know. I saw another fire, long ago, as I sat on someone's lap, hearing the squeaky honk of seagulls and feeling the cold sea air blow my young hair into my eyes.

One image stayed with me: Miranda, in the back yard of the orphanage, picking string beans with Nancy, waiting for her papa to come.

I drifted in and out of a light sleep for some time while all the images melted together into a stew of nightmarish confusion, haunting and taunting me. Several times I rolled from one side to the other trying to wake up enough to make sense of the melancholy melange in my mind. Eventually, I succumbed to a deeper sleep and slept soundly for a few hours until I awoke suddenly in darkness.

I was initially confused, finding myself there at night and not at home in the morning. Instead of feeling rested, I felt jittery and achy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I twisted my body this way and that to stretch out the kinks, and then I stood and got dressed.

I was still stranded, of course, but having slept, I could at least review my spell book and begin to reconstruct my magic potential.

I took my magic book from my pack and carried it, my money pouch, and the key with me out of the room in search of some food. I remembered there was a small cafe which served coffees and teas with pastries, but when I finally found it, it was closed for the night. There was another place that I had visited a few times. I remembered that I got to it from the laboratory wing on the ground floor.

I went down the hallway I remembered, but missed the door the first time past. It was a smaller door which opened onto a dark hallway that was lit only by a small torch at the far end about ten yards away. There were many shelves in the hallway to hold supplies for the laboratories, but I passed all of these. At the torch, the hallway turned at an angle to the right and began to slope downward.

These back passages were dug as the Guild was being built, and I heard that they eventually lead through the bedrock to the sea, but I'd never tried to find out. It would be too easy to get lost and possibly run into other unhealthy caverns under the city outside the protection of the Guild's spells.

There was a small alcove to my right that could easily be missed amid the rough and irregular stone wall. Inside the alcove was a very narrow stairway, perhaps only two feet wide between the rough cut rock.

It became completely black as the narrow stairs wound down through the rock. I kept stepping down gently and the further I went, the lower the ceiling became. Finally, the stairs widened and came onto a flat area. The stairs continued down in another spiral, but to the left there was an opening onto a rather well lit hallway. I left the stair tunnel and followed the hallway that went on for several yards and then curved to the right where I saw the familiar glowing sign flashing the words "Yertholian Underground."

The room was nestled into a space that had been carved into the rock and which undoubtedly had served many purposes over the years. Now it was filled with the Yertholian Underground, which was much like many other pubs in its basic function, but extraordinarily ornate. Dark wooden walls with marble pillars surrounded the perimeter of the large room meeting a ceiling of colorful frescoes that depicted historic achievements in the Guild's

CHAPTER ELEVEN

history. The floor was a deeply soft carpet and all the sofas along the walls and the chairs around the tables were large and comfortable. The ceiling was lit by bars that were hidden in the rafters and on which had been cast low intensity Glow spells. This left the room below rather intimate and dark, accented by the unsteady light from four circular pit fireplaces and candles which gave a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere to the quiet, spacious room.

I went around the perimeter to the bar and ordered a dark ale then found a seat at a table by one of the fireplaces. I opened my magic book on the table, sat in the plush chair and began reading the spell of confluence to focus my mental state into one that could accept Magic Potential from the glamour streams. The ale came and as I drank, I subvocalized the words to several spells, realigning their power with that of the energy that was focused through my concentration so that they would dispel properly when invoked.

It's best not to drink while imprinting spells, but I downed three glasses of dark ale before letting my concentration relax. I closed the book and looked around the room. The small crowd had grown quite a bit, and there was a low, friendly murmur humming among the sounds from the kitchen, which reminded me that I was hungry.

I took my book with me to the bar and bought a cup of leek stew with bread and finished a fourth ale while I ate and enjoyed the lazy lightheadedness of the drink.

I left a silver coin for the ales, soup, and a generous tip, since I didn't want to bother counting out fifty or more copper pieces.

As I was debating whether or not to let my self sink deeper into the apathy of the ale, I heard my name being called.

I turned my tired head around and saw Tamar walking quickly toward me.

"Are you okay?" was the first thing he asked.

"Hi, Tamar!" was all I could think of to say.

"You look okay, except for the fact that you seem to be trying to get drunk."

"I'm not drunk!" I protested weakly. "I'm just, well, comfortable."

Then I smiled at him.

"You're father has been looking for you all day."

"Oh. I thought he might."

"Let's find a seat. I need to tell you something."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He helped me to an intimate booth along the wall. My feet were walking kind of sloppy and I felt happily limp and relaxed but he got me settled down okay.

He seemed agitated and nervous. I leaned back into the corner and let my head rest against the back of the seat.

"Nyssa," he began with almost a whisper. "I'm not sure what's going on. Your father said you had some kind of fight with him this morning and that you ran off."

"That's right." I answered, not sure where this was leading.

"It made him mad, Nyssa. I don't know what to do here. Last night you wanted me to help you and now this. I don't know what's going on or who to believe."

He stopped talking and I waited for him to continue. He pulled his long hair back from his face, held it in a pony tail behind his head for a while then let it drop again. He looked up to me and said, "Say something."

"Why? You already told me last night that you didn't want to know anything."

"Well maybe I'm not so sure about that now."

"How come?"

He leaned forward with his arms on the table and looked at me through his fallen hair which he again tried to brush aside.

"He was not just angry, but vicious. He stormed into the lab and just screamed, 'Where is she?' He said he knew that you had been there and wanted to know everything I had told you."

"What'd you say?"

"I told him what I said to you. He grabbed me and threatened me and kept asking me what you knew."

I reached across the table and put my hand over his. He held my hand in his and said, "I glad I found you before he did."

Then he looked up and said, "Nyssa, what's going on with you two?"

He seemed genuinely upset and concerned.

"Did he hurt you," I asked.

"No, but I was afraid of what he might do to you. I've never seen him this way."

"He wouldn't hurt me, Tamar. Not ever."

He took his hand back and tapped them on the table.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"What did he do next?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"He left and was gone a couple hours then he ran in again and brought me to Seagate to ask around at the Guild. After that, he came back and we went to the warehouse because he thought Adrian might have told you something."

"Like what?"

"He didn't say. He cast some spell and said you hadn't been there then he wanted me to wait there for you but you still didn't show up. Then he sent me back to the Guild and I've been looking all around here for the past hour."

"Where's my father now?"

"I don't know."

"I need to talk to him. I should never have run off like that, but I had to."

"Why is he so mad?"

"He may think that Adrian has done something to me or turned me against him, but that's not what this is all about. It's about Miranda."

"Miranda?"

"The little girl who lives next door at Academy Manor."

"Yes. I know her."

"I shouldn't really be telling you this, but maybe it's best. The truth is I'm not very interested in what Adrian was talking about or what my father's doing anymore. That's his world and if he feels it's important to hide it and lie about it. Fine. But he's also been lying about Miranda. She's his daughter, illegitimate by one of our maids. I went back to the orphanage where she stayed after her mother died, and I found out for sure he was lying."

"But last night you weren't talking about that, were you?"

"No. I was angry and upset from talking to Adrian, but now I don't care about that. What she did was let me see my father as he really is. He's powerful and brilliant, but he's also alone and afraid because of all these secrets he's surrounded himself with. He may think that Adrian's turned me against him or that I'm going to mess with his research, but all I care about now is getting Miranda home where she belongs. She's my sister and she needs me."

"Tamar, he's losing his perspective. I think his research, all those plans, Adrian's resignation, and all that has caused him to twist everything inside out. It seems all he can do these days is lie and hide everything behind a web of silence and slight of hand. I want to help him deal with Miranda, take that burden off of him. I ran away

CHAPTER ELEVEN

when he needed me most, but I don't think I'd be able to help him if I hadn't."

"I don't know, Nyssa. It was all so strange. He was like I've never seen him before."

"He needs to be home. If I can get him to come back home, I can help him with Miranda and then he can take a vacation for a while."

Tamar seemed much more relaxed. I also felt better sorting it out in my own mind by explaining it to him.

I laughed quietly.

"What?" Tamar asked.

"It's just been so strange lately. I can imagine what you must have thought of me the way I carried on."

"Well, you did get me worried. Then the way your father's been acting today, I didn't know what to think."

"We're quite a family, aren't we."

"You're all so volatile. I mean that in a good way, I guess."

"No, that's okay. We all can be quite possessed at times, but we're not all that bad."

"I hope not."

I yawned, feeling sleepy from the ale.

"What time is it," I asked.

"About ten thirty."

"Let's go find my father."

"I hope he's calmed down some by now."

"He was probably worried about me, poor thing. Once we get home, everything will be all right. How do we find him?"

"I don't know. We could probably just wait here for him, but he did say something about keeping an eye on the warehouse."

"Will he be by there later? Maybe we could meet him there."

"I suppose."

We stood up and I picked up my backpack and book then we went out of the pub.

Tamar led me to the right instead of back to the narrow stair way and after making half a dozen turns we ended up in a familiar area under the lower library annex.

"I didn't know you could get down there from here."

"I know my way around here pretty well."

"How long have you been at the Academy? I'm surprised that I never got to meet you until now."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Well, let's see. I've been at the Academy for a couple years, but I've only been working with your father for the past four months or so."

"How did you end up there? Did you come from one of the villages?"

"No. Pash-nie."

"So how did you end up at the Academy?"

"I walked."

"From Pash-nie?"

"It took most of the spring, but it was better than what I had before."

"And what was that?"

"Something not as good."

He smiled mysteriously as he reached forward and opened the door for me. We went up the stairs to my room, got my stuff and dropped the key into the check-out bin then hurried back down and went out a side door onto the Guild grounds. We walked along the grass until we got back to the front and were able to go through the gate and walk along the dark Seagate streets to the dock area.

"So what made you walk all that way just to study magic?"

"Oh, I had no idea that I was going to get messed up in that. I wanted to be a ranger and ride with a group of hearty, fearless, men and pick up some of the gold that's supposed to still be hidden still in the N'jerah dungeon."

"You didn't go there, did you?"

"Well," he began. Then after he seemed to ponder an answer, he added, "No."

"Stay away from the N'jerah dungeon."

We were silent again as we walked through the port district, down the sloping roads toward the sea, keeping to the streets that were lit with at least torches, if not Glow lanterns.

"Are you going to make me ask you forty seven more questions, or are you going to tell me the rest of the story on your own?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Okay, be that way."

We walked on in silence another block or so until I asked, "How did you hear about the Academy?"

He was quiet for a while so I said, "It's okay. You don't need to talk to me. I'll just walk next to you and not say another word. Or I could walk behind you if you would prefer."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I don't think you need to do that. I was just considering telling you some amazing story about how I was captured by trolls and had to fight my way out with the help of a pretty little dryad who whispered my destiny to me in her lilting, song-like voice before she flew back to her tree, leaving me with new found direction and vigor and an ache in my heart as I remembered her fluffy, blond curls."

"You mean that's not what happened? I mean, stuff like that happens all the time around here."

"Actually, I stayed with a family in Pash-nie for a while and they told me that I could learn ranger and fighting skills so here I am."

"So the troll story â€" you just made that up here?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I thought you might like a good adventure story since you're always looking for something exciting to happen."

I stopped and said, "You arrogant, uncultured,..." but he just kept walking.

Then he said, "Are you going to follow behind me now?"

I held my pride and hurried up beside him again.

"Where is this warehouse anyway?"

"We're not there yet."

"I didn't ask if we were there, I asked where it was."

"We're going there. Would it really help you to know the series of turns and angles through which I'm going to walk? Are you looking for a short cut?"

"Never mind. Why are you being so annoying?"

"It's a hobby. I'm getting pretty good at it don't you think?"

I decided not to say anything else until we got there.

"I don't know," he said quietly. "I think it's because I'm nervous. It's like a defense thing I guess. I'm sorry. You're right. I'm being impolite. The warehouse is at the south end of the dock. The one we're going to is near the far end away from the pier."

"It's okay. I don't really need to know. I was just trying to make conversation."

"Okay."

"Do you mind talking about yourself? I don't mean to pry, but it seems a little odd that you know my father so well and I first saw you only yesterday? What made you want to be a magician?"

"You want to know?"

"Sure"

"Really? It's nothing grand or even interesting."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I want to know."

"I saw a group of young wizards playing fly tag above the courtyard in front of the library."

"Fly tag?"

"Fly tag."

"So, have you played?"

"No. I'm still learning Float, and as you found out, I'm not that good. Now, before you have to ask another question, the reason I ended up as your father's apprentice was that I saw him walking along one day so I went up to him and asked him who the best to teach Magic to a young ranger. He said, P'Tantis would be a good example, but he didn't have much time to teach, so he said to go with him and I did. We talked for a while and I told him about walking from Pash-nie and the rest is history."

"Just like that. You see the master regent of the Academy walking along so you just walk up to him?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I don't know. I guess I always figured that everyone kind of was in awe of him or something."

"No. He's just another man, I figured."

By then the night sea was visible through the buildings. We went down one steep road and we were then on the large dock with piers jutting out to meet the ships. Only now there were no ships. The sea air was cool and the breeze was strong and all around was dark and too quiet.

We walked in silence, listening to the dark sea trickle around the columns under the pier. There was a lazy breeze drifting across the water, blowing my hair gently behind me, carrying the briny scent of fish and the sleepy sound of buoy bells.

The pier led us inland to a wide cobbled path that ran between two of the three rows of warehouses. At another time, during a busy day, this road would have been filled with dozens of carts carrying goods to and from the ships or into town. There would be sounds of business, of activity, of drivers arguing with the customs or tax agents that scrutinized each transaction to the best of their ability. Even at night, there should have been the activity of the Merchants' Guild guards, protecting the supplies, and sailors wandering about, singing, fighting, bragging about the bordello.

Instead, the way was still. There was nothing left to protect. The sailors were out to sea, looking for better land up north. The torches

CHAPTER ELEVEN

were not even lit. The scene seemed almost unreal through the ale's comfortable dizziness that still fogged my head.

Tamar led me through the heavy silence of the night and whenever we came to the end of one of the large, hollow buildings, I looked both ways, expecting to see thieves or hungry dogs, homeless families, children, or even trolls hiding in the alleys, but there were only dense shadows against the night. Whatever might have been lurking there remained hidden out of sight.

At the next intersection, he turned and led me into one of those alleys. There were no boxes, crates, wagons, or anything else for someone to hide in or behind. That made me feel a little better, but not much. I looked up along the moonlit roof line expecting to see someone there, but again we seemed to be alone.

We emerged from the alley and across from us was warehouse twenty three, the only one with its large sliding door closed tight.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"He's not here," Tamar announced.

"So what's in there?"

"I don't know. What did Adrian tell you about it?"

"Nothing. But he thinks she did, which means that there's something there."

We crossed the street and stood at the tall wooden door on which was bolted a lattice of steel bars. This street was narrower and even more quiet than the other since it ran along the backs of the other warehouses, making this seem almost like a back alley itself.

"Do you think he'll be here?" I asked.

"Probably."

I sat down and we waited while Tamar paced back and forth, kicking small pebbles here and there.

I closed my eyes for a while but that made me uncomfortable. The air was damp and cold and the ground was hard and even colder and I grew more and more uneasy and uncomfortable as the wind picked up and blew through the vacant street.

Finally I said, "Come here and sit down, Tamar. Tell me more about yourself."

He stopped walking and said, "It's not much of a story."

"Well, it's better than watching you pace back and forth and kick up all kinds of dirt."

He shrugged and walked away from me then paced back in my direction and said, "Or you can tell me about yourself."

"I already know all about myself."

He shrugged and said, "Well, there you go."

I sighed heavily.

I think he was trying not to grin as he turned and walked away from me down to the end of the warehouse and back.

He looked around, glanced down at me once, then shrugged yet again and walked to the other end of the warehouse, stood there for a while, kicked a few pebbles then walked back to me and leaned against the door about five feet from me. He was being childishly coy, waiting for me to say something. It became like a contest: who could keep quiet the longest. He had spoken last so it was my turn,

CHAPTER TWELVE

but the last time I said something, he had brushed me aside, daring me to try again.

He walked back and forth in front of me a few times out in the middle of the street and glanced over my way a couple times, even though he tried to disguise it by pushing his hair back away from his face as he turned around. He walked down the street again, waited for a while with his back to me then came back along the front of the warehouse.

I leaned my head forward, as if tired, and watched him walk back to me.

He stopped and leaned with his back against the door, this time standing a little closer than before.

"I'm cold," I said, loosing the game.

"Maybe you should get up and walk around some."

"Are you sure he's coming?"

"No."

I stood up and said, "Well for the all the dragon's gold, why are we here chilling ourselves?"

"I think he'll be here. I'm just not sure when."

"Well at least we can wait inside."

"It's locked tight."

"Well let's unlock it."

I began delivering the chant to activate an Open spell, hoping to release the mechanical locks on the door and at least get out of the wind. It was ineffective. I grabbed the handle and pulled it to the side, but the door was still held fast. It didn't even rattle.

"They keep this one locked tight with all kinds of wizard holds."

I sat down, hugged my arms and said, "Thank you, Mister Magic."

We waited again in silence until my butt started to go numb from sitting on the cold ground. Again he walked back to the end of the warehouse. I watched him walk away from me for the third time and when I turned my gaze back, I saw shadows move within the shadow of the alley across the street. I watched closely for the next several moments but didn't see any other movement. I did, however, hear something, a kind of shuffling and whispering maybe.

I looked back to Tamar. He was leaning his hand against the wall, looking the other way.

"Hey," I called out softly to him.

He didn't respond.

"Tamar!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

"What?" he queried, still looking away.

"Come here."

Finally he turned around and stepped slowly back to me, wearing some far away, half grin.

I stood up when he got close and leaned toward him and said very quietly, "There's someone across the street."

He looked, but when I heard more foot steps, I grabbed his arm and pulled past the front of the warehouse and on around to the corner of the building where we waited, backs pressed against the stone wall.

There were voices again, and then the light sound of running steps.

Then we heard a male voice call out, saying, "You made a mistake apprentice."

"Who are they?" I asked in a loud whisper, feeling suddenly cold and uncomfortable.

"I don't know."

"What do they mean?"

"I don't know."

"Why are they here?"

"Your Open spell probably triggered some kind of ward."

"Then these are probably the Merchants Guild guards."

"Yes. Possibly."

"Then why didn't you say that in the first place?" I said as I reached back and slapped his arm.

"I don't know."

"Then why are we hiding?"

"You're the one who pulled me back here."

"But you could have said something"

"It doesn't belong to him," came the voice again from somewhere out in the street. "It's our way or nothing."

I said, "Let's go talk to them. Papa's working with them, right?"

"Tell him we're tired of his delays."

Tamar cried out and when I turned, I saw the shaft of an arrow in his right thigh. He pushed it through, broke off the tip and held the two ends of the broken arrow in his shaking hands.

I turned back toward the front and wove patterns in the air as I pulled a small tile of granite from my belt and spoke the chant for a Ricochet spell. The air before me shimmered briefly then I saw an arrow break against it and go flying sideways. I started a Wizard Dart spell and it went off as another arrow bounced off the magical

CHAPTER TWELVE

shield. As the missiles flew from my fingers, I spotted the archer across the street. He tried to duck the darts, but they changed course and hit him square in the chest, knocking him back and causing his fourth arrow to hit the ground near his feet.

Then I felt the pound of magic darts hitting me in the back. I fell forward, scraping my hands on the rough brick, but I tucked my head down and rolled forward. When I rolled back to my feet, I saw Tamar finish a Shrink spell and reduce himself to about two feet tall.

The voice, now from behind me, said, "No deals. We do it our way."

Tamar ran back to the front of the warehouse and disappeared around the corner of the building next to this one.

"Who are you?" I cried out as I looked behind me for the man but again saw only darkness.

Without waiting for an answer, I pulled open my pouch and found the little box holding dried bee eyes. I took one out and as I was casting an ultravision spell, another barrage of wizard darts deflected off my shield, which meant that my back was now exposed to the archer.

I searched my supply pouch and found a sulfur pellet and began summoning a Choke Cloud spell. It coalesced and I held my breath as the greenish, putrid, smoke began to fill the alley way. I backed out to the street and saw movement within the cloud as the invisible magician walked through then began coughing and retching.

I turned and reached my arm behind me and pulled my ultraviolet Glow stick from its sheath and put the attached chord around my neck, leaving my hands free. Suddenly the street was filled with the bright, purple light that wasn't quite purple. I saw Tamar climbing a drain pipe at the far corner of the other warehouse. The archer was positioned again across the street with an arrow ready to fly.

"Tamar, behind you," I yelled.

He jumped and the arrow hit above him, deflecting off the wall.

I pulled a thin strip of cat fur from my belt and began a Lightning spell.

The archer turned and aimed another arrow. I almost lost the rhythm of the chant as I watched the arrow fly swift and straight toward me. It was deflected and when I finished summoning the lightening, I sent the energy at the archer. The alley exploded with a quick, brilliant light and a loud crack of miniature thunder. He jumped to the side, but I saw him thrown back as he was hit.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When I looked back to Tamar, I didn't see him. I ran out of the alley and heard the footsteps of the magician following me. When I reached the corner and started to turn, I felt a force pushing me from behind, pushing me forward. I tried to compensate by taking longer steps, but I lost my balance and fell forward onto my shoulder. Before I could get up, I felt the painful stick of more wizard darts in my back and neck.

I didn't quite lose consciousness, or if I did it was only for a few seconds. I heard the magician say, "Where's the other one?"

I rolled over and saw that the archer was holding my light rod. My backpack was lying a few feet to my side.

The magician looked down at me and came my way but stopped as a rock hit him hard in the side of the face.

"Get that little bastard and bring him to me!"

As soon as the archer ran off, taking my light with him, I grabbed a long thorn and I started another Dart spell, but before I could finish, the magician stepped over and smacked the back of his hand sharply across my mouth, fouling the words and causing me to lose the summoning.

He grabbed me by the hair and savagely pulled my head back then stuffed a dirty rag in my mouth. Then he rolled me over onto my stomach, pressed his knee, bearing nearly his full weight, between my shoulder blades while he wrapped another gag on my mouth and tied it tight behind my head.

I tried to cry out because his knee hurt so much, but he ignored me as he pulled my hands back one at a time and then tied them, leaving rope burns on my wrists.

Once I was bound, he took a knife and cut the strap of my component pouch, took off my belt, and finally lifted his crushing weight from my back. I tried to curl up to get my feet under me, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me off balance. He picked up my supplies and dragged me back to warehouse twenty three, scraping my hip and legs along the uneven cobbles.

He spoke a spell that was completely unfamiliar to me then pushed the wide door aside enough for us to enter. He lifted me to my feet and walked me to the corner then tripped me and pushed me down to the floor. Without my hands to catch me, I banged my knee and shoulder really hard, but managed not to crack my head on either the wall or the floor.

He left me there to whimper and try to cry around the foul, dirty rag that he had shoved into my mouth. I kept trying to push it

CHAPTER TWELVE

forward with my tongue, but it kept forcing it's way back, gagging me.

I knew that I was going to die.

I knew it not as an academic, logical conclusion or even an emotional, frightened hysteria. I simply knew it. My body knew it. My heart knew it for it pounded with such fierce abandon that I feared the strain had sent it into fatal dysfunction. It pounded so hard that it hurt and made my fingertips tingle with the pressure of my blood squirting through.

Every defense I relied on was gone. My voice was gagged and I could not speak. My hands were tied and I could not gesture. My material and book had been taken from me and I was left a naked, fleshy target of fire, fists, or any other indecency he chose to enjoy.

I found myself wishing that the he would do it kindly, rather than let me feel the stick of arrows or the foul touch of his hands.

I closed my eyes and exposed my back to him, huddled with my knees drawn up, afraid to move, too frightened to cry, wishing almost that I would choke to death on the sour rag.

I heard a scuffle by the door and opened my eyes.

Tamar was still alive. He was bound and gagged, as I was, and he was back to his full size, kicking and struggling.

I turned over and watched the magician punch him brutally in the chest. The archer threw him to the floor next to me while the magician pulled the big door closed.

The light rod had been tossed aside and I could see now that the warehouse was completely empty. The light from the floor bathed the two men in eerie, purple light from below, casting crazy shadows against the walls.

Tamar scooted next to me and I saw him close his eyes.

Outside the crickets sang, unknowing or uncaring about my fierce desperation.

The magician knelt in front of us and said, "I think you know I'll kill you even if it looks like you're going to do something I don't like."

The archer took a cross bow from his side and raised it toward us and backed away while the magician knelt down to examine my backpack.

He picked up the light rod and said, "Nice work. Did he make this?" he asked, coming toward me. "What does it do?" Of course he couldn't see the bright, ultraviolet light that emanated from it. He stood in front of us and tapped the rod against his hand.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"What were you trying to do, I wonder. Why did he send you? He should know that we're getting tired of his tricks and his lies, and now this."

He was bearded and overweight. The archer was a bit thinner and had long, blond hair that fell past his shoulders.

"I'll put a Statue on them and we can carry them to somewhere more secure.

He bent down and started gathering my things and some other items that must have belonged to Tamar.

Suddenly he stopped, rubbed his cheek, and said, "I changed my mind. Kill him and we'll use her to get to the bottom of this."

Without hesitation, the archer let his arrow fly. I leaned over in front of Tamar and saw the arrow bounce off my Ricochet spell.

The magician laughed and walked toward us.

"Very funny," he said. "Nice try."

Then he reached down and grabbed me by the face, forced his fingers into my cheeks and said, "Drop it."

I didn't. I tried to pull away from him but he held me even tighter. Then he took his hand away from my face and grabbed me by the front of the throat and said, "Or how about I just yank your voice out of your neck, wizard?"

I closed my eyes again. His fingers hurt so much.

He finally let me go and stepped back to cast a Cancel Magic spell. When it formed, I felt my shield extinguish and I saw Tamar move in an odd way which after a quick moment I realized was a growth spurt from a slightly reduced size.

The magician walked back past the archer.

Tamar leaned into me again and I felt his hand reach behind me, searching for mine. He was no longer bound and I realized that he must have reduced his size after he was bound just enough to slip out of the rope. I felt him put a small wand of some kind into my hand.

"What are you waiting for?" asked the magician as he slapped the archer on the head. I told you to kill him."

Tamar leapt to his feet and charged the archer before he had his arrow set.

I rolled over onto my side and pointed the wand from behind my back at the blond man and summoned its magic. Whatever spell was infused in the wand discharged and the archer and Tamar both fell away from me. I rolled back onto my feet and ran away toward the back of the warehouse. I looked back over my shoulder then ran

CHAPTER TWELVE

into something hard. Invisible. It felt like wood, a crate of some kind. When I looked closer, I could see the edges as the dim ultraviolet light diffracted ever so slightly through it.

I fell to the ground and continued to crawl away, feeling my way with my shoulder as I saw the magician lean down to check his companion and Tamar.

I felt my way around one box and kept crawling. There was now at least one crate between me and the others, which might stop an arrow, but not more spells.

I saw Tamar sweep his leg quickly across the floor, hitting the magician just below the knee. As the bearded man stumbled backward, Tamar grabbed a knife from the archer's belt then pushed the magician back and hammered the knife into his side.

I leaned against another crate and began working my fingers around the knot as I watched the magician fall back onto the ground and work the knife gingerly from between his ribs. Tamar rushed across the floor to my backpack and components, and by the time the magician was back to his knees, Tamar, the pack and the pouch and all became clear.

The knot was loosening, but still held.

The magician rose to his feet, stumbled once then reached into his own bag of supplies and summoned a Detect Invisible spell, which meant that while he could see Tamar, he could also see the boxes, giving Tamar a chance to hide. I tried not to move too much since it was still dark to him and I could see pretty well in the ultraviolet light.

I kept working on the knot but I had trouble holding the wand Tamar had given me. I dropped it and he looked straight at me. I froze. I knew that he couldn't see me because of the boxes between us and when he realized this disadvantage, he cursed then quickly cast a Fly spell.

He rose and must have seen Tamar for he flew quickly toward the back. I saw the archer start to move and beside him lay the bloodied knife. I left the wand and tried to run back in that direction but I couldn't find my way around the crates that I was behind. I finally closed my eyes to avoid the confusion that my vision caused and felt with my shoulder and head for the end of the row of crates. I found a narrow opening and managed to squeeze through.

Behind me I heard the crackle of magic lightning and the splintering of wood.

CHAPTER TWELVE

By the time I was free from the boxes, the archer had risen to his feet. I dived onto him and banged my kneecap into the side of his leg as we fell to the ground together. I rolled off him and scooted back to the knife and got my fingers around the blood dampened hilt as he grabbed my ankle and pulled me toward him. I kicked his hands off me with my free foot then managed to back away and stand up.

I turned the knife around and sawed at the rope while we stood face to face. He took a step forward and I took a step back. The cross bow was on the ground to his left but he didn't try to pick it up.

I sawed as fast as I could and cut the back of my thumb pretty bad, but finally the rope came undone and I pulled my arms around to the front, holding the knife in a defensive stance.

I saw the magician flying at us quickly, casting a spell. The archer fell to the side, hit by Tamar who was still invisible.

I slid the knife against my cheek and pulled it away sharply, slicing the gag away just in time to turn and throw the knife at the approaching magician. It missed him, but when he threw his hands up his gestures were disrupted and his spell fractured and dissipated.

Tamar and the fighter were scuffling to the side so the magician turned toward me. I pulled the dirty rag out of my mouth and threw it on the floor then when he got close to me, I jumped to the side and picked up the archer's crossbow that was still cocked and unfired.

I pointed it at him and he backed off a bit then began his own Ricochet spell. I took careful aim, held my breath to steady my arms, and pulled the trigger.

I hit him in the shoulder.

"Nyssa!"

I turned around and saw that Tamar had canceled his invisibility. He tossed my pouch to me, but when he was turned toward me, the fighter put his thick, crushing arm around Tamar's neck. I ran over and pushed my fingers into the fighter's eyes. With that and an elbow in the gut delivered by Tamar, the man stumbled backward against the warehouse door, and then Tamar followed up with a quick punch to his throat, sending him coughing to the floor. For someone training as a magician Tamar was pretty good at hand to hand.

I turned my attention back to the magician who finally gave up on the arrow, and with it still sticking out from below his collar bone began casting a Statue spell directed at Tamar.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I took out a flask of oil from my pouch and as his spell finished and I saw Tamar freeze, I summoned a Fire Cloud spell. The fire washed up around him and down around the invisible boxes which caught on fire, revealing their shape. He flew away from the growing flames and I ran to the side, away from Tamar.

By the time I stopped and turned, the magician had begun to summon more lightning. Meanwhile, the archer had recovered, and seeing that Tamar was frozen by the Statue spell, he ran toward me.

I opened my pouch and found a frog leg. The magician and I faced each other, each chanting, each holding material that would be converted by the energy of the spells. His was a more advanced, complicated spell, so even though he had a slight head start, I was still able to finish first, even if only by a second or two.

I jumped.

Below me I saw his lightening flash on the ground. The archer tried to back off but took the full force of his companion's friendly fire and fell limp onto the hard ground.

Before he could begin another spell I fell down on him and pushed him onto the boxes, using him to break our fall. Because of his Fly spell, however, he didn't hit hard at all. I almost fell away from him but he grabbed me again around the throat and pressed his thumbs into my arteries. I felt myself start to black out as he pressed harder, cutting off the flow of blood. Then he flew up into the air, bogged down somewhat by my weight. I held onto his belt with one arm and with my free hand I reached up and pounded on his knife wound which was still bleeding severely.

He gasped and let go of my throat and used both hands to pull my hand away from his wound. I slipped and almost lost hold of his belt but managed to hold on.

He directed his flight lower, scraping my feet on the tops of the invisible crates, trying to knock me off. I raised my feet but he kept flying lower. We reached the rear of the warehouse and he began flying us back to the front.

When I heard above me the words of a Burn spell, I pulled myself up and tried to grab hold of his arm to foul his gestures, but he continued without missing a syllable or motion. I let go of him just as he reached for me and I fell with one foot on and one foot off a crate below me. I was able to reach down and put my hands on the edge of the box so when I fell, I was able to control myself a little bit.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The warehouse was beginning to fill with smoke from the boxes and their burning contents. More of the crates were beginning to catch fire and I was trapped with the growing fire between me and the front door.

He circled above me while I felt around and ran quickly along the row of crates in front of me until I came to a dead end. He followed above and was beginning a Fire Cloud spell. I climbed up onto the crate and stood below him, ready to jump down the other side when I saw him falter once, then again. His spell broke and discharged harmlessly as a crackle and flair of light. Then he began flying down toward me and midway he finally lost consciousness and fell straight down.

I saw him drop and wished I had turned away because I saw him crumple at an impossible angle as he hit the edge of one of the invisible crates.

"Tamar!!" I called out. He should be free now that the magician was unconscious, if not dead.

"I'm here!" he answered over the crackling of the blaze that now had taken over the front half of the warehouse.

Now it was my turn to fly. I found a bat wind and after casting the spell, I flew up to the roof, intending to fly over the flames, but the smoke was so thick up there and hot. I flew back down to the rear of the building. All before me was a wall of orange flame. I heard Tamar's voice calling for me through the blaze and I was afraid he might try to come through.

I moved forward, held my breath, and hid my face in my hands as I went through the fire. I felt an almost unbearable heat for about two seconds then it was over. I flew down to Tamar who tackled me and began beating his hands on my hair and clothes, which were starting to burn. I rolled on the ground under him until he stopped patting his hands against me.

"It's out. You're okay."

By then, the warehouse was consumed with an army of tall, eager flames and suffocating heat. Black smoke was rolling in a boiling churn just four feet above the floor.

We crawled along on our bellies to the front door, but it was still held shut with powerful magical and mechanical locks.

Tamar crawled away from me just as I realized what I needed to do.

"Tamar!" I screamed, unable to see him through the haze that burned my eyes. I pressed against the door as far from the fire as

CHAPTER TWELVE

possible and crawled in his direction. I met him on his way back and he had my backpack, belt, and Glow stick with him.

“Never mind that stuff!! Get down.”

I turned my back to the fire, found a ball of wax, and began chanting another Shape Shift spell. It felt like forever while I spoke the words with deliberate rhythm, horribly afraid that I would cough and have to start over. When I finally completed the chant, I stood up into the painful heat of the black smoke and felt myself grow into the form of a fire dragon.

I inhaled deeply, feeling the fire and smoke draw into my powerful lungs. I reached my claw to the front door and slowly felt for Tamar. My eyes were now surrounded by flame and black smoke so I couldn't see him, but I carefully put my clawed foot around his body and then I lifted my head up to the wooden rafters which were already starting to catch fire and I bellowed a massive torch that seared, then blackened the roof.

I drew down my wings, spreading the smoke and fire in circles all around. I held Tamar close to my body, hoping to hold him inside the protection of my curled claw. I belched another spear of fire onto the roof then became airborne through the blaze.

I flew to the roof, flamed once more then raised my head hard onto the burnt, weakened structure. It gave way easily, and I beat my wings against what was left, collapsing the roof and pushing myself higher.

I climbed fast from there and circled around to see the raging orange flames within the stone box that used to be warehouse twenty three.

I turned and flew south along the coast with Tamar hanging limp within my giant claw.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I flew south.

The dark sea stretched endlessly to my left, a pool of cold blackness beneath a gray kaleidoscope. To my right were the cliffs of southern Seagate on which stood the crowded homes of wealthy merchants and officials who in better times enjoyed the view of ships, bellies full of silk, lettuce, sheep, wealth itself, as they stampeded in and out of the harbor.

Beyond that, as the cliffs retreated further inland, giving way to the narrow beaches below, the small piers, boats, and lives of fisherman huddled together, sharing what was left of the once bountiful sea. The waters of the coast had provided quick wealth to the hearty, hard working men in the absence of fruit and meat, but now, hardly a single lobster, crab, or even shrimp could be harvested. Their lives were no doubt filled with the simple pleasures of eating, working, laughing, and loving, and as I flew over them, I felt a twinge of sad detachment, as if down there was where I should have been. If not for Estus Arrenkyle, I would very likely be in one of those small homes sleeping in my husband's arms after eating a simple but filling meal, or perhaps I would be awake, tending to my crying baby. Instead, a fire dragon flew across their bay.

I didn't want to believe in we had just done so I flew hard and fast rather than listen to the truth that followed me like a gibbering, mad troll.

Once we were well beyond the edge of the city, when the beach was finally alone with the trees, I began to descend. I selected a secluded inlet and arched my back to let my wings catch the sea wind until I was flying low and fast just above the small waves.

I pushed my wings up to catch more air then beat them a couple times to slow myself enough to lower my feet. I hopped forward on one foot, still holding Tamar in the other, and then came to a stop. I stood somewhat unsteadily, with the cold water foaming and steaming against my warm scales. The forest came alive with the shrill chatter of night birds escaping the area to warn all who might hear them of the dragon on the beach.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I set Tamar down as gingerly as I could then lurched forward one more time before returning to my own form and falling forward in the hip deep chill of the night sea. I stood up, drenched in ice water, and saw Tamar lying motionless several feet behind me.

The moment became frozen. My vision became like a picture. The power of the sea surged back and forth on my legs as each wave rolled in and then flowed out under the next. The wrongness of what had happened covered me as completely as the bitter brine and felt just as cold and alone and unwelcome. The picture moved. I was indeed here, somehow standing in the ocean, and before me Tamar lay. I tried to run to him, but my legs were slow in the thickness of the water and my steps became labored and forced, as in a dream.

“Tamar”, I cried out amid the hiss of the ocean.

I lost my footing as a larger wave tumbled in, throwing me sideways and covering my head with salty foam.

I stood up choking as the water slipped back along my ankles, leaving me free to run, finally, through the sand to Tamar.

“No, no, no,” I cried in a litany of despair as I took hold of his arms and pulled his limp form through the shallow water that was flowing over his head.

Once we were clear, I knelt beside him and looked through the sopping disarray of my hair into his shadowed face. I put my ear to his mouth but couldn't tell whether or not he was breathing. I took in a sudden, harsh breath when I saw that my huge, sharp claw had ripped through his robe and had sliced into his abdomen, leaving the front of his robe wet with a large, damp blood stain.

I held his face in my hands and yelled, “Tamar! Don't,” then worked the tear in his robe apart so I could see how badly I had cut him. There was something under his shirt, and when I reached in with my hand I found that he had stashed my belt, Glow stick, and his wand in an inside pocket with two other wands.

I pulled them out and threw them aside then worked the straps of my backpack over his arms and tossed it clear of the water. I opened my pouch, whose contents were now soaked, and found a clump of mold still intact enough for me to pull a piece away. I took two deliberate, deep breaths to calm my shaking then began casting my father's healing spell. I first laid my hands on Tamar's stomach and felt the skin pull together as the flesh below mended itself. After another spell, the wound closed on top, but I didn't stop. I cast another and yet another, holding my hands against his chest and throat, but he remained motionless.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I sat beside him and again held his face between my hands, slapping him on the cheek.

"Come on, honey. Tamar, don't."

His first breath was shallow then he rolled onto his side and choked and gagged as he expelled the water from his lungs and stomach. I used the last of the mold for a final spell while he coughed and threw up.

When I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder, he spun away from me and ran.

"Tamar!"

He stumbled. I ran and fell next to him, covering him with my arms, and said, "Shhh, honey, were okay. Its okay, Tamar. Were safe."

He lifted his eyes to me, and even in the gray shades of moonlight, I saw the wildness of angry fear in his eyes.

I brushed his matted hair away from his face and said, "You're alive."

"Nyssa?"

"Yes."

He put his arms around me and embraced me with the sincerity and hunger of a frightened child.

"Its over," I said, stroking his hair.

"Can you get up?"

"My gut hurts."

"I don't have any more of the healing component. I'm sorry."

I stood up next to him as he rolled over and lifted himself onto his hands and knees then I helped him stand up. He was shaky and in shock, but we were able to walk up the rise of the beach to the cover of the trees where I helped him lie down amid the wild cat tails and tall grass at the edge of the forest under the canopy of an old maple tree. I hurried back through the soggy sand to get our collection of magical supplies and devices.

When I returned, he was lying on his side, holding his arms over his abdomen and shivering.

"We've got to find papa," I suggested as I sat next to him.

He suddenly turned his head away, put his hand to his stomach and cried, "Oh, Nyssa. I don't feel good."

He kicked his legs slowly, as if trying to loosen up a cramp.

"I'm sorry. Sit still. I don't have any more."

He rolled over, away from me and drew his legs up as he held his hands over his stomach and grunted, trying to hold in the pain that I had inflicted on him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I rubbed his back and pleaded, "I'm sorry, Tamar."

I scooted back to the tree and pulled him upright next to me. I held his head on the front of my shoulder and put my arm around him while with my free hand I found a belladonna berry and spoke the commands to form a Sleep spell. As I delivered the final words, I felt him relax against me.

After he was quiet, I pulled his robe open again to check his wound and found why he was still in so much pain. There was a knife wound lower on his stomach and around to the side. It was just a shallow cut, not a puncture, and it wasn't bleeding much anymore. I pushed my hand over the wound to help stop the escape of his blood and wished I had some more healing mold.

Then I embraced his quiet, warm body next to mine, holding him because I needed to hold someone. I also needed to jump up, scream, and run away and hide under the bed, but there was no hiding from this. Men were dead by my hand. Dead. And now I was hiding out on a wilderness sea shore. Where was home? Where was my bed?

After a while, I heard the subtle noises of the sleepless forest, but mostly I heard the quiet, and the incessant shushing of the waves dropping on the shore, lulling me into a sleepy daze where the cool air, the flickering stars, the feeling of rough bark on my back all seemed less real than they should have. I felt myself freeze again in a cage of apathy that drained all ambition and hope, leaving me with nothing to do but sit and see the blackness of shadows and hear the emptiness of silence.

Dead.

They deserved it. They shot first.

Others will find me. I don't want to die.

I'm sorry, Papa. Please don't hate me.

Somebody love me. Somebody help me.

And so the voices inside me ran, bubbling and churning, daring me to face the magnitude, the depth, the horror of what I had done. I knew that I had done something far more sinister than simply kill and burn. All this was certainly related to the things Adrian had told me and to the fact that Papa must have been expecting, even fearing that this night might happen. I could not scream loud enough to get away or expunge my sin, and so I was left with nothing else to do but sit with this brave young man in my arms and wait to die.

I had poured the old me out of my shell and now sat empty with only the foreboding and dread of walking through the unwanted

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

hours of this very wrong, indecent reality which was now and forever cast. I was a hollow husk. My despair, my penitence, my anger were all too big to fit inside me so they fell away, to be blown out to sea along with all the future plans and happiness that I had always hoped would find me, leaving only unrelenting stillness in the wake of my lost dreams.

I closed my eyes and rocked gently, holding Tamar close, not wanting to wonder what hell I had caused my father, family, and our future.

For a long time I rocked him in my arms and cried dry tears, weeping with every part of me but my eyes which were steadfastly focused on the petals of a little wild flower that bobbed and swayed playfully in the night's breath, a gray silhouette, uncaring and unbothered about the consequences that were waiting for the fugitives that had washed up on its shore. Oh, to be that flower, caring only for the sun and rain, and the buzz of a friendly bee.

I brushed the hair away from Tamar's face as I wondered what this night would mean to him. What was the future to be now that we had entered this covenant of fire, together forging our futures?

I let my fingers trace the curves of his cheek and jaw and felt his lips as his life's air flowed past them, tickling my palm.

Is this what I had been wanting, needing, waiting for, to fill the void left by my father: adventure, battle, making my world by pounding clay instead of blowing dandelion seeds?

That night was the penumbra between then and now, who I was and was to become, whoever that was. I turned my head down and kissed Tamar's forehead, then closed my eyes and kissed his sleeping lips.

"What have I done?" I whispered, but he slept on while the voices of fear and despair rambled on, dragging me into a fitful, light sleep.

It was the shrill call of some wild forest bird that woke me up to witness the sun peeking over the same persistent waves. Tamar was still sleeping next to me. He was breathing quietly and his knife wound was scabbed over pretty well.

"Tamar. Wake up."

I patted his cheek gently and he opened his eyes, turned and grimaced as he twisted, pulling on his scab.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Somewhere South of Seagate. I guess nobody followed us."

"He put his hand inside his robe and felt in his inner pocket."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Where's the..."

"It's all over there."

"Why didn't you take us home, Nyssa?"

"What do you mean?"

"With the Transporter Wand. Where is it?"

I pushed him forward and slid out from between him and the tree then went to our pile and brought everything back to him.

He selected one of the wands and gave it to me. I held it in my hand.

"It was here all the time? Oh, Tamar I'm sorry. I could have healed you all the way. I was sitting here feeling so horrible and alone and helpless and all the time I had the ability to go anywhere I wanted."

Tamar stood up and gathered the other items while I kept looking down at the wand. He handed my backpack to me then took hold of my hand as I pictured in my mind the transport platform at the Academy and released the spell.

Moments later, Tamar stepped away from the platform and limped toward the back wall where he pulled the chord for the emergency bell. I immediately heard footsteps running to us, and soon there was an attendant by our sides. He saw Tamar and me and exclaimed, "You are Tamar Kalidon, yes?"

"So far I still am."

"Are you injured?"

"Oh, yeah."

He didn't bother to examine Tamar, but immediately cast a stronger variation of my father's healing spell which was developed at the Academy and which had complexities that were still beyond my capabilities to cast.

Tamar let out a deep sigh of relief and said, "Oh sweet diamond dust does that feel better."

I helped him up, and then the attendant said, "Your father was here late last night in a frightful state looking for the two of you. He left this for you."

He handed a folded and sealed piece of paper to Tamar.

"Thank you," Tamar said.

As the attendant left us, Tamar examined the paper and then gave it to me.

It read, "Go to the Academy house. Trouble in Seagate. Stay away."

"What does it say?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"He's telling us that there's trouble in Seagate."

I felt empty and alone again.

"Our trouble?"

"I hope that's all. We need to get to Academy Manor. Are you better now?"

"Fine as pixie locks."

We ran down the side stairs to the alcove under the second floor, stepping across the colorful patterns that the stained glass windows painted on the gray and green marbled floor of the front atrium. We ran past the tall fountain, which splashed noisily below the vaulted ceiling four stories above us, and on through the front doors then down the wide stone steps. We slowed to a quick walk when we crossed the road and entered the grove. We followed the brick walkway between the lovely trees, the sculptured hedges, statues, gardens, and pavilions of the grove. A few students were enjoying the sun or practicing sword play, conjuring, painting, whatever with their masters and tutors. Of course some were just playing music or Fly Tag. I thought of Tamar.

"Nyssa?" he said.

I turned to him but he was quite for a long moment. Finally, without looking my way he said, "Do want to talk about it at all? I've been wondering if I should say anything."

"I'm still scared," I answered.

He started to say something else then paused. I waited for him to continue, but the opportunity drifted away from us and every step took us farther away from the words until neither of us wanted to go back and pick them up. Maybe another time.

At the other end of the grove, the path led out to the street and I saw the house at the end, up on the shallow rise. We found Jheffery inside sleeping on the sofa, still wearing his armor and sword. Miranda was sleeping curled up on the chaise lounge, covered with one of Mother's elven tapestry quilts.

Jheffery jumped up, startled by our noisy entrance and looked ready to display his sword. I thought I was in control of my emotions and that last night was last night, far and away, ready to be coolly discussed and analyzed, but when I saw my little brother standing alert and battle ready, something broke in me and I ran to him.

"We're okay," I said as I threw my arms around him and hid my face in his shoulder.

"Where were you?" he asked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I couldn't bring myself to say anything but Tamar offered a conservative analysis.

"We ran into some trouble in Seagate."

"Like what? What happened, Nyssa?"

"I'm sorry, Jheffery."

I forced myself into an unsteady composure and stepped away from him until I was able to say, "I think I did something bad."

"How bad?"

I turned around to face him and thought I could answer him calmly and without another display of quivering emotion but I was wrong. I brought my hand to my mouth and cried out, "Oh, Jheffery."

There was a thud and then a crash upstairs followed by the dogs barking outside.

Jheffery's sword came out and my childish trepidation drained away from me as my hand fell on my component pouch.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jheffery twirled, surveying all around while his expression of confusion and surprise melted into a firm, angry countenance.

“You two stay together,” he ordered. “Stay with Miranda.”

He charged up the stairs.

Tamar reached down and picked up Miranda and together we all listened to the stillness, expecting some sign that would tell us what to feel next.

“What’s happening, Tamar?” she asked in a scared little whisper that carried well into the deep silence of the room.

For two more breaths, I stood with them in the hollow of that maddening, unrevealing quiet, and then I heard the muffled sound of our dogs barking in united fury. I left Tamar behind and bolted through the kitchen to the covered patio. They were on the far side of the house, next to the Alayas trees, still barking, although I expected any instant to hear the growls and yelps as they descended with trained cooperation upon their unfortunate prey. I ran across the patio and past the tall windows of the conservatory, almost losing my footing on the dew slick grass as I rounded the final corner.

My sudden appearance startled them for a moment. Griffon ran to guard me, and the others continued sniffing the air and barking as they circled between house and the pair of carnivores Alayas trees.

I felt myself become completely aware and focused, almost calm amid the storm of the adrenaline surge. What I felt wasn’t quite anger, but more of a reflex, like putting one’s hands out when falling forward. There was someone here and with the image of Miranda’s frightened, trusting face, and the still burning memory of last night’s battle, I finally understood with a conviction beyond words that I was capable of absolutely anything to protect my family. It was in that cold determination that I began a Cancel Magic spell.

Jheffery looked out of Papa’s workshop window and called down to me, “Nyssa! Get back inside!”

In a few seconds, the spell formed, causing the air to shimmer around the agitated scene, revealing a man holding onto the decorative stones beside the window. The dogs saw him and

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

renewed their growling and barking. Jheffery began climbing out of the window toward the young, bearded magician.

The intruder pulled a knife from a sash and threw it at me. I turned and fell to the ground, but Griffon was even faster. He jumped between the knife and me and knocked it away, taking only a glancing cut on his hind leg. I sent him back into the fray, and soon all three were jumping up trying to grab a foot or cuff, but their quarry remained just out of reach. I stood still and cast a Ricochet spell while I watched Jheffery swinging his sword at the intruder's arm and missing repeatedly as his target dodged and moved farther away along the decorative ledge trying to reach the overhang of the roof that sloped toward the front of the house. Once he was steady enough, the magician pulled a bat wing from a pocket, and I heard him begin to cast a Fly spell.

Jheffery moved out of the window and held onto the rough stones with one hand and wielded his sword in the other. Below them the dogs were still going wild, lunging up and trying to put their teeth on their prey. Jheffery took another swing, but the magician jumped and floated away from him. Without hesitation, Jheffery grabbed one of his throwing knives and flung it. The trespasser ducked and dipped down out of the way, but he made the mistake of lowering himself into Ranger's reach. The eldest guard dog jumped up and was rewarded with a mouthful of ankle and calf. Pain revealed itself in the magician's face as he flew sideways, dragging Ranger's hind legs on the ground and allowing the other dogs to taste his unarmored body.

Jheffery began climbing down the side of the rough stone wall, and I opened my pouch, took out an oil flask, and began a Fire Cloud spell. I pictured in my mind the bright explosion and concentrated on the center point that would put him inside the radius but not the dogs.

Midway into the chant, Jheffery ran past me.

The man's leg was now bloody from Ranger's bite, but he still had the presence of mind to send a volley of wizard darts at Jheffery, who dropped instantly flat on the ground in a vain effort to elude the magically precise missiles. With a continuous, fluid motion, he rolled to the side and was back on his feet and rushing back in amid the fury of our hounds. Jheffery spun and back fisted the wizard then grabbed hold of his arm, stepped away and twisted. I heard a crackle then the loud crack as the fierce energy flowed through me and ignited just above Jheffery, covering the upper half of the

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

floating mage in violent flame and bathing the scene in bright, flickering, red light.

He screamed and dropped immediately to the ground with parts of his clothes and hair charred and still glowing with dying flames. He sat and beat at the fire with his good arm as the dogs renewed their attack, digging their teeth into his shoulders and arms. They tore his robe and anchored their strong jaws in his flesh. He kicked at the animals with tortured legs that were growing slippery with bright blood.

Jheffery called out, "Break!! Defend."

They reluctantly stopped their attack and stood snarling in a half circle around the crippled intruder. Even in his broken, tortured state, he mustered the will to stand. His broken arm hung useless at his side and he breathed heavily, looking from the dogs to Jheffery and back to me. I saw his face and the tension and alertness betrayed by the tightness of his jaw and the focused, determined stare from his clear blue eyes.

"Do not move or speak!" Jheffery commanded.

He looked behind him. Already the branches of the tree were twitching, causing the vines to swing in and out, closer and closer to the unsuspecting man.

"What do you want?" Jheffery insisted. "Answer me or I send in the dogs again."

He hardly seemed worried, and it struck me how composed he was. Injured, bleeding, burned, and without any apparent escape, he ignored Jheffery's words and examined his environment, evaluating, plotting, considering his next action.

There was a tense moment when we all heard the panting of the anxious hounds, the gentle sigh of the wind in the trees, and the song of a far away yellow bird.

He rose quickly into the air, close to the Alayas vines, and as they swung out to him, he darted up and threw another knife at Jheffery with his good arm. His knife fell far off target but created enough of a distraction to allow him to fly up above the tree, where he stopped. He looked down at us while holding a crystal prism and began chanting to bring his current location and his destination into unnatural juxtaposition by a Transport spell.

His foot brushed one of the vines near the top and it constricted around his ankle, trying to pull him down. I held a strip of cat fur and began the spell to summon lightning. As I was carefully pronouncing the foundation of the incantation, I saw Jheffery pull

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

his arm back and let his long knife fly. It was fast and spinning quickly, and his aim was true. My spell went off just as the knife reached its target, but both struck only the air where the magician had been and the lightning converged on tree, causing it to twitch violently, sending its hanging vines swinging about frantically for a few seconds.

“Damn!” Jheffery grunted angrily. Then he commanded, “Circle! Patrol!”

Winston and Griffon ran around to the front and Ranger ran across the back yard. He ran to the back door and clawed at it barking and looking our way.

We ran to the back door and Jheffery ran in ahead of me.

Through the kitchen, we saw a struggle taking place in the living room. A second man, a fighter, had Tamar on the floor. He was pressing his foot on Tamar’s back and holding a choke strap around Tamar’s neck. Jheffery tackled him, sending them both crashing into the end table with the pottery statue of Mother that Papa had made by himself years ago.

I rushed to Tamar and began to help him up while behind us Jheffery and the fighter were engaged in the fast dance of trained hand to hand combat. The fighter was clearly stronger and much more battle tough. He spun and delivered a foot to Jheffery’s head knocking him down on top of Tamar and me.

Then he leapt over the three of us and I heard Miranda’s high pitched scream as he took hold of her. By the time we were standing, he held Miranda’s hair in one hand, pulling her head back, and laid the cold steel of his long, curved knife on her upturned neck.

“Tamar!” she cried out between her harsh panting breaths.

All my battle senses dropped, splashing me from the surreal, detached drama of combat into the cold horror of little Miranda’s life being turned into a frail shield, another foul manipulation. The fighter yanked her hair in response to her cry, more as a signal to us than to Miranda, but it caused her to clench her teeth and try not to move.

“Tell me, where is your father?” he demanded.

Jheffery spoke.

“I don’t know. Seagate probably.”

The captor moved the dagger from her throat, pulled her head to the side and ran the tip of the blade quickly across Miranda’s chin, drawing blood.

“Can you be more specific?”

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

This time I answered, pushing the words though my dry throat.

"Please. We don't know."

He considered for a moment then ordered, "All of you, back away toward the corner.

We moved and then he shifted to the front window and looked out.

We stood awkwardly, waiting for his next move. He continued looking out the window, watching left and right, up and down. Miranda's cut was bleeding all over her chin and flowing down onto her neck while all we could do was watch him, sharing his time, pawns on our squares, guessing at his next move.

"Yeah, it looks like we've got a pretty little mess here."

Miranda put her hand up to her cut, but he smacked it down with the flat side of his knife then put it again on her throat.

"Please," I begged. "What do you want?"

He regarded me with measured calm.

"I want you all to very slowly place your weapons and magical devices on that chair. You first," he said, nodding toward Jheffery.

He unfastened his sword and took his knives and set of darts from his belt. When he was done, I stepped forward and dropped my pouch, belt, backpack, and the Transport wand amid Jheffery's weapons. Then Tamar took my place and dropped his components and the variety of wands that he was carrying.

"Very good. We're now going to figure out how to get us all upstairs and you're going to help me find any details about the work Doctor Arrenkyle has been doing for us."

Tamar spoke up and said, "You won't find anything there."

"And why is that, apprentice?"

"He keeps everything in his laboratory."

"Well, that's all well and good, but we've already looked there. Perhaps you can explain why it was cleaned out. No books, no papers, not even so much as a candle or quill."

Again he looked out the window, watching, waiting, expecting someone, maybe Papa or his magician friend.

"Please let her go and I'll go upstairs with you," I offered.

He ignored me as if I hadn't even spoken and continued gazing out the window.

I resolved not to say any more for fear of revealing information that might be useful to him. It was obvious that this was all a result of what had happened last night, but I couldn't determine whether or not he knew that it was I who had unleashed that bit of history.

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

He seemed to think Papa had something to do with it. A sense of putrid despair threatened again to overtake me as I watched Miranda's bloodstained neck and shoulder and witnessed the fear that framed her entire body. We were finishing the ruination of her young life that Papa had started when he forced her to live his secret lie away from us.

"Well then, apprentice, where do you think I might find what I'm looking for?"

"With him most likely."

"Tell me what you know of this resistance group that he told us about."

"I don't know anything about that," Tamar answered.

"Really? He said that Adrian Blackwing was involved. Who is she? Is she the one that set fire to our property and murdered two of our friends?"

His request was met with silence. He looked at me and said, "You were seen with her two nights ago. What did you talk about?"

I cleared my throat and answered with a halting, dry voice.

"She said that she didn't want to work with him any more because of some of the things he was doing."

"Go on. What things?"

"She didn't say."

He added a second cut next to Miranda's first one. She screamed and tried to pull away but he pulled her back by her hair and held her close to him.

"Stop it! Please. She said a group called the Triples were going to use his invention to overtake the banks and that they were making the shortages worse on purpose."

"Is that why she broke into our warehouse? Did she kill your father and steal our work? Or was it all a diversion so he could betray us?"

"I don't know," I answered meekly, looking at the floor and not at the savage scene that he was painting, using poor Miranda as his canvas.

"You see, we have a lot of questions that we would like to ask your father, but he's not in Seagate, his lab is cleaned out, he's not here, and there's a smoking heap of nothing where our something ought to be. It makes you think, doesn't it? I mean, how would she know about, well, things of which she should not know? It makes you think."

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

Jheffery asked, "So if you're here to just ask questions, why did your friend start by trying to kill my sister?"

"Shut your face, boy."

I saw Miranda move her arm from her side to her neck, to try to wipe the blood again, I thought, but instead, she suddenly thrust her hand up between her shoulder and her kidnapper's hand and pushed his arm out enough for her to move, and before he even had much chance to look down, she yanked her head to the side and bit into his hand just behind the thumb.

Jheffery charged.

I began speaking the words to summon a Statue spell as I hurried to the chair and my supplies.

The fighter let go of her hair and punched her sharply on the side of the head, releasing her bite hold, and before Jheffery was half way across the room, he picked her up and held her close to him with his knife pointing into her stomach.

"Stop that wizard chatter!!"

Jheffery stopped but I didn't. The fighter looked directly at me and when I didn't stop articulating the invocation, he pulled the knife back, but a piece of Mother's broken clay figure, thrown by Tamar, hit him in the face. I found a piece of amber as I continued to form the incantation. Jheffery rushed forward in the next heartbeat and took hold of the fighter's knife arm, but he had no leverage and the fighter quickly let go of Miranda and delivered his free fist into Jheffery's face, knocking him back. Miranda started to run away, but the fighter took a step and grabbed the back of her dress and pulled her back to him. He swung her around to the front and again watched me, daring me to stop as he pounded his knife hand down to impale her in the kidney from behind.

But he froze.

There was a moment of lingering stillness while Miranda and her captor realized what had just happened. Tamar helped Jheffery to his feet and I walked around them, trying to force my body to stop shaking as if I had suddenly taken a frightful chill.

"Don't move, Miranda. Be careful. The knife," I told her.

She stopped pulling away, but the man's frozen fingers still grasped a handful of her dress.

Jheffery was standing up and holding his hand over his right eye.

I took one of Jheffery's throwing knife from the chair and gave it to Tamar.

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

“Cut Miranda free,” I said, giving it to him.

Jheffery held Miranda still while Tamar carefully cut the back of her dress around the stiff hand of the fighter until she was able to step free. Tamar picked her up and came back to me patting her on her back while Jheffery stood in front of the motionless man.

He was not just still, as a man sleeping or standing quietly, but frozen, watching us, locked into his position of attack and his expression of fierce determination, holding the knife and the loose fabric from Miranda’s dress.

“Take Miranda upstairs,” I told Tamar.

I looked past Jheffery into those piercing eyes, still filled with their cold arrogance and forced myself to hold his gaze while Jheffery waited for the others to leave the room. He continued watching me, holding his eyes on mine as if demanding that I release him. Even as Jheffery picked up his sword and pulled it from its scabbard, he watched me and I silently matched his resolve, keeping my eyes locked onto his. It was finally he that looked away as Jheffery approached. His eyes darted frantically back and forth, as if trying to flee from the petrified body that refused to answer him. He could not even blink as Jheffery walked to him slowly, sword held loosely in his right hand. Jheffery paused before him, briefly, then raised the sword above his head.

I closed my eyes and waited for the awful wet squish of steel on flesh, but it was slow in coming. I thought perhaps Jheffery was finding it hard to administer the fatal justice. I opened my eyes and saw him kneeling in front of the frozen fighter, glaring at him, moving his sword back and forth between their gaze, giving the man time to consider the ultimate finality of his impending fate.

The sword stopped swaying and Jheffery placed the tip on the man’s chin and pulled upward with a quick snap, cutting through to the bone. Inside his locked body, the fighter could not even so much as flinch and so he was forced to endure the cut as Miranda had done.

“Remember,” Jheffery said with the calm and solid demeanor, “Your life belongs to me.”

He stood, sheathed his sword and pulled the man forward onto the floor then dragged him by the shoulders to the front door. It was like dragging a wooden man. His joints would move against the floor or at Jheffery’s touch, but he was basically a full sized, flesh and blood doll. Jheffery dragged him out the front door, down the porch, and across the front lawn, ordering the dogs back repeatedly.

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

I watched from the porch while Jheffery carried the man through the front gate and threw him into the street. He fell hard on one arm, twisting it or even breaking it, and his head banged onto the rough brick cobbles of the road, and there he lay, twisted, broken, and bleeding in the street, left at the mercy of the creatures of the air and earth for the next several minutes until the spell wore off.

"Tamar, Miranda! We'll be right up," I announced loudly.

"Okay, Nyssa," said Tamar, coming out of Miranda's room. He was still holding her and had a wet rag on her chin. Her head was resting on his shoulder and her eyes were closed, but where should have been the soft curves of a quiet little girl was a mannequin blank expression with an aura of suppressed disquiet. I wondered if she was pushing away the hurt, the helplessness, the rage into a bottomless vassal as I had done so many times.

Jheffery came back in, and I gathered up our magic supplies. Jheffery took his sword, knives, and darts and then we locked up, went upstairs, secured all the windows, and finally went into Miranda's room.

"How is she?"

"She's quiet. I'm a little worried, Nyssa."

"She'll be all right once we get her home."

I held Tamar's hand, Tamar held Miranda, and Jheffery put his arm around my waist while I held the Transportation wand. I forced my mind into the trained, focused, stillness of conjuring and visualized the platform at home, but the spell would not reach closure.

After a moment, Tamar asked, "What's wrong?"

"It's not working. Has it expired?"

"No. That's a new one. He was working with power retention. Try another destination, but don't let it complete."

I imagined the Transport room across the grove at the library, summoned the magic, and immediately felt the spell begin to take form.

"It worked that time."

"Try home again."

After a while, I announced, "Same thing."

Jheffery said, "Sharbra's put up the ward spells. Try the back shed."

Behind our house, on the outside of the invisible wall, was what appeared to be an abandoned shed in which was a transport receiving wand and a trap door to the secret tunnel that led to our

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

kitchen cellar. I again summoned the power of the wand and felt the magic envelop me until I saw the dirt floor and the early morning sun slanting through the cracks of the ill fitted door. I felt the spell close then release, and the familiar musty smell of the small shed let me know that we were finally home.

The air was different, cooler and heavier. I looked out the small window to my home beyond the woods that ran along the back wall by the vegetable gardens. It seemed quiet and peaceful out there. The golems were patrolling even farther away, maintaining their restless vigil.

So what if living here is a dream, a fantasy of comfort and love all around, an illusion painted in our minds. If we must dream, let us at least understand its speciousness, and knowing that, let us remember to take hold of the brush when passion calls.

Jheffery went to the corner and felt around until he found the rope handle. He lifted the wooden cover from the floor, throwing dirt and straw to the side as it opened on complaining hinges to reveal the narrow stairs. He let the door fall back to crash nosily against the wooden wall of the shed and descended into darkness. Tamar, still carrying Miranda, followed him, and I came in last, pulling the heavy door down on top of us with an echoing rattle and a rain of dust and dirt. When Jheffery got to the bottom of the curved stairway, he opened a tiny light compartment that gave off about as much light as a small candle. The stairs seemed to lead to a dead end. I reached into one of the shadowy crevices of the rough cut stones that lined the cavern and found the row of seven iron rods that stuck out from the locking mechanism. I pulled each rod one at a time and listened to the clicks, seven for the first, two for the second, then five, three, five, two and finally six, remembering the key phrase "Welcome to those who enter as friend."

When I had finished, Jheffery pushed hard on one of the stones to the side and released the counter weight that let him lift the massive stone door easily up into the roof.

Once we were all through, Jheffery pulled the stone gate back down behind us. It slammed into place relocking itself and resetting the key rods.

No one spoke during our quick walk through the passage. Every fifteen feet or so we passed one of the stones in the ceiling that glowed with magical light and threw odd shadows around us, mixing with the repeating echoes to encourage a mood that fed my apprehension. I grew more and more nervous, wondering why the

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

defensive spells had been invoked. I dared not wonder what might be ahead if there was trouble in the house, but when I saw the stairs lower for us at the end and Sharbra's smile after he climbed down to us, I finally allowed myself to relax. He helped us up the stairs to the cellar and in short time we were all standing together in the kitchen, which was empty except for Sharbra and the four of us. We were briefly joined, however, by the concerned eyes of Crysta peeking in at us from the back door of the kitchen. Jheffery was unaware of both her concern and relief which I caught before she closed the door. His full attention was on the tactical situation.

"What caused you to raise the defenses?" he asked Sharbra.

"Your father suggested it last night. There was some kind of trouble in Seagate, and he was afraid there might have been an attack on us here, but it's been quiet."

"And everyone's okay?"

"Most certainly."

"Is Father here?"

"Not since last night when he took your mother and Sindee to the elf gathering."

I interrupted to say, "I'm going to take these two upstairs."

They nodded to me and I led Tamar out the back and up the rear stairs to the first guest room at the end of the hall. I went to Papa's lab and found a piece of fresh mold and took it back with me. I pulled Miranda's wet chin rag away and cast a Healing spell for her. Her chin closed and there were no cuts, no scar, and no more hurt. She ran her fingers around on her chin and smiled, so slightly. I took her from Tamar and sat her on the bed.

No more hurt, Miranda," I told said as I brushed her hair away from her face. I kissed her temple then went to my room and looked through my collection of old clothes. I selected the first dress that Papa gave me when I came here. It was an elegant but simple forest green dress with a gold colored belt. I also took a hair ribbon, shoes, stockings, and such.

When I returned, Tamar was sitting in a chair and Miranda was lying curled up on the bed under the covers.

I sat next to her and she opened her eyes.

"It's nice isn't it?"

She nodded yes.

"It's not like those stiff cots. It's always warm here, even in winter, and there are other children here, your brothers and sisters."

CHAPTER FOUTEEN

There was a long road ahead of us, I knew. It took me a long time to adjust after I came here under much better conditions. Just seeing her resting quietly between the soft mattress and downy quilt took me back to my first days here that were like walking through a shining cloud. I intended to scrub her clean, dress her up pretty, and take her through a ritual of introduction, to fix in her mind and those of the other children her proper status and position. Tonight would be a special celebration, a feast to honor our new sister.

As I was losing myself in the reverie of party plans, and sinking into the plush cover, wanting to let myself drift into a pleasant, warm sleep, I heard familiar footsteps in the hall then I heard the angry, tired voice of my father. "Get her out of here!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I heard his deep voice behind me and felt in the center of my back the edge of covered tension in his tone. I rolled over and saw that Tamar had left the room and that Papa had closed the door behind him, leaving us alone with Miranda.

His eyes wore the shadow of fatigue on a face filled with anger and urgency, and he was still wearing the same black guild robe in which I had last seen him. His body was tight, and his quick motions felt out of place with the sense of calm that I had finally managed to summon and which now disappeared as quickly as redberry seeds in a summer storm.

Beside me Miranda let out a quiet sniff, followed by a wet intake of breath, and then she exhaled with a wavering bellow of tears as the fear and confusion that she had so bravely kept inside broke loose. She stood and ran across the bed and leapt to her father's arms into which she emptied the hurt of her impossible ordeal.

Those same magical arms had absorbed so many of my own hurts since I was brought to this world, but now I kept all my fears and disquiet deeply sequestered behind a facade of artificial indifference.

Instead of the warm reassurance of his embrace, my papa gave me a look that promised a reckoning for Miranda's grief. I handed back a firm stare that denied his silent accusations.

"I'm here, baby," he cooed as he held his other daughter close.

To me he said, "Why is she here?"

I swung my feet over the edge of the bed and stood with my back toward them. When I turned, I saw not a powerful, ominous sculptor of worlds. I saw a frightened, little man who was too tired to be thinking clearly.

His eyes were still on me, demanding, questioning.

I faced him and answered, "This is where she belongs, and you know that!"

He ignored me and said, "I really do not understand you, Nyssa. Her mother must be terribly worried."

"Oh, stop it, Papa! I know."

He paused and blinked twice.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"I know," I repeated.

"Does it look to you as if she belongs here? You've scared her to hysterics, girl. I really cannot understand you. Now, of all times, damn it, you decide to run off on some selfish game without even considering how your impetuous, inconsiderate actions might affect other people. This is not like you."

He took a step toward me and barked in an angry whisper, "And now you're kidnapping my neighbors. How dare you, Nyssa?"

"Not this time."

He backed up a bit and patted Miranda's head then addressed me in low tones that might have been contrite, but I couldn't quite be sure.

"Can you look at her, Nyssa, and say with all your soul that this is the best thing? Nyssa, please. I know you thought you were doing the right thing, but look at what it's doing to her already."

"That's not why she's crying, Papa."

He sat down at the foot of the bed and rocked back and forth, comforting Miranda while I stood alone, embraced only by the rough memory of how it felt to know that I was going to die. It burned inside me like a hot coal in my belly that desperately needed to be purged. It was a living agony, thrashing inside, unspoken, joined by a mourning for the loss of the simple solution of my father's lap. This was no longer a thing that could be fixed with a promise and a cuddle. I needed his guidance, understanding, and advice, but even those doors were closed to me now because he had a new concern, a daughter of his own flesh. I could see that she was, as I had once been, his confidante, his partner. I was now too old, too far away, and I asked too many prying questions.

I turned away from their silent communion, sat down on a stiff backed desk chair by the window and felt the dull stab of jealousy. Finally, I understood his distance and inaccessibility and why he no longer needed me, even though I had never stopped needing him. He was my center, my core. He gave me new life and opened my eyes, and I loved him with every part of my mind and soul, for they were his making, his design, crafted by years of tenderness and guidance. He brought me out of the dark chill of loneliness and set a fire in my heart and mind. He gave a vocabulary to the feelings in me that I had always known but never understood. He promised to wrestle the world for me and I believed him. That promise had apparently been passed down.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

He gently rocked his Miranda and took from her the burn of her fear until she settled down and became quiet. He kissed her cheek and spoke to her in a private whisper. She nodded her head against his.

Then he said to me, "What did you mean that's not what upset her?"

I noticed how his thoughts were fully on her, and that I had become little more than a backdrop to her sadness.

"No." I said, barely aloud. "I deserve the truth, Papa. You owe me that, at least. I need to hear it from you. I know the truth, Papa, but I need you to trust me one last time."

He looked at me with contempt and anger and then looked away. He didn't answer and the longer he expanded the heavy silence, the angrier I became. I wanted him to understand what he was doing to me by closing me out, pushing me away. I did truly want to help him, but how could I if he tossed me aside? As the silence swelled, so did the distance between my father and me. Every moment that passed was another gentle word that went unspoken, another healing touch that was not given, another fear or hope that grew without resolution. Was I to be his daughter, or just a commodity that he purchased to get him through the tough times until he established his own family?

"I've told you everything you need to know."

This time it was my turn to allow the silence to grow. He was asking me to let it drop and let him deal with this in his way. Was I to be his daughter, trusting and supportive, or another of the many obstacles that faced him now every day?

Another uncomfortable minute passed with no words. The gulf grew without repair. He rocked Miranda and I looked out the window to the clear, beckoning sky that was waiting for me. A few simple words, a quiet incantation was all that I needed to fly away.

He looked in my direction and a decision formed itself within me.

"I went to the orphanage," I said, breaking the quiet.

His expression didn't change but Miranda looked over to me from the bed. I stood and walked toward them, speaking to Miranda.

"I saw Nancy, who is kind to birds and other animals. I saw Alexa, who took care of you, who is so sweet and special, and full of love. I saw Donna, still lost and angry. I heard how you ran away for two days until a baker caught you stealing."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I sat down next to them and pulled her arm from around Papa's neck and took her little hand in mine. Her eyes were wet and puffy and filled with forlorn bewilderment under her knotted brow.

"I saw your garden and the magic water. I learned that you kept telling them that you wanted your papa, and that he finally came and took you away from there."

I wiped tears from her round cheek.

"You belong here. You are just like all the other children. This is your birthright, Miranda. You are an Arrenkyle."

I put my hand on my father's shoulder and begged, "Let me help you, Papa."

He turned away from me and stood from the bed, holding Miranda closely to him.

"So that's where you were? Spying on me?"

"Do you deny it, Father?" I asked him. "Do you accept or deny this?"

As an answer, he grabbed me tightly around the arm and pulled me up from the bed. With one arm he held Miranda and with the other he shook me and barked, "Stay away. Stay away from my business. You don't want to find what you're looking for. You have no idea."

"Let me go!"

I pulled his hand off my arm and pushed him away.

"I know what you're doing to the family. To me. To Miranda. I know the danger you're bringing to us!"

"Don't you dare lecture me on danger. It rides on my back each and every day. I do what I do because of it. This family lives the way it does because of it. That is your birthright! I stand between that danger and you, and now you want to taste it by throwing sand into the stew. Stop it, Nyssa. You do not understand."

"I know more than you think."

He approached very close and yelled, "You have no right to do this. No right! I know you talked to Adrian and I know what she told you. I know you think you want to uncover things that must remain hidden."

"I know that you are and adulterer and a liar, and I will not allow you..."

Before I could finish, he smacked his heavy hand across my face, hitting my jaw hard with the heel of his hand. His blow swung me around and I dropped to the floor off balance.

"Poppy, stop!" I hear Miranda cry behind me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I pushed myself up and knelt on the floor with my back to him, holding my hand on my sore cheek that was scrunched up with the rest of my face into a grimace that helped me keep the terrible tears away.

There was no longer a gulf of silence between us, but a wall. He made me love him, fed me on his wisdom and friendship, and then left me alone and starving for him, but he fed me only contempt. I knew that I would be all right if I felt his hands on my shoulder or his arms around me to beg forgiveness for leaving me alone and afraid. I waited, but they didn't come. I waited some more and again time marked wounds unhealed.

I called to him silently in my mind, begging him to hold me and love me and stop this horrible nothing that we were falling into. I held my breath to deny the awful sobs that shook me from deep in my gut and I tried to push his cold betrayal and my disappointment away into the dark place inside me that held all my other old pain, but it was old and worn out. I nearly managed to compose myself, but when I felt Miranda's hand sweetly stroke the back of my head, I doubled forward and finally wept for all the things I had lost, and for the fear and loneliness that had replaced them.

Miranda knelt beside me and patted my back throughout the course of my episode which I both despised for its weakness and cherished for its release. I drank in her tender, unconditional compassion until my crying drifted away to wher ever used up tears go. I then felt energized and renewed, and was better able to accept that time and love both flow interminably forward.

"I'm afraid of what your mother might do, Nyssa. If she discovers Miranda, she might cast me out of my own home, take my children from me, and everything that I am working for will have no meaning."

"So you accept it? Say it."

He chuckled lightly behind me and said, "You always were stubborn."

I was unable to share his levity.

"Yes, Nyssa. Miranda is my daughter. I lied. I am an adulterer. Twice, in fact, since you seem to want to know every damn little thing about me."

"Brittany?"

"Brit was the second, and last. The first you didn't know."

I wiped away my tears and stood up then walked back to my little chair and sat down before I looked again at my father. He had

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

also retaken his seat. Again our room reverberated with the little sounds that filled the deep silence: calls from a vee of geese flying past, Papa's heavy breaths, the rustle of Miranda's dress as she climbed back into his lap.

My cheek still hurt, but I refused to rub it.

"Ivy cannot know, Nyssa."

"So what then? More lies, on top of more lies?"

"If necessary."

"Like all the lies you've surrounded around your work?"

He again became very agitated and said, "Stay away from my work. Stay away from Adrian. Whatever you heard, forget it."

"I can't, Papa."

"You can and you will! You don't understand how delicate the balance is right at this moment. I shouldn't even be here with you. I don't have the time for this, Nyssa, especially now. I wish you could just trust me. I wish I could trust you. There's so much betrayal, so much underhanded, back stabbing, dishonorable — damn them all. Nyssa, I need you to trust me and I need Miranda with me."

"You used to need me, Papa."

"I need you to stay out of my affairs."

"The Triples believe you had something to do with burning down warehouse twenty three."

He froze. He looked back at me then sat Miranda down and he stood up and walked stiffly back to me with near rage hinged in each of his tight joints.

He towered over me and said in an explosive single syllable, "What?!! "

"They were at Academy Manor this morning looking for you or your work, but you weren't there. They said your laboratory was cleaned out, your notes were gone and you had disappeared."

"Of course I did. That damned dwarf turned on us and there's no telling how many other attacks he has planned. How do you know about the fire?"

"He tried to hurt Miranda, the fighter did. The magician ran out back and the dogs got him, but then he Transported away. When we went back inside, the fighter grabbed Miranda and used her to make us tell him where you were."

His eyes grew large and he began pacing wildly back and forth thinking, considering, planning, analyzing.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"That's why she was crying, Papa. Not because I brought her here. She was crying because your secrets, your lies and manipulations backfired, and she was almost killed."

He stopped pacing and asked, "What did they say. What makes you think that they think that I did it?"

"He just said how it was funny that you told them about Adrian and that she somehow knew exactly where to go."

"Damn! Damn! It wasn't us, Nyssa! It was that dwarf."

"What dwarf?"

"No. I will not discuss this with you."

"I think you'd better."

He approached me again with a clenched fist and swung it in frustration through the air. "How can I make you understand? Can I say it any more simply? Shut up! Shut up and stay out."

He turned away from me with a flourish of frustration and went back to the sofa. He sat next to Miranda and pulled her onto his lap, holding her the way a frightened child might cling to a well worn doll.

"Why do you think some dwarf did this?"

"Papa's so sorry, Mandy. Did they hurt you?" he asked quietly.

She pointed to her chin and said, "The man cut me here and it hurt really bad, Papa."

"Well, it looks better now."

"Nyssa touched it away."

"Let me help it," he said, and then he bent his head down and kissed her chin.

"Does it hurt now?"

She shook her head no.

"Why do you think a dwarf did it?" I asked again.

"It's closed, Nyssa."

I sprung from my chair and took two giant steps as I said with voice too loud and too shrill, "Then, damn it, open it back up!"

He and Miranda sat still and looked at me.

"Put her down and answer me!"

He kept looking at me and it seemed that for the first time since he had entered the room he was actually seeing me, but instead of just seeing me, acknowledging me, he studied me with meticulous care. Then he tilted his head just a touch to the side and asked quietly, "Why?"

I grew uncomfortable under his scrutiny and I looked down at my feet.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When he asked a second time, there was a demanding urgency to his voice.

I answered, "Because I know that he didn't."

"How?"

"I was there."

"Did you see who did it?"

I nodded yes.

"Well, if it wasn't Longbeard himself, it was one of his men. He threatened to do this very thing a week ago. Now he wants to blame this on us as an excuse to break our agreements."

He let it go as if he were waiting for me to say something else, but I couldn't bring the words through my throat. I just stared at my feet and tried to breathe evenly.

"If you were there in Seagate, Nyssa, you saw how bad it's getting. It's worse for the Dwarves. At first they did better than all the others in the city. They're generally better with the ground, so their gardens lasted longer. Plus, they're stockier, which makes them look well fed. That warehouse held food that we would have sold through the new shops supplied by my transporter. But Ethan Longbeard and his followers were afraid that the supplies would have been given only to humans, which is not completely true, so he threatened to make sure no one would have it.

"That is how I know that he did it. He's been working well with us for some time, and I truly believed that I had convinced him our way was better, but his promises and assistance were all lies to keep me out of his way until he could strike. I was a fool to trust him. I told him that last night, Nyssa, and he told me the same thing. Whatever chance we had to work with the Dwarves was lost last night. Of course he's walking right down the Triple's path if he takes us to war. They would love an excuse to spread their racism and anger. They've been trying hard to incite the Dwarves anyway. I guess he finally decided to do it his way."

I closed my eyes and stepped over to the bed because I began to feel a little light headed.

"This is the Nexus, Nyssa. Three years of diplomacy, planning, and research are coming together, and now it's about to slip through my fingers. Must I beg you to leave me in peace? Do you even know what's at stake?"

"I thought I did, Papa. Why can't you just tell me?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Because there's nothing you can do about it, and knowing would only put you in more danger. Trust me, Nyssa. I know what I'm doing."

"But you don't, Papa. You don't know."

"What? What don't I know?"

"I did it! I did it, Papa. Please don't hate me."

"What did you do?" His question was calm but direct.

"I burned it. We were waiting for you and two of them attacked us. I didn't mean to do it, but we were fighting and I cast a Fire Cloud and then we almost got caught there."

I expected another demonstration of anger but it didn't come. He just sat there empty, looking through me, holding Miranda.

After a moment, he collected his thoughts and said, "No, you didn't."

"I'm not lying, Papa. It was me."

"That's not what I mean. You said they already distrust me, Nyssa. I can't have that. I can give them Ethan. It makes sense. It will lead them away from me and back toward Adrian, which is what we want. It's quite reasonable, actually.

"Let me think. Adrian left, and so I warned them. She went to the Dwarves, and they left the first mark of the resistance. Actually, it's ideal. We thought it would be too risky, but now that it's done, we can't turn away from it. In fact, a little war would make our work even more crucial, and if I can keep their trust until the critical moment, perhaps we can accelerate this thing and get it over with."

"What are you talking about, Papa? Are you going to let them think that this Ethan Longbeard burned down the warehouse on purpose?"

"No," he answered simply. "I'm going to them that directly."

"But he didn't do it! You said it might start a war!"

"It's already begun."

I wanted him to tell me he was joking, but I knew that he wasn't. He was discussing war as casually as he might discuss what he wanted for supper.

He saw the expression of shock on my face and said, "So you wanted to know. Now you do. The stakes are high, and thanks to you, they can only get higher. Welcome to the circle of world building, Nyssa. I think you just started a war."

"No, Papa. They attacked us!" My voice wavered as I begged him to understand, "Papa, they were going to kill me."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

He raised his voice. "If you weren't running around, spying on me, digging where you shouldn't, none of this would have happened."

"No, Papa" I begged. "Stop lying. Tell them it was me. Tell them I didn't mean to do it."

"I can't do that."

"Yes, Papa, you can. You've got to! It's not my fault. It's your decision, your lies."

He stood up and asked Miranda if she was ready to go home.

She nodded yes.

I got up from the bed and said, "Papa, no. You can't take her away."

He answered with fierce determination, "We have discussed this, Nyssa. Haven't you done enough? It's going to be hard enough trying to twist this back in our direction without worrying about Miranda. She will be fine with me. I told you to stay out of this and now you know why, so you just drop yourself back on that bed and you stay out of our way from now on. Do you understand me?"

I didn't move or answer him.

After a moment he repeated, "I said sit down."

I didn't sit down.

"If I don't, will you hit me again?"

With all my heart, the heart which he brought to life, which belonged so much to him, I needed to hear him say, no, never again, but he just opened the door and left me. I ran to the doorway but stopped. What was I to do? Shrink back into the cocoon of Arrenkyle Manor while Papa attempted to put right what I had done? He had no intentions of putting anything right. He intended to send things further astray, to the point of war if necessary, to achieve what he thought were worthy and necessary goals. He would take Miranda away, likely far away, where Mother nor I would ever be able to prove her existence, and she would eventually settle where he would hide her, forgetting about her rightful family.

Every moment, we either do or not do, Papa had taught me. Sometimes it is best to do nothing and let the flow of events rush past us, and at other times we must reach out and take directed action to affect the flow of those events. Each of us has access to nearly limitless power within us to move our bodies in a way that will either enrich or impoverish our lives and the lives of others. Every conscious moment we live is a moment of decision. It was a lesson that he knew well from living it so grandly. He was still living

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

it, and still teaching it to me. It was a lesson that I learned well, perhaps too well.

I stepped into the hallway and saw him turn the corner down the front stairway. I ran to follow him and when I reached the top of the stairs I called out to him.

“Do what you will, Father, but Miranda stays here!”

He kept walking down the stairs away from me, holding her. He reached the bottom of the stairs and turned around without looking up and walked under me. I hurried down the stairs and saw him standing next to the Transport platform.

“You say I’m a world builder, do you?” I said as I walked to him and felt my heart take on a heightened, powerful rhythm. “I don’t care what you do out there, start a war, spread lies and famine, but I will not allow you to destroy this world here. This family will remain together.”

I saw that Avery and the other children had come out of the school room and were standing along the rail which overlooked the front atrium.

“It is for the family that I do this,” he shouted.

Miranda hugged him tight around the neck and hid her face in his shoulder.

“You are blind,” I answered with a voice shaken by anger. “You live in such a fabric of lies and selfishness that you don’t even understand. It’s time to stop it right now. Miranda stays here.”

His voice filled the chamber with his loud echoes that sounded so unfamiliar, so wrong, so awful and angry.

“No, Nyssa. It will not stop! I can’t stop it, can you? Nobody can because it’s bigger than any one person. It can only be shifted, altered, as you have done.”

“I did what I had to do!”

“Yes! Exactly. As I do what I must.”

“She is an Arrenkyle and you will not take her from us.”

Jheffery and Tamar came in from the back. Tamar held back, but Jheffery came between us and said, “Hey now, guys. What’s going on here?”

Our father looked up to his children peeking down from between the balusters of the rail and he turned away from their questioning, frightened looks and said to Jheffery, “Nyssa is upset because of what happened this morning. She’s not thinking straight.”

Then he walked away from me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Stop him, Jheffery. He's lying. He's a liar and a cheat."

"Nyssa, calm down," Jheffery said, holding me back.

"Tamar, you know the truth!" I insisted.

He stepped back, unwilling to take sides so I ran by Jheffery and clutched my arms around Miranda and tried to pull her away. She screamed and then for the second time since I had known him, my father raised his hand to me in anger.

Jheffery intervened. He grabbed his arm and screamed, "Enough!"

The children had come downstairs and they stood witness to our harsh, irrevocable words which became braided into the fabric of our family, a knot, a blemish that could be diminished by time, but never erased.

After a moment of silence, Jheffery again repeated, "Enough."

He still held Papa's wrist in a painful twisting grip, and before letting go, he twisted some more, bringing a wince of pain from Papa, and said, "If I ever see you try to hit her again, I will take you down."

"You don't have to do this, Papa," I begged. "I'll help you work it out. I'll talk to Mother. You don't have to do this."

"And will you talk to Nikolas Mannerah, and Ethan Longbeard, and the Triples? Will you make that all better too? You arrogant, selfish, child."

Then he spoke past me to the other children and ordered, "All of you, upstairs. Get back to your school work."

"Aren't you going to introduce her? Children, this is Miranda. She's your sister. Take a good look because he's going to take her away from us."

"Damn you, Nyssa," growled our father. He came toward me, but Jheffery pushed him back. "Of any I hoped you would understand me. I needed you and you betrayed me again and again. Tell her then. Tell everyone. Now excuse us, please. I've got to try to mend another wound in this awful world."

He pulled from a pocket a small crystal prism and began changing the summoning of a Transport spell.

I ran past Jheffery and tried to pull Miranda away.

"No!! With poppy", she cried.

"Jheffery, don't let him do this."

I had my hands around her waist, but he held his arms around her back and legs.

"Father wait," Jheffery said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I put my foot on his waist and pulled back harder, forcing a high pitched, wild scream from Miranda.

Jheffery tried to stop me until Tamar rushed into the scene and began pulling Papa's arms away from his little girl. Papa's eyes became filled with a sadness, a fear, and I knew that he needed his special daughter with him to be a buffer from all the terrible things that surrounded him, to offer him love and unconditional acceptance when all else was in chaos, when even his family turned against him.

As he reached the final syllables of the spell and I began to sense the aura of summoning that would grant him the opening to his destination, we managed to pull her free.

I stepped back and turned Miranda around to hold her but she began hitting me and slapping my face screaming, "Bring him back! Bring him back. Papa! Papa!"

She kept slapping at me and screaming until Tamar took her from me. She clung to him and cried deeply, with growls of confused anguish. I felt dizzy and weak and Jheffery came over to steady me while I looked around me at the circle of frightened children.

Avery was white and shaking. The others were all crying silently, and I covered my mouth, trying unsuccessfully to disguise my raspy inhales and shaking, sobbing exhales.

It was done. Miranda was with us, with her family.

I looked to the children and wished that I could be strong to comfort them and explain to them, but I had no explanations, and I had no comfort to give.

I heard Rebecca run to our terrible scene and say, "Oh, children. Oh my. What happened?"

What happened was that our home had been forever altered. A cornerstone of the foundation had been weakened and we were all living in a world that should not have been. It was finally Dierdre who found her voice through the wrongness of the moment. Perhaps it was because she was more accustomed to things feeling wrong, or maybe she had a greater strength than we had always thought. She spoke with such innocent understatement, "Nyssa and Daddy had a fight."

Jheffery led me away and helped me up the stairs.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When we got to the top of the stairs, I patted Jheffery on the shoulders with a shaky hand and forced a pathetically fake smile. I wanted to tell him, in a confident and controlled voice, that it was all going to be okay, but the lump in my throat would not allow any such thing. I turned away from him and went to my room where I closed the door and locked it behind me.

It was early afternoon on a hot, pleasant day, but I wanted it to be dark, with shadows in which to hide. I stood still in the middle of the room for several moments, pretending that I would try to compose myself. Then, with a calm urgency, I walked to my dresser and knelt in front of the rightmost drawer on the bottom row and pulled it opened. Next to extra pillow cases, under a layer of bed linen, wrapped in a yard of rough, homespun cloth, I found the rag doll that Andrea had made for me when she learned that I was going to leave her. It was cut out of an old dress, stuffed with strips of cloth, and sewn together with wide, uneven stitches. There were buttons for eyes, too large on the small, circular doll head, and stubby arms with faded fingers drawn on with charcoal sticks. It had a piece of fabric that was supposed to be a dress and another that made a small, awkward bonnet.

On the back was the spot of blood, drawn from Andrea's finger and mine to infuse our friendship into the doll. I held the frail, fragile thing close to me then with the same decisive, somber, movements, I walked into my closet, closed the door and sat on the floor in the darkness and prepared myself to cry again. I felt welling up within me all the hurts I had pushed aside, all the guilt I felt at leaving my one and only first best friend behind, and all the storm of the past days that wanted only to overpower me. I breathed evenly, opened the door of my emotion and decided to allow the shameful sobs to shake me if they must.

My mind wandered. The world was changing so much around me. I felt it, saw it. It involved me. My father was changing. My little brother, who had once told me with complete seriousness that he would allow no woman to ever distract him from the discipline of a fighter, had confessed to me secret liaisons with a fetching young

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

distraction. The world was changing. War and anger and fear were about to reposition themselves, sweeping hoards of young men and dwarves toward the blades of the other. New babies lay downstairs, crying, suckling, sleeping. Miranda was here, in her true home. Change. Not like a storm that shatters trees, but like the passing of seasons: slow, obvious, inevitable.

Only I remained constant. I still saw the world through my own eyes, felt the detail and drama with my same solid spirit. I still knew what I knew, felt the little Nyssa inside of me and remembered her happy times, her sad times. She had grown up to change in so many ways and I was always with her, sharing every hour, every moment, every instant. We shared every secret, every thought, every dream. In my mind, the doll in my arms became little Nyssa, alone, afraid, full of desperate hope, and I told her that no matter what happened, no matter how terrible or unsettling the world outside of us might ever be, I would be with her, always. I told her, not with words, but with understanding and acceptance, that I loved her for everything she had done, and for all the trials she had passed and endured so that I could be who I was at that very moment. I asked her to always be with me, guiding me with the knowledge gained from all the steps and breaths taken, all the lessons learned and wisdom earned. She said she would, and I didn't feel as alone or afraid anymore.

Together we shared an odd sensation. It felt as if all the change around us had actually happened a long time ago, and we were only remembering something that was as necessary and detached as the past. All the differences between then and now shrank back into little puddles. It was like hearing a story about another family, another Nyssa. I understood, more clearly than I ever had before, that my happiness and fulfillment was not tied only to what happened in the family and world. All those things were a part of me, but I began to understand that I was more than the sum of what happens to me. All the changes seemed inevitable, really. What was happening to my father was his to experience. What was happening to my brother belonged to him, and not to me. Miranda had a path to walk upon that, although similar at times, was different than mine. Mother's path was one that I would never be able to fully understand, but things that she had told me now began to make sense.

There was one time when little Nyssa was very upset because Jheffery had taken her dragon doll away and hung it from the second floor, out of reach. I jumped and screamed, trying to grab it

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

as he dangled it just above me. I finally ran up the front stairs, screaming in anger and he lowered it to the floor, but when I ran down to pick it up, he yanked the string, pulling Smoky up again away from me. The next time I went up the stairs, I just ran right at him. He waited for me to get close to him then dropped it string and all. When I ran back downstairs, he passed me and reached it first. He grabbed it and ran through the dining room and kitchen, then out to the backyard holding it for me but snatching it away every time I reached for it.

Of course when mother saw us, she intercepted him and made him run around the house three times carrying my stuffed golden dragon. Then, when he could barely walk, much less run, she let me chase after him and told him that when I caught him, he would get a smack for every ten feet that we were away from the willow trees.

After the episode was over and I had Smoky, and Jheffery had been given his two smacks of Mom's sword, I was still very angry with him. She said to me, "Nyssa, Jheffery cannot make you mad. He does what he does. Your anger comes from inside you and he has no control over that. You can feel angry, sad, cheated, embarrassed, happy, or even polka dot if you try hard enough. He just does what he does."

"But he started it. He stole Smoky from me."

"And made you mad?"

"Yes, he did."

"No he didn't. He just took your dragon doll."

"But he started it!"

"But he didn't make you mad. You did that."

I didn't say anything so she asked, "Am I making you mad?" Then I was even more silent. She pulled me onto her lap, gave me a big hug and said, "Someday, my love, you will understand. For now, go play and try not to be mad, for a couple hours at least."

All I understood then was that I had won, Jheffery had taken the spanking he deserved, and that no matter what she said, I was still very angry.

That memory was a gift brought to me by little Nyssa, and it reminded me that I have little control over the outside world, whether it's a mischievous little brother or the Triples. She was right. I didn't have to feel angry just as now, so many years later, I didn't have to feel sad, or cheated, or alone.

I had come into the closet to cry because I couldn't imagine myself doing anything but that, even though I've always hated to

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

succumb to tears. My world, my inner world, was mine to decide. I was not my father. We come together and share our love and lives, give to one another, support one another, but we are all just a tangle of individual paths, touching where we choose.

In that moment of realization, I began to change again, along with little Nyssa, into yet another self, one that better understood, one that was no longer just a piece of wood floating in the river, but an oar. Every moment is a moment of change. Instead of crying, I smiled.

Papa couldn't make me sad; he just does what he does, and I love him for it. His tears are his own to cry.

I stood and felt for the doorknob. I opened the closet door and greeted the painfully bright sunshine. I felt grand. Papa's anger, my despair, the whole awful scene, stood apart from me as if behind a thick screen. It had happened and it needed to be dealt with, but I no longer felt the sting of urgency or desperation. I took the doll back to her sleeping place, wrapped her up cozy and closed the drawer. Then I stood up and glanced at myself in the mirror, ran my fingers over my hair, then set my jaw firm to face the rest of the day.

I unlocked my door, stepped out into the calm hallway, and with a steady, elegant stride, went around to Jheffery's room. He was standing with arms crossed, looking out his window, thinking his own private thoughts. I tapped quietly on his door as I stepped into his room.

He turned around and asked, "Are you okay?"

"I am."

I walked over to his dressing bench and sat down. We shared a prolonged moment of silence in which we exchanged understanding of our seldom spoken but deeply felt devotion between us.

"I wish Mother were here," he said.

He saw me nod my agreement.

He came over and sat next to me and we both looked forward at nothing in particular.

He let out a deep breath and said, "I guess this is pretty serious."

"Yeah."

We fell into another silence and I wished he would end it by doing something to start solving this mess, but he waited along with me for something to reveal itself. I was waiting for Mother, or Papa, or Nanny Beck to come in and tell me what to do, but that was not going to happen. Jheffery was waiting for me, and so were the rest of the children.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was me.

When it finally sank in that there was no one else to take control and resolve the hushed chaos that still hung in the house, it became easier for me.

I stood up.

"Jeffery. Get the children together. We've got to get the house in order and then you, Tamar, and I must go find Mother and tell her what happened."

"I don't think we should interrupt her elven business with a family matter like this."

"If this were just a family matter, you would be right, but I think there's going to be some bad political problems from all this. I'm afraid Papa's not very rational right now, and probably hasn't been for a while. This whole Miranda thing was very badly timed."

"Maybe you should have just left that alone."

"It's done."

"Maybe you should have left everything alone."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I don't know. Let me think."

"Think later. Take the children down to the lounge. I've got to try to talk to Miranda."

He seemed content to do as I asked. He nodded and went to the door, but there he stopped and suggested, "Perhaps you should let her quiet down a bit before trying to talk to her."

"We don't have time for that, I'm afraid. I want us to leave within the half hour."

We stepped out into the hallway together. He went downstairs to gather up the children, and I went on into the guest wing and found Tamar and Miranda back in the room where Papa and I started our fight.

Miranda was lying on the bed crying and Tamar was sitting next to her holding her hand.

Tamar was explaining to her, "It's not that simple. It's not for me to decide."

"You said you were my friend. If you were my friend, you'd take me home."

She yanked back her hand.

"Tamar," I called from the doorway. "Can I talk to her alone?"

He looked as if he didn't want to, but he stood up and left us. I closed the door behind him and went over to the bed. She turned away from me and pulled the covers up over her head.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Miranda?”

No answer.

“Will you come meet the other boys and girls, your brothers and sisters?”

“I want to go home,” she demanded.

“I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but this your home. This is where you are going to live from now on.”

The covers flew down. She rolled quickly out of the bed and ran suddenly for the door. I jumped up and just barely beat her to it. I grabbed hold of her hand, but she spun around and landed a firm blow to my ear then she kicked me sharply just under my knee and pushed me back. Before I knew it, she was out and running down the hallway. I ran after her but she was a quick one. She bounded fiercely down the front stairs and I chased her down and back through the dining room to the kitchen where Sera and a couple of the girls were juicing some apples. Miranda dashed past Crysta then scampered adeptly under the large table and was out the back door before I could squeeze past.

Of course there was nowhere she could go, so I didn’t need to catch her as much as look out for her.

She ran along the brick pathway to the garden, not bothering to look back. I caught up to her as she left the garden and ran across the statue lawn, weaving in and out of the large marble images of Duke P’Tantis, Mother, and other friends and family members.

I ran behind her and called her name a couple times but she didn’t respond so I finally reached out and grabbed her shoulder. She dug her feet in and turned back on me, slipping away as I stumbled forward.

She ran down behind the small cabin that stood on the edge of our pond and I finally caught up to her again on the far side. This time I held her firmly.

“Miranda, stop this at once. You can’t run away. This is your family. This is where you belong.”

She turned her face up and glared at me through narrow eyes and mumbled something, using gutter street talk. I leaned forward and told her to repeat it, but she spit right in my eye. When I put my hand to my face, she knocked the other one free and ran down the shallow sloping hill into the worn patrol path of the tall iron golems. She ran to the row of Alayas trees and before I could catch her, she smacked hard into the invisible wall and fell to the ground holding her head. She curled into a little ball with her knees on the ground

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

and her hands over her head while she growled into the dry, scratchy field grass.

I sat down beside her had rubbed her back.

"Mama!" she cried. "I want mama."

I pulled her onto my lap and rocked her until she stopped crying. When she did stop, her tears dried up immediately, as if she just shut them off.

"Take me to Papa," she insisted.

"This is where you are going to live now, Miranda. This is home. This is where Papa lives."

She pushed herself away from me and stood up. Her hair was in tangles, she had a nasty bruise over her left eye, and her cheeks were soggy with tears from eyes that had lost their faraway despair and now held fiery focus.

"So, where is he?"

"I don't know, Miranda."

"He's coming back."

"Of course he is."

She turned and started walking back to the house without hurry. I watched her walk around the far end of the pond and through the trio of willow trees. I followed behind and caught up with her as she entered the wide alley between the two rows of grand elms whose massive trunks supported spreading branches that formed a natural canopy, framing the front of the house ahead. We walked under a sort of unsettled truce, beneath the cover of dancing leaves that waved gently in the warm wind, then up the grand marble steps, and across the courtyard. She ignored me, walking as if she were completely alone.

"I want to introduce you formally to the other children. Will you let me do that, Miranda? I think it's very important."

"I don't want to."

"Please, Miranda. It won't take very long, but they need to know who you are and why you're here."

She put her hand on the large, ornate front door and pulled it opened.

"Then why did you ask," she asked with bitter contempt.

Instead of answering, I went on inside and she walked with me past the stairs to the left toward the lounge. I pulled her aside and down the back hall into the staff washroom where she let me wet a rag and wipe her face and brush her hair. I took an extra moment to chant a healing spell to lessen the severity of her head bang. She

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

offered a reluctant, "Thank you," when the sting and bruise went away.

When we went back to the lounge, Jheffery and all the other children were there. The kids were full of energy and Jheffery was having a hard time maintaining order. Kasimir was keeping some toy away from Dierdre. Drake and Darcy were spinning each other around. Keef was trying to tickle Charles, who was not at all amused, and Avery was trying to convince Kasimir to stop tormenting his sister. When we entered, the scene froze and there was a harsh and unnatural quiet that was broken by little Evan who took the opportunity to toddle over to Kasimir, take Dierdre's toy, and proclaim, "Mine."

I stood behind Miranda with my hands on her shoulders.

"Stand tall, everyone. I have someone special for you to meet."

Avery picked up Evan, who was content now that had something to slobber and chew on, and they all stood together quietly, as they had done several times when meeting a special guest of honor.

"Children, listen carefully. About seven years ago, a daughter of Estus Arrenkyle was born. She was born to a woman that Mother did not select. Papa made this selection on his own. It was not right that he did this and so the woman left, taking the child with her.

"Although this child was born an Arrenkyle, she was reared as though fatherless until that woman, the only woman the child ever knew as mother, succumbed to illness and died, leaving her to be orphaned. When Father learned of this, he took her to the Academy where she lived for the next several months. This was kept secret, because as I said, it was wrong for Father to have selected a woman without Mother's consent, so he tried to keep her away to protect himself.

"And then, two nights ago, when I was at the Academy, I discovered her, and, when I was able, I brought her home to live with her true family. Does anyone have any questions?"

I waited. Avery cleared his throat.

"Do not hesitate to ask, if there is a question in your mind."

Jheffery asked, "Does Mother know?"

"Not yet. At least I don't think she does."

Avery wanted to know, "Why did he select this woman and keep it a secret?"

"Only he knows that, Avery."

"Who was she?" Avery asked.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Again I hesitated, but Miranda answered, "My Mom's name is Brittany Drake, and my name is Miranda Drake."

Kasimir asked, "Does that mean she's a bastard?"

Miranda broke away from me and charged Kasimir. She took a swing at him, but he fell back and Jheffery put his arm around Miranda, picked her up, then carried her back to me. She started kicking until he put her down.

"Yes," I answered with the plain, brutal truth. "But she is just as much your sister as is Dierdre, and more so than I. If Mother sanctions this union, as I'm sure she will, that filthy label will apply no more to her than to all of you.

"Who else has a question?"

I waited a while for someone to speak.

Keef asked, in his mellow, clear voice, "Shall I write her a little overture of welcome?"

"Yes, Keef, dear. How sweet."

I waited just a little longer, hoping Keef's question would be the last so that we could end on a positive thought.

"Children, we are now three times blessed. We have two new children and today our family grows again with this very special and wonderful little girl. Come say hello to Miss Miranda Arrenkyle."

"I'm Miranda Drake," she said to no one in particular.

They all came over and gathered around us. Jheffery was closest to her so he knelt and hugged her warmly. Avery brushed her hair aside and kissed her cheek then Keef, a year older than Miranda, hugged her and told her that he would start working on her special melody right away. I was a little afraid that Kasimir might say or do something out of line but he didn't. He hugged her quickly and even kissed the back of her hand. Drake gave her a shy hug and then Miranda leaned down to embrace Darcy. Dierdre seemed a little uncomfortable at first but then gave her a warm, if tentative, embrace. Kasimir ushered Charles forward so Miranda could kiss him on the forehead. Avery held Evan while he got a quick kiss from Miranda who endured all this attention with very little outward expression of any kind.

Finally, I knelt down in front of her and held her hands. She seemed to be forcing herself to go through this all very mechanically, as if trying very hard to push it all away from her.

"It's real, baby. It's forever. It's okay to let us all love you. It's real, I promise."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She seemed surly and unimpressed, but I think she had to work hard to maintain those positions.

I stood up, turned around, and said, "Now for other news." I waited for them to all settle into a group.

"Jheffery and I are going to visit Mother for a few days, so you must all mind Rebecca and Avery until we come back."

Dierdre looked stricken, Kasimir looked disappointed, Miranda retained her fierce expression, and Avery just seemed angry.

"Run along now. Jheffery, can you show Miranda back to her room?"

They all left and, although it seemed to go well, I was still uneasy. I found Rebecca waiting in the hall. We motioned for me to follow her past the front atrium to the nursery where we checked on the new twins. They both needed changing, so we each took one and dried, powdered, and changed them together without speaking. I felt warm and homey and wished that I had nothing else to do but rock them with a gentle song and watch them sleep in my arms. When we were done and the babies were kicking joyfully, Rebecca turned to me and held my hands.

"Nyssa, dear, I overheard what you told the children. I'm so proud of you."

"I hope I didn't do more harm than good."

"It's so good to see her again. I last saw her when she was only three, and even then, I could tell she had a heart of fire."

"What?"

"Nyssa, I have known about Miranda since the first day Brittany suspected that she might be with child. I helped arrange all the details for your father. I kept in touch with them, for a while at least, found her a position, cried with your father, more than once. Ever since your father told me that he found her at the orphanage, I have worried about this day. You had the strength to do what your father could not. Some day, he will thank you for what you did."

"You knew?"

Her smile was warm and motherly. "Of course I knew. Someone had to."

I hugged her and whispered, "I just love you all through, Nanny Beck."

"I love you too, my lamb."

I smiled at her and felt that there might actually be some stability left to the world that for the past few days seemed to be crumbling, dissolving into a cloud of confusion and contradictions.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"You'll take care of her? Tell her that you were friends with Miss Drake?"

She chuckled with genuine affection and said, "You know that I will, but she needs you. So hurry back."

I turned to the twins, kissed them each on the forehead, then kissed our wonderful Rebecca on the cheek, and said, "I will."

I stepped out of the nursery and ran up the back stairs. Miranda was alone in her room sitting in a big chair with her arms folded boldly in front of her. I stopped in her doorway.

"I hate you," she informed me with simple, unshielded bitterness.

"Rebecca will make sure you have what you need. Don't hesitate to ask for anything. When we get back, we'll see about taking you to town for some clothes of your own."

She didn't look at me.

"I'm sorry, Miranda, for how hard this is. Your coming here should have been different, but this is how it turned out."

"Go away," she commanded.

I wanted so much to reach out to her, to comfort her, but there was nothing I could have done or said that would make her next few days any easier. Rebecca could, I was sure, so I left before I did any more damage.

I felt a pressing, restless desire to get going, to try to manifest some resolution from all this. I felt as if I couldn't get away fast enough. Jheffery wasn't in his room, but I found Tamar in the library.

"Are you ready?"

"I think so."

"Go across the hall to Papa's lab, the first door on your left. In the back is where he keeps all his supplies. Take whatever you think you can use."

He stood up and came toward the door. When he reached the doorway, he stopped and looked at me with questioning concern.

"Hurry up," I told him.

"Are you okay, Nyssa?"

I nodded and put my hand on his shoulder, to reassure him that all was well, but I suddenly found my other hand on his neck and felt myself putting my lips firmly against his. He kissed me back with wet, sloppy hunger. We threw our arms around each other and bumped our teeth then as quickly as it started, we were standing apart, feeling embarrassed and eager.

"You better..."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I'll go and get..."

"...some of the..."

"Yeah, the " um, stuff."

"Okay."

He turned to leave, paused, then left, and as soon as he was out of sight, I slapped my hand on my temple and tugged at my hair wondering what had caused me to do that.

I went off in search of Jheffery. I decided to take the back stairs to avoid running into Tamar again. When I passed Mother's drawing room, I heard a rustle. I backed up and pushed the door open and saw Jheffery and Crysta locked in a similar, but much less awkward, kiss. I backed out as silently as I could and rushed up the front stairs. As soon as I stepped up from the last step, Tamar came out of the study.

I flashed a wide grin and gave him a cheerful, "Hi."

As soon as I turned away, I felt awkward and stupid for being unable to offer more than that single, pathetic syllable, addressing him as if he were just some random acquaintance in the village rather than the young man I had just assailed in the library.

I hurried to my room, closed the door and asked myself in a hushed voice, "Hi?"

I tried to forget about it as I picked up my backpack and started checking what needed to be added.

There was a knock at the door. I became suddenly tense, sensing that it was Tamar. I told myself to stop being silly and I opened the door.

It was Dierdre. Before I could ask what was going on, she whined, "Nyssa, Kasimir took my color chalk."

I turned away from her and tried to hide my severe impatience with her.

She ran over to me and explained with her pouty voice, "He said I didn't need all the blue because I couldn't draw very good anyway, but I was drawing the sea and the sky and then he just took it from me."

Kasimir appeared in the doorway and refuted her version saying, "I didn't say you couldn't draw, just that you didn't need all the blue all the time."

"No he didn't. He said I drew bad then he just took it."

"I didn't just take it. I asked and you knew I needed a little blue for the fire. I was going to give it back."

"No he wasn't."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Yes I was."

"No you weren't."

"Shut up! You can't see the future."

"I know how you are."

"Children, stop it."

"So, how am I?"

"Mean and stupid."

"Well, your a cry baby tattle tale."

"Shut up, I am not."

"You know you are."

"Nyssa, he's calling me names."

"Well she started it."

They waited for me to pass my judgment.

"Are you two through with this pathetic display of nonsense?"

There was a moment of silence and then Kasimir mumbled, "She started it."

Dierdre began to pout her puffy cheeks, beckoning seemingly sincere tears.

"Where's the chalk now?"

Kasimir was holding it in his hand. He showed it to me.

"Give it to me," I told him.

He acted as if I had asked him to give me his entire arm, and he made a grand huff out of surrendering his bounty.

I snapped it in two and gave each of them a piece and said, "Now will you two go draw. I don't have time for this."

"But he..."

"But she..."

"Knock it off," I demanded, a little harshly. "You both know how to behave and if I have to come down and remind you, I'll send Sharbra up to paddle your butts good."

Although we very seldom found it necessary to actually ask him to perform this task, they knew, I knew, and Sharbra knew that, if asked, the job would be delivered most thoroughly and professionally.

They quickly grew somber and unable to look at anything else besides their own feet.

"Now go draw and stop worrying about our leaving. We'll be back soon."

Kasimir led the way back and I could hear them starting to bicker again in hushed tones. I stuck my head out into the hallway and called out, "Sharbra, can you come up stairs, please?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They stopped and turned back to me with expressions of shock and betrayal that lingered as they scampered as fast as they could around the corner to the study room. I wanted to go over a couple final details of security with him before we left, but they didn't need to know that.

I went back to the bed and emptied my backpack so I could do a better inventory. I had plenty of magical supplies, but I needed more camping and traveling equipment.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the children standing in the doorway. I turned, ready to deliver a stern reprimand against trying to continue their argument, but I stopped cold when I saw that it was Miranda.

Her arms were hanging straight down by her sides, ending in loosely closed fists. Her jaw was held rigid and she was breathing in and out through her nose with stuttering breaths.

I wanted to explain again that she didn't need to worry, but I couldn't do that. Not yet. Neither of us would have believed it. As I was struggling to find something, anything to say, she spoke with a firm and steady voice.

"My papa's coming back. He'll come back for me and take me away."

She stared at me, challenging me to deny what she no doubt believed to be a simple, unquestionable truth, then she added, "And you can't stop us."

She turned and left, leaving me alone once again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We arrived at Mother's family tree in the early evening, appearing at the edge of the expansive wooden platform that was supported by a network of branches and beams more than two thousand feet above the dark ground below. We stood in the midst of the dreamlike dim of twilight that washed the woods in shades of yellow gray. I immediately noticed the pleasant, pungent odor of the Encentilla forest and inhaled the familiar scent of the draft wind deep into my lungs, letting the fresh coolness slow the frantic pace of my worries.

Beside me, Tamar stood in awe of the grandeur of the Del-Gesius home. All around and above us were the apartments and chambers built into the gigantic central trunk and upon the network of enormous branches that rose upward to a sky filled with a deep filigree of intertwined limbs that darted throughout the solemn, yellow green glow of dusk. It was all so beautiful. Nothing the Elves did was simple or straight forward. Everything they touched showed their immense patience and skill that came from living lives measured in the thousands of years.

I left them and walked toward the edge of the platform and leaned on the side railing. I looked down into the hidden depths and watched a small herd of frail, gossamer clouds float by below in languid, unhurried unison.

It was such a shocking difference from the quick and noisy bustle that we had just left.

After Miranda left me in my room, I stood unmoving, battling with the question of whether I should even leave at all. Sharbra knocked on my doorway and asked, "Did you need something, Miss?"

"I don't know how long we'll be gone. Probably a couple days. Make sure that the children stay inside unless you're with them."

"Of course, Nyssa."

He inhaled deeply through his nose, paused, scratched his chin, then exhaled with a raspy burst and said, "Well, your Father was pretty well worked up. Are you not worried about the children, and that new one? I suspect they're lookin' for you to stay."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"This is bigger than what you saw, or heard, but you probably know that. I've got to talk to Mother, and tell her about what happened. The children will do whatever they're going to do. They'll be fine."

He stood for an extended moment and then answered, "Well, be careful. You'll be taking Jheffery at least, I hope."

"Yes. And Tamar."

"Ah. I see. Well, do be careful."

I stuffed a couple changes of clothes and a random handful of jewelry and other necessities from my dressing table into a traveling sack, pulled the drawstring closed, and tossed it onto the bed just as Kasimir came in and announced, "She took my piece. She says she needs two."

"Use yellow. Fire has yellow."

"I'm drawing an orc."

"A blue orc?"

"Well, yes."

"Let her draw and you do something else."

"Avery poked his head in and said, "Jheffery's wondering where you are."

"I'm coming."

"But I've got to finish my orc."

"Do it later. She's just trying to start trouble so I won't leave."

I finished loading my backpack and took it and my duffel sack into the hall, followed by Kasimir, wanting this, needing that, demanding my attention. I found Jheffery in his room with Drake sitting on his shoulders. Tamar was there, reclining on the bed. It seemed that Jheffery had given him some extra clothes to take as well.

"I want to go too," Drake demanded.

Kasimir disappeared and I soon heard from across the hall, "Give it back! Nyssa!"

"You can't go, Drake."

"Jheffery said I could go."

I looked at Jheffery, ready to give him a scolding, but he smiled and shook his head no.

I pulled Drake down and put him out in the hall.

"Not this time, sport."

Then I asked, "Are you both ready?"

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay here?" Jheffery asked. "You're certainly not going to run into any problems there."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Sharbra thinks it's best if you come along. You never know. If he's here, you might as well be with us."

Dierdre came running into the room crying, "Nyssa!"

I turned to her, pointed my finger and shouted, "Out. I don't want to hear it."

"Kasimir took my..."

I turned her around, smacked her rump, and said, "Go to your room."

She became devastated, bawled pathetically and ran down the hall.

"Nyssa, will you calm down," Jheffery said as he left to follow Dierdre.

"Let her go," I insisted, but he left, leaving Tamar and me alone together in the room.

"She does this every time I try to go anywhere. Do you have everything?"

"Yeah. I found your father's supplies. I hope he doesn't mind."

"Of course not."

I sat down and waited for Jheffery to come back while I sat frustrated because I was unable to find any words to fill in the hush which settled between us. I wanted to say something, but I found it uncomfortable even to look over to him. I kept thinking of how stupid it was for me to kiss him like that in the first place. I wished I could either take it back or figure out how to follow up.

I finally glanced over to him and found that he had been watching me, smiling.

He grinned and asked, "Think it'll rain?"

I had to chuckle at his parody of our awkward silence. After all, we had shared battles, adventures, a quick kiss, and now we could hardly even talk about the weather.

Jheffery finally came back, picked up his sack and stood between Tamar and me. I held Papa's Transport wand and began opening a connection to Mother's tree. As the spell started to take hold, I heard the Kasimir and Dierdre bickering from the other room.

As I stood on the platform, watching the lazy clouds and listening to the calls of the Fa'thril and the Telkan crows from the forest mesh above, Jheffery told Tamar about the Elf Kingdoms. I heard him tell about how the trees are upside down, with the roots at the top to catch the sun and rain and how their trunks drive deep into the ground and grow wider and wider, pushing into the ground to set their foundations.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jheffery and Tamar joined me at the rail and we watched the beautiful forest. Branches ten times thicker than the most massive tree trunk Humans usually see thrust out horizontally, reaching to the other trees, crisscrossing and overlapping, forming a sparse web. Fuzzy, blanket sized Ecentilla leaves waved and bobbed with easy, graceful motions, like rafts on calm water. Some of the larger branches had been pulled and bound to branches from the other trees. These supported the wide roads that ran along the top of the branches between rails of grafted root wood woven into a diamond lattice. Layer after layer of leaves, branches, and roads wound through the tree tops in a living maze that seemed to go on forever in all directions.

I leaned closer to Tamar, tentatively touched my shoulder to his, and said gently, "When it rains, you can hear it sizzling far above. It doesn't rain much down this low. You just get a cool mist. The water flows through the root wood and there are channels in some of the limbs, like rivers almost, which end in waterfalls, small mostly, but some are quite grand, and they're quiet. Even if you're right next to the fall, all you hear is a gentle trickle. It just falls silently into the mist."

"Interesting."

"It's beautiful. The rain brings out the Jenna flowers and there's so much blue and violet, and the birds come down here to fly, and there's a sweet aroma that hangs in the air for days."

We stood together for a while longer, imagining the way the forest should have been, and then I felt him nudge me with his shoulder. I looked up thinking he wanted to say something, but he just smiled. I looked down and couldn't help the corners of my mouth widen into a shy little grin. I felt strangely cozy and calm.

Then, from behind us I heard the familiar, deeply mellow voice of Uncle Garmon who spoke with the precise, elegant accent of the North where he spent much of the past two hundred years.

"Nyssa, it's you isn't it?"

I turned and saw his tall, robust frame, his joyful smile, his patient eyes, and I ran to him, threw my arms around his neck and gave him a tight hug. I laughed, as I always do, when he rubbed his beard against my cheek. Some of Mother's family could not help but make me aware that my life, in comparison to theirs, was fleeting and trivial, but Garmon never made me feel that way. He also spoiled me terribly every chance he got.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Let me look at you, Sunshine." He put his finger on my chin and turned my head one way then another and said, "Still the prettiest."

Jheffery and Tamar came over to us and Garmon shook Jheffery's hand warmly and said, "Jheffery, you've become quite the swordsman, I hear. Perhaps I'll be able to test your nerve while you're here and make sure my granddaughter is teaching you proper."

"I'd like that."

"And this is Tamar," I announced, "Father's apprentice and a friend of the family."

Tamar bowed from the waist and Garmon told him, "you have chosen your master and your friends most wisely."

"Yes. I'm discovering that ever time I turn around."

"Where is Mother," I asked. "Is she here?"

"She's joined the gathering council at Del-Trevia. I can show you the way."

He took my traveling sack, put his arm around me, and walked us back to the grand front entrance. One of the servant elves, wearing the same dark gray tunics worn by all common elves, opened the door for us and we entered the Del-Gesius grand hall, a cavern fifty feet across that had been carved into the edge of the central trunk.

He called out to a pretty little elf girl.

"N'Ira, tenya si skeretti, al combenyo Ivyette-isha."

"Aya, Garmon-isha," she answered as she took our bags.

Then she bowed to me. "Merishona gooto, Nyss-isha."

"Merishona, N'Ira-dolo. Ve' eloshati."

She nodded, then greeted Jheffery, and then Tamar, calling him, "galen-isha," honored guest.

Garmon offered to prepare a feast to honor our arrival. I knew he was completely serious, even though such an event would have taken more than an entire day to prepare, the elven equivalent of offering a guest a glass of lemonade. We declined his offer, as I'm sure he knew we would, and then he led us around the entry hall to a stairway with steps made of carved heart wood. I hated stepping on such fine art, but it was plenty durable. The stairs curved downward under dozens of hanging tapestries that hung from the high ceiling, each one unbelievable intricate showing legendary scenes from the history of the Del-Gesius clan. Such works that

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

would easily take the entire lifetime of ten humans to make were ordinary here.

Garmon led us through more hallways and down many other stairs until we exited at the base of one of the primary roads. The wide entrance was half blocked by a caravan of four large tree sloths to which the elves had harnessed wicker cages filled with goods to be exchanged with another tree.

"What's going on there?" Tamar asked, pointing to the large animals.

"Those are called Beltho cats." I told him. "They climb along the bottom of the branches. See that strap dangling under their necks? That's a harness for the driver who sits between their front paws to steer them."

Garmon came back when he noticed our interest in the Belthos.

"Of course. How rude of me. You would probably prefer to ride. I can take you around to the stables."

"No, Garmon. We didn't mean that."

"No," Tamar explained. "I just didn't know what they were."

"Well, they're not as good as horses, in my opinion, but we tried horses here a long time ago and it just didn't work out."

Jheffery said, "I can imagine they probably didn't like being up so high. The air is probably too thin for them."

"It wasn't that."

He waited until we were all looking at him for the answer, and then he said, "They just couldn't keep a grip on the bottom of the branches."

He earned two laughs and a groan, the latter from Jheffery who had taken the bait.

"Let's just go. It's not far is it?" I suggested.

"Oh, not at all."

Of course, "not at all" turned out to be two hours of walking along branch after branch, up and down connecting stairways and around and through countless trees. We spent most of the time listening to Garmon's many stories. Like many others in Mother's clan, Garmon was a master of all the fighting skills. He also knew some of the basics of elven magic.

Mostly, he talked and we listened, or asked questions, prompting him, and soon what little light was left in the forest had completely faded. I told Garmon to stop so I could get a Glow sticks from my back pack, but he told me not to bother, then he hopped over the railing and walked out to the edge of the limb. He held onto

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

a small branch and leaned down to cut off a Shessel vine that had a few ripe bulbs on it. He brought this back, pulled some of the bulbs off and showed us how to crush the bottom sack and shake it to make it glow. They gave off a dim, pinkish light that made the howls and chatters of the upper forest seem natural, almost friendly, rather than hidden and ominous. We continued walking in our frail circle of light until we could see The Del-Trevia tree ahead.

The gathering.

An elven gathering is part feast, part performance, part conference. They are held only once every seventy five years or so, whenever a clan or a particular family within the clan decides it wants to play host for a while. They can last anywhere from six to ten years. Mother told us about one gathering that went on for more than thirty years, but that was unusual, and stories told about the legend tales of that gathering are still favorite performance pieces.

Sometimes, even elves in Shelisl, their quiet time, bring themselves to travel to listen to epic legend songs that can last many months, during which players act out in almost real time their folklore tales. Garmon told us that only a month ago they had begun reenacting the telling of the story of the grand legend songs sung at a gathering six thousand years ago, which themselves includes reenactments of the telling of more epic tales within tales. Gardeners bring in special arrangements to set the scene of a telling. Chefs cook meals, sometimes repeating the servings of the earlier legend song or adding special dishes to highlight elements of the legends themselves.

Leaders of several clans are usually close by and so it is also a time where business matters between the families are discussed and relations with other kingdoms are managed.

This gathering had been going on for the past five years. It began when the famines and political difficulties with the Humans became more severe. This was only the second time since the gathering began that Mother had been asked to join in the conferences of the elders. It reminded me that Mother was not just an elf, and not just a noble elf, but an elder executive of her family.. It made me feel petty and small that I came to find her, filled with my quick human anger, expecting her to put her world aside and cater to me and my personal problems.

But she has always done exactly that, and I knew that she would want to know what had happened between Papa and me and about Miranda.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There were several other elves on and below the road. Mostly it was the servants who walked while the Nobles rode the Beltho cats. The servants all lowered their eyes as they passed Garmon, who accepted their servility without acknowledgment.

He led us to the Del-Treivia courtyard in front of their own grand entrance. Unlike the Del-Gesius tree that was somber and seemed almost abandoned, the Del-Treivia home was alive with activity. He led us past the tables filled with pastries, past the pockets of discussions and stories, around a trio of elves each juggling five clubs and performing rhythmic flourishes and maneuvers in perfect unison, and finally into the tree itself.

I recognized that he was being very un-elflike by walking straight through and not taking a few hours to first mingle and enjoy the festivities. He led us down, deep into the heart of the tree to a vast ballroom lit by thousands of candles hanging on chandeliers of wooden filigree which exhibited the vivid colors of the carved, painted ceiling and the splendid array of tapestries that hung all around the wide room.

Near the far wall an elven orchestra played a solemn, rhythmic symphony in three-four time that complimented the chamber with low, slow tones and meshed with the din of conversation that surrounded the group of dancers moving together, weaving in complex patterns that never repeated themselves.

"Over there," Garmon said pointing, "you will find plenty to eat. Sit, enjoy. I'll let your mother know you're here."

We made our way around the room to the tables.

Jheffery said, "Where are those little cake things with the green berries that I like so much?"

I looked around the tables and saw that, while they were filled, and no one would go hungry, the dishes were all of a similar variety, formed from what could be harvested from the trees. I picked up a round ball that looked like bread but tasted more like a thick, sugar coated paper. I ate the rest of it quickly and reached for a stein of Jenna Ale. I don't think the two flavors liked each other very much, so I quickly went on to grab a stem full of Shessel grapes. Jheffery found the cooked carcass of some forest beast, probably Fa'thril, on a spit. Tamar found some sweet pods and then we took an empty table nearby.

Being surrounded by such grandness, hearing the roar of quickly spoken Bashel Elvish, which I barely understood, smelling the food and the woody tallow of the candles, all while pushing

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

away layers of concern within my mind made the scene more like a dream than a feast.

Jheffery gobbled his serving quickly down to the painted china, drained his stein and announced, "I'm going back up to watch those jugglers. Do you want to come along, Nyssa, or just sit there and worry about everything like you've been doing since we got here?"

"I'm fine. I'll join you later. I should wait for Garmon to come back."

"Tamar?"

"Later. I want to try some of those sweet leaves."

"Oh well, fun awaits."

He hurried back through the crowd.

"You know, he's right. You have been awfully quite."

"I know. I wish I knew what I was supposed to do right now. I wish I didn't have to wait."

"We'll get through it."

"I know."

"I'd tell you not to think about it, stop worrying, but even I can't do that."

"You haven't even heard the worst."

"Oh?"

"I told my father what happened, that we burned the warehouse."

"What did he say?"

"He thought a Dwarf named Ethan Longbeard did it, and when I told him it was us, he said he was going to try to blame it on the Dwarves anyway. He said I probably started a war."

"Oh, Nyssa. No. You didn't."

"I know. But I feel responsible for butting in. I want to take some of it back, but I can't figure out how I could have found Miranda without doing everything else I did, and I am glad that I found her. I am."

"I think you did the right thing."

"Really?"

"I do."

"What was it like, Tamar? Did you see a lot of Miranda? She seems to be very comfortable with you."

"I saw her now and then. Sometimes your father would bring her with him to the lab, and she would help me clean, or I would take her to the cafeteria for lemonade or redberry pie. I just always

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

thought she was the girl next door. She was polite, but didn't talk much."

"Was she happy?"

"She smiled and laughed an awful lot. She seemed very comfortable and, yeah, I'd say happy, in a demure sort of way. A couple times, after she was used to me, she would tell me about her friends when she lived in Seagate and the games they played: Mayor's hill and something called Alley Scratch."

"That's a Seagate game. I played that when I was her age."

"I always figured that she moved with her mother and missed all her friends."

"Did you ever suspect that she was really Papa's daughter?"

"No. Not once."

"Did you ever see someone who was supposed to be her mother, or did she ever mention her family? Brothers? Sisters?"

"No. He said that her mother was away a lot. It was all very plausible."

"I just hope she can adjust."

"Oh, she will. She's young. Plus, she's a very strong willed little girl. She knows what she wants and she can be very stubborn about it."

"Oh yes. I can agree with that."

"It must be pressing on your mind, though. Worrying about her on top of all this."

"I wish that we never went anywhere near warehouse twenty three. I wish Papa wasn't stuck up to his ears in political games. I wish, I wish. I wish a wish, that's sweet as a dish, of cream and cherry pie..."

"It all makes me feel even worse."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, here you are worrying about your little sister, all the political problems, Dwarves, your argument with your father, and all I can think about is when I'm going to get to kiss you again."

My initial reaction was to look away, to pretend that he hadn't said anything. It seemed easier than having to know what to say or to deal with it when there was already such a melange of melancholy and misgiving in my mind.

I forced myself to look at him.

I wanted him to kiss me, if for no other reason than to give me a moment in which I could run away from my worries, pretend that I was someone else, someone who knew how to enjoy the attention of

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

handsome young men rather than analyze and think and fuss over what it all meant. I was also afraid to kiss him again because I wanted so much to escape into that simple world where the touch of a gentle hand, a caress, could wipe away so much self doubt and fill such emptiness.

Garmon returned, interrupting a series of quick mental justifications both for and against letting him kiss me right there at the table, or perhaps in a dark hallway.

"Nyssa," he said, as he sat down, "Your mother cannot see you now. In fact, I didn't even speak with her. The Emperor is here."

All of his jovial demeanor had sunk into a mask of stoic resolve.

"What's wrong?"

He put his strong hand on my shoulder and said, "Nyssa, my dear. They are discussing whether we should assist the Dwarves, who are marching toward Hartack to raid what they can from the Humans."

He saw my shocked reaction and apparently misunderstood. He quickly tried to reassure me by saying, "No matter what happens, neither you nor your family will be harmed."

"No!"

"It's okay, Nyssa. They're just talking. Even if they help, the Elves would not take up arms against the Humans. It's not our way."

He said it and it was happening. It was really happening. He made it happen. Not me. I didn't do anything wrong. How could one angry Dwarf send an entire army against the Humans? How could one man tilt the fate of humanity, of the world? By killing the High Druid. By building a machine to wreck the stability of an entire economy. By lying to his daughter and letting her run away to burn the trust between secret groups. It was happening, just as he said.

I didn't know what I felt, but it made my stomach jumpy.

"When can I see her?"

"I don't know."

I closed my eyes, pushed most of the wrongness aside, into that dark place, and I kept pushing everything away until I was a mere shadow of Nyssa, empty and alone, but calm and steadfast.

I stood up.

"Can you arrange for me to ride back to Del-Gesius? I don't feel very well."

"Certainly. I shall take you myself."

I turned and reached my hand down to Tamar. When he took my hand I asked, "Do you want to come home with me?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He paused at first, held my hand firmly, then asked, "Will Jheffery be coming with us?"

"I don't think so. He should be able to enjoy the gathering. I'm going to wait in Mother's apartment and try to get some sleep. It will be quiet there."

Our eyes met. I squeezed his hand.

"Nyssa, I..."

I felt his thumb run across the back of my hand.

"I think I should stay and wait for Jheffery. Maybe I'll go watch the jugglers or something."

"Okay."

I leaned down and put my cheek against his, felt his warm breath on my neck, his hand clenched within mine. I brushed my lips on his jaw close to his ear then turned and let Garmon escort me away.

I vaguely remember Garmon taking me to the stable, selecting a servant and a Beltho for our ride home. I remember the gentle swaying as the tree cat climbed along, digging his large claws into the wood. I remember thinking about how far down the ground was if our steed let go. I also remembering not caring much one way or the other.

Back at Mother's apartment, N'Ira prepared a hot bath for me and strung a hammock in Mother's room.

I sat swinging gently in the hammock, clothed in a plush and elegant robe, sipping warm sap tea, and looking out into the blackness of the Encentilla forest. I lay there and watched the shadows within shadows dance in the draft wind and listened to buzz of night bugs and the low howls of some far away, lazy Fa'thril.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I awoke amid the dewy chill of an elven morning in the clouds, and pulled the quilt closer to my chin while the faraway calls of a Telkan crow broke through the quiet buzz of the forest, helping to rouse me from my ebbing sleepiness. I inhaled deeply a couple times before opening my eyes to the green glow of sunbeams and twinkling glitter bugs that still darted through the air. Waking up in the arms of Mother's marvelous land was a heavenly sweetness that shrank slowly into the background as I came more fully awake and recalled in greater detail the awful events that had brought me here.

I wanted to stay in the cocoon of the hammock and sway in the draft breeze, but the pressure of the unknown and the unresolved made me restless. I had to be up. Already, even though my body was still comfortable and wanted to stay warm and wrapped, I began thinking about what I would say to Mother and what she might say to me.

I lifted the quilt and rolled my weight to the side so I could lower my feet to the thick, elven rug. I found slippers and a dark green peignoir which N'Ira had left out for me. It was soft, like a kitten's fur on the inside and was covered with a delicate, hand stitched pattern. I couldn't help but feel regal as I stepped up onto the balcony to survey the forest. Mother's apartment was carved into one of the upper limbs and granted a wide view of the Del-Gesius home. Below the balcony was one of the roads. I felt that I could almost jump down to it and startle the two servants that were returning with their arms full of flowering vines which would no doubt ornate someone's breakfast table. Below that I saw the balcony, large enough to hold a small Seagate home, which belonged to an elder elf whom Mother pointed out to me once long ago. I remembered his sunken eyes under thick brows, and his lips that neither smiled, nor frowned, but somehow made me feel accepted and understood. Farther down, below the level of the platform on which we had arrived, was a branch that supported along its length a museum filled with ancient art, some from cultures long dead and forgotten except within the minds and collections of the elves.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was so easy to feel lost among the grandeur, the magnificent expanse of space and time in which the Elves lived. What were we to them, I wondered, but mere butterflies that grow and blossom in a season, affording perhaps a moment of beauty or fleeting intrigue? What were we but bugs that brought pestilence and hardship to their beautiful land?

My father. My mother. How was it that I was here in the sky, wondering how they were going to change the world? However and whyever, there I was. So be it.

I padded across the hardwood floor and found the boys asleep in the parlor. Jheffery was sprawled on the Beltho skin rug still wearing his boots, sword, and jacket. Tamar was sitting sideways on the settee under a forest green blanket.

I pulled Jheffery's scabbard out from his belt and leaned it against the mantel then unlaced his boots and pulled them off one at a time. When the second boot snagged on the way off, he woke up with a startled jump, shielded his eyes from the light and looked sick and pained for a couple seconds then rolled over onto his stomach and fell back to sleep amid an effluvium of Jenna ale.

"Oh, Jheffery," I scolded gently as I rubbed the back of his shoulders.

He moaned, mumbled something then started snoring softly. I went back to my room and brought the quilt out and covered him with it.

"He'll probably be pretty uncomfortable the rest of the day," Tamar said from behind me. "He took in quite a bit of that sweet ale."

"Did I wake you up?"

"No. I didn't sleep very well."

He sat up and twisted from side to side, emitting a series of quick crackles from his spine.

"How about you?" he asked. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did. How was the party?"

He shrugged.

"I felt like an intruder. Everyone ignored us so we spent a lot of time watching the jugglers. It's just plain amazing what you can do if you have hundreds of years to practice. One fellow was doing a seven club cascade, sustained it for about ten minutes. When he heard his buddy come up behind him, he tossed them back and the other kept the pattern going without missing a beat."

"Goodness."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I stood up and asked, "Would you like some breakfast? N'Ira should be around close by, and she's probably awake by now."

"No, thank you, but I did have a glass of some greenish juice when we got in last night. It was good."

"Jherrel tea, probably. I'll get us some."

He followed me over to the cabinet and held two glasses while I poured.

He clinked his glass against mine, and we moved up the three shallow steps to a sitting area where hung a circle of hammock chairs. We sat together next to the wall, facing the apartment and sipping the warm Jherrel tea.

I was so glad that he was here. I wanted to tell him that, but I didn't know how. The words, rehearsed in my mind, said either too much or too little. We shared an understanding and an interest in this man Estus Arrenkyle, my father and his teacher. We shared a bond of battle and of knowledge and more. I didn't get a chance to respond last night to his comment about wanting to kiss me. Alone in Mother's apartment with Jheffery asleep was a perfect moment to continue what he had started, and yet I froze. The words pushed in my mind, phrased one way and then another. A couple times they even leapt up into my throat only to be stopped by my mouth that refused to commit what I wanted to say. I don't know why.

I finally had to give up trying and waited for him to say something.

"This is certainly good tea," he said.

"Yes. Quite."

I wanted to reach out and take his hand, to look into his eyes, feel his breath on my shoulder, but instead, we stared at the room.

He cleared his throat, sipped more tea, and said, "Those jugglers."

"Yes?"

"Very precise. In control. Very..." He sipped his tea again, leaving his comment hanging open like a window that let in a rush of cold air.

"Artistic," he finished, turning to me briefly.

"Yes. They're good."

You know, Tamar, I'm glad you're here. About what you said last night "I wish you did kiss me. If you weren't here, I would miss you. I know we don't know each other very well, but it feels right when I'm with you."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

How easy the words flowed into my mind and how difficult they were to speak.

Why fear the truth? I wondered.

The moment was passing, receding from us slowly like a boat casting off to drift without pilot or anchor.

What was holding my tongue?

I decided to say the words: about last night, just to force myself to finish that thought, even if I didn't know what to say. As I forced the words out, I again caught them at the last instant, leaving only an unintelligible grunt, "a-." With that halted attempt, I finally I knew why I couldn't say anything.

I knew nothing about this young man. Papa had selected him, which said quite a lot, but his reasons for selecting Tamar had nothing to do with why I would select him. Yes, we had fought together. Yes, we shared a common insight into the events in which we were so closely wound, but he was a stranger to me. The stronger I wanted to push myself toward him, the more I feared that I would lose myself in a passion which could leave me bound by mistaken fate. I knew that I had been wanting so much and for so long to know these wonderful, confused, and powerful feelings, that if I opened that gate even a tiny bit, my love could rush out and surround this young man about whom I knew almost nothing. Did he feel the same, or did he only want to kiss me the way he had probably kissed dozens of other girls? Or had he kissed none?

I knew that if I spoke the words that ached so much to be said, they could not be unsaid, and the world would change forever. Once changed, the world would have no pity and allow no return. Was it love? Would there ever be anyone else that could grant me the things I felt he could? Did it matter? He knew my world. Was there anyone else who would be able to know me the way he could, or help me or inspire me?

I didn't know if my hesitation was fear trying to break through love, or reason trying to break into an illusion? Is there even a difference? What is reason but a type of fear? What is love if not an illusion?

I hated my caution and self doubt, but like it or not, the moment was slipping away and who could say if there would ever be another like this, with the opportunity and freedom we now shared?

"What type of tea did you say this was?"

"Jherrel tea."

"Oh. It's very good."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Yeah.”

Give me some reason, some excuse to say the words.

“Well,” he said, standing and surveying the apartment carefully.

He looked down at me and didn’t speak for a long moment then said, “I think I’d like to go for a walk.”

And he left me.

He went back down the three long steps, found his shoes and put them on, stood up, looked at me again and headed toward the door where he finally stopped and asked, “Want to come along?”

“Okay,” I answered joyfully. “Let me get dressed.”

I watched myself almost jump up and rush to my room before I was able to tell myself to relax and be rational, but I didn’t feel rational. I don’t know what I felt, well, besides feeling confused and a little embarrassed.

I put on trousers, a sweater, socks, and my shoes. I twisted up my hair but didn’t have anything to pin it with. I held it with my hand while I looked around the dressing table that offered plenty of items filled with diamonds and emeralds, but nothing simple. I picked up my backpack and set it on the bed. With my free hand I pulled it open and began looking quickly through it.

After a frustrating moment, I stopped, stood up and let my hair fall. Why was I running off, I wondered? Mother could return at any time and I didn’t want to be out getting lost on the branch roads. I closed the pack and picked it up. Instead of going for a walk, maybe I could show Tamar some spells. The idea comforted me. Magic I knew, unlike a few moments ago when I had no idea what to say or do. I decided not to put my hair up, knowing that I was doing it because I thought Tamar might like it better that way, even though I pretended to believe it was because I couldn’t find an appropriate barrette or pin.

When I got back to the parlor and told Tamar what I thought, he picked up his own gear. We left Jheffery snoring on the floor and walked slowly through the ancient halls of Del-Gesius until we finally reached the grand hall across from the steps that Garmon took us down yesterday. I didn’t want to be hard to find, in case Mother came back, so I took us out to the main courtyard terrace where we had arrived yesterday.

The platform went all the way around the tree, but most of it, except for the front, was only about twenty feet wide. I took us around to a little garden area with potted shrubbery and a pergola whose upper lattice was filled with a leafy vine and tiny violet and

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

white flowers. Mother often brought us here during our visits to sit all day with her family. It was a comfortable, familiar place, filled with the memories of good times and epic anecdotes told over cakes and interrupted by legend songs and feasts. Today it was quiet and alone.

We sat together on a bench and I asked, "Can you think of any spell in particular you'd like to work on?"

"No. Not really."

"How about Float? You said you've been working on that."

"Okay."

I took out my magic book and pulled a handful of small lodestones from my component pouch, dropped a few a pocket on my belt and gave a couple to Tamar.

"The other spells closest to Float are Leap and Breakfall. Think of how the summoned energy relates to the ambient gravitational elementals for those spells. This comes from focusing your intent on the oupanash syllables during the summoning. Now, in Breakfall, the tamaysh variant of the anterior chant directs the summoning parallel against the downward force, whereas the sheedok variant of the Leap spell applies an orthogonal vector."

"Right."

"For Float, you apply all of the additional force past the first shell in the parallel, or tamaysh, direction using the basic abra control mantra to vary the intensity, allowing you to move up and down."

"What about the Fly spell?"

"For the Fly spell, the third shell power collects upon the oupanash, giving you more speed, while applying a coordinated juxtaposition of the tamaysh and sheedok, which allows movement in any direction. Plus you have two linked mantra variants to control, but don't worry about that yet. It will seem easy with practice, like two hands playing different parts of the same arrangement on the piano."

"I don't play the piano."

"You know what I mean. It's when you have to play a piece with six hands that it gets a little tough."

I opened my book and sat it on my lap. I pointed to the page and asked, "Are there any of these symbols you don't understand?"

"This phrase, tamaysh kal gorentha mas - am I saying that right?"

"Yes. Well, almost."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"What is that exactly?"

"Kayl gorentza are the binding words. I don't think there are any simple spells that require a formal binding. The mas makes it an exclusive bind so the energy is linked directly with tamaysh and none of the energy is wasted on sideways motion. Fly uses kayl gorentza melos, which forms a diffuse bind and lets the forces be a little more mobile, which you want for that spell.

"Anyway, Papa told me that when you speak an exclusive binding, hold in your mind the image of falling water turning to a column of smooth ice. That's the force becoming fixed into a rigid form, in this case, up and down like a column. Once you can say it, and see it in your mind, you can better sense what the energies are doing as they move through you. Eventually you don't need to try to see it because it has its own feeling that you get to recognize."

"What does it feel like? I think I know what you mean. The Burn spell feels orange to me. I'm not sure why. Does a binding have something like that?"

"Well, I don't know, really. I suppose it does, sort of. It just feels like a binding, like a rigid, fixed â€" I just feel it. Don't think colors for this. I see how that could work for the Burn spell, but imagine water turning to ice as you form the words."

I stood up and handed the book to him.

"Read along as I recite."

I held the stone and spoke the words, establishing the foundation control, summoning the elementals, classing and binding them, and finally absorbing the material to trigger the closure. I raised myself up to the latticed roof and pulled myself to the edge with my hands.

"It's easy. If I flare the abra, the intensity increases relative to the gravity elementals, and I can go up."

I shot up as fast as I could for a few seconds then stopped. I saw Tamar step out from under the pergola and watch me.

"Now if I relax the abra, I can come back down."

I lowered myself until I was standing next to him.

"Your turn."

He put the book down on the bench and repeated the chant with even and precise pronunciation. In a moment, he slowly rose into the air and I moved up with him.

"You spoke that perfectly," I commended him.

"It was easier than the last time when I used it on you. I didn't understand about the binding studying on my own like that."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"You really shouldn't be doing that. Magic is not a toy. Even a simple spell can trigger a cascade release if you do it wrong."

I reached out and took hold of his hand and said, "Try to match my height."

I went up and up and he moved in quick spurts, keeping up with me.

"Smooth it out a bit. Increase the abra. Picture it as getting bigger or louder, whichever works."

The platform seemed narrow from fifty feet up compared to the vast expanse of emptiness that was between it and the gray mist far below.

He shot up again then wavered and dropped like a rock. I held his hand and slowed his descent.

"Tamar. Bring it back. You've still got the spell."

"Don't let go," he cried out.

"Tamar, concentrate."

"No. Stop. I'm going to fall. I can't." He grabbed my wrist with his other hand.

"Look at me Tamar."

I flared the intensity of my spell, and was almost able to hover with him, but his full weight was pulling on my arm."

"Look at me."

"It's too far. I'm going to miss."

"Tamar, you're hurting my hand. Look at me."

His gaze was focused on the drop to the forest floor.

"Get me down. Get me down."

"Close your eyes! Now."

He did.

"You still have the spell. Feel it. Master your focus. Abra abdala mar. Do you have it?"

We sank slowly for several more seconds until I finally felt the tension of his weight lessen. As he regained control, I eased the upward pressure until he and I floated face to face still thirty feet above the platform.

"You did it."

"I did. I want to go down."

"No need for that. As long as you let yourself feel the energies, you're as good as on solid ground. Just keep the gate closed and everything is fine. Just look at me."

"Okay. Okay. Look at you. That's not too hard."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Up we go." I held his hands again and I led him up higher and higher. Fifty feet, sixty feet, a hundred feet. We came to a branch and I pushed us around it. When we were at its side, I pushed against it with my foot, and we floated out from over the platform.

"Just keep watching me or close your eyes."

I took out another lodestone from my belt and cast a Float on him so I could control us both if necessary. When I was done I said, "Okay. Keep control of your spell and look down."

He did and I saw a shudder of tension wash over him and then pass.

"This is great!"

"Let's go on up over this branch."

We went up and up, higher and higher, above all the apartments and elven construction. The platform seemed like a tiny ribbon next to the wall of the great trunk. We kept rising up into the thatch of the root wood with its web of smaller branches criss-crossing the larger limbs which held more and more velvety *Encentilla* leaves.

I pulled myself onto one thick branch and let my weight settle onto it as I dangled my legs and held onto a vertical shoot. Tamar pulled himself along and straddled the limb.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"I think I was pretty silly down there."

"You're not allowed to feel silly during a lesson. It's all part of learning. You did very well."

"It is nice up here, but blazes aflame, that's a long way down."

We went on with pleasant small talk for a while but we eventually began gently probing, asking more personal questions. He wanted to know what it was like at the orphanage, and I told him. I told him about Donna and Andrea and Alley Scratch and leek stew. Every time I asked about his past, though, he brushed the question aside and wanted me to tell him more about myself.

Finally I said, "Tamar, you've been avoiding telling me anything about yourself since I can remember. What happened to you before you walked from Pash-nie to come to Papa's Academy?"

"I don't like to talk about that very much."

"Why?"

"If I told you that, I'd be talking about it."

I let it drop again, but after a stretch of quiet that was filled with the low rumble of the wind skimming across the top of the rootwood, he looked, not at me, but sort of through me and said, "Goodness, it's a different life, long ago, like it's someone else.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"My father was a magician, too. An adventurer, always going for the risky prize. He was hardly home, and I think Mom started having second thoughts about settling down with this guy and having a son. I was probably a mistake anyway, knowing my mom. She never thinks ahead more than a two minutes ago.

"So one day he brings home some jewels and he's off again, to get the rest, he said. He never came back.

"Years later I found out that he and his buddies tried to grab a hoard of jewels from a group of southern Dwarves and he took a hatchet in his heart."

"What did your mother do?" I asked softly.

"Cursed him mostly. We tried to work our little farm by ourselves, and those jewels kept us going for a couple years. We got by."

He didn't say anything else for a while. I wondered if I should say something or just let it drop, but he continued.

"She always said she could probably get a man if she didn't have to find someone willing to feed a good for nothing little ogre. That was me. So one day, she packed up the carriage, took me over to her cousin's farm, and dropped me off. I was about eleven."

He focused his eyes on me and said, "I never saw her after that," and then he looked away again, as if embarrassed for having to admit such a thing.

There was so much pain and confusion everywhere, all caused by selfishness of some kind: money, power, glory, pride. I realized that I was as guilty as everyone else.

"Tamar, I'm sorry. I've only been thinking of myself. I never even considered that all of this would be hard on you too. I've been just awful."

I looked at him, saw the old pain behind his eyes and wanted somehow to help.

"Stop looking at me that way!"

"What did I do? I'm sorry."

"I shouldn't have said anything. I don't want you feeling sorry for me."

"I won't."

"Yes you will."

"What's wrong with that?"

He answered me with another uncomfortable moment of silence, but soon he continued, saying, "I didn't mean to bark at you. I'm sorry."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I wanted to reach out my hand to him, to hold him and ease his discomfort.

"I get a little crazy when I start thinking about it all. I tried, Nyssa. I was nothing to them. Just someone to do their chores. I tried, at first, to show them that I could do good work, but it didn't matter. They treated their damned, broken down horse better than they treated me.

"I put up with them for over three years. There were times when I thought it would work, but it just didn't matter. They didn't care, and they bad-mouthed my father and Mom and me. I was a their game. Make Tamar cry.

"One day I stopped crying and I just took off. I wandered around getting into trouble everywhere I went. I became a pretty good thief for a while, but I never joined a family or accepted the guild rules, so that didn't last long.

"I was making my way through southern Pakana, working as a Legionnaire squire, of all things, until I boarded with that family in Pash-nie. I stayed there a couple years. Odd jobs. Hired hand. Whatever. Then I heard about the school and thought I'd come learn to be a Ranger, maybe join up with the Pakana Legion. The rest you know."

"Papa's brother is a Legionnaire. He could help you, I'm sure."

"That was then. That's not what I want anymore."

"So what do you want?"

A small smile grew slowly on his face as he turned his gaze fully on me. I didn't turn away. If he was going to go there, I decided I would follow, but what he said was, "I thought I wanted to be a magician. I still do, I suppose. I don't know."

He stood up on the branch, and said, "Suppose we should head on down?"

"Careful, Tamar!" I warned. The spells have worn off by now."

"What?"

He froze.

"Sit down," I told him. "Don't move."

He started to sit down slowly, but he was awkward and stiff from trying to be too careful. He bent his knees about half way and reached forward to the branch with his hand. He looked up at me and smiled and said, "I'm getting there. I thought you still had me covered."

Then his levity stopped as his foot slipped.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He fell and slapped his arms flat around the top half of the branch.

"I'm okay," he said, but his weight was far to one side and one leg was dangling beside the limb.

"Okay, don't move," I told him as I pulled my final stone from my belt.

"Stay there!" he commanded. "Don't try to help me."

He tried to scoot his other leg higher, but when he moved, he slipped more. Both legs were over the side and he held on with his arms barely clinging to the smooth bark.

"I got it. I got it."

Then he fell.

I jumped.

I watched him floating in front of me as I chanted, moving my arms and speaking into the blast of air rushing by. I noticed the level of the platform flash by. I kept speaking, carefully and deliberately, with a clarity of focus that I had seldom felt before. The energies moved through me and I felt them take hold. I saw Tamar react as his descent was interrupted by my spell, but I immediately released the hold, as Tamar had done unintentionally, and we continued to drop together. I tipped myself forward as we fell close above the mist.

I dived closer and hit him in the back and tried to throw my arms around him, but I bounced away. I grabbed his sleeve then felt his hand on my arm. He pulled me toward him and I threw my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist.

We fell into the rolling fog and I flared the power of the spell as strong as I could and felt us begin to slow down.

We finally eased out of the bottom of the clouds, and I saw what I never thought I would see: the elfland ground, only a couple hundred feet below us.

I kept forcing the spell upward, but our combined weight was more than I could sustain, and we continued to move slowly down. Once I was sure that it was our weight only, and not the momentum from our fall, that pulled us, I lowered us more quickly to the ground.

All around the tree, the ground rose up sharply, forming a steep hill that held its foundation, which was at least five hundred feet across.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Our descent brought us to the foot of that hill into a growth of whitish fungus plants whose smooth cylindrical stems rose as high as ten or twelve feet.

We continued to cling to each other, he holding me with his arms, and I holding him with my magic. When Tamar was finally able to put his feet onto the ground, we sank together onto the slippery, mossy turf, bound in each others arms.

We kissed deeply, ravenously, and for a very long time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I think I would have felt a little better if there had been a few spooky howls or rustling or sudden movement or anything stirring on the cold forest floor. Then I would have had something specific to which I could have attached my quiet uneasiness.

Tamar and I had climbed up the steep, muddy, moss-covered hill that rose from the flat plain to surround the gigantic trunk. It felt better to be next to the tree. We sat with our backs to its iron-like bark and watched the bobbing sea of gray finger plants that shared the vast plain with a variety of crawling fungus vines and prickly bushes.

He held my hand in his and we shared the chill and suspense of the dim forest, the lingering relief of being completely alive, and an understanding that our passions, now broken free by this sudden shock, would not be forced back into the shackles of well practiced decorum or diminished by the clouded mirror of words. Fear from what might be lurking below, pride that I was able to save Tamar, disappointment for letting him fall in the first place, and worry about what to do next all barked in vain outside the fragile aura in which Tamar and I sat. Time was a memory as distant as yesterday. My hand and his held between them as much of the world as I cared to care about.

We sat through an unmeasured length of time while I swung back and forth between despair and enchantment until a glider broke through the low ceiling of the clouds and into my reverie. It circled out far across the plain then banked toward us. It dived down quite sharply, and I feared it might plunge into the ground, but the pilot, Garmon I could now see, forced it suddenly level then upward, dropping its belly onto our hill and skidding to stop about twenty yards away.

Behind him sat Albrock, his grandson by seven generations, who was in his fiftieth year of looking and acting very much like a ten year old Human boy.

Garmon saw that we were alive and well and yelled out, "You're supposed to grab a leaf when you jump off those limbs, my girl."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He swung his leg over the center rod and hopped down to the ground then lifted Albrock out. Tamar and I stood as they walked up the hill.

"It was an accident," I suggested.

"Well," he said, firmly, but not angrily, "We can discuss the subtleties of that word another time. Are you hurt?"

"No. We're fine."

"Nyssa, do remember my grandson?"

"Well, it has been quite a while. Didn't we play tag once on a summer day long ago?"

He smiled wide and said, "Yup. That was me."

Then he stepped to my side, swung his arm around in a wide arch and smacked me square on my rear then yelled, "Your it!"

"Albrock, I don't think Nyssa wants to play now."

"Aw, come on. I've been it for IT for over five years."

"Patience, grandson. I was once IT for seven hundred and twenty nine years."

"Wow," came a gasp of admiration from Albrock, but Garmon's knowing grin suggested he was hanging the truth a bit low. "Hurry up and send the flare."

Albrock took an arrow from the quiver on his back, lit a fuse with a flint spark, and shot it from his crossbow. It sailed up into the clouds and exploded in a flash of color, a message to the Elves above monitoring this little mission.

That diverted my attention so I didn't notice the second glider until it landed just behind the other one. Mother and Adrian Blackwing stepped out of the small seats and started up the hill. Mother pulled ahead and I braced myself for a loud and stern scolding, but when she reached us, she threw her arms around me and held me tightly.

I found myself clinging selfishly to her, not only because of our near disastrous fall, but for every horrible twist that this week had delivered.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I spoke quietly to her, again thinking of all the things I had done. She patted my head and rocked me back and forth and the world felt a little more stable. When I was finally able to raise my head from her shoulder, I saw Adrian standing behind her and my next words, spoken, harshly with exaggerated bitterness, were, "What's she doing here?"

Mother looked from me to her and said, "Ask her," then went down to her glider and stated dismantling it with Albrock's help.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I turned back to face Adrian, deserter, traitor, the cause of all this trouble. She had abandoned my father at the worst possible moment. It was because of her actions that he didn't want me to study with her, which made me want to find out why, which led to me discovering Miranda, learning about my father's secret motives, and damaging the fragile balance of his work.

She said to me, "I hear you've been up to no good, junior."

She was smiling, in a friendly, inviting way which only mocked the severity of her actions. Did she have no idea what she had done to my family, my sweet Papa, this wounded world? Did she think she could spill such betrayal and leave others to clean up her foul mess, then laugh like an idiot in our faces?

She noticed that I wasn't sharing her cheerfulness and her expression changed from carefree to concerned.

"Nyssa..." she began, but I cut her off.

"You bitch!" I heard myself say. "You selfish, traitor. After what he's done for you. We should have let you die in that clay hut. You don't deserve to be here." By the time I finished talking, I was nearly shaking with anger. I turned and started walking away fast. I heard her come up behind me and then felt her hand on my shoulder.

I stopped, spun around, and slapped her touch away, then glared into her for a long moment.

I turned away again and this time she grabbed my arm. I turned and balled up my fist and managed to land a glancing blow across her chin. That was the key that opened up the deluge of anger and despair that had been mounting day after day behind the thinning veil of my resolve. The fear at being gagged on the warehouse floor revived itself anew. The pain of Papa's hand returned to my cheek. The dread of seeing Tamar lying near death with icy water rushing over his head sunk my stomach once again. It all rose into my hands and feet that kicked and clawed and smacked and stomped with reckless fury until instead of kicking, my feet flew up, my arms circled in the air, and I hit the ground solidly between my shoulder blades.

I woke up coughing and saw Mother's face bent over mine below a halo of concerned faces above me.

I started to sit up and discovered that my head was made of fire that burned from the inside out.

"Lie still," Mother warned.

I put my hand up to my throbbing temple and felt the stickiness of blood matting my hair.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I focused my eyes on Adrian and said, "Nice sucker punch."

She laughed and said, "You crack me up, junior."

I was suddenly startled by another face close to mine, looking at me upside down.

"Tamar?"

He said, "You slipped, Nyssa. Do you remember rolling down the hill?"

I heard his voice, but it was like listening to a far away echo. I reached my hand up to his face and patted his cheek.

His face was replaced by Adrian's.

"Let me in here, sport," she said.

I heard the words of the healing spell, Papa's spell, Papa's words.

The burning stopped, and I realized that my whole body had been tense. I heard her begin a second spell, and I let myself ooze into the soft, cool ground. I wanted to stay there and rest, but arms were lifting me up to my feet. Garmon came to my side then picked me up to carry me back up the hill. I put my arms around his neck and rested my head on his shoulder while Mother walked beside us.

I watched from the safety of Garmon's arms while the baskets were lowered from above. When the first one reached the ground, Albrock grabbed hold and pulled it down along the steep incline so that the cargo basket rested just a few feet away from the gliders.

Mother walked to the topmost basket, which was lying on its side like all the others. It was circular with a bench that ran around the inside and looked as if it could hold five to six people. The rope rose through its middle and provided an anchor for six smaller ropes that were attached to the rim. I watched Albrock and Adrian stow the gliders in the large cargo box below until Garmon lowered me down, with Mother's help, onto the seat next to her. I rested there with my back against the wicker weave and my head resting on the cool earth. Most of the activity below was blocked by the opposite side of our basket, but after a few more minutes I saw another flair explode above us. A few short seconds after that, I began to feel the basket bump back and forth as the thick rope was lifted off the ground, freeing it to swing a bit until its slack was taken up. I leaned forward when we lurched back a few feet, paused, and lurched again. Once we were lifted off the ground, the bucket righted itself for the long journey back up the side of the tree.

Mother slid around for balance to sit across from me. She was so elegant and calm, like a statue of crystal, yet strong as granite and

CHAPTER NINETEEN

older than both. She was an elder in her family, yet chose to spend her time rearing Human families, one after the other. She was as much a mystery to her own family as she was to me.

Sindee understood her, and I think Jheffery did a little, but not me. It was as if they all shared a secret that I did not know nor would understand if I did. Now and then she would mention someone, a friend that she knew, and I would later learn that this person or that had been a king, or empress, and had been dead for centuries. Yet she lived on. Would she remember me?

She was as dear and gentle a mother as could be, in her own way, of course. She had spent so much time watching and helping Humans grow up that she always knew exactly what to do and say to instill into us the code by which we lived.

Looking at her that day, I could almost pretend that she would grow old, and that her hair would gray and wrinkles would burrow into her face. I would some day succumb to that fate while she still held her same unfaltering beauty. How would she leave us, I wondered. Would my grandchildren's grandchildren know her? There must be hundreds of descendants from the families she brought together. Where were they now?

She still wore her hair long, just as I had seen it that day Andrea and I sat back to back in the shade of the honeysuckle hedge.

"I don't want you to leave us," I confessed.

"Why would I do that?"

"I mean when I'm old."

"I won't."

"Words. I don't understand. I don't understand you."

I was still in a dreamy fog from the bump on my head and the words fell out unchecked. She accepted my words with a nod, as if she had expected them. She said nothing.

"Do you know about Miranda?" I asked.

She tilted her head, inviting me to continue, giving me her full attention without staring or making me feel that I had to keep talking.

"I have to tell you things, Mother, things that are not really mine to tell, but I need to."

Again she sat patiently, waiting for me to continue. I felt so small under the shadow of her immeasurable span of time and wisdom. I always did and nothing I could ever do would change that.

I suddenly heard myself say, "I wish I had a real mother."

"I know," she said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"How can you understand? You're not going to die."

"Nyssa," she spoke with such warmth and intimacy that I felt embarrassed for feeling the way I did.

"Do you want me tell you why I live as I do, with Humans?"

I raised my eyes to her.

"You are more alive than any Elf, Nyssa. You burn so brightly, but so quickly. You love, so easily, and so strong. I find that I've come to need that. This life has awakened something in me that no Elf should have to live with."

"What's that?"

"Love."

"What do you mean?"

"What Elves call love runs so deep and with such conviction that it's as near as the air we breath. It becomes a part of us as common as our fingernails, and about as interesting. Maybe what I've come to know is only a small part of what you are capable of feeling, but it's like seeing a color one has never seen. Not green, or blue, or yellow, or anything else that can be imagined, but having seen it, I cannot turn away. The Elves call it tashello, the folly."

"Why haven't you told me this before?"

"I didn't think it mattered."

"I don't know what to do. I try so hard. I want it to stop."

"It can't stop, but I can walk with you, if you understand that I do love you, not as a pet or a butterfly, but as my daughter."

"Like Sindee?"

"No. Like Nyssa. Oh, Nyssa I envy you. You have such fire. You are stronger than even you know, but I see it. I feel it. There is greatness in you, Nyssa."

It was all so dreamy and distant. It was quite like watching it happen to someone else.

"But," she added, "You do tend to think with your fire sometimes."

She looked at me with a sly grin, and I didn't know if she meant my altercation with Adrian or something else, like running off after supper and chasing secrets.

"Do you know about Miranda?" I asked again.

"Tell me about Miranda."

"Papa and Brittany Drake."

I sought for a word to describe the affair without being too blunt or too vague.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"A little girl. Seven years ago. Then last year sometime Brittany died and Miranda went to the orphanage and Papa took her and hid her at Academy Manor until I found her. I took her home."

When I looked up to her, I saw that her expression had changed from calm and open to dark and firm. I saw her lips form the Elvish word: tashello, and then she covered her eyes with her hand and sat that way for several moments.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I shouldn't have just said it like that."

"What else," she asked, her hand still covering her eyes.

"Papa and I fought about it in front of the children. He wanted to take her back, but we pulled her away when he Transported."

She pulled her lips tightly together and her jaw muscles became rigid.

"At first we fought in Anna's room. That's where he hit me."

She took her hand away from her face and reached it out to me. I held her hand and she said, "We must forgive him, Nyssa, you and I, right now, completely and without reservation. Your father carries many pains within him. Let this be the cut that lets the some of that poison out."

"Right now?"

"If I don't, I may not be able to forgive him until far too long after he's gone. Will you forgive him, Nyssa?"

"I don't know why he's doing all these things."

"None of that matters. Only love."

"Not yet. There's more, Mother."

I took my hand back and held it together with my other while I explained further.

"Adrian told me some things about his experiments, things about this group called the Triples. Do you know about them?"

"I have had quite extensive experience with the Triples, yes."

"Why would Papa work for them?"

"I could tell you these things, *mia dolo*, but you should hear them from Adrian."

"All this is her fault. She ran out on Father and started everything."

"Nyssa, you must not believe that everything is as it appears to be. I trust Adrian with my life, with yours, your father's, and many more than that."

I still wasn't ready to join her in her trust. She didn't know what I knew.

"There's more, Mother."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Go on," she answered, again with such patience and openness.

"When I went to Seagate, to find out more about Miranda, I got stranded because my wand ran out of charges. Tamar found me at the Guild and said that Papa was looking for me, so we went to one of the warehouses and waited. Two men attacked us, a fighter and a wizard, and we fought. I ended up burning it with a Fire Cloud and Papa said that the Dwarves thought he did it on purpose and that's why they're going to start fighting."

"Yes. I heard about that from P'Tantis. Nyssa, look at me."

I met her eyes and she said, "It is not your fault."

"Maybe I didn't start it, but I was a trigger of some kind. I tipped the balance."

"Nyssa, stop. The Dwarves have been looking for an excuse since last season. We were invited to join them long ago, and one reason the Dwarves haven't begun fighting is that the Emperor himself has asked them to wait. This is not something that started when your father began his work, or even with the death of the High Druid. Listrith has been maneuvering the Triples for more than one hundred and fifty years, Nyssa."

"I thought Listrith was Human."

"She is. She is also one of the most powerful magicians that has ever lived. Your father's efforts against her plans are only one of many obstacles she has faced and will continue to face. All the non-Human species of L'thenia have been working together against her for longer than you or your father have been alive. There have been wars and there will be again. This is bigger than you. You are not responsible. The world does what it does and uses us all in ways we may never understand. The Dwarves would have attacked anyway."

"But I did start something here. I can't turn away from that."

"Yes you can. Nyssa, the Dwarves have started marching not because of what happened at the warehouse, but because wizards attacked the Black Mountains and raided their stores of jewels and platinum."

"Have you spoken with Father?"

"No. P'Tantis has been in touch with him."

"Then what we did doesn't matter?"

"I'll leave the rest for Adrian to explain."

"Why?"

"Because she knows better than I the things you need to know and the things you don't need to know. She is still your teacher."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"I want to know everything. I want to know what's really going on."

"Yes. That has become apparent. You really should learn to control that. You'll know what you need to know and then only when you're ready. You already know far more than you should."

"I don't like that answer."

Her only response was a quiet glare that told me more than any words could.

I sat and pouted for a while. My head didn't hurt much at all, but I couldn't wait to get back to the room and wash out the evidence of my rash actions. Would I ever change, I wondered, or would I always act in the moment, leading myself into fire and fury, pains and passions? I felt a warmth inside that comforted me like an old friend when I realized that I knew I would never change and that I would never want to.

Mother said, "There will soon be a small army of four hundred or so Dwarves moving through the mountains above Karth, where they intend to secure stores of food for the other waves that will be descending on Hartack. We believe they intend to take the North western rim of Pakana, which has been harvesting well. If we can hold them at Karth, the others will have to forage on their own and we'll have the advantage."

"So the Elves are joining the Humans instead of the Dwarves?"

"No. The elders decided to stay out, hoping the Dwarves will do the work for them."

The depth of the reality sank into me and I greeted it with a nod of quiet resolve.

"Tomorrow morning, early, I will be leaving with Sindee, Adrian, Garmon, and a few others to offer what aid we can to Karth, if we can arrive in time."

I nodded again, picturing Dwarves running across fields, burning barns, killing horses.

"Nyssa."

I looked at her.

"I want you to return home with Tamar as soon as you get yourself cleaned up."

"What about Jheffery?"

"He's going with us."

"I'll go."

"This is not training, Nyssa."

"I said I'll go. I'm good, Mother. Let me help."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

She paused for quite a long while, and then said, "I'll consider it if Adrian thinks you're ready."

"What does she have to do with this?"

She answered me by ignoring my question.

We sat for a few quiet moments. I looked up, and I could see that we were close to the main platform level. Above us was the limb into which we were being slowly drawn.

Mother asked, "So, what do you think of Tamar?"

"I think I'm falling in love with him."

"I meant as a fighter."

"He saved my life."

"Is that an answer to my first question, or my second?"

"Your first."

"And my second question?"

"I don't know. If I knew why, it wouldn't seem as real."

"That's reasonable. Have you told him?"

"No. I don't have to. He knows."

She laughed a friendly, knowing, motherly laugh. "But Nyssa, that's what words are for."

I shrugged my shoulders, smiling.

We were suddenly in darkness as the basket rose through a small shaft and came to a stop inside a chamber that had been carved into the heart of the wood. Two servants tugged on ropes to pull a large plank, into which had been cut a long notch for the rope, covering the hole so that we could step safely out of the basket. Once we were out of the way, they untied the support lines from above then pulled a section of the basket up and out so they could unhitch it from the rope. They stored the basket upside down on top of a column of other baskets that stood beside ten or twelve similar columns, some holding larger baskets, some smaller.

Then they pulled the plank aside and I watched the rope begin moving up again onto a spindle that was no less than twenty feet in diameter. There was another chamber cut above and to the side where I could see that the axis of the spindle was attached to five walking wheels in which large Beltho cats lumbered obediently.

We stood to the side and watched as the Elves repeated the same maneuver for the next basket, which held Albrock and Tamar, and the next one in which Adrian and Garmon rode.

Albrock stayed behind, chatting with the workers, and the five of us filed up the narrow stair that burrowed through the center of the branch to the road on top.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Garmon and Mother flanked Tamar and began explaining the situation to him, leaving Adrian and me alone together behind them.

"How's your head, kiddo?" she asked with the same familiarity and ease that she always had shown with me.

"I've spent the last several days being incredibly angry with you."

"I know," she answered.

"Why?"

We walked a dozen or more paces before she spoke, and then all she said was, "Did Ivy ask you to join us?"

"No. She told me to go home. But I'm not. I'm going."

"Do you think you're ready?"

"I'll be there. Are you still working against my father?"

"I never was, Nyssa. I can't tell you more than that."

"I don't think I believe you. I think you should run off and take care of yourself. That's what you seem best at."

She stood in front of me and stopped.

"Okay, Nyssa. We don't have time to baby-sit your wounded ego, so shut up and listen to me. You don't know what's going on and you're getting in the way. This is not about you, and it's not going to be about you. Do everyone a favor and get over it. We don't owe you a damned thing so stop walking around like your the princess of peace with all the answers. You are lucky that you didn't do any more damage than you did. Remember that. Now you think you're going to stand in judgment of me? I don't answer to you and I'm sure as hell is hot that I not going to start now. I know where my loyalties are, and I don't give a burning damn what you think. This is no game, and you've already screwed up big time, so I'm in charge now. If you have any problem with that you can just sit your pretty, self-absorbed little ass right here and watch the leaves grow until we get back."

Then she slapped me sharply across my face, poked her index finger on my chin and said, "That's for calling me a bitch."

I stood fuming, enduring the indignity of her finger poking my chin with her sharp fingernail, feeling smaller and smaller as her words festered their way into me despite the denial and anger that I tried to throw in their path.

She took her hand away from my face and asked, "Are we clear, sister?"

I swallowed hard, feeling growing anger bubbling and crawling under every pore of my skin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We stood face to face while she held me in a gaze from which I finally had to lower my eyes. I felt anger and contempt rippling from her like heat from a glowing hot iron.

"You don't have to like it, but if I don't hear a 'yes', I will tie you to this tree myself because I will not waste time pretending that you know what you're doing or listening to any more of your pathetic, pretentious crap. Are we clear?"

"Yes."

"Good. I want to count on having you to cover my back. You're a fine magician, and you're capable in a fight. You should be dead by now, considering what Jheffery told us. Once you understand that you don't know every damn thing, we're going to be quite a team. You need to learn patience and trust, Nyssa, because I need you and so does your father." She left me and I waited until she was well ahead before I followed after her.

I made my way back to Mother's apartment and braced myself to face them all again, telling myself to keep my mouth shut and hoping I would listen to myself for a change. I was relieved to find it empty. I hurried into the washroom, drew a shallow bath, and cleaned up and washed out my hair as best I could. My head stung a bit under the running water, but I ignored that, just as I ignored the detestable feeling that came from having to endure Adrian's harsh words and knowing the every one of them was absolutely true.

I turned the water off and wrung out my hair. Adrian had said more to me, not so much by the words she chose, but simply by the way she spoke. She reminded me that I didn't have to do this alone. No longer did I have to try to find all the answers, or figure out what to do, or not do. If anyone else had tried to speak to me the way she did, I would have become more deeply entrenched in my visions, my truths, and my resolutions. It didn't change the fact that I hated feeling as worthless as a third shoe and hated her for making me feel that way. I stood up and wrapped myself in a soft towel and saw myself in the mirror. Nyssa was frowning and looked sad. Could one blame the mirror for the sadness, or the frown?

I went back to my room, dressed, and took my backpack out onto the balcony where I carefully emptied its contents to take an exact inventory. A few minutes later, Adrian and Tamar came in looking for me. Adrian told me to put everything away and bring it all with me.

We followed her to the armory and she help us to be fitted with leather vest armor and sturdy walking boots. She selected a short

CHAPTER NINETEEN

sword for Tamar, once she learned that he had some Ranger training. She also gave him five knives, one for each boot, one holstered on either side, and a long one in a sling under his arm.

She gave me a single hunting knife that fit into a small scabbard that she laced around my left calf.

She checked everything twice, made sure we could wear everything comfortably, and then ordered us to her room. There she gave us each a new back pack, much larger than the one I normally use. She gave Tamar a brand new magic book and a writing kit then put him onto the meticulous task of inscribing the spells that he knew, copying from her book into his. She grilled us about our competence with a vast array of spells and made sure we were more than amply supplied with material for everything within our range of ability.

We left Tamar copying spells while she took me in search of an Elf named Zot, one of Garmon's servants, who selected a robe for me. He looked me over with a measuring eye, took out a long, dark green robe with wide arms, billowy skirt, and oversized hood and lowered it over my upstretched arms. Adrian made sure it didn't drag the ground or hamper my movements in any way. Then she told me to take it off until tomorrow morning.

When we got back, Adrian made us fill our packs with wilderness gear: one hundred feet of rope, a spool of twine, a tinder box, a water skin, bandages, protective gloves, packs of dried meat, a sewing kit, Glow sticks, candles, boxes of dried fruits and nuts, fishing line and hooks, and then explained in plainly blunt language the complete dos and don'ts of wilderness sanitation.

After that, Tamar went back to copying spells and she sat me down and began pulling my hair into a tight weave and warned me no less than four times not to try to undo it. It pulled tightly on my scalp, threatening a headache, and ended in a fat braid which she told me to always keep under the robe.

All this took up the better part of the day, and as the forest air was turning heavy with dusk, she took me to the main platform where Mother and Sindee were giving Jheffery a workout. Adrian did her best to show me some moves and kicks that might help out in a pinch. She kept after me, making me try a move again and again, until I began taking a bit of pleasure whenever my blows landed firmly.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

That night we all shared a solemn supper in Mother's apartment. Luckily, Garmon was there to offer diversion through his never ending stream of jocular stories, but I was only half listening.

That was really the first time that I had an opportunity to contemplate battle. Before, it had always been as far away as stories told by Papa, or uncle P'Tantis. Recently, it had descended upon me without granting the luxury of analysis or worry, but that night it covered me with a cloud of quiet gloom. It wasn't fear, although fear joined it. It was a gnawing emptiness that came from flushing away every part of me that was screaming to run away. What was left was a hollowness that I had to fill with somber acceptance and an abundance of forced dignity to help me confront the death that I would face and that I would see.

We all went to bed early but I could not stop myself from cataloging my spells and imagining all sorts of attacks we might face and all the appropriate counter spells. I expected my preparations to give me a degree of comfort, but the attacks that I imagined grew increasingly furious and gruesome, and I couldn't stop my imagination from staging the death of my family, of Tamar, and, time after time, of myself.

I eventually got up and paced back and forth on the balcony, demanding unsuccessfully that the images stop. I lay back down and slept for a short while, only to be awakened by a dream that ended suddenly when a hatchet swung down to split my heart in two. I awoke with a heart functioning all too well, racing madly, turning my fingers and feet cold and making them tingle with jittery needles. I tried pacing on the balcony some more and then tried to sleep on the sofa, but it was too narrow and the more I fidgeted, the more frustrated I became.

Finally, I stood up and listened to the silence of the room and the far away howl of the night wind. I walked to the door and opened it to the dark hallway. I allowed myself to ride the crest of what I needed to do, ignoring that I knew better, letting it carry me downhill faster and faster until turning back was as impossible as turning off what I was feeling.

I let myself into Tamar's room and found him sleeping in a hammock away from the window, hidden in the shadows of night, wearing loose, white cotton trousers, which were all I could see of him until my eyes adjusted themselves. I stood next to him and listened to his even breaths and watched him swing slowly, rhythmically in the gray on black shades.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I lifted my sleeping gown over my head and stood wearing only my short slip, feeling the night air chilling the light patina of perspiration that I wore. I stood there for some time, watching him, waiting for myself to turn around and leave.

I touched his arm.

As he woke, I leaned down and slowly lay on top of him. When I felt his arms resting on my bare back, and his breath brushing my neck, when I put my lips against his and found acceptance and understanding, the images left me and I finally slept, gently, as if there didn't have to be a tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I always knew that I was hungry, that there was an emptiness which hid away inside me like a locked room in the corner of some forgotten cellar. I knew that someday the door would open and light would scatter the painful cobwebs, but it always remained a mysterious, impossible dream. Until that morning, lying on my side in an elven hammock, resting beside Tamar, shameless and sincere, I had never been fed.

"No wonder everyone makes such a fuss," I murmured onto the back of his shoulder.

He stirred, shifted positions, and reached his arm back to take my hand.

"You're lucky you didn't come to me when I was still awake. I'd hate to face Jheffery in an honor feud."

There was knock at the door and Tamar immediately replied, "Come in. Unlocked."

"Tamar!"

I sat up and rolled out of the hammock, but before I had a chance to even step away, the door opened and I stood facing N'Ira, who was carrying a breakfast tray. She quietly lowered her eyes, set the tray on a table, and left. By the time I put on my sleeping gown, the door opened again and she set a bundle of clothes, my backpack, and my green robe on a chair then went out one final time and returned with a second breakfast tray. This time she caught my eye and tapped her lips with her fingers.

Tamar got out of the hammock and said, "Lucky you."

He put his hands on my waist, kissed me and said, "Don't ever do that to me again."

"Do what?"

He laughed.

"You don't know what I mean?"

"No."

"Look, don't put me in the position where I have to exercise such unnaturally excessive restraint. It's not fair."

"Tamar, I wasn't going to do anything," I explained.

"Yes," he said, becoming impatient. "Exactly."

CHAPTER TWENTY

He walked over to the breakfast trays and tasted one of the sweet muffins.

"This is good."

He sat down and pulled the tray onto his lap and ate, ignoring me.

I sat down into the hammock and rocked myself back and forth with my foot.

"I didn't tell you not to do anything."

He grunted an acknowledgment and kept eating.

"You don't have to protect me from myself or anything."

He chuckled softly.

"You weren't very reserved when you were pawing all over me yesterday," I said, grinning.

He stopped eating, looked at me for a long moment. Twice he started to speak but then backed off. Finally, he said, "Get dressed."

I didn't want to. I didn't want to let time move forward, into the forest, into battle, into all the dangers and fights for which Adrian had tried to prepare us. I went over to Tamar and sat beside him. He took another bite. I scooted closer to him and pulled his arm around me.

"I'm scared," I confessed. "I don't want to do this."

He put his tray back onto the table and I slumped down across his lap and let him rub my back.

"I'm sorry," I told him.

"Shh."

He massaged my neck, my back, the tight weave of my hair.

"We don't have to do this, Nyssa. You can go home."

"No."

"Then we've got to get ready. Hurry up and eat. Come on."

He lifted me up, put my tray on my lap, then kissed my cheek. While I ate the pastries and fruit, he got dressed, strapped on his knives, boots, armor, backpack.

"Here, Tamar," I said. "You should finish your breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

I got up and changed from my sleeping gown and slip into trousers, shirt, boots, and leather vest armor. After Tamar helped me put on the green wizard robe, I opened my pack and took out my pouch and belt, buckled them around my waist, then lifted the straps of my pack onto my shoulders.

"Am I forgetting anything?"

"Your knife?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Oh. It's in my pack."

"I'll get it."

He took it out and knelt down in front of me. I put my foot up on his knee and he strapped on the small scabbard. Then he picked up his pack, swung it over his arms, buckled on his supply belt and said, "You be careful."

"Okay. I love you too."

Jheffery and Sindee were in the front room, standing by the fireplace. Mother was sipping a cup of Jherrel tea in the corner sitting area, watching as Tamar and I came in together. I wondered if she knew that I had gone into his room last night. If she did, she gave no indication of it.

"Morning, Nyssa." Jheffery said. "All ready?"

I nodded.

Mother said, "Jheffery, Nyssa, Tamar, Come over here."

She was wearing her full battle gear, including her two swords, worn on her left hip, a wide quiver with a few dozen arrows, a short bow, tall suede boots, and a full set of ring mail armor that was sewn into her Del-Gesius battle colors jacket. Sindee wore the same outfit that she had when she came to Arrenkyle Manor, except now she held a long bow.

Jheffery also wore a suit of ring mail and had the metal hood pulled up over his head. A two handed sword was strapped to his back, and he also carried the traditional dual elven swords, a full quiver, and short bow. Across his chest were two sashes, one loaded with darts and the other holding an array of throwing knives. Instead of a backpack, he had a large pouch, like Mother and Sindee, that held his camping gear.

I went to the cabinet, poured myself a cup of hot tea and took it to sit next to Mother along with the others. Sindee sat with us but didn't interfere.

There was a calm tension among us. It seemed rather odd to be sitting in the comfort and security of our apartment while dressed up in full battle gear. I took a sip of the bitter sweet tea and tried to ignore the jittery tightness that wrapped itself around my heart.

"A dwarven army is made up of several groups, called divisions, of thirty-one dwarves each. They have a very simple command structure. Each dwarf commands exactly two subordinates. A division is made up of four teams with seven dwarfs per team, and they're identified as the North, South, East, and West teams. Each team is led by a guard and has two three-man Squads: one Squire

CHAPTER TWENTY

and two juniors. A counselor directs two teams, so there are two counselors who report to the knight, for a total of thirty-one.

“Their ranks are Junior, Squire, Guard, Counselor, and Knight.

“Usually, only the knight will be mounted, if any.

“Dwarves hold deep pride in the prowess of their division and of their team. This pride of individuality often makes it difficult for their army to maneuver as a single unit. Each knight receives his orders from their king and then they are left to exploit whatever means they can to achieve their goals. There is fierce competition between the knights, which often gets in the way of their effectiveness, but have no doubt, they are fierce and deadly fighters.

“Their weaponry consists of long knives, hatchets, and hammers. Some carry crossbows, but it’s considered a weak weapon since it allows distance attacks. Dwarves are proud of their hand crafts, and they view fighting very much the same.

“In hand to hand combat, you will seldom fight one dwarf at a time, and most of the time, a squad of three will never separate. So in hand to hand, you must attack, move, attack, move. Remember, you have the advantage of both a longer reach and a longer step.

“We have three magicians and four fighters. The magicians will focus on the teams, using coverage spells such as Fire Cloud, Lightning, and such. The others should seek out the knight and the counselors using arrows.

“We suspect that there are ten to fifteen divisions and that they will reach Karth sometime tomorrow evening. There will be roughly one hundred on our side, scattered in groups about our size throughout the forest hills above Karth.

“Pakana has sent two hundred men into Karth to hold the town. Our job is to slow and stop as many of the roaming divisions as we can. We do not need to down every last dwarf in a division, but to weaken them, prune out their leaders, and leave them unfit for the confrontation with the Legionnaires.

“Nyssa, you and Adrian will fly invisible ahead of Garmon who will be leading us. Stay no less than fifty feet ahead but don’t lose visual contact.

“Tamar, stay far back and always try to cast your spells from behind us. If the fighting gets close, float so you can get away from the dwarves. It would be best to go invisible and stay quiet if they get near you at all.

“Jeffery, stay close to me. Always start with arrows. When they get closer, switch to darts and knives. When you engage a squad, use

CHAPTER TWENTY

your long sword first and waste no time on the defensive positions. Strike quick and firm.

"In the forest, do not speak. We'll gather for a break every two to three hours if necessary.

Her eyes darted behind us and back. I turned and saw Adrian and Garmon come into the room together.

"It's time," Mother said.

We stood and gathered at the center of the room where we waited in silent reverence of the mission we would share.

Adrian asked Mother, "Are they ready?"

"We're ready."

"Form a circle," Adrian directed.

Adrian took hold of Garmon's left hand and the circle extended itself around Tamar, myself, Jheffery, Mother, and Sindee, who took Adrian's other hand.

Adrian began the chant of Transportation, but after the initial summoning, I was unable to recognize any of the words. Their rhythm and dynamic of the spell were quite unlike any other spell I was accustomed to. This was either a very high level spell or was some type of variation based on a completely different paradigm. I watched the space inside our circle grow brighter above a small circle of pine needles and leaves which replaced the center of the floor and then flowed outward under our feet. When the spell engulfed us, the room was replaced with the rich forest atmosphere.

Adrian, Mother, and Sindee all immediately spun around and ran out a few yards to examine the area. They quickly returned. Garmon looked up to the sun, listened to the air, felt the wind, and then pointed the way for us.

Adrian pulled out a bat's wing and began the familiar words of the Fly spell. I started with Invisibility and then cast Fly. Adrian moved forward and to the right, so I angled out to the left and rose as high above the ground as I could without entangling myself in the thicket of branches that wove the forest roof into a tight canopy.

Behind me, I saw Garmon walking forward. Mother and Jheffery followed twenty paces behind him and Sindee and Tamar took the rear position.

I flew forward and worked hard to keep track of Garmon, dodge the branches and limbs, and watch for dwarves.

The scent of pine drifted through the other muddy, wilderness odors and the heavy, dull sounds of the woods. I kept sweeping my eyes from side to side and back to spot Garmon and the others. I

CHAPTER TWENTY

forced a cleansing breath and expelled some of the tension that was gripping my body.

A bird flew across our path. A pair of rabbits hopped out of our way. We settled into a comfortable, mundane pace, moving ever onward, heading parallel with the hill, moving neither up, nor down. Eventually, the trees opened up a bit, letting in the glare of the sun. At first, it felt cozy and welcome, warming me from the chill of the early morning forest shade, but after another half hour, I began to become scratchy and sweaty under the heavy wizard robe. Garmon kept pressing forward, and I decided that no matter how horribly numbing it was to examine tree after tree, shadow after shadow, that I would perform my task well. It grew increasingly monotonous and difficult and my mind kept wandering to Papa, Miranda, Tamar, dwarves fighting with humans, burning warehouses, and the garden at the orphanage. Whenever my Fly spell came close to expiring, I pulled another wing from my pouch, hovered, and cast a new spell to keep going.

We stopped in the early afternoon and sat together eating a silent snack of dried nuts and raisins while Adrian and Sindee kept watch on our perimeter. Mother wouldn't let us speak, which added to the tension I felt, keeping me alert. When Mother rose and directed us to resume, I felt relieved to be moving again.

Once our path opened up to the sun and the trees became more sparse, I flew higher and farther out where there were scant few limbs to cover me. I raised my right arm and wiped my forehead with the back of my wrist, dampening the sleeve of my robe in what was becoming an all too familiar gesture, a salute to the burning sun which tracked higher and higher into the sky through the dreary hours of the afternoon.

We stopped and rested a second time. The hours of staying alert and ready were making me tired. I sat next to Tamar and munched a few more handfuls of trail mix. Mother seemed calm and not at all tired. I felt exhausted and nervous. Again she motioned us onward and we resumed our positions.

The hours pulled forward and I lost all sense of time. My concentration and fatigue finally kept my mind from wandering, and so I was left with my silent, personal vigil.

Once when I looked back, I noticed that Garmon had stopped walking. I turned and watched him. He raised his arms up and patted his wrists together, forming an X with his arms, and then pointed downhill.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I circled back to him and settled to the ground.

"Garmon?" I whispered.

He turned in my general direction and said, very quietly, "In the air. Follow me."

As I was flying back up, I heard Adrian's voice behind me. "Stay high up, above the trees if you have to."

"Okay."

Garmon moved down to his left and the others swept down diagonally across the slope. They moved as quickly and quietly as they could across the dried leaves and twigs of the forest floor.

It looked like a single division, marching just as Mother had said. In the front was a single dwarf on horse back, followed by two others, each followed by two teams. I held back and circled around to the rear as our fighters and Tamar hid low to the ground behind trees ahead and to the right of the dwarves.

I held a small piece of cat fur and readied myself to begin summoning a Lightning spell, keeping my eyes on the far team.

The dwarves plodded on down the hill in proud, triangular formations, each dwarf deferring to his superior. Two arrows flew from the right striking the knight, who fell over off of his horse.

I began summoning the spell as I saw one arrow strike each of the counselors. The dwarves were surprised for only a moment, and soon they were all charging in the direction of the arrows.

I saw a Fire Cloud engulf the far right team out of the corner of my eye as I brought the final words of the my spell into place and felt the energy course through me as a quick, brilliant flash that surrounded the middle left team, dropping four of them immediately, and causing the other three to turn and drop to defensive positions watching behind them.

I moved around and almost directly below, I saw Garmon running from his position toward the fallen knight. The far left team also hurried forward to the knight's position.

I glanced over to my right and saw the horrible charred remains of the team Adrian had burned. Beyond that, Mother and Jheffery were standing, releasing arrows into the team that was still charging toward them.

Below me, I saw Garmon fix himself into a sturdy stance, holding his bow level.

I pushed the flap of my pouch out of the way and reached down to the bottom and felt for a briar twig. I took this out and quickly spoke the words that would transform the small twig into a large

CHAPTER TWENTY

bramble that would stretch between the trees through which the dwarves were charging.

Garmon let one arrow fly, stopping one dwarf who took the arrow in his leg. In a quick, smooth motion, Garmon pulled another arrow from his quiver, set it, and let it loose into the stomach of the closest dwarf.

My spell finished, and the large, prickly web appeared, hanging between two trees. The first three dwarves didn't see it and ran right through it, covering themselves with scratches and cuts. The last two skidded to a stop then ran around it to Garmon who dropped his bow, drew his sword, and swiped it at them both.

I sent a barrage of wizard darts into one, and Garmon was able to dodge the swift knife of the other long enough to deliver a swift cut on the back of the dwarf's legs.

Back to the right, I saw Jheffery and Mother both engaged in combat with two dwarves each. Jheffery was keeping them back with wide and furious sweeps of his long, two handed sword.

He stepped forward, lunged, holding the sword with one hand, while he pulled a knife from his sash with the other. He spun and hurled the knife into the belly of the dwarf behind him then pulled his sword back, continued his spin around, and sunk the heavy blade into the neck of the first dwarf, even as the dwarf's arm was moving to bury a thick blade into my brother.

Mother danced quickly between her two, kicking, jabbing, keeping them defensive and off balance. Three other dwarves approached. Jheffery engaged one as an arrow and a volley of magic darts came from the right, both striking one of Mother's opponents.

They were all too close together for wide area spell, so I began another Wizard Dart spell.

Jheffery's dwarf suddenly rose high into the air and dropped onto the ground with a crack and heavy thud, the victim of a Float spell from Tamar, I figured. I delivered my darts into the second dwarf that was pressuring Mother, and I saw three other dwarves rush toward Sindee and Tamar. Sindee drove an arrow into one of them then pulled her sword to face another.

The third dwarf swung a large hammer at Tamar, but Tamar jumped back and when the momentum of the dwarf's motion moved him to the side, Tamar leapt forward and plunged one of his knives into the dwarf's side.

I flew down and knocked Sindee's opponent aside with my feet, pushing him over onto his face.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sindee poked her sword into his side, withdrew it, and then she and Tamar ran back in response to Garmon's call, "Move on!"

Jheffery and Mother were still engaged with the last two dwarves. Jheffery's left side was a pool of red, and he was being driven back hard by an old dwarf wielding a double bladed hatchet in one hand and a long sword in the other.

At almost the same instant, an arrow flew from behind me and hit Jheffery's opponent in the shoulder and Mother delivered a spinning kick knocking her dwarf to the ground.

Adrian was on the ground running beside Garmon. Jheffery, Mother, Sindee, and Tamar all followed and I flew up over the trees.

We ran for several minutes until we were confident that we were not being followed, and then we gathered in a clearing. I canceled my invisibility spell and saw Jheffery collapse. Adrian pulled his armored vest open and began administering healing spells.

I stood next to them, beside Mother. Sindee and the others stood back.

Adrian said, "He needs a priest. This is bad."

"I can help," I offered, kneeling beside him.

Adrian pushed me back and said, "You watch the perimeter."

I ignored her and started to reach into my component pouch.

"Go on, Nyssa," Adrian commanded again. "There's nothing you can do here."

I felt Mother's hand on my shoulder. "Watch out for us. Be our eyes."

I stepped back and watched Mother kneel beside Jheffery and take his hand.

I saw him looking up at her. I saw the pain and the fear in his eyes as he clutched her hand.

I flew up and away from that scene, pushing back the emotion and the cold realization that my brother was dying. I also felt shame for feeling as I did after what we had done to all those dwarves. That emotion soon faded as I circled the camp some fifty yards out, dodging the trees and watching outward. This was our forest, not the theirs. They came here to steal and plunder. They chose to be here. We were here to protect, to defend. Every time I dared glance back at the group and saw Mother and Adrian beside Jheffery, I felt another stab of blind anger that washed away any pity or remorse I might have felt for the dwarves. I took out a flask of oil and held it in my hand, ready to burn any intruders.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I found myself hoping that they would come so I could burn them all. I recognized that I was letting myself be driven by burrowing fury which could impair my judgment if we did encounter more fighting, so I tried to calm my hatred, though it stayed with me.

I heard the footfalls of a horse.

I rose up and saw on the far side of the camp another division of dwarves driving to our position. I screamed an alarm and clenched the oil in my fist as I flew toward our group. I formed the Fire Cloud spell and let it ignite past the knight to the dense rear troops. Tamar ran forward and delivered a blast from his wand of cold.

While I began a Lightning spell, Tamar delivered another blast of cold and Adrian summoned a pillar of fire, a churning, boiling mass of orange and blue flame. I delivered my Lightning spell through it, but there were close to ten dwarves who were already on this side, including the knight.

Ivy picked up Jheffery onto her shoulders and ran away from the fighting.

The knight followed her, galloping through our clearing. Sindee aimed and let her arrow fly, but it hit him on the shoulder and bounced off of his armor.

Mother did a somersault, lying Jheffery on the ground then she rolled up, drew her sword and lured the knight away from her son.

When I turned around, I saw a group dwarves charging us. Garmon and Sindee pulled two or three of them down but we were soon surrounded by five dwarves and more were running from around the far edge of the fire that had begun to spread to a couple of the trees. Garmon fought two, one was on Sindee, and two were chasing Tamar, who was running away from camp.

I flew toward them and then my Fly spell ran out and I suddenly fell the fifteen or so feet to the rocky ground. I hit with my feet first and tried to roll forward, but I smacked the ground hard, knocking the breath out of me and twisting my hand.

I rolled over and held my wrist. It was nothing but a ball of biting pain up to my elbow. I looked up and saw one of the dwarves running back to me. An arrow sank into his chest and he stumbled and fell forward, wailing awfully in the guttural language of his people. Garmon ran past me, and when I stood, I saw him draw the dwarf away from Tamar, who was doing his best holding two of his knives. Garmon drew the dwarf's attacks and I ran to Tamar.

CHAPTER TWENTY

He was cut on his shoulder and arm. He ran to me, turned me around, and together we ran back to camp. I heard steel against steel then steel on flesh accompanied by a low scream that was quickly followed by footsteps and Garmon's voice, "No, this way." He redirected us away from camp, away from the dying column of fire and the few smoking trees.

Tamar and I ran. I stumbled and he helped me up. Then he fell and I stopped and looked behind us. The camp was engulfed in a thick green fog, a Choke Cloud spell from Adrian.

"Nyssa!" I heard off to our left.

Mother was carrying Jheffery over her shoulders again. Garmon was running, and Adrian was flying behind him carrying Sindee. I caught up with Mother and we followed her. Jheffery was unconscious, and his wound left Mother's clothes as bloodied as his.

"How is he?" I asked between panting breaths.

"Shut up, Nyssa."

"Is he going to be all right?"

She didn't answer me, but kept running.

We followed and soon Garmon caught up. As Adrian flew past us, I saw that Sindee's leg was broken and hung with an angle below the knee.

Garmon stopped and called out, "Tamar."

I looked over my shoulder and saw three dwarves running, trying to catch up with us. Garmon stood with his bow and I heard Tamar release another charge of his wand of cold as I summoned another Choke Cloud behind us. Then I followed Mother and tried not to notice the way Jheffery hung limp across her red soaked shoulders.

Garmon caught up with us again and let Adrian pass Sindee to him while she flew back to cover our retreat.

We slowed to a fast walk and continued on with all our pains for another ten minutes. Adrian eventually returned and said, "We can stop for a little while."

Garmon set Sindee down next to a tree and pulled her legs out in front of her. I sat down and cradled my wrist, which was now throbbing with each quick heartbeat.

Adrian examined Tamar's cuts and cast a Healing spell on him, then one on my arm, pulling out maybe a third of the intensity of the pain. She then went to help Garmon set Sindee's leg. Mother stood off to the side, still holding Jheffery.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Garmon sat straddling her leg above the knee, facing away from her, using his weight to hold her still. Sindee leaned forward and gripped his shoulders and didn't make hardly a sound when Adrian pulled on her ankle and felt along her shin.

She held Sindee's lower leg, pulling and pushing it into position and then she called out, "Nyssa, come give this a mend, will you?"

I hurried over to them and knelt next to Adrian. I pulled out a piece of mold and cast a Healing spell, holding my hands beside Adrian's on Sindee's leg. We then took our hands away gingerly.

"Stay put, Garmon," Adrian directed. She dropped her pack to the ground and took out a long roll of bandage which she wrapped tightly around Sindee's leg. She stopped, took a couple slats of wood from her pack and then bandaged them up on either side of her leg.

"It was a clean break," she said. "You'll be just fine."

After she wrapped, tucked, and cut the bandage, Garmon stood up and Adrian cast a second healing spell, to ease the pain and stitch the bone some more.

Mother called from ahead, "I'm going on ahead."

She turned and hurried down the sloping hill through the trees.

Adrian cast a Shrink spell on Sindee, reducing her to child size so Garmon could carry her more easily.

Mother walked in front, followed by Garmon carrying Sindee. Adrian made Tamar and me walk together so she could watch our backs.

"Are you still cut bad?" I asked.

"No." He showed me that he had wrapped his arm. "I'll be fine. How's your hand?"

"It's my wrist. It hurts like hell."

"You should fix it up a bit more."

"No. I want to save my spells."

We walked on in silence for another several minutes, down and down, sometimes down steep passages, sometimes shallower, but we went on and on, down through the hills toward Karth.

I said, almost to myself, "My brother's dead."

"I know," Tamar answered.

And then we walked and walked and walked more. The sky moved toward early evening, darkening slightly. Once Mother made us all stop and hide low and sent Adrian ahead to monitor a passing division or dwarves. She was gone for a terribly long time, but Mother would not let any of us try to go after her to see if she was all right. When she finally ran back, I heard the sounds of battle echoing

CHAPTER TWENTY

painfully through the woods.

Soon after that we entered a tiny camp and I saw Burn hurry over to Mother. They laid Tamar down and covered him with a blanket. Adrian brought Sindee back to normal size and Garmon opened up a bedroll for her.

I stood back and looked from face to face, trying to find my father. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to see him here or not, but if he was here, I wanted to know. So far as I could tell, he wasn't here, but I saw someone else I wanted to talk to.

"Tamar," I said, "I'll join you in a little bit, okay."

Before he left, I pulled him to me and we held each other in a tight embrace, then we parted and walked apart.

I crossed the clearing and saw him standing at the edge of a sharp drop. As I approached, I could see that he had chosen this location for his camp because it offered a good view of the village below us. Beyond him I saw the fields of Karth lying innocent and empty in the blue shadows of the mountain.

I approached him directly. Duke Damned Kingdom; P'Tantis Hawkwing Jaguar; tamer of trolls; killer of druids, high and low as it suited him; despoiler of worlds, they say; despoiler; mad man, according to many; my dear Uncle P'Tantis.

He stood wearing his illusion, hiding the extent of his armaments and equipment. He appeared as he always does, wearing mirrored spectacles, a black business jacket with matching trousers and a white button shirt with a plain red tie. On his shoulders was his unmistakable cloak of multi-colored feathers and his longsword, Frostheart, hung, as ever, by his side.

He nodded to me when I approached, but he seemed engaged in a telepathic dialog with someone so I waited.

After not too long, he said, "Hello, Nyssa."

"Where's my father?"

There was a pause before he answered. Then he said, "He's down in Karth. Do you want me to tell him you're here?"

"Are you talking with him now?"

Again there was a long pause and then he simply answered, "No."

"Don't tell him, but can I talk with you later?"

He nodded, but just stood there. His head turned slightly this way and that as he surveyed the camp, me, the village below, constantly examining, analyzing, watching.

Then he said, "It's about time."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I knelt beside the right shoulder of my lifeless brother. His cheerful face was drawn down, carrying a still frown, a mask that hid his sweet innocence and youthful bravado behind closed eyes. He was too young to have to learn this lesson now.

He lay before me, shirtless, stripped of his weapons, his armor, his life. The wound had been cleaned and bound tightly. It was deep, a cut through the right side of his abdomen.

Adrian sat across from me. To my left stood Burn, our friend, our savior, our link to the Elder Gods who, I hoped, would still find us worthy of their effort. Mother stood by her son's feet, looking down at the lifeless little boy that had grown so strong and proud for her.

Around us burned five torches, giving us enough light, and too many shadows. Outside our small circle of hope stood a concerned handful of friends and strangers.

We had learned earlier that six of the dwarf divisions had been stopped or severely injured and that eleven had broken through pretty much untouched. Over three hundred and fifty fierce and furious dwarves were now battling with half as many Legionnaires who were supported by the desperate men of Karth and the other groups like ours that had fought in the forest.

Burn stood in silent prayer with her palms and face turned upward to the sky. I remembered that gesture from so long ago in her temple as I watched my father lying on her slab.

Tears of anger, desperation, loss, clamored to burst through, and I wanted to hold his hollow husk in my arms and wail. I wanted to watch him grow up, to find real love and not just games. I pushed back those feelings by telling myself that they would not be needed because in a very few minutes, he would be able to hug me back.

Burn knelt behind his head, and when I saw her touch his temples, as she had touched Papa's, my resolve broke and I filled the somber silence with two quick, angry gasps before I was able to bear down my teeth and keep them away.

Adrian reached across his body, laid some mold across his wound and laid her hands upon him. I pulled a piece of mold away

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

from my supply and held it under my right hand. I placed my hands to either side of Adrian's while Mother moved forward and settled her weight above his knees to hold him steady.

His skin was cold.

Burn began moving slowly back and forth, speaking her prayer, communing with the Gods that they might restore life through her.

She reached the end of her prayer and began the chant to form the spell while she held his head between her hands.

We were still for an eternity of three seconds. No one moved. Burn slapped his face and shook him. He lurched, and Mother pushed her hands down onto his hips while Adrian and I began the chant in unison to mend his broken flesh.

"Oh Mama, it hurts!" he cried.

It was both beautiful and horrible to hear, like the frightened cry of a newborn baby, cut away from his mother.

Adrian began another spell immediately, and I followed a beat behind her. Burn laid her hands upon his chest and helped us mend him.

After a third spell from each of us and two spells from Burn, he lay quietly. I stood and Mother took my place beside him, clutching him to her, rocking him. Adrian came to me and put her arms around me in a sturdy, brief embrace.

"You did good, Nyssa. I proud of you."

"He'll be okay?"

"He will be."

I went out to the middle of our clearing and looked around for Tamar but he was already right beside me. I took his hands, placed his palms on my cheeks and held his hands there with mine until his touch gave me the strength to calm myself. He pushed my used up tears away with his thumbs and then put his forehead to mine, giving me his energy, letting me drain my fears and worries into him. Then he took his hands away, held my hands between his and said, "how is he?"

"He made it."

I walked with him hand in hand into the darkness at the edge of the clearing. There was a steep drop before us and through the trees I could see the field that lay between Karth and the hills in which we stood. Shadows moved about between stray torchlight and I heard the distant clink of steel on steel and the wind torn cries of hundreds of men and dwarves in fury.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

P'Tantis also came by to observe the battle, standing about twenty yards away.

"Tamar," I said. "I've got to talk to P'Tantis for a while.

"Okay. I'll be with Garmon and Sindee."

He began to walk away, but I held his hand and pulled him back to me for a brief but full kiss. I watched him walk away and then I walked over to P'Tantis and stood with him. Together we saw the field below crawling with angry steel.

"Why does this have to happen, P'Tantis? We should be fighting with them against the Triples. They're behind all this."

"If you were a dwarf, what difference would it make?"

"I just don't understand."

"I think you do, but you don't want to."

"There has to be some reason, some way to make sense of all of this."

"To the outsider, incompetence and selfishness almost always appear to be conspiracy. Most of the time there's really nothing to understand. Just because someone has power, doesn't mean he knows what to do with it. Yourself, for example."

"But Papa's not just somebody. I know him. I love him, and I don't understand why he's helping them."

"Then you should ask him, not me."

"He won't tell me."

"Then why should I?"

"Because he's loosing himself in this, in that down there. I don't know him anymore. I'm loosing him."

He didn't answer. His gaze was fixed casually on the little black shadows that bobbed and danced beneath the torches, stabbing and killing, each side carrying its cherished banner of righteousness. A barn to the far edge of town flickered and then became engulfed in flame, a man's hard work, his hopes, his life, twinkling like a used up candle.

"What do you want to know?"

I watched him watch the battle. Flares of orange reflected in his spectacles. A gentle wind blew the colorful feathers of his cloak, bringing a wash of cool air past us. His arms hung at his sides, bent slightly at the elbows. He seemed calm, but poised, like a spring waiting patiently to unwind in an instant.

"Adrian told me that she was going to work against my father, and then she said she wasn't. I know that he was commissioned by the Merchants' Guild, but he answers to the Triples. I know he's

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

holding large deposits in the Seagate banks and he's going to help start a run on them."

"It sounds as if you understand quite well."

His voice was firm but kind and somewhat disinterested.

"But why? Why is he doing it?"

"You already know, if you think about it."

"Stop playing games and just tell me."

He laughed kindly.

"People always want to know what's really going on, even when it's right in front of their eyes. We all just do what we do and the world either follows or leaves us alone."

He turned his mirrored lenses to me and showed me double images of my upturned and concerned face.

"It usually doesn't leave me alone, and it gets pretty damned annoying at times. Everybody thinks that I've got some terrible motive, some sinister plan that I've been working for all my life."

"Do you?"

"Not usually."

He turned back to watch the battle. Spots of Fire Clouds illuminated the battle field, spraying the area with quick blasts of reddish light and looking for a moment like little orange powder puffs. As their light dimmed, leaving scarred crops and men behind, after the light was gone and all that was left was a thin, gray smoke rising against the blackness of the night, the sound reached us, a gentle puff, diminished by the distance. It hardly seemed attached to the explosions at all and made the battle seem a little less real.

"Tell me, Nyssa. Can you think of any reason he would support the Triples, human supremacists?"

"No."

"And you say Adrian supports him but wants to appear as if she doesn't?"

I knew as deeply as I was alive that Papa was good and he only wanted to help as many people as he could. He was not a human supremacist. That meant that since he was not working for them, he was somehow working against them, while maintaining the appearance of being their ally. He could direct both the Triples from one side, to the extent he was able, while he directed their opposition from the other side.

But why now? Could it be coincidence that he announced his breakthrough on the same day that Adrian declared her opposition

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

to him? Was it coincidence that the ship was sunk and its cargo hidden in an abandoned warehouse?

Why would the Triples want to incite the dwarves?

"They're getting close, aren't they? They're going to take over the economy. The Merchant' Guild will release the Transporter, and they're going to make the switch."

"In a couple months or so, yes."

I began seeing patterns, events flowing, merging, carving out realities ahead of us.

"Then Adrian," I continued, "will denounce it publicly and work against it."

"That's right. She'll tell everyone she can that the machines are based on unstable technology. She'll tell them that a paper currency can be devalued and inflated at the whim of the printers, and that once they turn in their gold, they'll never get it back. She'll feed superstitions that the devices could poison food or blow up unexpectedly, which she'll support by blowing one or two of them up herself. She'll expose the Triples and blame them for all sorts of ills from the weather to the price of elven quilts. Can you guess what all her efforts will bring her?"

"Nothing. It won't work."

"Why not?"

"Because of the war that they started. Everyone will blame their troubles on the dwarves. The Merchants will look like saviors. People will be eating. They'll think about how great it is that they can Transport Legionnaire troops. They'll rush in without looking back."

"And Adrian?"

"She'll probably be branded a traitor against humans."

"If everything goes right, that's exactly what's going to happen. None of us, Nyssa, not me, not Adrian, and not your father, started this drama, but he decided to take advantage of it."

"What do you mean?"

"They believe that your father is motivated by a singular drive to feed and help all the people he believes himself to have injured."

"But that's true."

"Yes, it is, but they also believe that because of his convictions, he's incapable of doing what he's going to do."

"And what is that?"

Again he paused. Perhaps he was deciding whether or not to tell me what I wanted to know, or maybe he was busy maintaining other

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

telepathic conversations. When he answered, it was with his same deep, clear voice, unchanged by the far reaching significance of his revelation.

“Once everyone is comfortable using automatic magical transportation, trading in their gold, feasting, buying, celebrating, when humans are advancing in the dwarf war because an army can be placed anywhere in an instant, after the Merchants eliminate what’s left of the existing overland and sea trading routs, he’s going to shut them off, introduce errors. Supplies only at first, then Legionnaires will be reported to be lost then killed. The food will stop, the dwarves will take the advantage. When that happens, the seeds that Adrian planted will begin to grow. The resistance groups she will assemble will lead angry, hungry mob after angry, hungry mob to destroy all the Transport centers before the Triples can fix the machines.

“Then the Traveler’s Guild will take over trade. We’ll open up the Seagate ports, and Adrian and her people will spread the news, the complete story this time: why the Triples started the war, how they withheld food and hijacked their own shipments, how the banks were run dry, how they manipulated everything and everyone so that a few could profit greedily from an untested, dangerous technology.”

He spoke it all so casually, without homage to the fact that it would damage and destroy hundreds of lives.

“You’re using the entire Kingdom to destroy the Triples. You’re going to just pull thousands of families back and forth, ruin their lives, starve their children again, take everything they’ve got, and twist it to your own designs?”

“Something like that.”

“Damn you, P’Tantis.”

“Damn the Triples, if you got damnation to pass out. This wasn’t my idea. He’s playing their game, according to their rules. They set the stage. All he’s trying to do is rewrite the ending.”

“But it’s... It’s so...”

“Unthinkable? Horrible? Yes, I suppose it is. That’s exactly why they trust your father. They believe that he would rather see Pakana living fat dumb and happy under the benevolent dictatorship of the Triples than to force men to suffer to earn their freedom. They’re wrong.”

“But, P’Tantis, what if it doesn’t work?”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

"It will work. People always give their deepest loyalty to whoever gives them food. Besides, we don't need to destroy them completely. We just want to make them unpopular, push them underground, turn Triple into such a foul, filthy insult that anyone daring to show their emblem will be chased down and stoned. We'll just make it a little harder for them to get things done for a while. After that, the transporters can be established slowly, through the Travelers' Guild."

"Who knows about this?"

"Your father, Adrian, Ethan Longbeard, and now you. I hope you can keep a secret, or your father will have sold his soul for nothing."

He turned his mirrored gaze back out over the dark, bloodied plain, and I left him on his mountain, from which he could see everything, and do anything.

I turned away from him and hurried back toward the tree where Adrian, Garmon, and Mother were preparing their packs.

Adrian said, "We're going down, Nyssa. I could use your help."

Tamar touched my arm and said, "Your mother asked me to stay with Jheffery."

"It's up to you," Adrian said. "It won't get any easier."

"I'll go." Then I turned to Tamar and repeated, "I'll go. I'll be back."

"I know you will," he told me.

Garmon's voice broke through, pulling me away from Tamar back to the ugly now, saying, "Let's go, then. Stay close."

He led the three of us out the back of our little camp into the blackness of the trees. My eyes adjusted as best as they could and I kept my focus on the gold highlights of Mother's battle jacket, which was pretty much all I could see as we stomped through the tall grass and carpet of crunching leaves. I listened behind me to make sure Adrian was still with us.

Garmon found twists and turns, sometimes following game paths, sometimes delving through bushes or across shallow streams, taking us closer and closer to the odor of smoke and ozone and the clamor of battle. We walked on and on, through slippery mud and mossy rocks, sharing the silent night with startled birds and angry animals that quickly disappeared into the night. I felt strangely calm and was able to notice the tangy sweet scent of the chilly forest, the rustle of the leaves in the breeze, and the proud, low songs of the night birds. He led us down to the edge of the plain, and I looked

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

out from the cover of the trees across the open field and watched dwarves and men still fighting.

Adrian leaned close behind me and said, "Cast Fly and stay close. We'll float above the field and I'll take us where we can be the most effective."

I reached into my pouch and found a bat wing then cast a Fly spell.

Mother came back, put her arm around my shoulder and said, "Stay with Adrian."

"Be careful, Mother."

"Don't worry about me. I'm the last thing that should be on your mind. I will be fine."

She disappeared with Garmon back into the trees, moving so silently that one could almost believe they simply vanished.

"Do as I say, when I say it. Or stay here. No in between."

I nodded.

Without another word, she rose into the air. We went up and then across, out from the cover of the trees, and then straight up until we were high over the edge of the field. We passed above a group of men who were moving low in shadows to position themselves behind two teams of dwarves that were moving to position themselves for a sudden charge. When we got out over the field, I could see that it wasn't a rage of constant fighting as I had expected it to be. I could see clusters of men and dwarves lying low in defensive positions while other areas were filled with wild skirmishes.

Behind us I saw the dwarves start to charge toward a line of men. A few dwarves dropped from the arrows behind them and then a human magician cast a Fire Cloud spell over the dwarves, and the few remaining tore into the humans with wild power. As that scene fell farther behind us, a new scene took my attention.

Four horsemen were charging toward an entrenched dwarven division. Adrian dropped, called out, "Darts on the front two," and led us down between the charging horses and the dwarven line. I began the spell and we flew low and fast, distracting the dwarves and attacking their point as we flew just out of reach above them. When I looked back, I saw the horses breaking through and scattering the orderly ranks of the dwarves.

We moved on and Adrian circled back around. "Anywhere," she commanded.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I started another spell, which I sent to the nearest dwarf, and she cast a Summon Wind that slowed their pursuit. Into this confusion came a volley of arrows from the far side followed by over twenty men with swords and tall shields.

We moved away and rose again, high into the night, floating quietly.

Another Fire Cloud ignited at the far edge of the field, close to the village.

More horses ran below us.

I felt a little dizzy.

Adrian began moving quickly back toward the village. I followed behind. We flew down to a group of men around an older Legionnaire lying by a stricken horse. Two men were standing over the fallen man and three others were trying to hold off five dwarves.

"Take care of him," Adrian yelled as we touched the ground.

I ran to the older man and tried to ignore the noise behind me. I fell to my knees beside him and pulled out my supply of healing mold.

One young soldier was supporting the older man in a sitting position.

"He got it in bad in the chest," the other young man told me.

I put the mold over the man's bloody chest and began speaking the spell of Healing while the first man said, "Hold on, Cap, we got you a wizard here."

When I finished my first spell I took a second to glance over my shoulder and saw Adrian on the ground with her sword drawn. The fellow sitting beside me turned, drew his sword and ran to join them. I pulled another piece of mold away and began a second spell.

"Is he gonna make it? Come on, Cap, wake up. It's okay now, we got you a wizard."

I finished the second spell and the young man asked again, "He's okay now? Come on, cap, come on now. He's okay, isn't he?"

"I don't know. Is he breathing?"

I started to prepare for a third spell, but I felt someone grabbing my shoulder. I jumped back and fell to the side.

Adrian said, "Fire"

The dwarves and one of the men were lying on the ground, dead or dying.

I put that out of my mind, jumped to my feet, and quickly found another vial of oil. A line of dwarves was running toward us. As I chanted the summoning for the Fire Cloud spell, I rose up above

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

them. My spell went off, engulfing the front dwarves in fire and a couple seconds after that, Adrian's Panic spell engaged so any dwarves left standing suddenly turned and fled, but more were coming in from the side. I flew up and saw more men running to meet them. Two carried Cap away and the others met the dwarves. Adrian flew toward me and beckoned me to fly up, away from the skirmish.

Next, she led me out to the middle of the field where a large group of dwarves were running together in formation.

"Lightning," she called back to me. "You take the left side."

I pulled out some cat fur and began forming the Lightning spell as I followed Adrian's fast glide low over the ragged remains of the trampled wheat stalks.

Her spell went off first, covering a wide area to the right. Then mine engaged and I directed it to the left and then flew straight up, following Adrian. I looked back and saw half of the charging dwarves lying still in the mud as others rushed over and around them.

And so it went on, rushing back and forth, casting spell after endless spell, Lightning, Fire Cloud, Wizard Darts, Healing, Bramble. She commanded and I followed. We ducked in and out, delivering assistance or outright frontal attacks where ever she chose. I stopped thinking about the dwarves as anything but targets. I became concerned only with the proper meter and rhythm of my chanting and the proper placement of their effects. I was in a zone, a daze. I turned off the part of me that was capable of caring or worrying. My fingers drew forth the power of the world and laid it upon our enemies, the foul, stinking, raiding dwarves, little, stubby, half men. I began to hate their puny little hatchets, their fat legs, their stupid, swinging beards. I saw arms cut and guts pierced. I saw good men putting their bodies between a small, innocent village and raiding, snarling monsters. Every cut, every blow, each hatchet and bow made me curse their hell bound, dirty, fat, little bodies.

They didn't stop. They pushed forward, over good men, through lines of bowmen and charges of lances, and still they didn't stop. This was our field, our land, our food. Damn them for being here. Damn them for hurting us.

We began searching out farther, dropping magic on any group we could find. The men were tired, the dwarves were scattered, but still they came. Far away blasts from wizards each gave me a dirty pleasure, knowing that more dwarves were going to be stopped, or

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

better yet, killed so they couldn't come at us again another day. I hated them and hated myself for hating them, but they were here, hurting us. Hating us and hurting us.

What else could I do? They wouldn't stop. I wanted them to stop and run away, but they didn't, so what else could we do but kill them?

Echoes played like washed out water color paintings in the pit of my thoughts that drummed on between spells and fire. Shiny glasses and a feather cloak watched me scream, twin flames burning in his eyes. Father danced with Miranda while Mother cried and Jheffery died.

Adrian pulled us down again to heal another man and I felt a hammer strike my leg. Adrian pushed me away, stepped forward and killed the dwarf who had hit me. I watched him die, wished him to Hell, and then we ducked behind three Legionnaires with heavy swords and took to the air again.

Faded images followed me again, showing me a phantom father, a floating figment of smoke that faded into colorless nothing. My head started to swim, and I saw fleeting glimpses of stick figure swords that were lying in caverns all filled with the ringing of screaming of scared, stubby dwarf children, waiting for Daddy as dead as the Dirt. The horses in barns were frightened and hurt when the fire consumed them and chewed up their manes. The blood on the plains and the swords and the hate, were setting and fixing the well planted fate that the Triples and Papa were painting with people, the pawns of Pakana who had no idea their lives were for sale, their hopes didn't matter, their very survival was hung by a thread. Jumbles of colors all turning to red. Damn all the dwarves who want to be fed. Dizziness danced, I tried to be sick but the smoke in my head turned purple and thick, so I floated and thought of my papa and dwarves who were flying and buying and crying and dying as P'Tantis and I, we watched from on high, through black clouds and white clouds that bubbled the sky.

"Lightning. Over there."

Adrian's words bounced off of the shell of painted visions and I floated unmoving, watching the tall, dark rain clouds move in over the mountains. I watched Adrian fly down and zap a team of dwarves with a purple white flash of forked lightning. Above the mountain, lightning jumped from one cloud to another and behind that, another quick bolt struck the high ground, draping the hills with an instant of daylight and leaving a dim, burning tree top

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

behind. Two heartbeats later, the dual booms washed over and through me.

Adrian noticed that I wasn't with her and she flew back up to me and called out, "Stay with me." Then she moved quickly away again, but I grabbed her robe and pulled her around.

"I can't anymore, Adrian. I can't keep going like this."

"Go into town and find a place to rest. Stay away until you get some of your energy back."

She flew down and I watched her until she was a tiny, darting shadow. I flew high above the battlefield. Toy soldiers moved like pebbles in the moonlight. The hate that had overcome me seemed as far away as the simple safety of my clean cotton sheets, but the hate I held for myself for being able to hate so purely stayed with me as I flew in a wide circle over the madness. Still they fought, carving out the beginning of victory for the Triples, sowing the hate that would set their stage. Their hate, not mine. I forced myself to stop hating completely, forgiving myself as I forgave the dwarves. The scene below was only a play, a fulfillment of the Triples' plans and manipulations. It wasn't a real war, but a contrived mechanism. Yet it was as real as the blood I had helped shed. How could it be both real and not real, deadly and yet so empty?

Clouds were moving across the field and I felt a light drizzle on my face.

I kept circling, wondering what I should do, how I could help. I kept watching the few hearty groups that still continued acting out The Triples' play. I was stuck between duty and disgust. I watched below and began to feel more and more uneasy. What could I do? How could I help?

I circled, watched, and finally listened to what I wanted to do. I didn't want to fight, or hate. I didn't want to be a hero or villain in somebody else's story. I didn't want to have to know who was right or wrong, or fix this awful, damn mess. I never decided that this world had to be a complex, corrupt, deception, filled with liars, movers, and mirrors. I gave up thinking or caring and flew toward the wounded village of Karth.

A brick, single story building stood just outside the edge of town and formed the edge of the perimeter of defense. Lines of people stood in crooked rows between the town and the deserted edge of the battle plain, protecting the wounded men and empty buildings behind them.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I flew down to the brick building and found an open window on the long side facing the mountains and looked through. My leg was still terribly sore, but it didn't bother me much. The building looked to be designed to store the wheat from the field. Large empty brick stalls were bare and dark, waiting for the grains that were now being trampled. Across from me, by the large open door, the commanders of the Pakana Legion gathered to discuss their battle strategy. I saw my Uncle Baron standing with them. He looked tall and proud in the regal Legionnaire uniform and his graying hair. I hadn't seen him for over a year. A young man ran in, saluted quickly, and spoke to the group. My uncle and another man hurried away. I didn't know what it was all about and found it strangely difficult to even care.

I flew around to the side of the building and canceled the Fly spell. When I put my full weight on my leg, I couldn't stand the bitter pain that shot through it. I fell forward and rolled over holding my shin. After a moment I scooted back in the moon shadow and sat with my back to the brick wall and gingerly rubbed my shin. It might have been broken, but I couldn't tell. It had been throbbing strongly ever since it was hit, but trying to stand on it made that ten times worse. I pulled up the flap of my supply pouch, took out the last of the healing material, and cast a spell to mend it. It stopped throbbing, mostly, and I figured I should keep the rest in case someone else might need it. After a moment, however, I decided, again, to allow myself to do what I wanted, and so I cast another spell. I tried to stand and felt only a little twinge, but went ahead and cast a third spell, fixing it completely.

I sat back down and waited, resting my body and my worries, but soon I became restless. There was just too much energy still bottled up inside me that I couldn't sit still, even though I was so tired I wanted to drop. The drizzle was beginning to turn into a light rain as I strolled with a gait calmed by my fatigue past groups of busy men, past little islands of torchlight and a row of horses, grazing on the moist grass, oblivious to why they were here and what was happening half a mile away.

Out toward the field I saw the defense line, villagers holding long makeshift pikes carved from rough wood. I walked on across the damp ground, letting the rain fill my wizard robe with a soggy heaviness. A couple junior Legionnaires were walking along the line of nervous defenders, keeping them ready, watching for trouble. As I got closer, I saw that the villagers holding the sharpened sticks were mostly children. There were a few men, a good number of women,

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

and some older folks, but mostly, children. Everyone able to swing a sword had likely been sent farther out.

I approached and stood behind them. They all stood facing the field and the dark mountains behind it. One of the young Legionnaire soldiers saw me and nodded to me as he passed.

I walked down the line, looking at little boys and girls standing bravely against the dark field, against the noises of faraway battle hidden in the darkness, and against their own fear. I stood with them and ignored the rain with them and watched the lightning burn the sky.

Battle sounds grew louder and then we heard shouts to our left. I started walking that way and stepped out in front of the line. I kept walking and then saw over a dozen dwarves running in from the field toward the line of children. The soldiers ran that way, and a hundred children charged at the dwarves with their sticks level.

I saw dwarves running one way, children running the other, moving together before me. The dwarves paused for just a second, startled that they were charging against children, but the children and their sharp sticks didn't stop. They descended on the dwarves like little bees with long, wooden stingers.

Soldiers on horses rode in next and jumped into the churn of stabbing sticks. I kept walking, not sure if I could help much, considering I couldn't see any of the dwarves and I was still far away. Soon there were voices screaming for everyone to stop and several of the sticks rested upright. A boy was rushed away in the arms of an older man. The dwarves were led away or dragged. I turned away from the scene and my eyes fell upon a small figure standing alone back at the line.

I walked over and found a young girl, maybe nine or ten years old. She held her stick in front of her with the point straight up and the end resting on the ground. As I got closer, I saw that she was clutching it strenuously with her arms drawn in tight to her body that was trembling with tension. She was not crying really because she was too horribly frightened for that. Tight gasps and desperate whimpers forced their way out through her quivering jaw that shook the mask of horror and desperation surrounding her wide, frightened eyes which gazed intently through dripping bangs.

I stood in front of her, but she didn't notice me. She looked through me, seeing only her tunnel vision nightmare. I knelt in front of her, face to face, and finally she saw me.

"You don't want to do this, do you?"

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

She managed to move her head back and forth with quick, short jerks.

I put my hands over hers and after I slowly worked the pole away from her, she clasped her hands together and held them close to her. I turned and threw the pole aside. She managed to cry freely now, moaning and shivering. She spoke, forcing the words with her little, quaking voice through the awful darkness of her frightened agony.

“My daddy’s out there.”

“So is mine,” I told her.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

Then I pulled her to me and let her fall limp in my arms while I carried her away.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I carried my little friend back to the grain warehouse and found a place for us to sit at the front of the building, near the corner, shielded somewhat from the rain that continued to blow in from the mountains. We watched men hurry back and forth through the yellow glow of the lanterns that swayed in the gusty wind, making the shadows dance. After a while, I moved her from my lap to sit next to me and I held her hand. Neither of us said anything. We both just let the world go by, doing what it had to do that night. I moved my arm around her shoulders and let her catch brief moments of sleep under the blanket of my damp wizard robe.

An excited discussion broke out in front of us. A woman wearing a robe with both the insignia of the Pakana Legion and the sign of the Seagate Magicians' guild announced to the leaders that the few remaining dwarves were finally retreating back into the hills. That was followed by a series of new orders that were delivered and dispatched almost directly in front of us which sent soldiers into the hills to pursue the dwarves. Their conversations woke my sleepy companion and when people started walking in from the field, she was unable to fall back asleep. Now and then she would look to me with a questioning glance, but all I could offer was understanding and a little bit of comfort. I had no answers for her. We watched a parade of tired men, women, and children move past the building, walking into town.

Suddenly, she jumped up and ran, calling out "Daddy! Daddy, here." Four men turned, but only one man, with a bandage covering his left hand, ran out to meet her. She jumped up to him and he pulled her into his arms. When they were almost lost in the crowd, I saw her look back over her papa's shoulder and wave to me.

After they were gone, I stood and stretched my tired body. I wondered where Uncle Baron and all the others were. Mother had told me not to worry, but I couldn't help it. I didn't have to worry about Papa. I knew he would be all right.

I walked around the corner of the building into the heavy, wind blown rain and went out to the grassy area where the children had stood. Men and women were still coming in out of the field, some

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

being carried, some limping. I walked against the crowd and crossed through the grass until I entered the knee high wheat stalks. The battlefield was bathed in faded moonlight that lit the muddy, scorched field and its crop of dead men and dwarves. The rain fell firmly onto the trampled furrows, mocking us all by watering blood and broken flesh instead of the fragile wheat which we had so selfishly destroyed.

Around me and in the distance the dead were being collected and the wounded were being bandaged. I walked for a long time across the broken ground, sinking my feet into sticky deep mud and crushing the bent stalks of the ruined plants. I came across a thoroughly trampled region with four dead dwarves, a horse that had been slain, and one dead man. I saw the dwarf who had hit me with the hammer. His face was still locked in the same death wail that I will always remember. Nothing could be done. My sins had been set. I walked on under the rumbling sky.

I saw my father rushing from man to man, rejecting the fallen and helping the wounded. I followed him until he came to a stop and surveyed the area, turning slowly. He stopped when he saw me. His tall wiry frame seemed almost to glow in the moonbeams against the blackness of the mountains behind him. I went forward. He waited unmoving, arms relaxed at his sides, his shoulders drooping slightly forward. I stopped about ten paces in front of him and we each stood still, watching the other, sharing our tender memories, the bond of unquestioned trust, the simple joy of innocent, unguarded love one final time before we would have to speak and risk losing all of them. Neither of us wished to break the seal, and so all we heard was the loud splattering of heavy rain drops falling against the mud. I think he would have waited forever to spare us that realization, but I knew that we could no longer pretend that we would ever be to each other what we once were. For a long time now, we had been bound more by familiarity than by intimacy, a different kind of love, I suppose, which meant that whatever was to be between us could only be found by going forward, and so I spoke.

"I know all about it. P'Tantis told me."

"I know."

"But I don't like it."

"Neither do I, particularly."

Another stretch of silence fell between us. He had met me half way, but gave me no hint, no clue as to what he wanted from me. I

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

looked around us and felt myself speaking boldly, breaking across the barrier of euphemism and pretending.

“Oh, Papa. Look at all this.”

“Stop it, Nyssa.”

“You stop it! Stop all of it!”

A crash of thunder rolled across the mountains and shook the air. It persisted in stubborn echoes, crawling slowly away.

“I don’t know what to say,” I confessed.

“Go home, Nyssa. You should not have to see this. You should not have to know. War is not a thing which should bother the minds of the young. I don’t know if I can help you understand the truths that lie between right and wrong, the balance of now and tomorrow.”

His head listed to one side, heavy with shame and his voice pleaded for me to leave him alone with the ugliness of the ruined plain. He didn’t need me to tell him how horrible it all was.

“Is there no other way?”

He said nothing at first, waiting for me to turn away and leave him to his plans, his half truths, and abstract justifications, but I held firm, watching, waiting for an answer until his demeanor changed slightly. His defenses broke and something within him, spite, perhaps, or loneliness, allowed him to accept me as his confidant. He pulled his head up, fixed his eyes on me and explained, “If we do nothing, they win. If we fight them outright, they win. If we miss even a single step, they win. The world does not run by itself. Look around, Nyssa. This is how the world is running now and no amount of hoping or wishing or crying can change it.”

“But you don’t have to help it.”

“Don’t I? If you really do understand what we’re trying to do, you know that we have no choice but to harden ourselves against certain sacrifices so that, in the end, they will all have the best lives we can give them. We owe them that. You know why.”

“I know that you’re using them just as much as the Triples are.”

His voice took on a subtle edge of fierceness.

“Of course I am. I have to because I cannot sit every one of them down and show them what they need to do. I wish my life that I could.

“The people of Pakana don’t know what’s really going on. They’re incapable of believing that they can be used as so many pieces in a puzzle. Well they can and they are. I’m doing this to help

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

them. The Triples want to enslave them in a world whose money, power, and beliefs are controlled by a few hidden masters.

“But we have power too, and we have a sacred responsibility to exercise wisdom, compassion, and care to choose the greater good. The greater good, Nyssa.

“You don’t have to like it, but sometimes we will kill to defend our life or our way of life. Sometimes we heal. Once you have that power, you cannot ignore it. You must control it, or it will control you. The Triples have been controlling it for too long. It’s a puppet show and they have their hands stuck up everyone’s back. If they say dance, you will dance. If they tell you to go fight their wars, you’ll fight. If they want you to hate the dwarves, elves, or your own dearest friend, you have no choice because they know how you think, how you feel.

“But they have a weakness. People believe themselves to be free. If you rub their noses in the fact that they don’t own their own destiny, some of them will finally smell the stink and then they will move. As long as you give them enough of their own lives to let them eat, work, brag, and laugh once in a while, they will happily watch their world rot before their eyes until the only choice we have is to accept a society controlled by the secret strings of the Triples or none at all.

“Like it or not, what we must do is pull their society out from under them, remind them that they are men, not puppets, force them to fight for themselves. That’s why it has to get worse before it can get better. That’s why I have to watch men and dwarves slice each other open, and make children go hungry, and stomp on the dignity of good men. I have the foul, damnable job of letting the Triples push them to the brink of chaos so that I can push them over.

“This horror that seems so pointless, so terrible and unnecessary, is like the pain of childbirth. We can only hope that it’s as short and painless as possible. No mother will tell you that she would rather give up her baby than to have never felt the pain of its delivery. This is no different. It will hurt like Hell, but the pain will go away, and we will be left with a world where men can be free. That’s the world I want my grandchildren to inherit. So you’ll just have to excuse me if I’m not there to wipe every nose or kiss every scratch. There are bigger pains in the world.

“You must understand that this is not something that I choose to do. I have to do it. I wish I could just go home and pretend that the world is a kind, fair place that would let me work in peace, help my

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

children grow, read good books, and scratch my belly, but it's not kind, nor is it fair. If it were, we could not have done what we did. We opened the door and the Triples came through to exploit the drought and other hardships we created. I cannot let this world be controlled by reigns attached to the bit I helped to place in its mouth.

"If men are to live free, we must hold their feet to the fire, wake them up, make them take back what we took from them.

"You see, we can't fight them alone. They have man's acceptance, his loyalty, and beliefs to turn against him. All we have left is his anger and fear. All people believe that they care about liberty and freedom, but all they really care about is comfort. They'll let you take half their lives and dreams, sacrifice their sovereignty and security, and then brag about how well off they are.

"This is not a battle to be fought between us and the Triples, but between freedom and complacency in the minds of all the people of Pakana.

"We must let them fight to stir their fury so that we can then direct their fury against their captors who would use them as toys.

"So, Nyssa, no. There is no other way."

His words left me weak, drained. I felt exhausted and alone again. This was his vision, the world into which I had forced myself. I had hoped for something better, but how could that have been?

I began to walk forward to him but halfway there I was overcome by the gulf that I feared would have to separate us from each other from that moment on and I fell forward to my knees, squishing them into the hard, messy mud. I sat with my head bowed forward, feeling the rain trickle down the back of my neck and around to the front of my cheeks. Then I closed my eyes and raised my face and my hands to the sky. I felt the warm rain tickle my eyelids, my brow, my chin.

When I opened my eyes and blinked them against the steady sprinkle of rain I saw my papa, standing still once again. His robe pulled heavily on his shoulders and his hair fell across his face, but he stood like a statue, waiting for me

"It's raining, Papa."

He didn't say anything, or nod, or move at all. He could only wait for my answer, hoping that I would say what I was now incapable of saying.

"It's raining, Papa, and you didn't even have to build the clouds."

I lowered my hands and looked directly at him.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"I heard what you said. I even understand. I know you think that I don't, but I do. I understand everything. I found the box that holds the secret that holds the world, and it's empty. I know that you'll listen to me and think that I don't understand, but I do. I understand because you taught me, but what I just heard has nothing to do with what I learned.

"You can't give people freedom. They either discover that they have it or they don't. Even if you could give it to them, it wouldn't be by making them slaves to your own particular vision of their freedom. You don't see that because all you want to do is cage them, shackle them, and keep their eyes hooded until you can set them free into your brand new world.

"But you're not giving them their freedom, Papa, you're giving them yours."

I stood up and moved two steps closer to him. His face was quiet, blank, and revealed neither anger nor acceptance.

"You're a teacher, not a shepherd. They don't belong to you. Just leave them alone. They don't want to be used to fulfill your hopes and dreams for their lives, and they do not care about your personal salvation.

"I know you want to help. I know you want to fix the world, but you can't because it doesn't belong to you.

"There will always be Triples or some other group trying to control everyone. You can't stop them all. Maybe some men were meant to be controlled. For some, that's good enough because that's all they know or care to know. Maybe some people don't want to own their own lives but you're going to force it down their throats just to make yourself feel better and get rid of some of that terrible guilt that you have branded into your mind. I don't know which is worse, forcing someone to be a slave, or forcing him to be free. It's the same thing, really.

"If you truly want freedom from the Triples, start with yourself. They've got you so wound up in their world that all you can do is fight them their way. Your own life doesn't even belong to you. How can you expect to give people freedom from themselves while your own neck is pinned under the boot of their power?

"The funny thing is, you actually think you're working against them. You're all the same. They own your mind, your soul. You think you can play along, hurting, manipulating, forcing everyone to kill and hate, then turn it all around because you have some noble intentions behind your back.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"P'Tantis said you gave up your soul for this. I want you to take it back right now. Stop this. You don't owe anybody anything.

"So what if you opened some door? Doors are opening all the time, and it doesn't always have to be your fault. Let the people who want to be free find it for themselves. Help them. Teach them, if you want.

"Papa, you did change the world. You changed mine. I had a father once and he left me. I'll never know why, or how, or what he looked like, or if he was gentle and kind, but now I've got a father, a real, live, sweet, wonderful, man. Don't make me lose you too. Don't make us lose you. Come home where you belong. Come home and wipe noses and kiss scratches.

"If you've got to give your soul away, give it to me because I love you. I'll help you change the world. I'll wrestle it and make it right for you, just as you used to promise me. We'll work with you to spread understanding and truth. Let that be what your grandchildren inherit.

"Do you understand me?"

He nodded slowly with his eyes closed and said, "I do understand, Nyssa, but, believe me, it's not that simple. It's just not enough. Not anymore. Surely, you must see that."

"No. Either your life belongs to you or it doesn't."

"What do you know of my life, or what belongs to me? It's underway. It's going to happen. I cannot stop now."

"Of course you can, Papa."

He rose his voice in fierce anger and shouted, "Then I won't, if you must have it that way."

In a moment, he continued, without the anger, but still carrying absolute resolution, "I will do what I want with this. I don't ask that you do any different."

I searched for words to say, but none came. I knew that no amount of begging or shouting could convince him. All that was left was to leave him alone to follow the path that he had chosen. I lowered my eyes and reached back to pull my hood up over my head.

"Good night, Papa," I said quickly before I turned and walked away, stepping quickly and heavily through the soupy mud toward the village. I pounded my feet out of the field, across the grassy plain, and past the brick storehouse which was still alive with crowds of soldiers moving quickly, carrying the wounded, calling out orders, doing such things as soldiers do to keep the situation as

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

safe and orderly as possible. I moved past them, keeping away from the buzz of their camp, following a rocky wagon path toward the village whose town lights illuminated the low rain clouds with a faint orange glow. Other people passed me, going one way or the other, but they let me be. The path grew wider and soon merged with a well traveled road.

Hundreds of crickets sung their night song over the background hum of the rain pattering on the ground and the top of my hood. The way was lit by the shine of the moon and I could see other small groups walking ahead. I heard the sound of trotting horses behind me, growing slowly closer. Two Legionnaire squires passed by and moved on ahead.

I yawned deeply and then yawned again. I was tempted to stop and sit for a while at the side of the road, but I kept going rather than expend the energy to decide to do that. I was completely drained, mentally, physically, and I had forced myself to channel more spell energy than I should have.

We live our entire lives locked behind the same set of eyes, watching the same trusted reality which we invent over and over, day after endless day. I could not accept his world, his reality, any more than I could abandon mine. It is not something which is a part of us. It is the essence of all that we are. We are every thought, every word, action, and smile.

Neither of us could be exactly what the other needed because we were only and exactly who we were. So be it. My thoughts rolled on in a weak churn, but that was not the time for thinking. It was a time for walking in the rain and wiping the mud from my boots by walking in the ankle high grass. Thinking would have let me realize how awful the things I did were. I wondered if I would count in my sleep all the dwarves that I helped to kill, or if I should count the number of humans I healed or saved by fighting as I did.

Once I reached the edge of the town, the tall grass and trees quickly became replaced by rows of buildings. I passed a Smith shop and a wagon maker's large barn and began to hear a commotion ahead. My little road intersected with the main street which was filled with people moving about. Some celebrated. Some huddled together with their families, grieving their losses. They fell together into the street, seeking the comfort and understanding of the town's shared trauma. I walked among them in a sleepy daze, wondering why I wasn't trying to find a place to sleep. I yawned again, then I heard my name.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I turned around but didn't see anyone. I yawned again then saw Adrian running to me through the crowd.

"Nyssa, we've been looking for you. Are you hurt?"

"No. I'm just tired. I'm sorry I left."

"It's okay. Did you rest?"

"A little bit."

She led me down a side road to a little school house that bordered the north rim of the town, just below the Legionnaire's base camp. She told me it was filled with wounded men and that she would let me sleep for an hour to shore up my channeling strength and then wake me up to help. She went in and I lay down on the long porch out of the rain. Faraway thunder massaged the air and helped send me quickly to sleep.

When she woke me I saw a ribbon of purple morning light cutting across the eastern sky. I got up but didn't really feel any more rested than before. She told me that the dwarves had regrouped in the cover of the hills and a second skirmish had begun. There were many wounded and still more being brought in to us.

Four other magicians and two priests all worked with us and the field medics to bandage, patch, and heal. I cast spell after spell, knitting flesh and straightening bone until my hands and clothes were sticky with warm blood.

She made me nap again for a short while, and then I continued spelling until my chanting became a mantra to hold me together through the sight of missing fingers and legs and open sores. For a while, Papa was with us, taking the most extreme cases. A few men were revived by the priests, but others were too badly mutilated. This went on into the late morning. We moved as quickly as the cadence of our summoning would let us, always aware that more were suffering outside on crowded pallets.

Finally, they stopped coming. News that the last of the dwarves were driven deep into the mountains let us finally hope that the wagons would stop delivering their desperate cargo to us. Papa, Adrian, and a Legionnaire magician rode out to the mountains to do what they could there, leaving me and the others to care for the final remaining injuries. One of the medics told me that they could handle the rest and I was more than happy to get away.

Mother was waiting for me outside.

I was in a shattered state. I could have broken into violent tears, or a fit of laughter just as easily.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

“Thank you, Nyssa.” she said. She took me by the hand and led me North to the camp where the Legionnaire troops were preparing their gear and horses for the ride to Hartack to meet the main body of dwarves. We moved through the crowd of soldiers to our own group. Jheffery was sitting wrapped in a blanket next to Sindee. He looked pale and weak, but managed to give me a smile as we approached.

Tamar and Garmon stood and greeted us. Tamar asked, “How is it back there?”

“It’s slowed down for now,” I answered with a gravelly voice.

“I wish I could help.”

“You’ll get your chance. It’s the next thing I’m going to teach you.”

Garmon brought me a piece of soft, warm bread, and I sat down, feeling restless and very conspicuous, and gobbled it with some salted jerky and nuts from my pack.

I distracted myself by watching the soldiers and wondering how they maintained their proud posture, their strength of will, and duty in the face of fierce battle. Some held broken arms in slings arms and groomed their horses with the other. Some wore torn shirts but still managed to look regal and ready.

I finished my meager meal and Tamar asked, “How are you feeling?”

I turned my tired eyes toward him and peeked out from under my eyelids and heavy brow, showing him the dirt and blood and sweat that caked itself over my face and neck and letting him see the wreck that my beautiful robe had become.

“Do you want to lie down?” he asked.

I shook my head no and turned away from him, wishing I could disappear and collapse for a week, or at least take a bath. After a moment, he moved behind me and started massaging my shoulders. I pulled away from him at first but he kept working on my sore, tense muscles.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“Yes,” I answered, trying to keep the little grunts of release and pleasure to myself. “In about two years.”

Father and Uncle Baron rode up together. Baron went on to speak with his men and Papa dismounted. He pulled his horse close to us and stood there for a moment, lit by the full afternoon sun from which there was no hiding the fatigue, the pain, the awkwardness with which he stood there, like a little boy waiting to be scolded.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"You're all going on home now?" he asked.

Mother replied, very business like, "Yes. As soon as Adrian returns."

Garmon said, "Sindee and I would like to ride with you, if you have no objections."

"No. Of course not. We're going to try to reach some kind of agreement with the dwarves, if they'll listen. I would be honored if you would help us with the negotiations, Garmon."

"It will be my honor, sir."

Another moment passed. In the background, Baron assembled his men and began a cursory inspection.

"Can I talk with you, Ivy?"

"No, you may not."

We all shared their stretch of uncomfortable silence. It was terrible to see them like this. The moment lingered on until I wanted to say something, anything to break the span of growing emptiness.

"Ivy, I'm sorry. I never wanted to hurt you."

"Not here," she barked, stopping him short with a cold eye. "And not now. We'll talk when you come home."

Baron returned and stood next to me.

"You went and grew up on me behind my back."

He knelt in front of me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Thank you for helping mend my boys. I'm so glad you're here. I'm so proud of you."

I put my arm around his neck and held him close. He kissed my cheek, stood up, and said to Papa, "We should move out soon."

"Do you have some spare horses? Garmon and Sindee will be coming with us."

"Aye. We have far too many spare horses, I'm afraid."

He stepped back, called out for one of his men to come over.

The horses were brought and the four of them mounted up. The rest of us stood up to send them off.

"Jheffery," Papa called out. "Stay in bed. Make sure to tell Sharbra what a damn fine job you did."

I tried waiting for him to say something to me, but before he had a chance, I ran to him.

He reached his hand down to me and I held it firmly.

I heard Baron give the order for his men to mount up.

His voice was quiet, almost a whisper, "I miss you."

"Me too."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The troops started moving, kicking up dust. Papa's horse stepped impatiently, wanting to move along with the others.

"I have to go."

"I understand."

He nodded with a sorrowful smile then leaned forward and tapped the reins to follow the others. Sindee and Garmon waved and moved on.

I ran along after them for a while, watching them ride out of the camp.

I thought about all the things that he had to face alone, right or wrong, and how hard he had tried to shelter me from having to see those things. I also thought about the things we had said last night. I knew that even if I couldn't believe in what he was doing, I believed in him and in all he tried to teach me. I wished him well on his path, hoping that he would find what he needed and that the world wouldn't have to suffer much for it.

I looked up to the bright sun and the white, thick cotton clouds. I looked back at Mother, Jheffery, and Tamar. Somewhere a little yellow bird praised the glory of his song. I cast a Shape Shift spell, became a beautiful, ebony horse, and ran to follow my father.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

"Do you think Jheffery will let me go with him?"

Avery and I were sitting in the gazebo, enjoying the warm breezes that carried the sound of the children who were playing in the field behind us while we watched Mother and Sharbra down by the lake coax Jheffery's reflexes back into shape.

"I doubt it. Besides, it wouldn't be up to him."

"I could help him with his gear, and he could teach me, like an apprentice or squire or something."

"I don't think that would work, Avery."

"Why not? Just ask him."

"He's joining the Pakana Legion. It's different. He has to go to training and learn their ways and tactics. There's a lot of school work. It's not like just riding around with a sword."

"It's so boring here."

"I know."

The noises from the children changed from usual shouts and songs of their games. We turned around and I saw Kasimir running away with one of Dierdre's shoes, holding it back just out of her reach. Dierdre, of course, was wailing and crying as if he had lost the most precious thing ever made.

"Kasimir," I called out sternly. "Knock it off."

He looked my way and stopped running, but he only pretended to give her shoe back. He kept pulling it away whenever she tried to take it. Dierdre stomped her feet and cried buckets.

I started to call out again, but Miranda ran up behind Dierdre and calmed her down a bit.

"Give it back," Miranda told him firmly.

He again held it out, but pulled it back when Miranda reached for it.

She was not amused, nor was she going play that game more than once. She reached up and grabbed two handfuls of his hair and pulled him down to the ground where she smacked him solidly on his back and pushed his face into the grass. When he let go of the shoe, she picked it up and took it back to Dierdre.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Kasimir ran bawling over to me and complained with nearly incomprehensible blubbling while he pointed back at the girls and pulled grass out of his mouth.

Dierdre stopped crying and sat down while Miranda put her shoe back on for her. She laughed at something Miranda said, then stood up, got a hug from her big sister, and was all better with her shoe and pride back in place.

Kasimir was still explaining his side of it until I said, "Oh hush. What do you expect? You were being a pain."

"It's not fair," he complained.

"Play nice anyway."

Drake came running over yelling, "Come on, Kasimir. We're gonna play Blind Beholder."

When he got to the gazebo, he said, "Hey Nyssa, look what I found."

He lifted his dirty little hand up to give me a rock, and then he wiped his curly hair away from his eyes, leaving another mark on his little round cheeks.

"Ohhh. What is it?"

"It's a rock, silly"

"Ah, so it is."

"You can have it."

"Thank you."

They both ran off and Kasimir yelled out to the others, "I get to be II."

"It looks as if Miranda's getting along fine," I said.

"I suppose so. She loves to listen to Keef practice."

"How is she doing in school?"

"She doesn't read very well, but she tries. She's been a lot better since you all got back."

We sat for a moment, enjoying each other's company for a while. I yawned and stretched and decided to go in so I stood up and said, "You might want to sneak over and referee their games for a while, just in case."

"I guess so."

I put my arm around his shoulder briefly as we stepped out of the gazebo, then he ran out to the field and I walked through the garden to the back door then cut through the kitchen.

"What's for supper, Sera?"

She and a couple girls were peeling apples and chopping vegetables.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

"Oh, a little this, a pinch of that, and a couple servings of whatever."

"Sounds wonderful."

Then Crysta asked, "So, how's Jheffery doing," trying to sound as if it were just an idle question.

"He's almost totally recovered. How sweet of you to ask."

She raised her eyes to me and offered a shy smile. Sera caught my eye and grinned. We were both happy to let Crysta believe that only she knew how she felt. I no longer worried about them, and I even wished her all the best, now that I knew what she was feeling.

I found Papa and Tamar where I expected them to be, the same place they had been for most of the two weeks since we got back from Hartack, working in the lab. I stood at the door and listened to them talk for a while then I went in. Papa was bent over a table, examining his notes, the results of a new experiment.

I tried to beckon Tamar away while Papa was occupied. He shrugged, pointed to the notes, then shrugged again.

"Papa," I said, interrupting his thoughts. "You can't keep him locked in here all day long. It's beautiful outside."

"Hmmm," he said.

"We're going to go for a walk," I told him.

"Hmmm? We've still got work."

"I'm taking him away," I said as I took Tamar's hand. "We're going." I led him to the door. "Tomorrow you can have him all to yourself."

"Hmmmmm," Papa said one more time before looking back down at his work.

We walked hand in hand down the front stairway and out to the courtyard.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Oh, he's got it all finished. I think he's just trying to keep me busy until you go off to school."

"I thought so."

I looked over to him with bright eyes and a little half smile.

"Is that your 'kiss me' face?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

He kissed me.

We went down the large front stairs toward the colonnade of elm trees.

"So, Nyssa. Are you okay with what we're doing?"

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

"I suppose. Do you really know what you're doing? Has he told you?"

"About turning them off? Yeah."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. I just suppose he knows best. He managed to talk the dwarves out of a fight."

"For now, but it's not that simple."

"No. I guess not."

We walked on, sharing the touch of each other's hand, the shade of the trees, and the whisper of the leaves in the wind.

"Who are you going to study with?" he asked.

"Grayling. One of Adrian's friends. I think I want to study history, too. Maybe I'll understand better."

"I think you'll like living at the Academy."

"I'll like it better when you and Papa come back to work there."

We got to the end of the trees and watched as one of the enormous iron golems stomped tirelessly by.

"I have an idea. Let's sneak down to the wharf and get a wine cake," I suggested.

"I don't think we're supposed to."

"I know we're not. You Float and I'll Fly so I can pull you along."

He looked over his shoulder back to the house and said, "Why not?"

I took a bat wing from pouch and he took out a small lodestone. We cast our spells together and rose into the sky, above the trees, above the golems, over the Alayas trees and the tall, invisible wall, leaving the beautiful mansion to grow smaller and smaller behind us while we followed the shore above the waves that rolled in steadily, one after the other, after the other.