

Ages ago, elves and dwarves unknowingly migrated between Universes via a Junction. Jenneva and Egam believe they have found a Junction and plan a trip with Alexander to test the theory and investigate the origins of the elves and dwarves. Because they believe that the perennial animosity between the two races is due to misunderstandings about their histories, the mages include the prince of elves and the prince of dwarves in the group.

Trouble begins at the very start of the journey as Egam falters going through the Junction, awakening an old nemesis, the evil demon, Alutar. It appears that the excursion will not just clarify history, but also actually change it.

As the group discovers they are trapped in the new Universe, the shocking truth of the real history of the races is overshadowed by impending doom as an ancient prophecy begins to unfold.

Meanwhile, the evil sorcerer, Sarac, not only gains freedom from his imprisonment, but also gains the blessing of the evil demon, Alutar. With the blessing, Sarac is given new powers and is promised a reign of a thousand years.

The race is on to prevent Sarac from unfettered control of the Universes, as our trio stands incapable of altering the prophecy of destruction.

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The world is in peril again as Mordac, Sarac's assistant gathers the forces of evil to free Sarac from his imprisonment. Mordac calls for a gathering of Black Devils and instructs them to obtain every book ever written. Plans to cause havoc and destruction are also undertaken to soften the world's armies in preparation of Sarac's return.

Two especially devout followers of Sarac, Aurora and Dalgar, rise to prominence as nations topple and mayhem runs rampant. Armies stand poised to obliterate each other and thrones are stolen by magic and cunning.

Follow the tales of our young trio as Alex is accused of assassinating the king and an arrest warrant is issued for Jenneva.

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Ages ago the peaceful continent was invaded by savage conquerors. The invading army sought not only to rule and own the land, but to exterminate the indigenous peoples. Survivors of the peace-loving inhabitants of the continent escaped the slaughter and reformed their meager civilizations to learn the arts of war and magic awaiting word from the gods to extract their revenge and retake their homelands.

The series starts in the country of Khadora with *Young Lord of Khadora* in which the son of a slave

seeks to reform a government bent on feudal wars and disrespect for mages and the indigenous peoples.

Star of Sakov takes place in Omunga, a neighboring country to Khadora and features a young female mage student who is suddenly and brutally thrust into a position of leadership of a strange indigenous people.

Web of Deceit is centered in Fakara the third country of the continent and features a young man whose destiny is to create a financial empire that will aid in overthrowing the invaders.

The series will be seven volumes alternating between the three countries with the final volume drawing them all together.

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The world is in peril. The Evil sorcerer, Sarac, seeks an ancient document entitled, the Origin Scroll. This ancient tome contains the knowledge to control the very existence of the Universes. Sarac will stop at nothing to obtain the Origin Scroll and the fate of the Universes rest with three unknown children.

Alexander Tork, a fifteen-year-old boy, is an apprentice lumberman learning the trade from his father in a small nameless village in the frontier region of Targa.

Oscar Dalek, a fifteen-year-old boy, lives with his widowed mother in a town on the Targa-Cordonia border. The family's survival rests with the boy's abilities to salvage whatever he can from the caravans crossing the border.

Jenneva Roth, a fifteen-year-old girl who loves to read, lives with her aged uncle in western Targa. Unfortunately, her uncle's health is failing and she must travel across the country to live with relatives she has never seen.

Origin Scroll by Richard S. Tuttle is a fantasy novel about three formerly insignificant young people who will meet and unite their special abilities to challenge the evil sorcerer, Sarac, before he destroys the Universes.

Origin Scroll is the first volume of the Targa Trilogy. *Dark Quest* and *Ancient Prophecy* complete the Targa Trilogy.

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Map of Edonia

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 1

Lorgo

The woman's scream echoed through the Fisherman's Inn in Lorgo. Lorgo was once part of Sordoa before the Collapse of the Universes a generation ago. Now, Lorgo is in one of the many unclaimed areas of the continent, which hasn't received the attention of any of the marauding armies yet. Esta Tern, the innkeeper, told the young boy selling rabbits to wait and hurried his bulky frame up the stairs and along the corridor to the room at the end of the hall. Esta knew which room the scream must have come from because he had only one female customer this morning and he didn't stand for unregistered guests in his rooms. Esta banged loudly on the door. "Innkeeper! What's the problem in there? Open the door."

The door opened and the female traveler, dressed in a fine white robe, pointed towards the window.

"Somebody was trying to come in through the window," she shrieked. "What kind of an inn are you running when decent people don't even have privacy in their room?"

Esta trudged over and leaned out the window, looking in both directions. Only a skinny strip of wood ran along this side of the building and a bandit would have to be crazy to attempt moving along it, the fall could kill him. Down below in the street nobody was moving. The only movement visible was down in the harbor area where the last of the fishermen were putting out to sea. Esta watched the small, drab boats heading seaward under the dim light of morning before closing the shutters and turning to the woman.

"I don't see anything out there," he stated. "Don't think anyone could walk on the little strip of wood out there and there aren't any ladders in sight."

"Are you calling me a liar?" she demanded. "I tell you, someone was out there and I shouldn't have to pay for a room that's not private."

Esta made a motion to smooth hair on the top of his head, hair that had disappeared years ago. He had long demanded that rooms be paid for in advance and occasionally ran into customers who would find fault with rooms just to get their money back. Placing his fists on his hips, he scowled at the woman.

“Look,” he stated, “this is a private room, just what you paid for. Your door locks and the windows have shutters. You want to go parading yourself around in front of an open window, that’s your business, but if your screaming wakes any of my late sleepers, I’ll have to kick you out.”

Esta stormed off, leaving the woman complaining as he left. Everyone looked towards Esta as he reached the ground floor and the innkeeper just waved them off to indicate that there was nothing to worry about. Back in the kitchen, he returned his attention to the young boy who was selling rabbits to the inn.

“Sorry, Arik,” he sighed. “That’s one crazy woman. First she travels around without a decent bodyguard, or as part of a caravan, and now she tries to sleep for free. She wouldn’t even get to keep her coins if I did refund her room price. The bandits would get her for sure. How many rabbits do you have this morning, Arik?”

“Six good-sized ones this morning, sir,” Arik replied. “What was the screaming about?”

Esta looked up at Arik and rubbed his chin. “Nothing, I suppose. Where is your friend, Tedi, this morning? Have you seen him?”

“No, sir,” the boy answered. “I suppose he’s sleeping late today. I should hurry along, though, if I’m going to fish with my father today.”

“Sorry, Arik,” the innkeeper apologized. “I saw him leaving while I was upstairs. I shouldn’t have kept you so long.”

“It’s okay, Master Tern,” Arik said. “He doesn’t really need my help anymore. The fish keep getting smaller and less plentiful each season. Pretty soon, some of the fishermen are going to have to find other work.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’ve decided to branch out then,” chuckled Esta. “This is a fine morning’s work, Arik, the best batch of rabbits you’ve brought in this month.”

“Thank you, sir,” beamed Arik as Esta counted out the coins for the young hunter. “Do you think the bandits will attack Lorgo again?”

Esta leaned his bulky frame against the long wooden table that was the centerpiece of the kitchen. “I suppose they will,” he answered. “Ever since the Collapse, the world has been a very unsafe place. The bandits will keep attacking and raiding until one of the great armies wipes them out.”

“Do you think we could send a message to one of these great armies and get them to come help us?” quizzed Arik.

Esta laughed and scowled at the same time. “Lad, the only difference between the bandits and the great armies is that the armies are bigger. They’ll loot and plunder us as sure as the bandits. The only reason that they will kill the bandits is to get rid of the competition.” The innkeeper’s brow knotted with concern. “Sooner or later some of them are going to come, though.”

Arik gazed at the innkeeper trying to gauge his mood. For once Master Tern seemed to be talkative, but none of the townspeople seemed to want to talk about the days before the Collapse. Hesitantly, Arik broached the unspeakable topic. “What was it like before the Collapse? Could you really see the

sun? Were there bandits then also?"

Esta jolted upright and hurriedly glanced around the room before turning a frosty glare at Arik. His fists were clenched and he appeared to be struggling with himself to avoid striking the boy. Arik stood toe-to-toe with the innkeeper and didn't flinch. Although he was considered a boy in the town, Arik was already a year past Forgeno, the age when young men started their apprenticeships. Forgeno didn't hold much meaning in Lorgo anymore, as trade with other cities was limited to an occasional merchant or caravan because of the bandits. Most merchants refused to travel except with the rare caravans. As a result, most trades in Lorgo were of a similar nature to a small village instead of the bustling seaport town it used to be and most young men became fishermen.

Esta's composure softened and the large man relaxed his tense stand. "You should know better than to talk of times before the Collapse," he admonished. "It is said that to wish for the old times out loud is to bring down the wrath of the Dark One on you and your kin."

"But you don't believe that, do you?" pressured Arik.

"Of course not," blustered the innkeeper. "Still, if anyone heard me talking, the town would boycott my inn. There aren't enough travelers to survive on. I depend on the townspeople coming in and eating and drinking. I can't afford to alienate anyone."

"I won't tell a soul," promised Arik.

"Well, truth be told, you are of the age to be making up your own mind now and soon you'll be taking a wife," whispered Esta. "I suppose you have the right to know the truth for what it's worth."

"I reckon I do," smiled Arik, "but I'm not making promises to any girls."

"A smart lad," laughed Esta while glancing around to make sure that they were still alone. "It's true enough, it is. When I was a younger man, Lorgo was a fine town, almost a city. It was a town in the great nation of Sordoa, which was so large that it would take a month on a fast horse to go from border to border and everywhere that rider went, the sun would shine all day long. At night you could look up and see the heavens, a thousand twinkling lights dancing around the black sky. When the moon was full, you could read a book by its light and it used to cast a long swath of golden light over the sea, calling lovers down to the beaches to marvel at its reflection."

"I've read about the moon, but it's hard to imagine the sight you describe," sighed Arik. "Were there bandits back then, too?"

"No," reflected Esta, "bandits didn't last very long back then. The army would hang them and the army was a friend of the people in Sordoa, not like the armies of today. People call them great armies, but they're just a large band of ruffians. The Sordoan Army was a real army with uniforms and discipline. It was the most feared army in the world, but the citizens of Sordoa didn't have to fear them. The merchants used to kill bandits, too. Some young boy from Targa, probably not much older than you, made a name for himself and a fortune by becoming the first merchant with his own army of bandit-killers. It got so a bandit would only attack a lone stranger in the woods."

"Wouldn't all that sun burn all the crops?" asked Arik.

"Glory, no," chuckled the innkeeper. "The plants need the sun. The dark sky is why the crops get smaller and fewer every year. The animals also suffer without enough food to survive on. No, lad,

sunshine is a wonderful thing. What I'd give to see another sunny day."

Arik sensed the innkeeper's despair and knew his questioning would soon be over. "What caused the change and when will it change back?" he asked.

Esta frowned and chewed on his lower lip as he answered. "Some say that a great demon escaped his imprisonment and collapsed the universes. A god came along and imprisoned the demon again, but not before the demon found the world's greatest magician and made him the Dark One and commanded him to rule over the world for a thousand years. It is said that the Dark One abhors the sun and ordered it to remain hidden and never show its face again."

"You mean that I'll never get to see the sun?" exclaimed Arik.

Approaching footsteps warned the innkeeper of the pending interruption and he rounded on the young hunter. "You won't get to see tomorrow if you don't get about your business and leave me to mine."

Arik walked out the back door of the inn, jiggling the coins in his purse, pondering a world without bandits and an inky black sky. As he turned the corner of the inn, a hand reached out and grabbed him.

"Tedi!" Arik exclaimed.

"Shhh," whispered Tedi. "I don't want old man Esta to hear you."

"So it was you," chuckled Arik. "What did you do to make the woman scream?"

Tedi pulled his friend down the dusty alley and away from the inn. "I was just making rounds of the empty rooms to see if anybody left something behind. How was I supposed to know that some woman would be getting dressed?"

Arik shook his head. "I don't know what's going to kill you first, falling off a roof or getting beat to death by your father when you get caught."

Tedi frowned at the mention of his father. "If he beats me again, it will be the last time that he does. He nearly broke three of my ribs last time. I'm not going through that again. I'd rather take my chances in the woods with the bandits."

Arik remembered the last time that Tedi was beaten. Arik was concerned that Alan Markel might kill his son one day. He knew it wouldn't be on purpose, but Tedi's father was drunk most of the time and Arik suspected the fisherman didn't realize how strong he was or how hard he could hit. Alan never recovered from the loss of his wife and had spent the last three years going from bottle to bottle. Arik's father, Konic Clava, and Alan used to be best friends and used to take their boats out together. Tedi and Arik used to go along and help. Three years ago, bandits raided the town and both of the boys' mothers had been taken. When the two fishermen and their sons returned from the sea that day, Alan started drinking. He hasn't been sober a day since.

"Why do you do it?" Arik asked. "Why don't you take your father's boat out and fish or come hunting with me? There are lots of ways to make money without stealing it. I just sold six rabbits to Esta and he'll take a lot more if I can get them."

Tedi kicked a stone down the dusty alley. "I don't know," he admitted. "I never was much good at fishing and there aren't that many fish left, anyway. I guess I like the adventure, the chance of getting

caught and the thrill of getting away with something. I was never as good a shot with a bow as you, anyway.”

“We could go hunting together,” offered Arik. “We’ll split everything we get no matter who bags it.”

“Your father needs the money as much as mine does,” submitted Tedi. “He’s always having to buy things to fix his boat and nets. He’s hardly making enough to live on as it is.”

“That doesn’t matter,” declared Arik. “My father and your father have been friends a long time. I’m sure that he would give whatever he could to help your dad.”

“Your dad is the only friend my father has,” admitted Tedi, “and my father doesn’t even realize it. Besides, anything my father gets is going towards the next bottle. No, I’ll try hunting with you, but I’ll only keep what I actually get myself.”

“You’re a good enough shot to bring in plenty of game,” cheered Arik. “Let’s go by my place and I’ll show you the animal trap I made. I’m hoping that I can catch something really big with it.”

The smell of fish and salt air increased as the boys sauntered down the alley towards the dock area where both of the boys lived. Arik laid his bow and quiver on the stoop of his house and led Tedi around to the back yard. Proudly, Arik picked up his homemade trap and presented it to Tedi.

“It looks like a metal jaw,” commented Tedi. “How does it work?”

“Well, it doesn’t really work yet,” conceded Arik. “I used oarlocks for the jaws and filed them into teeth. They’ll hold tight whatever gets between them, but I need to find a couple of stiff springs to put some pressure on them. I’ve looked everywhere that I can think of, but I can’t find any. See, the springs will go in right here.”

Tedi was impressed. “I’ll check around and see what I can find,” he offered.

“Well, if you find anything, let me know,” smiled Arik. “And don’t steal them. I’ve got enough money to pay for them.”

“I don’t steal,” replied Tedi angrily. “Taking stuff that people leave behind before the innkeeper gets it and keeps it for himself is not stealing.”

“Alright,” conceded Arik, “I just don’t want you getting beat again.” Arik wanted to believe in Tedi’s honesty, but still he wondered how Tedi could find all of the things he had claimed to find. It was mostly the things that Tedi found that kept some food on his father’s table and drink in his father’s cup. What amazed Arik the most, was the gold necklace that Tedi wore all of the time. It certainly was a very expensive piece of jewelry with six strands of delicate gold woven in an intertwining fashion that culminated in a small golden heart. Certainly, no goldsmith in Lorgo had the skill to create such a piece and the thought of some traveler leaving it in a room at the inn was preposterous. The necklace was probably valuable enough to buy a new home, but Tedi never gave any inclination to part with it even when he and his father had no food to eat. In any event, Tedi stormed off angrily whenever Arik mentioned the necklace.

“Why don’t we go out to the woods and try getting some game,” offered Arik.

“Later in the day would be better,” Tedi replied quickly. “There are bandits just outside of town and

the way they were carrying on last night, they won't be getting up early."

"How do you know about the bandits?" asked Arik.

"I overheard Esta talking to a traveler yesterday," responded Tedi. "They were talking about a merchant coming down from the North. I was hoping to find their campsite and hear tales of the outside before the townspeople all crowded around. You know how nobody will talk about the old times and I figured if I shared a campfire with him, he would feel better about talking. The only thing I found were a group of bandits, though. I don't suppose a lone merchant will survive to even get here now."

"You're crazy going out in the woods at night," exclaimed Arik. He wanted to add in a statement about what they would do to get their hands on Tedi's necklace and decided not to let Tedi end the discussion and storm off. "What if the bandits saw you? Nobody would even know what happened to you? You would just end up dead and rotting in the forest."

Tedi looked down sheepishly and shuffled his feet like a small boy being scolded by his mother. Slowly, though, his shame turned to anger and he thrust his chin up and his lips tightened with determination. "I am not a little boy anymore, Arik," he shouted. "I know how to take care of myself. In fact, they did see me and they did try to kill me and they didn't succeed."

"What happened?" Arik asked calmly. "How did you get away?"

Tedi stood silently for a moment and calmed himself. He reached into his pouch and brought out a small metal disk painted black with sharp points on it like an artist's drawing of a sunburst. "One of them threw this at me. I never even saw it coming, but it missed and struck a tree. I grabbed it and took off."

Arik reached over and took the small disk, feeling the sharp points. Murmuring to himself Arik said, "I wonder if they are planning to attack the town again. Maybe we should alert somebody. How many bandits were there?"

His anger dissipated, Tedi replied softly. "I didn't get a chance to find out. I wanted to sneak back after they chased me, but I couldn't chance it. I don't know how that one bandit knew I was there. I pride myself on being able to sneak up on people, but I didn't even get close before he hurled that thing at me. I guess I'm not as courageous as I like to pretend."

"Not courageous!" Arik exclaimed. "Nobody I know would intentionally sneak up on a group of bandits. What were you trying to . . .", Arik stopped. It suddenly dawned on him why Tedi was sneaking up on bandits. Tedi's whole life had fallen apart the day their mothers were taken from them by bandits. He wondered how long Tedi had been sneaking into the forest at night in an attempt to find his mother again. Arik talked admiringly as he gave the small weapon back to Tedi. "You have more courage than any ten men in this town, Tedi. Only a fool would have attempted that camp twice. You're pretty quiet when you want to be, but that bandit must have pretty good hearing. You're used to sneaking around people, not animals. I've learned a few tricks about being quiet in the woods from old man Grein, the trapper. I could show them to you if you want."

"I would like that," beamed Tedi. "And I'll let you practice throwing this nasty little thing at trees. I don't know how we are going to alert the townspeople, though. My father has warned me to stay out of the woods at night and you know what he'll do if he finds out."

"Esta knows that I hunt in the woods," offered Arik. "I can tell him that I saw the bandits and you won't get in trouble. Tell me exactly where you saw them on the way back to the inn."

Arik went back to the front stoop to retrieve his bow and quiver while Tedi ran next door to get his own. The boys walked along the shore to the quay, lost in conversation of bandits and battle and the town finally standing up to the thieves. The problem, of course, was that most of the able-bodied men were out to sea trying to haul in meager catches of fish. At the quay, the boys turned up the broad street heading for the coastal highway that ran through the town of Lorgo. Many of the shops were abandoned and boarded up. Arik, once again, began to think of what the town must have been like before the Collapse. He pictured all of the businesses open and people bustling about with gaily wrapped packages under their arms. He imagined grand carriages bearing nobility up and down the street with their footmen keeping pace and their mounted guards fore and aft. He fantasized columns of Sordoan soldiers marching along the coastal highway on their way to a frontier fort, their uniforms all with matching bright colors and gilded with gold. It took him a moment to realize that Tedi was no longer beside him. He looked up and down the street and the only person moving was a sturdy woman in a long green dress and wearing a felt hat with an embroidered strip of flowers around it. She was walking down the center of the wide avenue and staring at him. Without knowing why, Arik turned and dashed between the two closest buildings and turned down the alley towards the sea. Arik was halfway down the alley when Tedi called to him. Arik stopped short and peered around. Tedi was hiding beside some old crates behind one of the buildings.

“Why did you leave me?” panted Arik.

“I had my reasons,” laughed Tedi, “but I’m not running like I just saw a revenant. What are you running from?”

Arik winced as he thought of overheard stories of revenants, beings brought back from the dead that could not be killed. Suddenly he broke out laughing. “I don’t know,” he offered. I guess I was daydreaming on the way to the inn and looked up to see this woman walking towards me. At least I thought she was heading towards me. It felt like her eyes were burning into me. I don’t know why, but I just started running. Pretty stupid, I guess.”

“If she was wearing green,” Tedi laughed, “it wasn’t so stupid. That was the woman who screamed this morning at the inn and she saw us walking together before I took off running. I don’t know if she saw me through her window earlier, but I’m not about to take any chances. Best off if we just avoid her.”

“I wonder what she is doing in Lorgo,” Arik mused. “Her dress is one of the finest I’ve ever seen and Esta remarked about her traveling without a bodyguard. I can’t see her getting past all of the bandits along the highway and if she had family here, she wouldn’t be staying at the inn. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

Tedi stared down the alley and tugged at his woolen breeches. “You know,” he began, “in all the time I’ve been checking out the Fisherman’s Inn, there has never been a lone woman staying there. In fact, I don’t remember any woman ever staying there. Most of the women who come through town stay at one of the inns along the highway. That’s a pretty fine dress to be heading for the quay. Well, at least we know she won’t see us when we talk to Esta. Come on, we’ll go up the alley to the inn.”

The boys were laughing at being so skittish as they proceeded up the alley, but, still, they each turned and looked towards the street as they passed any opening that afforded a view. As the boys neared the Fisherman’s Inn, the distinctive sound of a traveling merchant trilled the air. The two boys looked at each other with their mouths hanging open and raced between two buildings to the street. Where the street met the coastal highway, a lone merchant's wagon was just pulling into a small courtyard. The boys

forgot all of their thoughts regarding bandits and finely dressed women and raced towards the courtyard.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 2

Witch

Arik and Tedi screeched to a halt just as the old merchant was climbing down from the driver's seat of the wagon. The old man was dressed in drab gray woolen breeches and matching tunic. His garments were clean, but had obviously been mended many times over the years. A gray woolen cap was stretched over his head and he moved as if he had been sitting too long on the wagon. A young boy, similarly attired but in brown, was already bringing oat buckets from the rear of the wagon for the two old horses that stood quietly at the front of the wagon. The old merchant moved to the rear of the wagon and lowered a small gate that kept parcels from falling off.

"Say, old timer," hailed Tedi, "what news do you bring from the North?"

The young boy had returned for a couple of buckets to get water from the well for the horses. Hearing Tedi's remark, the young boy shot a disapproving glare at the two town boys, but left to accomplish his tasks. Tedi knew that they only had moments for any news before the townspeople started gathering and then there would be no talk of old times.

The old man turned towards Tedi and looked him up and down before answering.

"The news from up North, child, is that their children are better mannered. The name I use is Boris Khatama. That means that you will address me as Master Khatama and if it's news you want, then you will wait for the townspeople to assemble and hear it with the rest."

"Forgive my friend's lack of manners, Master Khatama," offered Arik. "We are eager to hear of news that the townspeople never speak of. Lorgo is a small town and most people refuse to discuss things that Tedi and I read about in books. I hope you will forgive our poor manners."

Master Khatama focused his attentions on Arik as he pulled down small crates of goods from the wagon. "And why should I talk of things that your own parents would rather not have you hear?"

"Oh, it's not that they don't want us to hear," Arik responded quickly, "but I fear that they still think of us as children and too young to hear such stories. Why just this morning at the inn . . . a friend was telling me about the old times, but he had to return to work. Our fathers are fishermen and they are gone most of the day and tired at night. Besides, what they know is very limited as they have not traveled far and wide as I'm sure you have."

Master Khatama peered at the boys again as if measuring them. The clatter of approaching footsteps announced the coming townspeople. "We'll see," Boris whispered. "You go help Tanya brush the horses, while your friend here helps me unload the wagon and you two can join us for dinner. I will consider then what I will speak of."

“Yes, Sir,” replied Arik.

“Tanya?” questioned Tedi looking at the young boy watering the horses. “I mean, yes, Sir. Right away, Sir.”

As Tedi moved to help the merchant unload the wagon, Arik walked to the front to help with the horses with Tedi’s comment ringing in his ears. As he approached the merchant’s helper, he looked more closely. While her face still sported the glare given to Tedi for his comment, Arik could now see that she was indeed a girl, a rather beautiful girl if she had not been dressed in those rags. “Pardon me, Tanya,” Arik greeted the girl, “but Master Khatama requested that I offer you assistance with brushing the horses.”

“As if I required assistance,” snapped Tanya. “You can only brush the horses if you know what you’re doing, fisherboy. And if you have any more sly comments about my uncle, you’ll lose your teeth.”

Arik stepped back and raised his hand to ward off the expected attack. “Tanya, please,” he said soothingly. “Tedi did not really mean anything disrespectful. He just has a brash way of talking. He thinks if he acts tough, tough people will leave him be. I am no horseman, but I do occasionally help out at Master Tern’s stables. I do know how to brush a horse.”

Tanya tossed a brush to Arik and began using one herself. The pair worked on in silence for some minutes before Arik spoke again. “Tanya, I really do apologize for Tedi’s remarks. He was anxious about hearing some news of the old times and he knew the townspeople would be arriving soon.”

After a few more minutes of silence, Tanya finally asked, “What’s your name, fisherboy?”

Arik looked over the horse at the young girl. “I am Arik Clava,” he finally answered. “And I would prefer that you do not call me fisherboy. You make it sound like a derogatory term and my father is a fisherman. I find nothing dishonest or unsavory in his character because of his profession. He provides the best he can and I’m proud to be his son.”

Tanya stopped brushing and gazed at the village boy. “It would appear that I also owe you an apology, Arik Clava,” the merchant’s niece responded. “It was meant as a derogatory term and I apologize for it. Why are you so interested in the old times? I thought all of you Sordoans feared the Dark One coming in the night if you spoke of them.”

Arik dropped his brush and started. “You know about Sordoa?” he exclaimed. “I never heard it mentioned until earlier today. I’ve read a little about it, but only of times long gone. Do you know about the Collapse and what happened?”

“Did this Master Tern teach you how to do that with the brush?” Tanya smirked.

Arik apologized profusely and retrieved the brush, once again applying long strokes to the horse. “What can you tell me of the Collapse?” he questioned.

Tanya stopped brushing the horse and stuck out her hand for Arik’s brush. “You did good enough for a f . . . boy who is not used to taking care of horses,” she quipped. “I will tell you nothing of the Collapse or the old times. If your townspeople found out, my uncle would be driven out of town and times are poor enough as it is without losing some trade here.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Arik promised. “I won’t tell a soul. We could just be friends talking. No one

will suspect what we are talking about.”

“You won’t tell a soul because you will have nothing to tell,” she stated. “And I don’t have friends. Friends cause you pain and grief and I don’t need anymore of either, thank you very much.”

Tanya disappeared around the side of the wagon and a befuddled Arik headed towards Tedi, who was now standing with the crowd of townspeople that had gathered to hear the latest news. Tedi noticed the woman in the green dress on the other side of the crowd and she seemed to be trying to slide through the group nonchalantly. After fifteen minutes of tales of bleakness and starvation, bandits and rogue armies, the two boys left the gathering with the mysterious woman only several feet away. People started crowding around the merchant and picking out small items from a rather poor selection of goods. Tedi pulled anxiously at Arik’s sleeve and started to run towards the harbor.

When the boys reached Arik’s home, they leaned against the back of the house in silence. Finally, Tedi turned towards Arik. “Did you see her trying to get closer to me,” he wheezed.

“I’d say it was your imagination,” offered Arik, “but she sure didn’t seem to be interested in anything the merchant had to sell. What did the old . . . Master Khatama have to say after I left?”

“Not much,” Tedi replied. “He griped a lot about youngsters today and their lack of respect for their elders. He also asked our ages about three different times. I guess my big mouth got us off to a rather poor start.”

“I’ll say,” chuckled Arik. “The merchant’s niece practically bit my head off for that one comment she overheard you say. She’s a bitter one, she is. You hear people talk about bitter old maids, well, this girl is around our age and she already has the demeanor to put those old maids to shame.”

“Well, I guess we won’t have to bother going back for dinner, then,” Tedi laughed. “The chance of either one of them knowing anything useful, or telling us if they did, is probably out of the question.”

“I don’t know about that,” remarked Arik. “Even the girl knows about Sordoa and the Collapse. She wouldn’t talk about it, but I could tell that she knows.”

“If I didn’t know better, I could almost be suspicious of you liking Tanya,” chuckled Tedi.

“Forget it!” exclaimed Arik. “She doesn’t even want friends. I tried to be friendly with her and I had to keep an eye on her hands to see if she would pull a knife on me. That girl is poison and will never have any friends, never mind boyfriends. Still, she does possess knowledge that I’d like to have. I’m willing to go back and talk as long you come and keep an eye on her hands.”

“Heck, if nothing else it’s a free meal,” smirked Tedi. “Why are you interested in the Collapse so much all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know,” replied Arik. “Lately, I’ve been having dreams of what I think the old times must have been like. I guess it may just be not knowing what all of the older people know and frustration at their stubborn refusal to talk about it.”

“You mean you are not afraid of calling down the Dark One on your family?” asked Tedi.

Arik combed back his shoulder length brown hair with his fingers and sat on the back stoop. “How are we supposed to believe that story about the Dark One if nobody is even willing to talk about

him?" he quizzed. "You know, Tanya laughed about the Sordoans believing in that story. She called us Sordoans. She knows an awful lot about what I want to know. I've got to get her to open up and tell me."

"You have a better chance of her opening up a cut on your lip," laughed Tedi. "Why don't we go out in the forest and see what game we can find. I doubt the bandits are still around if the peddler got through, but we can go out the south end just in case."

The boys headed along the shore towards the south end of Lorgo. When they reached the quay, the woman in the green dress stepped out in front of them. Tedi grabbed Arik's sleeve and the boys ran out to the end of one of the docks. The woman slowly marched after them and paused not ten feet from the end of the dock where Arik and Tedi stood with no escape. The woman stood staring at them, her long black hair twisted into a single braid as thick as an oar shaft. "Who are you?" she demanded.

For several moments, the boys pondered their position. Certainly they could leap into the sea and she wouldn't follow or maybe they could just run past her. When they refused to answer and the woman realized that they still planned to evade her, she moved her hands and the boys were frozen in place from the neck down. Arik tried to move his arms and legs and failed. His body refused to listen to his commands and it tingled like he was just doused with a bucket of ice-cold water. Only his head moved and he realized that it was sweating. Looking at Tedi, he realized that his friend was experiencing the same thing with sweat pouring down his face.

"I'm sorry if we've offended you, Mistress," Arik croaked. "Whatever it is you think we've done, I apologize for it. If you could just see it in your good grace to release us, I promise we won't bother you anymore."

"Shut up!" she shouted. Lowering her voice as she came closer, she stared Arik in the eyes. "What is your name, youngling?" she demanded.

"Arik Clava, Mistress," Arik whispered, "and my friend is Tedi Markel."

"Tell me how old you are," commanded the witch as she came toe-to-toe with Arik, her breath smelling strongly of onions.

"Fourteen years," wheezed Arik trying unsuccessfully to lean back away from the strong odor. "And so is Tedi," he quickly appended.

"You look much older than fourteen," she scowled. "Perhaps you need a lesson in truth telling. How old are your parents and where do they live?"

Sweat was dripping into Arik's eyes and his nose was starting to twitch. Arik was focusing on the woman's face when all of a sudden, she literally rose up and was tossed into the sea. The moment she hit the water, the spell binding the two boys broke and they took off running down the dock. They didn't stop running until they entered the woods at the south end of town. They both collapsed into a gully and turned to watch the path from town. Long minutes of silence passed before either one talked.

"What was all that about?" asked Tedi. "And why did you lie about our ages?"

"I don't know," answered Arik. "Nothing about today makes much sense. When she trapped us, I thought she was after you because of the incident at the inn this morning, but she seemed to be more interested in me. I guess I figured if she thought we were younger, the punishment for whatever it was

that I was supposed to have done would be less because we were younger. I don't know why, but I don't mind telling you that I was scared like I've never been scared before."

Tedi nodded in agreement and wiped the sweat from his short black hair. "Why is everyone interested in our age all of a sudden? First the merchant asks me three times and now this . . . witch. This witch uses magic on us in broad daylight and demands to know how old we are. How did you manage to trip her anyway? I was frozen solid except for my head."

"I didn't do anything," Arik quivered. "Somebody else tossed her into the sea."

"What do you mean someone else?" quizzed Tedi. "There wasn't anyone else around. Nobody in sight anywhere."

"I know," Arik grimaced, "but I was looking at her face when it happened. She was more surprised than we were. Someone used magic on her like she was using on us. She may even think it was one of us. One thing I know for certain. I am not going to be anywhere where she can get a hold of us again. That woman would kill us as soon as talk to us again."

"But you gave her our real names," Tedi objected. "Even if we can stay safely hidden, what about our fathers? She'll have no trouble finding out where the Clava and Markel homes are."

Arik pondered for a while as his breathing simmered down and his heart started beating regularly again. He reached into his pouch and extracted some coins and pressed them into Tedi's hand. "Get to your father as quickly as you can. Tell him that the innkeeper at one of the inns owes you a favor and he can drink for free all day if he hurries. Pick any inn but the Fisherman's Inn. Give the coins to the innkeeper. It should be enough to cover his drink and a room for the night. I'm sure your father will need the room before he's done."

"You know I don't like him drinking," spat Tedi.

"I know, Tedi, but you won't like him any better dead. Let him drink today. Tomorrow we can come up with a better plan. That woman will be soaked and she'll have to return to the Fisherman's Inn to get changed, so we don't have much time. When you get done, meet me back here."

"Okay," Tedi agreed, "but what about your father?"

"I'm going to send a message out to him by one of the old fishermen who repair nets now. I'll have my father bring his boat in down here away from the docks."

"What if he ignores the message?" asked Tedi.

"He won't," stated Arik. "After my mother was taken, I was pretty upset and frightened about the bandits coming back. I refused to acknowledge that she was really gone and my father had some harsh words for me about lying. Then I was afraid they would come back for my father or me and that my father wouldn't believe me if I told him I was in trouble. He promised me that if I ever swore on my mother's life that I was in trouble, he would believe me without question. If anything can be said of Konic Clava, it is that he is a man of his word."

The boys split up to see to their fathers and returned an hour later. Tedi was frowning when he arrived. "The green witch is on the prowl again," Tedi scowled. "I heard her asking Master Tern about our fathers and mothers and where they lived. He asked her if she had a problem with either of us and

when she didn't answer he told her to get out and let him get his work done. That put her in a right nasty mood as if she wasn't in one already. Incidentally, she's wearing a blue dress now. Then she started going down the street towards the quay and stopped in each building. I didn't see any smiles crossing her face, so I guess nobody was willing to talk to a stranger."

"Sooner or later somebody will answer her," Arik sighed. "Who is she and what does she want with us?"

"I don't know, but I suspect that she won't leave town until we answer her questions," mused Tedi.

Arik sat drawing pictures in the dirt with a stick and finally jumped to his feet. "I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Let me sneak back into town and tell everybody that we've decided to go seek our fortune up north somewhere and left town. Whatever she wants, she'll have to head north to find us."

"That sounds good," admitted Tedi, "but why north?"

"The bandits you saw in the forest," beamed Arik. "With any luck at all, they'll take her captive before she gets to the next town."

"I like it," Tedi readily agreed. "I'll tell everybody down by the quay. You get yourself up to the Fisherman's Inn and tell Master Tern. He likes you for some reason and the witch has to end up back there sometime."

Arik dashed up alleys and slid between buildings until he was behind the Fisherman's Inn. It was approaching late afternoon and fairly soon the dinner hour would be upon him, making Master Tern unavailable without entering the common room. He still hadn't figured out a way to get Master Tern to believe his story. Arik quickly slipped in the back door to the kitchen and caught Master Tern entering from the door to the common room. The kitchen help didn't even blink as Master Tern strode across the room and swept Arik out the back door.

"What kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into?" demanded the innkeeper. "You should know by now that the Markel boy is nothing but trouble."

"I don't know, Master Tern," Arik quickly offered. "We didn't do anything, but that witch means us harm. I can feel it."

"This has to do with this morning and her window, doesn't it?" Esta scolded.

"I don't think so, Master Tern," confided Arik. "Tedi was up on the roof this morning, but she seems more interested in me and it doesn't have anything to do with her window. She's been stalking us all day and finally trapped us on one of the docks. She threatened us and demanded to know about our ages and our families and where we lived."

"I figured that Tedi would be the one on the roof this morning," growled Master Tern. "She probably knows it was a young boy but not what he looks like and she is picking on you because you look older. It is a very serious thing to be pushing women into the sea, young man, and I expect to be talking to your father about this matter."

"We didn't push her," pleaded Arik. "We couldn't push her. We couldn't even run away, Master Tern. She had us frozen from the neck down with magic. Somebody else tossed her into the water and they had to have used magic, too, because there was nobody else in sight."

“Arik,” sighed the innkeeper, “I am very disappointed in you. Ever since I watched you and Tedi for weeks while your fathers went hunting for your mothers, I’ve had the feeling that you were a very good lad and I’ve grown to like you, but I will not accept such rubbish from your mouth. Now, you will march inside and sit in the common room until the woman comes back and we will get to the bottom of what you have done to her. I’ll send someone down to the docks to wait for your father.”

Esta grabbed Arik by the shoulders and started pushing him into the inn.

“No, Master Tern,” Arik almost shouted. “By my mother’s life, I swear that I’m telling the truth. The woman is a witch and she means me harm. I really don’t know why, but I know it well enough to have sent a note to my father to meet me in the woods and for him not to go home.”

Master Tern stopped abruptly. “I was present when your father made you that promise, Arik, and I will act as I know your father would. I will tell you, though, I don’t put much store in stories of magic and you would be the first to admit that your story seems rather unbelievable.”

“I do understand, Master Tern,” Arik sighed with relief. “I wouldn’t believe it myself except that I felt it. I couldn’t move anything but my head and she stood toe-to-toe with me and demanded to know all about me, and her breath reeked of onions. I was looking right into her eyes when she was tossed into the sea and she was very surprised. As soon as she hit the water, it was as if someone untied me. Tedi and I took off running.”

“Well, there is no doubt about her breath,” chuckled Esta. “That woman eats more onions than are good for a person. I’ll let you go meet with your father, but I want to know what is going on.”

“Master Tern,” Arik began, “the reason that I came to you is to lead her away from us before she can do any harm. We know that she has been asking everyone in town where we live and she seems determined to get her questions answered. Tedi and I plan to spread the word that we left town to the north to seek adventure. We hope that she will try to follow us and leave Lorgo.”

“You’re still a bit this side of a man to be adventuring off,” scolded the innkeeper.

“We don’t plan on really leaving, Master Tern,” Arik added quickly. “We’ve had enough adventure already. We just want to get rid of the witch before she captures us or our fathers in that spell again.”

“That cuts pretty close to a lie,” admonished Esta.

“It is a lie,” admitted Arik. “I also lied to her about my age. I told her I was fourteen. I don’t know why, but I get the feeling of just wanting to be rid of her. Master Tern, I really don’t know what to do about her. I know she means me harm and I’ve never done anything to her. I’m hoping that my father can help me when he arrives.”

“I’m not sure why, Arik,” responded Master Tern, “but I believe you think what you’re saying is true. I won’t lie for you, though. The woman started questioning me and I refused to answer her. I will do that again. You run along and meet with your father and tell him that I want to know what is really going on.”

“Certainly, Master Tern,” replied Arik. “You could honestly tell her that I said we were leaving town. If she is not really after me, she won’t follow. I will go to my father and he will let you know what is going on.”

Arik hurried down the alleys and between buildings to return to the woods at the edge of town just as the sky was getting darker. It could hardly be called a sunset by a boy who had never seen the sun, but it was the time of day that the fisherman planned to be back in port. Hopefully, he would make it to the woods without running into the witch.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 3

Merchant

Konic Clava was a large, square-shouldered man with heavily muscled arms and hard calluses from many years of plying his trade as a fisherman. His short brown hair and square jaw gave his face the hardened look of a frontier soldier. His well-proportioned frame gave the impression of someone who could handle himself in a brawl without working up a sweat. Yet, for all of his hard looks, Konic's eyes spoke of a kind gentleness beneath his imposing figure. His gray tunic was accented at the waist by a broad leather belt with loops and notches designed to hold various implements of a fisherman. The only tool currently hanging from the belt was a long, sharp knife. When Konic spoke, his voice was low and gravely, yet his soft, sure tone was soothing and comforting.

"You lads did right well under the circumstances," Konic was saying to Arik and Tedi, "although I would prefer a solution that didn't involve forcing drink on Master Markel. Still, your solution did keep him safely away from the witch."

"Then you believe us, Dad?" smiled Arik.

Konic eased himself to the ground and leaned his back against a large tree. "Of course I believe you, son. If either one of you ever lied to me, you'd have to spend nights on your belly for a month. Arik, I told you once that if you ever used that oath I would believe you without question. I meant it and I know you did, too. Most of the villagers would probably believe that you were lying because nobody believes in magic anymore. Most of them have not been outside the town in their entire lives. When Alan and I were searching for your mothers, we saw and heard things that we would not have believed possible before. I believe you saw a witch and I don't think she would risk exposing herself because somebody looked in her window."

Tedi winced at the implied insinuation in Master Clava's remarks. "Master Clava, I was not trying to . . ."

Konic waved the boy to silence. "Tedi, whatever the reason for your little journey up on the roof, it was not the reason the witch was questioning you. Arik, I want you boys to move down to the little clearing just south of here, the one we used to picnic in with your mother. Start a campfire but keep alert for bandits. I'm going into town to get Master Markel and we'll meet you there."

"Master Clava," Tedi interrupted, "are you sure it's a good idea bringing my father out here? I mean with his drinking and all, he might . . ."

“Tedi,” Konic began softly, “your father is a good man. Never forget that. He has had a problem coping with the loss of your mother and he is not the first man to try to drown his grief. I think his time for mourning is over now. I probably should have forced it to end sooner but, in a way, I could almost join him in a bottle. You know the man as your father and that is a pretty narrow scope of perception. I’ve known your father for over thirty years and there isn’t a finer person I’ve ever known. If there is going to be trouble, he is the one man I would call on to guard my back. You boys get going and we’ll meet you there soon.”

“Be careful, Dad,” Arik called after the retreating figure.

The boys moved to the clearing and gathered wood for a fire. “Do you believe those things your father said about my dad?” asked Tedi.

Arik turned and looked at Tedi. “If my father says it, then it’s true,” Arik replied. “I don’t know what he can do for your father that hasn’t already been tried, but if anybody can help, he will.”

Tedi nodded solemnly. “I guess what he said about my view being too narrow is probably true. I guess I’ve been more trouble than help to him. I just thought he didn’t care about me. You know, the times he beat me, I deserved to be beaten. I just don’t think he knew his own strength.”

“Well, maybe everything will turn out for the better,” hoped Arik.

“Yikes!” exclaimed Tedi. “I forgot about the merchant. We were supposed to eat with him tonight and find out the secrets of the outside world. If we don’t show, he’ll start looking for us and he may run into the witch.”

“Forget him,” responded Arik. “The secrets of the Collapse can wait a while longer. We’ll talk to the next merchant to come to town.”

“You don’t understand,” argued Tedi. “I told him our real ages and where we lived. If he goes looking and runs into the witch, she’ll know everything. I’ll run up and tell him that we have to leave town in a hurry and he’ll point the witch northward.”

Before Arik could protest, Tedi leaped over a small bush and disappeared into the forest. Tedi ran as fast as his legs would carry him. The sense of urgency in arriving at the merchant’s wagon before the witch was the only thought on his mind. When he arrived at the wagon, neither the merchant nor his niece was visible. Tedi ran around to the rear of the wagon and leaned in to peer into the darkness. Roughly, two hands seized his neck from behind and hurled him to the ground.

“We don’t give our goods away, ruffian,” snarled a voice.

Tedi rolled over onto his back and gazed up to see the old merchant standing over him. “Master Khatama,” he groaned, “I was not trying take any goods. I was just coming to talk with you and thought you might be in the wagon.”

The young girl came towards the wagon and lowered a torch so that Tedi’s face was illuminated. “It’s one of the young bucks that was coming for dinner,” she announced.

“So it is,” growled the merchant while extending a hand to the boy. “Sorry about the toss, lad, but I don’t take kindly to townspeople rummaging through my wagon.”

Tedi was amazed at how firm the old man's hands had felt. When he reached up to rub his neck, he realized that his necklace was missing. He started looking around frantically when the merchant moved to him.

"No need to be looking for your gold, lad," he whispered. "I've got it here. Must have got stuck on my ring. I'm afraid the clasp is broken, though, but I can fix that right up. You wait here and I'll be right back."

Before Tedi could respond, the merchant had climbed into the wagon and was lighting a candle. Tedi watched him gently lay the necklace on a table and smooth out the two unconnected ends.

"There's some dinner left," offered Tanya, "if you truly came to eat."

Tedi turned towards the girl. "Actually, Arik and I got ourselves in a bit of a fix and I was coming to tell you that we weren't going to make it."

"Why am I not surprised," she quipped. "You two looked like trouble since I first laid eyes on you this morning."

"We are not trouble," Tedi retorted angrily. His tone softened as he delivered the message he had come to say. "We do have to leave town, though. Arik and I are going north at first light to seek our fortunes."

"You may find a different fate than fortune if you plan on traveling alone," the merchant said from behind Tedi. Tedi twirled and the old man was standing there grinning and holding out the repaired necklace. "The clasp is fine now, lad. As good as it was new. I see that you had broken the clasp once before and it hadn't been properly mended. No matter, though, no one could tell it was ever broken now. It is a beautiful piece. Where did you get it?"

Tedi reached out and took the necklace. Refastening it around his neck he answered the merchant. "I didn't steal it, if that's what you mean. It was my mother's and the only thing I have to remind me of her."

The merchant gently patted Tedi's shoulder. "Is that true, son? I don't mean the part about you stealing it. I mean about the only thing she left you. It seems to me from our earlier conversation, that she left you something she loved a whole lot more than that necklace. It also seems that both you and your father have forgotten that. Taking care of his pain is your job now and yours, his. Talk to him before you run away, lad."

Tedi gazed at the merchant's glistening eyes and nodded. "I will, Master Khatama, I will." Tedi turned and ran back to the clearing getting there just moments before his father and Master Clava arrived. His father was walking unsteadily and mostly supported by Arik's father. Master Clava also had a long duffel bag slung over his shoulder by a strap. The bag was stuffed solid and he rolled it off his shoulder and onto the ground.

"Tedi," Master Clava ordered, "there is a pot and some coffee in there. Get some water from the stream and make a pot of it. Arik, forage through those provisions and round up something to eat for the four of us."

Arik's father eased Master Markel to a sitting position with his back against a tree. Konic sat next to him and talked quietly. Arik could not quite hear what was being said, but Tedi's father stiffened and his

eyes opened wide and he started nodding his head. The only word Arik thought he heard was Empress and it made no sense to him. Tedi finished with the coffee and took two cups over to the men. Konic sat his on the ground and held the other to Alan's lips.

"What were they talking about?" Arik whispered to Tedi when he returned from delivering the coffee.

"I don't know," Tedi softly replied. "They stopped talking as soon as I approached them." After a few moments Tedi continued. "You know, Arik, I've been a fool for three years. It took an old merchant to show me what was in front of my face the whole time. I've been so selfish and feeling sorry for myself over my mother's disappearance that I couldn't see how much he was hurting. At first, I thought my mother's disappearance was just an excuse for him to start drinking and after a while I just mentally belittled him for not being able to control himself. The old man made me realize that I'm part of the reason that he still drinks. I shut him out of my life and made his loss twice as bad and my own, as well."

Arik looked across the campfire and saw the tears welling up in Tedi's eyes. "You really ought to tell him that, Tedi. I can keep my father busy for a while." Arik stood up and called across the clearing. "Dad, I need you for a moment."

Master Clava stared at the two boys near the campfire wondering what was so urgent that Tedi couldn't help Arik with. He saw Tedi hesitantly start to walk over to where he and Alan sat and decided to find out. By the time he got to the campfire, he looked back to see Tedi kneeling next to his father. "What is it, son?" he asked Arik.

Arik walked over and hugged his father. "I just want to thank you for being here for me," he choked. He smiled when he looked past his father and saw Tedi and Master Markel doing the same.

"I'll always be there for you, son," Konic replied. "As I know you will always be there for me." Konic turned to see what Arik was staring at and sighed softly. "Now that is a sight I have longed to see, Arik. Whatever trouble this witch has brought, she has brought some good, too."

Breaking the embrace and tending to the boiling pot, Arik asked, "What are we going to do about her, Dad? What is it she wants?"

Konic poured himself another cup of coffee and sat on a log staring into the fire. "I don't know, son. I asked around about her and determined that she did find out where we live. I didn't get much of an idea why she is so interested in us, though. I did have many people offer their sympathies about my boy running away up North, though," he chuckled.

"It seemed to be the best way of getting rid of her," admitted Arik. "I hope it works. It looks like you brought enough stuff to stay out here a month."

"Always be prepared, son," Konic smiled, "always be prepared. I'll check in with Master Tern later tonight and first thing in the morning. We'll know if she takes the bait."

Konic lapsed into silence and Arik tried to pick up traces of Tedi's conversation. The only things that Arik could out pick between the cricket chirps and the wind fluttering the leaves was the word necklace and an admonishment for Tedi to promise something.

Eventually, the weak soup was ready and Tedi and his father came over to the campfire. Master Markel looked steadier and more determined than anytime that Arik could remember. There wasn't

much talk around the campfire, but Arik noticed the two Markels sitting closer and more comfortably than he would have imagined before tonight.

After a while, Konic Clava rose and walked silently out of the campground. He returned about an hour later wearing a smile. "She already left," he declared. "Master Tern said she was in such a hurry that she didn't even ask for a refund for the room she had already paid for."

"Well, that's a relief," Master Markel sighed. "Konic, I would like to go fishing with you for a few days if you will have me, starting tomorrow."

Konic smiled at his old friend as he eased himself to a seat by the fire. "You are always welcome in my boat, Alan. I have a new spot I would like to try."

"It is good to have such a friend," Alan said warmly. "That will give Tedi enough time to earn what we need to fix my boat properly so I may begin getting my life back together."

Tedi touched the necklace around his neck and his father shook his head slowly. "No, Tedi, you will go with Arik hunting. When we have enough money, we will rebuild our boat together."

Tedi beamed as his father put his shaking arm around his son and hugged him. Master Markel's brown eyes shone with a determination that had been absent for too long. Tedi knew the next few days would be very hard on his father and being out at sea with Master Clava was just what his father needed.

Everyone sat around the campfire in silence, lost in his own thoughts. The sounds of the waves lapping steadily at the shore and the crickets' melody in the woods were peaceful and calming.

Konic was the first to stir as he went to the long duffel bag and pulled out some blankets. He handed one to each of the group and rolled his into a pillow. "Not much sense going back to town tonight," he announced. "It's been a while since I camped out, but the night is fair and I am tired. First up should put on a pot of coffee." With that he stretched out on the ground and went to sleep. Everyone soon followed.

Arik awoke to the smell of coffee and oatmeal. He sat up and looked around. It took a while for him to get his bearings and realize where he was. The two men were quietly cleaning up the campground. The only things not packed in the duffel bag were two cups and bowls and the oatmeal and coffee pots that were on the fire as well as the two blankets that he and Tedi were using. Arik leaned over and shook Tedi, who groggily awoke.

Konic looked over at the two sleepy-eyed boys. "Morning comes early and the fish won't wait," he chuckled. "You boys clean up and store the gear somewhere safe before you go off hunting. I think we will spend a few more days camping out if that is not objectionable to anyone." Master Markel was whistling a tune gaily as the two men headed towards the boat.

Arik got himself some coffee and filled a cup for Tedi. "Your father seems in a good mood this morning," he remarked. "What did you say to him last night?"

Tedi rubbed his eyes and reached for the cup. "Just something the merchant made me realize," he answered softly. "I think your father had already softened him up by the time I spoke to him, though. Whatever the cause, it sure makes me feel good. I'm not going to be getting into any more trouble."

The boys cleaned up the camp and stowed the bag before taking off in search of game. They hunted

for a couple of hours and finally decided to head back to town. Arik had caught five rabbits and Tedi three. "I said we could be partners and split the take," Arik began, "and I meant it."

Tedi shook his head and laughed. "No way, fisherboy," he chuckled. "You may have out-hunted me today, but tomorrow it will be my turn."

The boys laughed all of the way to the Fisherman's Inn. Master Tern was in a good mood this morning as well, although it was already later than when Arik usually showed up and customers were already eating breakfast.

"So, we have two hunters now, eh?" quipped Esta Tern. "Show me what you've brought for my guests. That bag doesn't look big enough to hold a deer."

While Arik dumped the contents of the bag and talked with Master Tern, Tedi strode over to the doorway to the common room. He began gazing at the strange and different costumes the travelers wore, wondering where they were coming from and where they were going. So little was known about the outside world and most travelers were not the talkative type. His eyes settled on a dark figure in the dimly lit corner of the common room. Tedi focused his eyes at the dark warrior image hiding in the shadows. The stern, cold face had icy blue eyes that seemed to be constantly scanning every person in the room without seeming to move. He was dressed entirely in black and his outfit appeared to have pouches sewn into it everywhere. The man could probably carry the contents of a campsite in those pouches and not even need a pack on his back. His long hair was jet black and bound into a tail that was draped over one shoulder. The black hilt of a massive sword strapped to his back protruded over the other shoulder. Across his midsection was a wide black belt with many loops for implements, but only a lone black knife was present now. His eyes turned on Tedi and stopped in recognition. Tedi turned and ran out of the kitchen without stopping.

Arik looked up from his conversation with Master Tern as Tedi flew through the kitchen and out the door. The innkeeper looked shocked at Arik and then quickly pressed some coins into his hand. "You need to tame that boy down, Arik," the innkeeper stated. Arik nodded and took off after his friend.

When Arik reached the alley, Tedi was nowhere in sight. He ran alongside the inn to the street and saw Tedi just disappearing into the woods where the merchant had been the night before. Arik took off running for the woods and started calling Tedi's name when he entered the forest, but he could find no sign of his friend. After half an hour, Arik decided to give up and return to town. As he walked along an animal path he heard a large sound and froze, an arrow fitted to his bow without thinking. Arik lowered himself to a crouch, eyes following the sound, which seemed to be coming nearer. After a few seconds, which seemed an eternity to Arik, Tedi walked onto the path.

Arik lowered his bow and stood, scaring Tedi into producing a quiet gulp. "Okay, Arik, so you are quieter than me in the woods," Tedi sighed with relief. "I promise I'll let you teach me if you don't scare me like that again."

"Actually, you were pretty quiet, Tedi," remarked Arik. "I was only alerted by that one sound. If I hadn't heard that one crack, I would never have picked you up and I can detect anyone in the woods within one hundred paces."

The two boys sat on the path and talked.

"Why did you run from the Fisherman's Inn," Arik inquired.

Tedi breathed deeply and replied. "I saw the bandit in the common room. The one who tried to kill me with that black sunburst thing and he saw me. He recognized me, too. I could tell as soon as his eyes set on me."

"What is he doing in town?" questioned Arik. "We had hoped the witch in the blue dress would stumble into them when she left thinking she would follow us north. Now she may come back when she finds out we didn't leave town."

"I don't know," pondered Tedi. "I just got frightened and took off. Still, I think I'd rather face some bandit killer than that witch with her magic and questions about our age."

"Maybe we should just go spend the day at our campsite until our fathers return," suggested Arik.

"I think that is a good idea," responded Tedi. "I don't want that bandit to know anything about us. He might even start asking questions like the witch did."

The two boys rose to continue along the path, oblivious to the man dressed in black that had been squatting not ten paces away.

The boys crossed over the coastal highway and reentered the woods to make their way to their campsite. Once along the way, they heard rabbits and managed to bag two of them for dinner. Arik laughed. "See, when you are quiet enough, even the animals don't know that you are there. Maybe we can spend the afternoon by me teaching you some of the tricks I learned from Trapper Grein."

The man in black smiled slightly as Tedi agreed to the lessons and the boys continued down the path. It took longer getting to the campsite through the woods, but the boys felt safer keeping out of sight of anyone in the town who might be looking for them. When they reached the campsite Arik retrieved the hidden duffel bag and started a fire. The man in black crept off as Arik started teaching Tedi his tricks of quietness.

When the men returned from fishing, the boys had a dinner of rabbit stew waiting for them. Master Markel walked over to the pot and inhaled deeply. "That smells mighty good, boys," he remarked. "Master Clava and I have kept some of today's catch for dinner, but what you have smells a bit more appetizing."

"I think we can have the stew and the fish," added Konic. "It's not right to waste good food. Did you have a good day hunting?"

Arik and Tedi had agreed to be honest with their fathers and explained about running into the bandit at the inn. Tedi went on to explain how he had run into the bandits' camp two nights ago and the bandit had hurled the deadly little star at him. The boys continued talking over dinner and their fathers seemed content to listen. Tedi had expected his father to be furious, but Alan's facial expression was one of concern.

After dinner, Alan and Konic sat talking quietly while the boys cleaned the dishes and pots. Tedi thought his father looked happier than he had at anytime in the last three years. When the boys were all done with their chores, Alan spoke. "We are going to post a guard tonight and every night until things quiet down in Lorgo," he announced. "Tedi, give that star weapon to Master Clava. Arik, you are going to have the last watch, so you should get to sleep right away. Tedi will wake you when it is your turn. Everyone is to be awakened if you even think there may be a problem. I will take first watch."

Tedi handed the star to Konic. Alan indicated that Tedi should sit next to him so they could talk without disturbing Arik. Konic stuck the weapon in his pouch and started walking towards town. “Where is Master Clava going?” Tedi inquired.

“He is going to talk with your bandit,” Alan said quietly.

Arik shivered as he watched his father walk away from the campsite.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 4

Bandit

Konic Clava walked into the common room at the Fisherman’s Inn and looked around. It did not take him long to pick out the man in black seated by himself in the corner, nor did it surprise him that the man had already inspected the newcomer. Konic understood why the man was seated alone. No one who valued their life would voluntarily sit with a man whom so obviously reeked of death, at least not while there was another open seat in the common room. There were other open seats as the number of travelers to Lorgo had steadily decreased since the Collapse, as they had everywhere else. Still, Konic marched over and sat across the table from the mysterious killer. And a killer he surely was. Konic could see death in the man’s icy blue eyes. The man’s hands carried the calluses of both sword and bow, as well as some that Konic could not identify. The bandit sat, bowstring taut, ready to spring in any direction at a moment’s notice, yet he gave the casual appearance of relaxing with his drink. The man might not be a bandit at all, Konic pondered, more likely an assassin.

A young town girl came over to take his order. “Good evening, Master . . .”

“Just an ale, girl,” Konic interrupted. “And I’ll signal if I wish another.”

The girl left with a puzzled look and Konic turned his attention back to the mysterious man who was looking out towards the rest of the common room, though Konic was sure that the man was watching his every move.

“Can I get you a drink when the girl returns, stranger?” Konic asked.

“I am well cared for, fisherman,” the bandit smoothly replied.

The bandit’s accent was slight, but obviously not Sordoan. “You are not Sordoan, I see,” he remarked.

The bandit blinked at him before replying. “No one is Sordoan anymore,” he stated flatly. “And if I came from anywhere around your town, you would surely already know me. What is it you wish to ask me that comes so slowly to your tongue?”

The man was no fool, but Konic had already determined that. The problem would be getting any useful information from him. Konic was sure that the man could lie with as straight a face as if he were

telling the truth. It was also clear from the man's behavior that he did not consider Konic as a threat, only a distraction from watching the other people in the common room. "I am just curious what brings someone of your obvious skill to such a small town as Lorgo," Konic finally asked.

The girl brought Konic's mug of ale and gave him a puzzled look but did not say anything.

"I am just traveling through," smiled the bandit. "Who can say what makes a man travel any particular road any more than what makes a soldier settle down and take up fishing?"

Konic was startled. Not many townspeople even knew that he had been in the Army when he was younger. Surely the sword calluses were long gone and covered by years of fishing. How could this simple bandit know that? Then again, this was no simple bandit, Konic reminded himself. The man had all the poise of a person who had spent his whole life in the Army. Perhaps he is a forward scout for one of the many warring armies ravaging Sordoa. Then again, most of the bandits plaguing the world had been soldiers at one time or another. "We've had trouble with bandits invading the town before," Konic finally said. "If that is your intention, I would like to dissuade you from the thought."

"If that is your true purpose," the bandit smiled, "you can leave now, satisfied that you have accomplished your mission. I have not seen much in your town that would interest a group of bandits."

The bandit's smile told Konic that the man had not bought his story, but surely he could not know why Konic was here. Even Konic was not sure exactly why he was here. He wanted the boys safe and he suspected that this man might be harmful to them, but why? What did the bandit want here? How could he find out? Finally he decided, as he did most other times, that the truth was usually the best course. "I lost my wife to bandits three years ago," Konic declared bitterly, "and all I have left is my son. If you are here to harm him or his friend, I will kill you."

When the bandit made no comment, Konic shakily continued. "I know you are a man of great skill and you think my threat idle and boastful, but I assure you that I will not rest until your bones are scattered to the vultures." Konic took the star weapon out of his pouch and slammed it on the table. All eyes in the common room turned at the sound and the bandit swept the star up and out of sight before Konic could see the man's hand move.

The bandit rose and gently touched Konic's sleeve. "Let us walk," he simply whispered and strode out the door of the inn. Konic rose unsteadily and followed. The man could easily kill him outside and be out of town before anyone even noticed, but Konic had a duty to his son that nobody would frighten him out of. When Master Clava had gone through the door, he saw the bandit leaning lazily against a post as if he had not a care in the world. He was holding the star weapon in his right hand.

"Was this given to you by your son?" the bandit asked.

"His friend," Konic responded. "The son of my friend. He says you almost killed him with it."

The bandit just nodded and before Konic realized it, the man in black had three of the stars in his hands. He turned casually and nodded at a sign across the street. The bandit threw the three stars, one at a time, at the sign. All three of them landed inside a letter O in the sign. "If I had wanted to harm the boy, rest assured that you would not now be talking to me about him."

Konic followed the bandit across the street to retrieve the stars with his mouth hanging open. "The boy was attempting to sneak into my campsite and thought no one could hear him. I scared him away. That is all there is to it."

Konic nodded as the bandit pried the three stars out of the sign. He handed one of them to Konic. "Return this to Tedi, that it might remind him to never underestimate his opponent. It is called a Lanorian Star and it is a potent weapon in experienced hands. Perhaps he will learn how to use it."

Konic stared at the bandit. "How is it that you know the boy's name?" he demanded.

The bandit sat on the stoop of the building, the other two stars already put back wherever they belonged. "I overheard him and Arik, who I suppose is your son, talking in the woods about some witch in a blue dress. They were on an animal path just west of the coastal highway. Arik was trying to find Tedi and finally succeeded. Do you know who this witch is?"

Konic was stunned with the amount of information that the bandit possessed. The man would make an excellent spy. He had been in town less than a day and already knew more than most of the townspeople. Master Clava sat next to the bandit and shook his head. "No," he replied, "but whoever she is, she has too much interest in the boys for my taste. How do I know you are not allied with her?"

"If I was," the bandit smiled, "she would still be here instead of chasing your boys up North somewhere. She will return, you know. Whatever she is after, she will know by tomorrow night that the boys did not go north."

"How do you know so much?" Konic frustratingly asked. "Just who are you?"

The bandit stared at his feet as if debating with himself as to how much to say. "My name is Garth Shado," the bandit finally stated, "and I mean no harm to you or your boys. As to the witch, I saw her pass last night. She travels in the company of Dark Riders, about twenty of them. How old are the boys?"

Konic's head jerked upright. The boys had told him about everyone wanting to know how old they were. He turned and stared into the bandit's icy blue eyes. "You will explain your need to know their ages," Konic demanded with a tone of challenge.

Garth raised his hands as if to fend off an imaginary attack and smiled. That smile was beginning to get on Konic's nerves. "There are the Prophecies of the Collapse," Garth said softly. "The Prophecies foretell of the children who will rise up to slay the Dark One. Although the Prophecies don't specify when the children will be born, many believe that those children were born in the year of the Collapse. There are rumors that the Dark One has ordered the death of any child born that year. The boys are close enough in age to draw a lot of attention, even if they are not the children of the Prophecies. I am afraid that people will be interested in their age as long as they live. Some people, like myself, will only be curious. Others will have a more serious agenda."

Konic was not sure that Garth had put himself in the right category, but at least he now knew why everyone wanted to know the boys' ages. "How do you know that the witch will be back?" Konic asked.

"Because the Dark Riders will fan out and check everyone heading north," Garth replied. "She will soon know that she has been duped. It is only logical for her to return to the last place she sighted them to try and pick up a trail."

Konic stood and faced the bandit. "Thank you for sharing your knowledge with me, Master Shado," Konic said formally. "I will digest what you have told me, but know that I am sincere where the safety of

the boys is concerned. If you have duped me with your intentions towards them, it will not diminish my resolve to protect or avenge them.”

Garth only nodded as Konic strode down the street towards the quay. Konic was shaking with fear and he was determined that no one would notice. He barely held his body back from running all of the way to the campsite. Instead of returning directly to the campsite, Konic waved to Alan and continued down to the shore to sit and think. After a few moments, when Alan realized that Konic was not coming back to the campsite, he walked down to join Konic. Konic was sitting on the sandy beach and didn't even appear to notice when Alan walked up and sat beside him.

“What is the matter, friend,” Alan asked cautiously. “Are you all right?”

When Konic looked over at his friend, Alan could see that he was shaking and his eyes were moist. “It is worse than we expected,” Konic replied with an unsteady voice.

Alan wondered what had happened to make his friend afraid. Konic had always been the steadfast one, never shaken, never fearful. He wondered if the bandit had harmed him in some way. Alan could not see any bruises, but he knew a man could be broken without any marks. “What did the bandit do?” demanded Alan.

Konic gazed at the rolling surf, heard the waves crashing against the shore. Strange, he thought, how some violent actions were so soothing, while others so unnerving. “It isn't what the bandit did that bothers me,” confided Konic. “It is what he said that upsets me.”

Konic relived the meeting with the bandit for his friend, leaving no detail unspoken. “Then, even if these rumors are untrue,” Konic concluded, “our boys will never know peace or safety in their lifetimes.”

“Surely, if we explain it all to the town council,” Alan offered, “the whole town would stand behind the boys and help protect them.”

“Would they?” queried Konic. “Would this town really stand against twenty Dark Riders and a witch? How about the next time when it was two hundred Dark Riders and a dozen witches? What if one of the townspeople was a Black Devil and nobody knew it? All it would take is one arrow, or one knife, or some damn spell.”

Alan recalled stories of the Black Devils from before the Collapse. The group was a society of magicians devoted to a wizard known as Sarac, the same Wizard who supposedly had been chosen by Alutar, the Great Demon, to be the Dark One and rule the world. If the stories are true, it was Sarac, as the Dark One, who had caused the Collapse of the Universes. “You know that I will stand with you until the end, Konic. No matter what the end may bring.”

Konic looked over and gave a weak smile to his friend. “I know that, Alan, without asking. It is not you or I that I am worried about. I would gladly trade my life for the boys, but even that will not help. The only thing that I can think of is to send the boys away.”

“How will that help?” Alan asked. He was just finally reunited with his son after three years in a bottle and he wasn't too happy to even think of sending him away. “They will be in danger no matter where they are. Why shouldn't they stay here?”

Konic rubbed the tears from his eyes. “Because if they stay here, the townspeople know how old they are. Someplace else, they can lie about their age and perhaps survive until the rumors go away.”

“Well, why can’t we go with them, then?” asked Alan. “That way, we could get them away from the townspeople who know them and still be close enough to protect them.”

“I thought about that,” replied Konic, “but we would stick out like a small bandit gang and, sooner or later, one of the larger gangs would eliminate all of us. If the boys go alone, they can make their way to another town or city and become apprentices without raising too much suspicion. If they lie about their ages when they first arrive, everyone in their new town will vouch for their ages because it will be as they always knew. It is the only solution that I can think of and I am going to miss them both very much.”

Alan could only nod in agreement because his throat was too choked up to speak. Konic reclined on the sand and a few moments later was sleeping soundly. Alan figured the stress of the day had finally taken its toll on his friend and reclined to ponder the dilemma, hoping to discover some solution that was more palatable than losing the son he had just rediscovered. It was not long before Alan was also asleep and nobody woke Tedi to take his turn at watch.

Garth climbed the stairs of the Fisherman’s Inn and opened the door to his room. Sitting in a chair reading was a beautiful woman in a long, black dress and long, flowing black hair. “Did you learn anything interesting?” she asked.

“Quite a bit,” Garth smiled. “The father of one of the boys came to confront me. Even though most of the people in town say that they are younger than what we are looking for, I believe they are all lying.”

“What makes you think the townspeople would all lie to save two sons of fishermen?” she queried.

“The townspeople are very hesitant to talk about the boys, but quick to tell me their ages,” Garth answered. “The father’s face when I told him about the Prophecies was the real teller. At least one of those boys was born in the year of the Collapse, maybe both. I am sure of that.”

“Couldn’t the father be a better actor than you think?” she teased. She knew Garth did not offer an opinion as fact unless he was really confident about his conclusion.

“The father is as honest a man as I’ve ever met,” Garth laughed. “He had the chance to lie to me about their ages and he couldn’t bring himself to utter that lie, even when he knew the dire consequences. I like the man, Kalina. He knew me for the type of man that I am and he still had the spunk to stand up to me and even threaten to kill me if I harmed either boy. He meant it, too. I have no doubt that if he thought I had harmed his son, he would spend the rest of his life tracking me down and killing me. I think you should meet the boys socially without the fathers around.”

“Do you know where they are staying?” Kalina asked.

“Of course, my pet,” Garth smiled. “Did you think for a moment that such a small detail would escape my grasp?”

“Certainly not,” she responded, “but if I don’t keep asking, you will get lax. How are you going to get rid of the fathers?”

Garth’s face grew serious. “I will never be lax about this matter,” he protested. “Normally, they would go out fishing for the day, but I doubt those two will be fishing tomorrow. They will react quickly. Arik’s father used to be a soldier. A long time ago, perhaps, but his training will take over and he will

start to make decisions like he was on a battlefield. We have a day at the most before the boys are sent on their merry way. I'm afraid I told him about the Dark Riders."

"That is probably for the better, Garth," Kalina responded. "In the morning you will show me where they are staying. When the time is right, I will move and you will remain hidden. Now, we should get some sleep. Fishermen are known to be early risers."

To the north two Dark Riders came to a halt.

"There is no way that they went north from the town," the older rider said.

"As she half suspected," sighed the younger rider.

"That will mean a fast ride back to the town and the men are beat now as it is. Let's rest the men until morning and then decide that the boys didn't come this way," ordered the older rider.

"You will get no argument from me or the men," answered the younger rider. "In the morning, we will be sure that they did not come this way."

Tedi woke as the sky lightened somewhat and looked around the campsite. Fear set in when he could not see either of the two men and he quickly shook Arik awake.

"What is it?" Arik asked groggily. "Is it my turn for watch already? It feels like I just got to sleep."

"It is past the time for your watch to end," snarled Tedi. "Nobody woke me for my watch and neither of our fathers are here."

Arik jumped to his feet and grabbed his bow and quiver. Tedi also grabbed his and the two boys looked for signs of a struggle. Arik quietly motioned to Tedi to search the inland side of the camp while he went towards the sea. When Arik reached the beach he saw the two bodies sprawled on the sand and shouted for Tedi to come running. At the sound of his shout, both men leaped to their feet and looked around in confusion. Seeing no danger, the men sat back down as Tedi came running out of the woods.

"What is it?" yelled Tedi. "What happened?"

"That is what I would like to know," demanded Arik. "Nobody woke either of us for our watch. When I got here I thought you both were dead. Why are you here on the beach and why weren't we awakened for our watches?"

"You will make a fine officer someday," Konic laughed. "I feel as if my Sergeant has just caught me asleep at my post."

"That is exactly how you should feel," Alan stated, "except it was my responsibility to wake Tedi. It is my fault, not yours."

"Let us not start this day off with ill feelings," Konic decreed while looking at Alan. "I wanted to think last night and I like smelling and hearing the sea when I think. I'm afraid that I enticed Alan down here. That is not what's important though. You two boys get breakfast started. Master Markel and I will be

along shortly and explain everything.”

Arik looked at Tedi and shrugged. He certainly was not about to argue with their fathers and breakfast sounded like a fine idea. Arik and Tedi went back to the campsite and Arik started a fire while Tedi got a couple of pots of water from a nearby stream. Within minutes the coffee was underway and the two men showed up with handfuls of clams. “I think these will stretch that oatmeal a little bit.” Alan quipped.

Konic fished in his pouch and brought out the Lanorian Star. He handed it to Tedi as he began to relate the basics of the story of the previous night. Both boys sat listening as Master Markel took over the cooking. When Konic had finished the story, he asked the boys what they should do next. Alan handed out the bowls of breakfast and sat studying the boys.

“Why did he give this Lanorian Star back to you, Master Clava?” Tedi asked.

“He sent it back with a message, Tedi,” Konic began. “It is a message that you both need to hear and remember. He wanted it to be a reminder to you that you should never underestimate your opponent. He demonstrated quite adequately that he could just have easily put that between your eyes.”

“So you think he might be a friend?” asked Arik.

“I don’t know what his game is,” admitted Konic, “but I know a killer when I see one and this man is a very capable killer, probably the most capable that I have ever seen. He acts like he has no interest in you two, but I know that is a lie. Still, he could easily have killed you both when you were in the woods talking about the witch.”

“What do you mean?” asked Arik. “When did he see us in the woods? If you mean the time that I think you mean, there is no way he could have been around. I would have heard him.”

“Son,” soothed Konic, “he said you were on a game trail looking for Tedi and finally found him. He said you were talking about a witch in a blue dress and that you each addressed the other by name. He said that was how he learned your names.”

Arik turned beat red as he realized that the bandit had been close enough to hear the conversation and he hadn’t even heard him. He blushed further when he remembered his boasting about how good his hearing was and how he would be able to detect anyone within one hundred paces. “His advice about overconfidence will be well taken,” admitted Arik.

Tedi, who had been quiet and reserved during the previous exchange looked sadly at his father. “The only proper course of action is for Arik and I to leave Lorgo. If we stay, we endanger both of you and the rest of the town.”

Alan started to protest and Konic laid a hand on his arm to quiet him. Arik looked up, his face still red, and nodded. “If we can get a new start in another town, we can . . . sorry, Father, but we can lie about our ages and try to establish new lives.”

Konic went over and hugged his son. “Don’t be sorry, son,” he soothed. “I have always told you that the truth will never hurt you. I was wrong. You should always try to tell the truth, but this is one lie that we can live with.” He pushed his son to arm’s length and looked him in the eye. “But it is the exception, mind you. Don’t let me catch you making a habit out of it just because I excuse you one lie.”

Arik laughed and hugged his father. "I will miss you, Father."

"I will miss you, too, son," Konic cried, "but not today. Today we have much to teach you and many things to get ready before you leave. I also think it is high time for you to call me Konic. From now on, I will think of you as my friend and should we meet again, that is what you will be to me."

Nearby in the woods, two black clad figures watched the emotional scene in silence. As patient as trees, as quiet as the earth, they stood and waited.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 5

Departure

The boys were still having a hard time getting accustomed to using their fathers' names, but nobody spoke of it. Konic was laying out the plans for the day. "I figure that if you two leave tomorrow morning, that should be soon enough. What we need to do today is get everything organized for your departure. Alan, your first task will be to see if the bandit left town or if the witch has returned. I will go round up whatever money I can find so that you will not have to be beholden to anyone until you find a place to settle down. You two will talk and try to decide where it is that you are going. You will not tell anyone where you are bound for, not even Alan or myself. If nobody knows, there will be no chance of anyone discovering it. We will be back in a couple of hours."

As Konic and Alan turned to leave, Kalina tapped Garth on the arm and he turned soundlessly and moved along a path back to town. Once he was out of hearing range, he broke into a run. He would be back at the inn well before Alan could make it walking through town.

Kalina waited silently for over ten minutes after everyone had left and then she noisily started along the path that would enter the clearing. Almost as soon as she started walking, Arik started and turned towards her. Kalina could hear the two boys talking quietly, but could not make out what they were saying. She waved to them as she got closer and called to them just as she entered the clearing. "Hello there! I seemed to have gotten lost on my morning walk."

Neither boy called back to her, but she could see one eyeing his bow and the other looking around for the best escape route. When she got all the way into the clearing, she realized that the two boys had intentionally divided themselves so that her attention would be split between the two. She wondered whether it was the result of talking or they had done it subconsciously. She walked right up to within ten paces of Arik and stopped. "Good morning," she began. "I am staying in Lorgo and I was taking a morning hike. I feel silly admitting this to two boys, but I have become lost. Can you point the way back to town?"

Both boys spoke at the same time and pointed to the path that their fathers had taken. "Thank you, kind Sir," she said to Arik and turned towards Tedi. "And you, as well, Sir. That is a most beautiful necklace that you have," she said as she walked closer. "Would you consider selling it?"

"No," Tedi almost shouted. More reservedly, he continued, "I mean no, I would not consider parting

with it.”

“Well, I don’t blame you,” Kalina cooed. “It is very beautiful. Your mother must have been a Princess. Well, thank you both again for the directions.”

Kalina headed along the path that the boys had pointed out and returned to her room at the Fisherman’s Inn. She paid no attention to Garth sitting on the front stoop or the fisherman across the street watching him.

“Well, what did you make of that?” Tedi asked.

“What do you mean?” questioned Arik. “She seemed to be what she said to me.”

“Perhaps,” Tedi pondered, “but it is not every day that a beautiful woman comes walking through the woods into this particular clearing. And why does everybody eye up my necklace?”

“It is a beautiful necklace,” commented Arik. “I never knew it was your mother’s. I always wondered why you didn’t sell it with money being tight like it is. Now I understand.”

“Does this necklace mean anything special to you?” Tedi asked.

“Special?” quizzed Arik. “I guess it is very special if it was your mom’s. I wouldn’t part with it either if it was my mom’s.”

“Yeah, well, we better get back to making plans,” Tedi said suddenly. “I was pretty surprised when our fathers didn’t object to our leaving. It is to protect them, but I still thought they would argue.”

“We are to think we are doing it to protect them,” chuckled Arik. “If you had seen your father’s face at the time you suggested it, you would probably recognize the truth.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tedi.

“They were both glad when you started to suggest us leaving,” explained Arik, “but my father had to restrain your father when you gave your reasoning. I suspect they sat and talked for a long time on the beach last night and came up with the same solution. I also suspect they have a different motivation for us leaving. For some reason they feel that they would endanger us if they came along. Neither man would subject us to harm to save himself.”

Tedi nodded slowly as Arik’s logic sunk in. What he didn’t understand was his father’s logic, but he could ponder on that later. Right now they needed to plan their journey. Arik started gathering up the belongings that were scattered around the campsite and came to a halt by his blanket. He bent down and picked up a gold ring that hadn’t been there before. Tedi looked over and asked, “What is that? Where did you find it?”

“It was on top of my blanket,” Arik stated. “It must be that woman’s. Did she say what inn she was staying at?”

“Don’t be a fool, Arik!” Tedi scolded. “You can’t possibly be thinking of returning it? What better way to lure us into her trap then to make us feel obligated to come to her?”

Arik at first thought that Tedi was just arguing to keep the ring, but by the time Tedi stopped

speaking, he realized the truth of his friend's statements. "You're right," Arik agreed. "We can leave it with our fathers and if she is still in town after we leave, they can return it to her. I have to learn to start thinking skeptically like you."

"You're darn right about that," laughed Tedi. "If what your father said was true, everybody is out to kill us and your father doesn't lie."

"All right," Arik said while slipping the ring on his finger, "let's figure out where we are going before our fathers come back and we can't talk about it."

Garth entered the Fisherman's Inn and walked up to his room. Kalina was sitting at the small table staring at her hands. "I think I gave him enough of a viewing that he is convinced that I'm not up to anything today," Garth stated.

"That's good," Kalina replied, "because they are heading south at first light. They plan to travel along the beach as far as they can because it will be low tide and their tracks will be washed away in the course of an hour. Neither of these boys are stupid, Garth. They both show a remarkable intelligence and a strong determination. Our own plans must be fool-proof."

"They may be smart," agreed Garth, "but they are still boys. I suspect that the Black Riders might be here as early as tomorrow morning."

"We will leave here this afternoon and camp a few miles south tonight," Kalina ordered.

"As you command," chuckled Garth, "always as you command. You shall make a fine General someday."

"One doesn't need to be a great General when you know what your opponent is going to do next," chuckled Kalina. "That damn Arik was actually going to try to find me so he could return the ring. They plan to leave it with their fathers, but if you read Konic properly, he'll insist the boys keep it as a reserve in case they run out of money."

"That he will do," smiled Garth.

"There is also a Locating Spell on Tedi's necklace," frowned Kalina. "I can sense it, but I cannot break it. As long as he wears the necklace, the caster will be able to find him and there is not much we can do about it."

"Do you think it is Wolinda's spell?" asked Garth.

"There is really no way of knowing," admitted Kalina. "We will just have to be prepared for whatever comes."

"You fools!" shouted the witch. "I don't care how tired your men were, you are to follow my orders. Perhaps you would prefer taking orders from an ogre."

The Dark Rider shuddered at the thought of taking orders from an ogre. There were too many stories about what happened to a person who disobeyed an ogre order and most of them centered on being eaten by the ogre. "A thousand pardons, Mistress Wolinda," bowed the Dark Rider. "I wanted the men

in top form to assure your success. We will ride like the wind to make up for lost time.”

“That you will,” scolded Wolinda. “We return to Lorgo immediately. I want those two boys and I will have them if I have to tear the town apart. And I will accept no more disobedience from you.”

“I hear and obey, Mistress,” the Dark Rider submitted as he bowed his way out of the tent.

“The bandit rode out of town about an hour ago,” Alan Markel reported. “He didn’t seem to be in a hurry.”

“Well, that’s one less problem to worry about,” remarked Tedi. “I think we are all set for our journey tomorrow morning.”

“Alan and I will go fishing early,” stated Konic. “No one should suspect that tomorrow is any different from any other day. I did check all of the inns looking for your mysterious woman, Arik, but she was not to be found. Master Tern said there was a woman staying there last night who fit your description, but she left around noon. Keep the ring as a reserve of money. If you run out, don’t hesitate to sell it and use the proceeds. If the woman comes back here for her ring, Alan and I will promise to make amends to her. I shouldn’t worry about it, though. The ring probably has little significance to her.”

“I suggest we all get a full measure of sleep tonight,” Arik declared. “It’s not likely anyone will bother us. Everyone who has been interested in us has left and we will all have a full day ahead us tomorrow.”

Everyone agreed and slept without a guard. Alan and Konic were up before the first lightening of the sky and had breakfast ready by the time the boys awoke. Farewells were short but sentimental and the two fishermen left the clearing before the boys had finished breakfast.

Arik and Tedi each sported a long duffel bag as well as their bows, quiver, and knife. Each wore gray woolen breeches and a hooded tunic with a brown leather vest over the top. Short soft-soled boots, newly resoled, completed their outfits. The boys waited until Konic’s boat disappeared in the distance before heading south along the beach. They walked where the sand was still dry, but close enough to the surf that they knew the prints would be washed away within the hour.

The coastline wove out to points and in to create bays, greatly shortening the distance along the coast that one could see at any particular time. The boys did not see any other people, yet they walked on in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. There had been no opportunity to say goodbye to their friends in the town because they could not chance the possibility that someone might come looking for them. Each of the boys dealt with the departure in his own way.

Around midday the coastline started to turn rocky and the boys chose to turn inland and seek a path through the forest. The further filtering of sunlight made the dense forest dark and foreboding. Neither of the boys had ever been this far from Lorgo and emotions of excitement mingled with the fear of the unknown. The birds chirped and sang merrily seemingly unaware of the troubles that plagued the world. Twice the boys sidetracked to the sound of small animals and ended up with a quail and a rabbit for dinner later that day. The trail started slowly climbing and when the boys finally entered a small clearing, it was already well past the last light of day. The darkness of the forest had obscured the setting of the light. Wearily and without comment the boys set about starting a fire and cooking dinner. Arik could hear the pounding of the waves, but the sound was distant and below them. Quietly the boys ate and went to sleep.

Wolinda rode into town wearing a red silk riding dress and surrounded by twenty Dark Riders. This time she didn't plan on being subtle with the townspeople. She would not pose as a traveler and she would not ask her questions slyly. She wanted the two boys and no townspeople was going to deny her. The few people in the streets immediately fled as she rode into town. Business doors closed and shutters were flung shut. Mothers dragged their youngsters into their houses. Within moments, Lorgo very much appeared a ghost town; the only sound was hooves echoing off the buildings.

The first stop was the Fisherman's Inn. Esta Tern saw them coming and ordered all of the workers out the back door. There were no customers in the common room as the midday meal was an hour past and when Wolinda and her group stormed into the inn, only Esta was there to greet them.

Wolinda stood in the common room glaring at Esta. "Where are the two runts?" she demanded.

Esta swallowed deeply, sweat already forming on his brow. "I don't know, Mistress," he croaked.

At a signal from Wolinda, two Dark Riders moved towards the innkeeper. One grabbed his left arm and twisted it behind Esta's back. The other produced a large hunting knife and held it to Master Tern's neck, the point drawing a small pinprick of blood. "I don't know is not good enough, innkeeper," Wolinda scowled. "I want the two boys and you will tell me where they are."

"I can not tell you what I do not know, Mistress," pleaded Master Tern. "If I knew, surely I would tell you. The boys mean nothing to me."

Wolinda smiled as she nodded to the Dark Riders. The Dark Rider pushed up on Esta's arm and the sharp crack of bones reverberated through the room. Esta howled with pain and his movement caused a cut on his neck from the knife blade being held by the other Dark Rider.

Master Tern's eyes rolled with pain and his legs weakened, even as he tried to remain still to avoid further damage from the knife. He gritted his teeth as he grunted his reply. "As well I know they have left the town. I heard stories that they went north for adventure, but I do not know for sure. The tall boy brings rabbits every morning, but the last two days he has not come around. Sometimes he goes fishing with his father, but I know he did not today or yesterday. I know nothing further. My only association with the boy is buying rabbits. The other boy is a lay-about and I have no association with him. Kill me if you must, but I know nothing more."

Wolinda scowled and stormed out the door into the street. The Dark Riders followed after tossing Esta to the floor. His scream of pain could be heard clearly in all of the rooms in the inn. When the customers were sure that the Dark Riders had left they slowly filed down to the common room to help the innkeeper.

Wolinda led the Dark Riders down to the waterfront. She sent six into Arik's house and six into Tedi's house with orders to find anything that might indicate relatives other than the fathers. With the rest of her henchmen, she strode along the waterfront looking for anyone that she could squeeze information from. The only person visible was a woman trying to drag her toddler into the house. Wolinda signaled two of her men and they swept the child up and seized the mother.

"I am looking for Arik Clava and Tedi Markel," Wolinda spat. "You are going to tell me where they are or your child will try taking its next step on the bottom of the sea." Taking Wolinda's statement as an order, the Dark Rider with the child marched out onto a small dock and held the child over the edge.

The woman and the child started crying together. "I know the boys," blubbered the mother, "but I don't know where they are. I haven't seen them for days."

The Dark Rider holding the child by its feet started lowering the body towards the water. When the child's hair got wet, the mother started babbling. "I do know something that might help," she screamed.

The man stopped lowering the child's body and Wolinda snapped, "Well, out with it! I don't have all day to wait."

"I think they are planning on leaving," she shouted. "Master Clava has been going all over town trying to raise money. He refuses to say why, but he normally has no use for money other than food and taking care of his boat. The boys haven't been in town for days and the fathers have been sleeping in the woods. I've seen them coming and going down that path over there. And they were gathering things that people would want on a trip. Last night, they hauled all of the stuff into the woods and came out this morning with nothing. That's all I know."

Wolinda called to her men and headed towards the woods. The Dark Rider with the child let go and the child went head first into the water. The mother ran screaming out onto the dock to retrieve her child. Wolinda sent two Dark Riders ahead of her down the path. Eventually, they came to the clearing where the boys had camped.

"They camped here for several days," one of the men stated. "The only useful tracks are back the way we came and towards the sea. Whatever tracks there were by the sea have been washed away."

"They think they are being clever," chuckled Wolinda. "Letting the sea cover their tracks would be a good trick if the choice of which direction they went was greater than two. If they went north, they would end up back in town. Get the rest of the men and the horses, we head south."

"We will not make good time on the beach," mentioned one of the men. "Why not send a couple of trackers down the beach and the rest of us can use the coastal highway. If they left this morning, we will not catch them today, but the trackers can tell us where they left the beach. Tomorrow we will have them located and captured."

Wolinda gave the man an appraising look. "See to it," she stated, "and see if anyone in this town has a map." Wolinda turned back down the path towards town.

Garth finished his exercises and wiped the sweat from his body with a towel. Exercising by himself was never as satisfying as sparring with a partner, but Kalina was not one for swordplay. Still, Garth needed to keep fit and every night he exercised at least an hour. He turned towards the wagon and campfire and saw Kalina still sitting by the fire with a frown on her face. "What's the matter?" he quizzed. "Surely it is not real trouble or you would be more agitated, but something is bothering you."

"You will get no observation awards for that guess, Garth," she smiled. "It's the ring. I had hoped to find out more of their plans, but they haven't said two words the entire day. Wherever they are, I can hear the surf. From the sounds of setting up camp, I gather they walked on into the night, but that does not give me a good idea where they are."

"Does the sound get louder when you get closer?" Garth inquired. "If it does, perhaps we can move around until we draw nearer to them."

“No, it doesn’t work that way,” she replied. “The sound varies depending on the distance the sound is from the ring, but it does not matter how far from the ring we are. If I could just hear something distinctive, we would have some idea of where they are. I don’t like not being nearer to them.”

“Perhaps I can hear something that you don’t,” Garth offered. “It is worth a try.”

Kalina nodded and removed her earring, handing it to Garth. He held it up to his ear as he sat down next to the woman. For several long moments, he said nothing. Eventually, he smiled. “The waves are breaking on rocks,” he uttered. “Waves rolling into shore collapse on themselves, but these waves are crashing against the rocks and creating a spray. Is the sound you hear the same sound we would hear if we were standing where the ring is?”

“Yes,” responded Kalina. “Just as if your ear were the ring. Does that help at all?”

“Certainly,” smiled Garth. “I can tell you that they are not right at the rocks where the waves are crashing. They are maybe eighty to one hundred feet away. They are also at least thirty feet away from the nearest trees. You can hear the wind blowing through the trees, but it is not close. I can also hear the occasional flutter of bats, more than one. My guess is that tall outcropping we passed a couple of hours before stopping. It’s likely to have nesting spots for bats and it is one of the few places with rocks right up to the sea. And they are in a clearing. It is just a guess, but I would think it enough to go on.”

Kalina laughed. “I wonder how you would look in earrings,” she giggled as she reached to retrieve her earring from Garth. “You may be right or wrong, but I do feel better having some idea of where they are even if it is wrong. Tomorrow I would like to camp a little closer to them if we can manage that.”

“I could track them down and keep them in sight if you like,” offered Garth.

“No,” Kalina responded, “we can not take the chance that they might see you. The last thing we want to do right now is spook them. They are so skeptical of strangers that we would lose them for sure. Especially that Tedi. I don’t think he even trusts himself. We need to let them get themselves in trouble so we can come to their aid. It is the only chance of drawing them close to us and even that is a slim chance.”

“I would be more tempted to just grab them and bend them to our will,” commented Garth. “I think we take too many chances letting them run free. They need to be reeled in and put under yoke.”

“You do have a brutal way of expressing your gentleness,” she chuckled. “Is that how you handle me? Have you got me sufficiently harnessed?”

Garth reached over and grabbed Kalina with his arm, drawing her nearer. A strong scent of jasmine caressed his nose as he hugged her. “You know,” he cooed, “this could be one of the last times we have alone for a long time.”

Kalina leaned back and kissed his lips. “While that is true,” she smiled, “you smell more like a mule than a man. Perhaps a trip to the stream will make you more desirable or do you prefer sleeping with the animals?”

“Am I still here?” he laughed as he headed for the stream. Kalina watched his muscular form as he walked away. So much of life had changed since she met Garth, but he was right. If everything went according to plan, they would not have much time alone together for a long time. Perhaps tomorrow the plan will start falling into place.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 6

Forgum

Niki Forloe watched the short, wiry boy approaching the shack with a self-assured saunter, his dark brown hair blowing gently in the breeze. His brown eyes darted left and right, not for fear of anyone sneaking up on him, but as if to assure himself that the rabble kept its distance. Niki laughed to herself. Fredrik Wason was the rabble as far as anyone else was concerned, but Fredrik always maintained the air of being superior. The buxom young girl hoped that His Highness managed to steal some food this time. Any less to eat and Niki would start losing her figure and that was unacceptable. If Fredrik couldn't start taking care of her like the Princess she should be, she would find somebody who could. Niki waved her hand in the air and the door to the shack slid open smoothly allowing the young boy to enter. Fredrik glided in and placed a turkey on the table.

"A twelve pound tom," Fredrik proudly exclaimed, "and already stuffed and cooked to perfection."

"What about vegetables?" complained Niki. "Meat by itself is not good for the digestion. Honestly, Fredrik, you promised that we would be living like royalty and all you can do is pinch a turkey."

Fredrik turned and frowned at the young redhead. Her curly hair was neatly combed, but the blue satin dress was obviously a poor fit. "You shouldn't be using magic for such mundane things as opening doors," he scolded. "One of these days somebody will detect you using magic and there will be the demon to pay for it. If you must use magic so often, why don't you use it to make your dress fit better."

"The nerve of you ordering me around," she protested. "I'm not a bloody seamstress. I'm a princess and I demand to be treated as one. Look at this shack! Is this the type of palace that a princess belongs in? If I didn't use my magic, I wouldn't even have a dress to need altering."

"Quite true," Fredrik laughed, "but you didn't have to leave the poor woman in the street naked, did you?"

Niki laughed too. "Probably not," she admitted, "but it certainly made a convenient diversion. Nobody was watching us get away. Really, though, Fredrik, this place is not to my liking. I deserve better, much better."

"I couldn't agree with you more," conceded Fredrik, "but is it my fault that Forgum has been overrun by rogue armies? Too many people knew us in Trekum and you got us run out of Caldor by tossing all of those guardsmen around like toy soldiers."

"They were toy soldiers," Niki insisted. "Besides, I refuse to put up with their insolent behavior. Just because I'm smaller than them, they think they can have their way with me. Well, they hadn't reckoned with who I am. They'll think twice at accosting a woman again."

"I'm sure they will," sighed Fredrik. Niki was Fredrik's only friend, but there were times when he

wondered why women had to be so pushy. She seemed to delight in impressing people with her magic, mindless of the possible repercussions if the wrong people knew of her ability. The only place for a magician today was in the Black Devils serving the Dark One and Fredrik had no desire to serve anyone. Anyone found with the ability was given a choice of joining the Black Devils or dying. The only exception might be to endear yourself to one of the great armies. They would welcome the skill and give some measure of protection against the Black Devils, but that option also entailed serving someone. Fredrik wished Niki wouldn't live so dangerously.

“What are you thinking about?” quizzed Niki as she cut slabs of turkey to put on the two plates.

Fredrik snapped his head around and realized that his mind had been far away. “Oh, I was just thinking that maybe we should head for the next town north. Perhaps it will not be destroyed like this one. Cidal is a good-sized town and should present some better opportunities.”

“Is there a palace there?” Niki inquired. “You haven't forgotten your promise to make me a queen have you?”

“I didn't promise to make you a queen,” Fredrik reminded her. “I said I could see you in a palace someday.”

“It's the same thing,” insisted Niki. “Let's eat this while it's hot, but next time try to remember some vegetables.”

“All right,” Fredrik agreed, “but in the morning we travel north again. Maybe Cidal does have a palace.” Niki actually brightened up at that statement and was eager to get to bed early so they could leave first thing in the morning.

The gray sky of morning came too soon for Fredrik, but he slid into his brown leather pants, tan woolen shirt, and brown leather vest. Quietly he stepped outside and strode down an alley that ran behind the businesses along the coastal highway. In a short time, he came to the stables behind one of the inns and spoke to the stable boy as he walked past.

“Can you believe it?” he asked. “After all these years, we finally have an Emperor again.”

The stable boy started running to catch up to him. “What do you mean, an Emperor?” he inquired. “You mean here in Forgum?”

Fredrik stopped and turned towards the boy. “Why, yes, haven't you heard?” Fredrik asked in mocking shock. “He's entering the town on the coastal road from the south at this very moment. Word is he's looking for people to serve him in the new palace they are going to start building tomorrow. Forgum is going to be the capital. I'd like to stay and tell you more, but word is that only the first few to greet him will get the high-paying positions and I want to be one of them.”

“But you're not much older than me,” protested the stable boy.

“The new Emperor likes his people to be young,” Fredrik insisted. “Sorry, but I've got to be moving along.”

Fredrik snickered to himself as he watched the stable boy's reaction. The boy was looking around frantically to see if anyone would notice if he left his post. Fredrik continued sauntering down the alley and caught a flash as the stable boy went running between buildings to the highway. The fact that he

didn't run down the alley past Fredrik indicated that he was willing to take the extra chance of getting caught by the innkeeper to beat Fredrik to the Emperor. Fredrik smiled as he turned around and entered the stables. He quickly threw saddles on the two closest horses and led them along the alley back to the shack.

Although he hadn't awakened her before slipping out, Niki was already packed and ready to go. "We need to hurry," Fredrik simply said.

Niki needed no explanation and mounted one of the horses. Fredrik mounted the other horse and they headed out of town to the north. "How much of a lead do you suppose we have?" Niki calmly inquired as she inspected her face in a small round mirror that she had acquired in Trekum and greatly treasured.

"The boy won't be too eager to admit he was so stupid," Fredrik commented dryly. "Still, we will have an hour at the most, much less if the owners of the horses decide to leave. If we hear anything coming, we'll cut into the woods and watch them pass. We can determine if they're looking for us before we need to take a different path to get to Cidal."

Fredrik looked admiringly at the dark green leather outfit that Niki wore today. Unlike the dress she wore last night, the leathers fit her exceedingly well. Of course, they should fit well considering the price he paid in Trekum. Fredrik had enjoyed life in Trekum, gambling with groups of guards and mercenaries who had too much pay to know what to do with. They had always considered Fredrik to have too much luck, but they enjoyed his company and they always liked it when he brought Niki along. Fredrik enjoyed the lifestyle of the old capital city, even if there were occasional times when someone got an overheated temper during a game. It had been one of those occasions that had forced them to leave Trekum. The guard had accused Fredrik of cheating again and Fredrik had laughed at him as he always did. The guard drew a dagger and was threatening Fredrik. All of this had happened before and Fredrik always dealt with it using words, but Niki had been along at that game and she did not realize that the threat was just the guard's frustration at losing. She reacted instinctively and forced the guard's dagger into his own stomach. The rest of the guards had leaped to their feet in anger and magic was the only way that Fredrik and Niki could survive long enough to get out of the city.

Then there was the incident in Caldor. Niki again had used magic to attack guards that she thought were getting overly friendly. Niki always seemed to resort to magic before trying any other way of handling things. It was a habit that Fredrik had to break her of if they were going to survive.

Fredrik's thoughts were disrupted by the sounds of galloping horses coming from behind. "No illusions," Fredrik warned as he and Niki turned quickly into the woods. They had no sooner secured cover, when a dozen Dark Riders appeared around a bend in the road and went thundering past. The pair sat silently for several long minutes listening as the sound of the galloping horses faded away.

"They certainly weren't after a horse thief," Niki whispered.

"No, they weren't," agreed Fredrik. "I'm glad I mentioned no illusions. Niki, I've been thinking about the dangers of using magic too quickly. It is surely going to get us killed. I think this incident helps to illustrate how easily we could slip up. We were expecting someone after us because of the horses, so we had time to hide, but we cannot always expect to be lucky. We have to start being more careful."

"Careful?" snorted Niki. "Do you mean like being careful when the guard in Trekum was going to gut you? Magic is a skill just like wielding a sword. It is only being smart to use it when you are endangered."

“But sometimes using it can endanger you,” Fredrik insisted. “I only ask that you think of some other way before you resort to magic. Detection can mean death.”

Niki sniffed and turned her horse towards the road. Fredrik clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, but he followed her and soon the pair were back on their way to Cidal. They rode on in silence for several hours, encountering no other traffic on the road. Eventually, they decided to stop early for the night and worked their way down to the coast where they found a quiet clearing close to beach. Niki jumped off her horse and announced that she was going for a swim. Fredrik quickly grabbed the reins of her horse and sighed.

Fredrik went about taking care of the horses and setting up the campsite before he decided to check out the beach. Niki was frolicking naked in the surf, but what caught Fredrik’s attention was the beautiful, wide beach. There was a point sticking out directly to his right, but on his left was a sweeping wide, white sand and shell strip stretching northward for miles. The lines of shells stretching along the beach culminated in a large mound of shells near the point. The beach in Trekum was much narrower and people walking on them constantly crushed any shells there.

Fredrik walked down to the point and saw another long, uninhabited stretch of beach with palm trees leaning over it as if trying to reach the sea. He started poking the piles of shells and marveled at all the different types. For a long time all of his problems were nonexistent as he examined shell after shell, until Niki’s screams rang through the air.

Fredrik jumped to his feet and looked around the shell pile. Niki was standing waist deep in the water and using magic to deflect a rain of arrows heading towards her. Across the white strand of beach near the tree line were four men with bows sending arrows at Niki as fast as they could load. Niki was too busy deflecting arrows to cast any other spell at the men. Fredrik stood tall with his hands outstretched and felt the power begin to well up. The power filling him had an intoxicating effect and he had to focus his mind back on the men. He had already soaked in enough power to obliterate them several times over. Without further thought, he flicked his wrists and the sky crackled open and a huge streak of lightning arced down and struck in the middle of the four men.

Niki stopped screaming and came out of the water and Fredrik ran to her. Together they stared at the massive crater that marked the spot where the men had stood. There was nothing left of the men. Where they had stood was a glowing depression with walls of heated glass. The palm trees on either side of the hole were scorched black and the fronds were burning brightly and dropping to the ground. Several coconuts hissed and burst apart, throwing chunks of coconut meat flying.

“Get dressed,” Fredrik ordered. “We need to get out of here now! The force I used was too much by far and it could probably be felt for miles around. I don’t want to be anywhere near here when someone decides to investigate.”

Niki got dressed while Fredrik swept up the campsite and hastily packed it away. When Niki mounted, Fredrik handed her the reins for two of the horses the men had ridden. He took the other two and they headed north by way of a trail through the woods.

After they had ridden for a while, Niki broke the silence. “You killed them, Fredrik. You didn’t try to stun them or freeze them; you just killed them. I didn’t know you had such power.”

“I didn’t know, either,” admitted Fredrik. “I’ve never used magic that powerful before. I only planned to stun them, but I couldn’t stop drawing power. I was so angry that I just grabbed for the

power and it . . . it felt good. Sort of like warmth flowing into your body on a cold winter night. I had to work at it to stop drawing the power and start using it. I was more surprised than you with what happened.”

They were quiet for a while with only the sounds of lapping waves off to their right and the birds flitting around overhead, chirping and cawing. “I didn’t mean to kill them,” Fredrik continued, “but I couldn’t let them hurt you. “Besides, there is no undoing it now. I do think that we need to practice our magic more, though, and we cannot do that in a city. Without practice we will not have the proper control we need to measure our responses to threats. I think we have probably gone far enough away from the crater to safely camp for the night.”

Niki just nodded and started looking for a clearing. Fairly soon, she found a suitable one and dismounted. This time she helped Fredrik set up the campsite and take care of the horses. They dined on some of the leftover turkey and sat quietly across the campfire from each other. “What did you mean before when you talked about drawing the power?” she asked. “Drawing it from where?”

Fredrik got up, walked around the fire and sat next to her. “When I was younger and realized that I had a special gift, I used to use it for pranks. I didn’t know much about what I had or how to use it, so most of the time the prank ended up being on me. One day I heard some men talking about the magicians of the Black Devils, so I followed them. They had a house on the edge of Trekum that they used for a meeting place and a spot for them to practice. For months, I used to go to the house before light came and climb up on the roof. I would watch them all day and listen to their meetings until well after dark. That is where I learned most about magic.”

“It’s probably where you gained your dislike for the Black Devils, too,” guessed Niki.

“Yes, that too,” admitted Fredrik. “They all talked boldly about how great they were when no one was around, but as soon as somebody important showed up, they were all down on their faces in fear, bowing and scraping. There didn’t seem to be any purpose in belonging to the Black Devils except to learn and I was getting that anyway. The only thing they seemed to do in an organized fashion was to send out teams to punish selected people or go in teams on the Great Hunt.”

“What is the Great Hunt?” interrupted Niki.

“That was the worst part,” sighed Fredrik. “The Great Hunt was an edict handed down by the Dark One. The Black Devils are supposed to be looking for children who were born in the year of the Collapse.”

“But that’s when we were born,” stated Niki. “What did they want with kids our age?”

“Death, mostly,” answered Fredrik. “It seems there is some old, moldy prophecy that the Dark One wants fulfilled and it requires the death of a couple of kids born in the year of the Collapse. Not just any kids, but two particular kids. The members of the Great Hunt were to determine the parentage of the individuals found. If they had a certain parentage, they were to be captured alive. If not, they were to be murdered, just in case they might miss the real ones that they were searching for.”

“Now I know why you are dreadfully afraid of being discovered by the Black Devils,” interjected. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? At least your demand that I not use magic so frivolously would have made sense.”

“Would you have stopped using it?” he asked.

“Probably not,” she conceded, “but at least your request would make sense. That still doesn’t explain about drawing power and why you never taught me to do it. You taught me everything else.”

“Exactly,” Fredrik laughed, “and look what trouble that has brought me.” Fredrik ignored her hurt scowl and continued. “One of the things that I learned up on the roof, was that power exists in everything, not just ourselves. You can use the power within yourself to accomplish something, but it diminishes you like running makes you tired and requires that you rest. If you can draw your power from other things, you can use your power longer and more forcefully. I didn’t feel right teaching you about it, because I’ve never really learned to use it myself. I tried it once and it was frightening. I thought I was going to burst open like a ripe melon.”

“But if we are going to have to defend ourselves against the Black Devils, we will need every edge we can get,” Niki stated.

“It’s not that simple, Niki,” Fredrik declared. “Not every magician can draw on the power of other things. It is almost like another gift in addition to the magical gift, but I’m not sure. I do know that most of the Black Devils were unable to attain any power outside themselves, at least the bunch that I observed. What we really need to find is a tutor who is not connected with the Black Devils.”

“Fat chance of finding one,” she said disappointingly. “Still, you could teach me or test me to see if I have the potential.”

“No,” Fredrik said too loudly. Softer, he continued, “I don’t feel safe using it, Niki. I would not forgive myself if I taught you and you blew up. After we get settled in Cidal, we will put feelers out for tutors, but in such a way that will not lead back to us.”

“You just don’t want me being as powerful as you,” she berated, “. . . or more powerful. Well, if you won’t teach me, I’ll just find someone who will.”

Niki went and lay down on a blanket to go to sleep, covering herself with her old cloak, a white cloak with gold trim and a sunburst upon the left breast. Within moments she was asleep. Fredrik sat staring at her for a long time. She was a very beautiful girl with her flaming red hair and pert nose, but sometimes he wished he were traveling alone. She never seemed to listen to reason and never missed an opportunity to punish him with silence at some unseen offense he was supposed to have committed. Eventually, Fredrik went to bed still mystified about the ways of women.

The next day the pair wound their way back to the coastal highway and towards Cidal. There was very little traffic on the road and the people they passed did no more than acknowledge the couple. Several days later they reached the outskirts of Cidal and immediately proceeded to a less traveled street. Like most towns, there were some abandoned houses and Fredrik picked the one that seemed to be in the best shape and yet out of the way. They did pick up a few strange glares entering the house, but most people were afraid to say anything to strangers. Still, they could not stay here long before somebody reported their presence in the house to whoever passed as the authorities in Cidal.

After they got settled in, Fredrik went out alone to see what the town was like. Cidal was in much better shape than Forgum as no army had yet ravaged it. There was a fair amount of people and the businesses seemed to be doing rather well. Fredrik visited some of the inns, always blending in and keeping to the shadows, and picked up the local rumors. There was a local organization of mercenaries, which probably accounted for the fact that Cidal had not been plundered yet. The most important piece of information was of the Black Devils who had left town this morning. They had obviously killed an old

sea captain and taken over his mansion while in Cidal. Fredrik learned the name of the sea captain and hurried back to Niki. Within moments, Fredrik and Niki were back out of town in the woods where they dressed in their finest outfits. Fredrik was dressed in gray flannel breeches with a fine white shirt whose wrinkles were covered by a gray flannel vest. Niki donned a violet silk dress with white frilled sleeves and a lavender sash around her waist.

Once suitably attired, the pair strode into town with Fredrik leading the train of six horses. This time everyone turned and stared at them as they walked along the coastal highway. Niki walked right up to a group of mercenaries that seemed to include an officer or at least someone whom the others deferred to. The men all stared at her and she had to push back images of drooling dogs else she would ruin her entrance.

“Excuse me, kind Sir,” she cooed, “but we are just in from Trekum and I am seeking my uncle, Amos Alrecht. “Could you possibly direct me? We’ve had such a dreadful journey with the wagon burning and all and I really wish to make an early night of it.”

The smiling faces all grew dim at the mention of the old sea captain and most of the group melted away. The authoritative man remained and appraised her. “Your uncle, you say?” he asked. “Old Amos never mentioned any kin to me.”

Niki had to strain her neck to look up at the man. “Well, that is quite a minor problem, Sir. I can assure you that I am his niece as I am sure he will also attest, but that is no concern of yours. I am merely asking for directions to his home so I might settle in with my brother.”

The man appeared suitably rebuffed, but eventually nodded. “All right, Mistress Alrecht, I can show you to his home, but you won’t be finding old Amos there, I’m afraid.”

“Well, if he is not in, I am sure he will return soon, Sir,” she smiled. “He is, after all, expecting us.”

“It is not that he is out, Mistress,” the man frowned. “Old Amos was killed a few days ago by Black Devils. They claimed he was a sorcerer. When we found out, it was too late to do anything for Amos and it didn’t make much sense to start a war with the Black Devils over something that could not be undone.”

The man lowered his head sheepishly; obviously ashamed of letting the Black Devils have their way within his domain. Niki collapsed in the street and Fredrik let go of the horses and rushed to her aid. He frowned up at the mercenary, but nodded at the man. “It’s all right, Sir,” Fredrik added. “Similar tragedies have occurred in the South as well. I’m sure you and your men would have done something if you had known before it happened. Could you have some of your men grab our horses and help us to his house?”

The man was only too eager to help Amos’ kin after not avenging his death. Fredrik and Niki allowed the men to fawn over them and see them safely put into Amos’ mansion. The head mercenary introduced them to the servants and scowled at any objections to the youngsters moving in. By the time the mercenary left, the servants were satisfactorily cowed to accept their new Lord and Lady.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 7

Escape

Arik and Tedi rose at first light and surveyed the area they had chosen to camp at the night before. “It’s a good thing we didn’t try to roam around last night,” Tedi commented, looking over the cliff to the sea. The promontory they were on was about eighty feet above where the waves crashed into the rocks below. The view was spectacular with long vistas of beach, both north and south. This was clearly the highest point for some distance and afforded glimpses of the coastal highway farther inland where the trees were sparse enough to see through or the view was not blocked by the plateau itself.

Arik fixed breakfast while Tedi stood inhaling the strong salt air. After a quick breakfast Tedi cleaned up the campsite while Arik checked out the surroundings. “Hey, Tedi,” Arik called. “I think I see something coming down the beach.”

Tedi ran over and looked northward. “I don’t see anything,” he remarked. “It’s too far to see anything, anyway. Maybe it’s just someone out for a morning walk.”

“Could be,” Arik muttered straining for a better view, “but not unless they’re on horseback and it looks like two people. Wait, they’ve stopped.”

Tedi looked once again, trying to make out what Arik was looking at. “I don’t know about seeing people or horses,” he commented, “but that looks like the area where we left the beach yesterday.”

“Yeah, well, they are, too,” Arik said hurriedly as he watched the tiny dots disappear into the forest. “I think someone might be tracking us. If they are on horseback, they’ll catch us for sure.”

“How do you know they are on horseback?” Tedi asked. “I can’t see anything at that distance.”

“By the relative size of the two dots,” Arik answered. “I think one of them got down for some reason and led his horse. I could be wrong, but can we afford to take a chance?”

Tedi thought for a while and said, “Horseback won’t help them that much on the trail we took yesterday. It was hardly more than an animal trail and not often used, at that.”

“Unless they swing out to the coastal highway,” declared Arik. Arik swung his eyes back to the only major road in the area and froze. “Tedi,” he whispered. “Look down at the road.”

Tedi joined his friend and looked where he was pointing. A large group of riders was gathered milling around, not traveling. “The trees are in the way,” Tedi frowned. “I can’t quite make out who they are or how many of them there are, but I am beginning to not like this.”

“I like it even less,” added Arik. “It looks like more than ten, but worst of all, one of them is almost assuredly a woman.”

“Okay, let’s keep calm,” instructed Tedi. “If they knew right where we were, we would have been dead on our blankets this morning.”

“You have a great way of making me feel calm,” Arik quipped. “We can’t outrun them if they have

even one fairly decent tracker. We can't go out to sea or to the road. A couple of them are coming in from the North. We really don't have much of a choice on which way to go."

"We do have the option of staying right here," declared Tedi. "This place is pretty defensible."

"I don't think I'm ready to start killing people even if they turn out to be Dark Riders," frowned Arik.

"Well, you better get ready, Arik," Tedi scolded. "If they come for us, it won't be to take us home to our fathers. Even if the witch is with them, Dark Riders don't openly track someone just to ask questions. Oh, she may ask some questions before she kills us, but you better believe that we'll end up dead no matter what. The Dark Riders don't normally leave anything alive behind them."

Arik stood staring at the milling riders on the road for several minutes. "Okay," Arik finally said, "we'll shoot if we have to, but staying here is suicide. We may kill some of them before they get us, but there are too many of them for us to win. We will head south trying to avoid them. If it comes to a fight, we'll fight, but we'll hide and avoid it if we can. We may kill fewer of them with this plan, but how many of them are dead will matter little to us if we are dead, too."

Tedi nodded his head in agreement and they both began gathering their gear. Quickly, they started southward down the steep path. When they reached the bottom, Arik stopped suddenly. "I have an idea," he declared excitedly. "Follow me."

Arik broke through the forest undergrowth with no regard to hampering the trackers and headed for the sea. When they reached the beach he was panting, but he did not stop. Arik waded right on out in the surf while continuing south. "Is this your good idea?" asked Tedi frantically. "We drown ourselves and deny the Dark Riders their fun?"

Arik stopped and smiled. "Okay, now that they are convinced that we hope to erase our tracks the same way we did at Lorgo, we walk north through the water until we reach the rocks below the promontory to our north. We can circle the bluff behind them and cross the coastal highway."

Tedi smiled at the idea until he looked towards the rocks that he had seen the surf crashing on from up above earlier. "You want us to cross those rocks?" Tedi blurted out.

Arik nodded. "Have you ever spent the night with Dark Riders?"

Tedi didn't even bother to answer, but started wading towards the rocks. The rocks were slippery and coated with some type of green slime wherever they had remained submerged for long periods of time. The salt spray here was intense and soon the boys' eyes were smarting. Several times they slipped and were submerged. Once Arik had to grab Tedi by the collar to keep him from being swept away or dashed on the rocks. Slowly the boys made their way to the base of the promontory and rested on the rocks. The effort of forcing their way through the surf had tired both boys. "Why did you head here instead of continuing around the North side of the rocks?" asked Tedi.

"Two reasons," panted Arik. "One, we have to be sure that the two riders we saw along the beach have already passed before we try to get behind them and two, look at the cliff face. It is hollowed out enough that we can stay here and rest and we can't be seen from the shore either to the North or the South. Three, I could use the rest."

Tedi chuckled and leaned back against the cold stonewall. The boys wiggled as far back as they could go so they could remain dry. "We can stay overnight back here if we have to," remarked Tedi. "I

think it is about high tide now. This far back would only get wet on a moon tide.”

“If we get some sleep now,” commented Arik, we can move out at low tide and it will be dark. Wherever our pursuers are they will be camped for the night and we should be able to avoid them fairly easily.”

Tedi agreed and the boys were tired enough to doze off.

“Where are they now?” asked Garth laying his bow on the seat of the wagon.

“They are sleeping at the foot of the cliff,” Kalina stated. “They are hoping the Dark Riders will pass them by and I think they might. Then they plan to cross over the road and lose the Dark Riders.”

“Nice if it worked,” Garth said simply. “The problem is the Dark Riders are not totally stupid. They will realize that they have been duped and that will lead them back to the cliff. It sounds like the boys have a defensible position, but they also have no reconnaissance capability. If they decide to leave their hole while the Dark Riders are near the cliff, they will be visible.”

“We could lose them before we can react to save them,” summarized Kalina. “This is not acceptable.”

“I agree,” Garth declared as he started moving. The bandit grabbed a coil of rope off of the wagon and retrieved his bow. “I want you to get the wagon about a half mile into the woods west of the coastal highway just north of the cliff. Avoid the Dark Riders at all costs. If you are not there when I need you, I will move directly south from that spot until we meet.”

“Where are you going, Garth?” she demanded.

“Me,” he laughed. “Why, I am going hunting. There are a couple of pigeons on the rocks, and I understand they are in season.”

Wolinda screamed at the men, “What do you mean, they didn’t come this way? Are you trackers or slackers? You told me they came south. You said that they hadn’t left the water and now you’re saying that they didn’t get this far. Explain yourself.”

The head Dark Rider stepped between the two scouts and faced Wolinda. “What they are saying is that the boys headed back north, Mistress. They must have done it very soon after they entered the water or we would have caught them already.”

“Now you’ve become a tracker, Klarg,” spat Wolinda. “I thought these two fine specimens were the trackers.”

“Enough, Wolinda,” Klarg cautioned as his men gathered around. Klarg was dressed like the rest of the Dark Riders in dark brown leathers with spurs on his boots and bands of metal spikes on their leather gauntlets, but he was also a massive hulk of a man. His imposing figure towered over the hardy witch. “My men wanted to check the area where the boys entered the water, but you were adamant about them heading south. You have no one but yourself to blame for this delay.”

Wolinda was stunned. She led this team and the stupid Dark Riders should know better than dispute

her authority. She could destroy every man here with her power and their leader hadn't even addressed her as Mistress. "You should have better control over your emotions, Klarg. I may be forced to punish you if you continue in this insolent manner."

"Do not be a fool, Wolinda," Klarg asserted, "and do not take me for one, either. You are in charge of this expedition and we have followed you without question, but it is the Dark One whom we both serve. If your actions jeopardize this mission, I would be within my rights to eliminate you, witch or no. I also have nineteen men to back my play. If you managed to kill all of us, you would still fail in your mission as you did back in Lorgo. And I'm sure you know that failure is death. My men and I are willing to follow your orders to accomplish our task, but do not blame them for your actions. If we must backtrack to capture these boys, let's be about it without recriminations. If you are acceptable to our agreement, we are ready to serve."

The color drained out of Wolinda's face. She burned with the desire to kill every one of these maggots, but Klarg was right. Without them she was likely to fail and one did not fail the Dark One. "Lead the men north, Klarg," she ordered.

Klarg slapped his fist to his chest in a salute. "I hear and obey, Mistress."

Arik and Tedi awoke to the sounds of horses not far off. Quickly, the boys sat up and tried to determine which direction the horses were coming from. It was already dark out and the water was at low tide, but the sounds echoed off the walls of their little hideaway and determining direction was impossible. The boys hefted their duffel bags and readied their bows. Arik slid down the rocks a way and tried to pick up the sounds again. It had gone deadly quiet and he stayed perched on the rocks waiting without movement. When he finally heard a sound, it was the sound of men wading through the water from the South. "There are men coming through the water," Arik whispered. "We need to move now or we will be trapped."

Tedi was already at Arik's side as the taller boy started edging across the rocks to the north. As the boys stepped into the water, they could hear shouts coming from behind them. Arik could distinctly hear a man bellow the order, "Take nine men with you over the top and cut them off." Frantically, Arik tried to run through the water, but succeeded only in kicking up more water.

"We aren't going to make it," Tedi shouted. "They will have us between them."

"Just keep going," demanded Arik. "Don't ever give up."

As the boys struggled through the thigh-high water, ten horsemen galloped up the southern incline and across the plateau towards the northern path that led down to the other side of the rocks. The charge to encircle the boys quickly turned to chaos as the first four riders succumbed to a rope stretched across the path at neck height, right where the path started down the northern slope. The rest of the group of Dark Riders reacted quickly enough to avoid the unseen rope, but confusion reigned as the forward riders turned their horses aside and the following riders smashed into them. While it might have been expected that several riders would fall from their saddles during such a collision, no one could mistake the sound of a bowstring singing as those riders fell.

"Bowmen towards the sea," shouted one of the Dark Riders. "Dismount and take cover!"

One of the Dark Riders dismissed the orders and charged towards where he thought the bowmen must be hiding. A black shape hiding behind a bush near the cliff's edge hurled a Lanorian Star, which

struck the rider's forehead. The horse continued to carry the dead rider and plunged off the cliff striking the rocks below.

Garth took stock of his situation. Two of the lead riders were down and unmoving. Two were down, but writhing in pain. Three had fallen to arrows and one had charged over the cliff. That left two healthy Dark Riders trying to kill him and two who would regain their wits and functionality all too soon. Garth strained to see the two healthy riders, but the fool who had charged had distracted him and now they were well hidden. Garth crawled slowly along the edge of the cliff towards the two fallen riders who had hit the rope. He caught a momentary glance of one of the healthy riders doing the same, but heading for the point. He froze for a second to make sure that the other man had not spotted him and then continued on.

Garth reached the last bush before the northern path where his rope had helped even the odds. The two wounded men lay curled in fetal positions holding their faces and howling in pain. Garth knew he had to find the last healthy man before risking exposure of himself in the open to finish these two wounded men. Laying a Lanorian Star in the dirt before him, Garth stole a glance behind him to see if the point man had decided to come back this way. Satisfied that he had a few moments to complete his task, Garth reached into a long narrow pouch and extracted a long tube and two slender myric quills. The myric quills were poisonous and taken from an animal that inhabited marshlands. Their use as a weapon was pioneered by the Targan Rangers, a group of elite soldiers in Targa before the Collapse, but most bandits and mercenaries shunned their use because obtaining the quills often led to the death of the gatherer. The poison in the quills was so strong that it produced instant death and many a gatherer failed on their first attempt.

Garth fed a quill into the long blow tube and raised it to his lips. Steadily, he sighted on the farthest man and blew. He reloaded the tube as quickly as he could because he knew that the cut off of the man's screams would bring his enemy running towards him. Garth sent the second dart into the closest man and shoved the tube into its pouch as he lifted the Lanorian Star he had placed in the dirt with his other hand. The two remaining Dark Riders were charging his position, one from the point behind him and the other from across the clearing by the south path. Had Garth been visible, arrows would be coming his way instead of charging men. Garth leaped to his feet and hurled the Lanorian Star at the man coming from the point. Even as he watched the man clutching his bleeding throat as he tumbled off the cliff, Garth pulled his large sinuous sword from the scabbard on his back. Holding his great sword with both hands, Garth twirled just in time to slice through the last Dark Rider's midsection.

Garth ran to the four dead men by the rope and cut off two of their scabbards before wiping his blade clean on one of the dead men and sheathing it. He grabbed the two Dark Rider swords and ran down the path to the North.

Arik and Tedi heard the shouts and screams from above and hurried on. Tedi continuously turned his head to look behind himself for any signs that the men were getting closer. He never caught sight of the men, but he gasped when he saw the Dark Rider and horse plummet over the cliff to the rocks below. The boys had just made it to shore when another Dark Rider bounced off the side of the cliff and landed on his back in front of them, a Lanorian Star buried in his throat. The boys leaped over the body and continued running though their legs felt like they were about to give up.

Trying to run through the undergrowth was almost as difficult as running through the water and both boys were getting very tired. As they broke through the bushes to the path that paralleled the seacoast, they both came to an abrupt halt. The bandit from Lorgo stood directly in front of them holding the reins to three horses in one hand and two sheathed swords in the other. "Why am I not surprised that it is you two who are causing so much fuss?" chuckled Garth.

The two boys looked at each other and started slowly backing up. "Let me guess," Tedi spat, "you expect us to believe that you aren't one of the Dark Riders who are chasing us. We give you our weapons and you escort us back to their camp so they can torture us before killing us."

Garth just smiled and tossed the two sheathed swords at their feet. "I would hardly welcome your company, fisherboy, but Kalina thinks you are worthy of rescuing from the Dark Riders. You can have the swords and two of their horses to do with what you want. If you come with me, I can offer you safety. If not, then take the horses and get going where you will, but make your mind up now because I am not waiting. I've killed ten of them up on the plateau, but there are ten more coming as we speak, as well as a witch, and I am getting tired of killing men for the sake of boys." Garth stepped forward and shoved the reins of two of the horses towards the boys. Arik stepped forward and grabbed the reins. Garth twirled and mounted his horse as soon as Arik had taken the reins.

The sounds of men shouting behind them indicated that the Dark Riders pursuing them had found the body that had fallen from above. "Time's up, fisherboy," Garth whispered. "Follow or flee, I head west." Garth took off heading for the coastal highway.

Arik and Tedi exchanged glances and quickly picked up the swords and mounted their new horses. "I don't suppose being hung as horse thieves is any worse than being killed for no reason at all," Arik remarked as he turned his horse westward.

"Surely you don't believe his story," Tedi quipped as he turned to follow. "You don't really think one man could have killed ten Dark Riders by himself? And who is this Kalina?"

Arik sighed as he followed the path that the bandit had made through the bushes. "I don't know if he did it by himself," stated Arik, "but I have no doubt that the Dark Riders died up there on the plateau. These scabbards have been cut off somebody's body and there was blood on the blade that cut them. These horses didn't just wander in from the road and the Dark Riders who were supposed to be coming over the top of the plateau never made it. Think what you want, but I am inclined to follow this bandit, at least until I learn more of what is going on."

"I think he is one of them and that this Kalina whom he is taking us to is the witch who held us on the docks in Lorgo," Tedi declared.

"Well, my father said that this man was a killer," argued Arik. "He certainly just had the chance to kill us without anyone finding out and he didn't. That means, to me, that we can trust him to some degree. I don't mean to trust him very far, but right now we need a safe place to hide and figure out what is going on. I don't know of any other solution, Tedi."

The boys soon came to the coastal highway and crossed over it. A short way into the woods they came to a small clearing with the bandit and two horses standing in it. One horse was the one the bandit had left the battle on. The other was a large, beautiful black stallion. "I had to stop and get my own horse," explained Garth. "If you boys have decided to accept our safety, just continue heading west. I will follow and make sure that no Dark Riders are tracking us."

Arik simply nodded and continued across the clearing and westward.

Klarg was studying the placement of the bodies and the method by which each was killed when Wolinda reached the plateau. "What happened here?" she demanded.

“It would appear that our little boys had some help this evening,” Klarg explained. “Several very skilled assassins, if you ask me.”

“Why assassins and not mercenaries?” inquired Wolinda.

“The weapons and methods used, Mistress,” Klarg answered. “Perhaps several mercenaries and one assassin. That is possible. Lanorian Stars are used by some very skilled mercenaries, but myric quills are used only by highly skilled assassins. They are extremely dangerous to use. A single prick while loading one will lead to instant death. No mercenary would risk ending his career with such a dubious weapon.”

“Are you sure that they were here to help the boys?” Wolinda asked.

“No,” replied Klarg, “I am not. The rope was meant to create a killing ground and allow for a slaughter during the confusion. Bandits have used such tricks in the past to snare a quarry, but it normally requires horsemen traveling at great speed to have any real effect. That is what puzzles me. Why put such a trap on this plateau? I would expect bandits to target the coastal highway, not some seldom used path.”

“Could it have been the boys, themselves?” Wolinda queried.

“Not a chance,” laughed Klarg. “This was professionally done. If it was done to aid the boys, it was very lucky. I, myself, did not know that I would send riders along this path until I actually did so. No, Mistress, I think we may have just stumbled into a bandits’ den by accident. The rope was probably part of a standard campsite protection and they were only alerted by the noise from down below when we spotted the boys. That is the only scenario that makes any sense.”

“What does that mean for our mission, Klarg,” Wolinda inquired.

“Unfortunately, our two trackers were among the ten dead men,” Klarg responded. “The spooked horses have left so many trails through the bushes that we will not find the proper trail until we have more light. I suggest that I go to Toresh and get replacements. I think ten men is enough to get the boys, but if there are bandits in the area who do not fear to kill Dark Riders, we should have a company strong enough to deal with them, as well. Plus, we need to replace the trackers.”

Wolinda thought a moment before responding. “Your plan is acceptable, Klarg,” she began, “but send one of your men instead of going yourself. If this is a bandits’ lair, your expertise in leading the men will be valuable should they decide to return and attack during the night.” Wolinda would never have stated her real reasons for keeping Klarg close. Once in Toresh, Klarg could report on Wolinda’s lack of progress and without Klarg around to contain his men, Wolinda might not wake up from her night’s sleep.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 8

Young Lord

Niki yawned and stretched in her fine, white silk robe while standing on the balcony overlooking the sea. At first Niki had been put out that the servants had assigned her to guest quarters instead of the Master's Suite, but that was before she discovered the rich wardrobe of clothes in various sizes and styles. Fredrik also pointed out that they were supposed to be brother and sister and putting one of them in the Master's Suite would naturally insult the other. The servants had, after all, made the correct decision. Surely, the old sea captain's mansion was not a Royal Palace, but Niki had never seen a palace and this was more than she expected. She had a bedroom that was larger than any house she had ever been in and it was only one of several rooms that were hers alone. Even the balcony she stood on, overlooking the peasants running around below, was larger than the house she grew up in. She stood there for a long while soaking up the sea air and listening to the bustle of the townspeople running about below.

A knock at the door disturbed her and, reluctantly, she turned and made her way through the suite of rooms to the entry. Opening the door, she saw a man standing there in a rich, red velvet suit with vest and coat and a white, frilled shirt with fluffy sleeves protruding from the cuffs of the coat. It took her a moment to recognize the man as Fredrik. Laughing, she threw open the door to admit her partner. Fredrik sauntered in like he was the Lord of the manor, a stride that Fredrik had perfected long before Niki had met him.

“What brings the Lord to his Lady's Suite?” chuckled Niki.

Fredrik hurriedly closed the door and took up position in one of the large cushioned chairs. “I just wanted see how my Lady was accepting her transition,” he smiled smugly. “This place is huge. I've been wandering around for an hour and I doubt that I've seen all of it. This old sea captain must have been a smuggler to afford something this grand.”

“Well,” she chided, “I think I did rather well getting us in here, but don't you think for a moment that I have let you go of your pledge to make me a queen. Perhaps you can organize the rabble down below into some kind of kingdom for me to rule. Those mercenaries will do for a Palace Guard while we look for someone more suitable and then we can have them organize an army to take over any neighboring countries.”

Fredrik looked at her with disbelief. Could she really think getting in here was her idea? Get the mercenaries to bow to her? Maybe she really was crazy. Grand fantasies were one thing, but what she was proposing was suicide. “I never promised to make you a queen,” he stated. “I said that I would like to see you in a palace. Now that I have, I do think it becomes you.”

“You will serve in my court, also,” she continued as if not hearing a word he said. “Perhaps I will have you as my Royal Consort.”

“We are best to avoid the mercenaries,” Fredrik reminded her. “They have let us in here because it costs them nothing and avoids embarrassment of their failure to do anything with the Black Devils. If we do anything that might upset them, you will be surprised how quickly they acknowledge their mistake. Where are your old clothes?”

Niki snapped out of her fantasy. “In the closet in the bedroom,” she answered. “Why do you want my old clothes?”

“I asked Miranda to have our old clothes washed today,” Fredrik said. “I do not know how long we will be here, but I want our clothes to be clean and packed in case we have to leave quickly.”

“Leave?” she asked incredulously. “Why would we ever want to leave here? We just got here and you’re talking about moving on already.”

“I am not planning on leaving just yet, Niki,” he declared emphatically. “I just believe in being prepared. One can never know what tomorrow will bring.”

As if on cue, there was a knock on the door followed by Miranda poking her head in. “Does My Lady have wash today?” she inquired. “Perhaps your traveling clothes could use a refreshing?”

“They’re in the closet in the bedroom, Miranda,” Fredrik directed. “And thank you for your prompt service.”

Miranda went and retrieved Niki’s clothes and returned to leave. She bowed to Fredrik and said, “Your thanks are most welcome Lord Wason. Certainly not necessary, but graciously welcome.”

“Take extra care of my cloak,” demanded Niki. “I intend on wearing it on my Coronation Day and I don’t want you mucking it up.”

Miranda looked confused but merely nodded and withdrew from the suite. Quickly, she hurried downstairs to have Alicia do the wash. When she reached the servants’ quarters, Alicia was talking with Orthan, the Lord’s butler. “Humph,” Miranda began, “that Fredrik is all right, a pleasant boy at least, but that Niki, I’ll strangle her with my own hands before too long.”

“Now, now,” admonished Orthan, “we went through all of this last night. We all know they are not who they claim to be. For goodness sake, Lord Alrecht did not even have any brothers or sisters so he certainly couldn’t have nephews and nieces, but without a Lord or Lady in the manor, we will all be out in the streets. I, for one, am willing to put up with this charade for as long as we can make it last.”

“He’s right, Miranda,” agreed Alicia. “We can’t afford to be out on the street. It would kill us for sure. There is no other Lord or Lady in Cidal who will employ us and there are more than enough beggars already so that none of them can get enough to eat. You’ll just have to grin and bear it.”

“Not quite,” snapped Miranda, “I am the head maid here and I have decided that you will be the one to deal with our Lady Niki from now on. We shall see just how well you grin and bear it.”

Alicia went storming off with the wash. “Was that really necessary?” asked Orthan. “We are all in the same boat, so to speak.”

“And how safe is our boat, Orthan?” Miranda inquired. “Does the young Lord have access to funds to pay us? Or even funds to pay for food? And what if our Lady decides to fire us? Do you have a plan for everything, Orthan?”

“We will take one step at a time, Miranda,” Orthan said fatherly. “I will work with Lord Fredrik Wason to solve all of our problems. The young man is a thief if ever I laid eyes on one. I will arrange for him to allow me to manage the finances of the estate. Once that is accomplished, I will sell off enough out-holdings to sustain all of us in comfort. The hard part will be in getting him the legal authority to then turn it over to me.”

“Well, you had better start your bargaining then, Orthan,” quipped Miranda, “before I strangle our Lady and they haul me away for murder.”

Orthan patted Miranda’s arm comfortingly and headed upstairs. He caught Fredrik just coming out of Niki’s suite. “Will My Lord spare me a few moments of his time?” Orthan asked Fredrik.

“Certainly, Orthan,” replied the young Lord. “Let us go into the study and we’ll see about what troubles you.”

The young Lord and his butler entered the study and Fredrik took the Lord’s chair without hesitation. “What seems to be the matter, Orthan?” Fredrik asked.

“The problem, my young Lord,” Orthan smiled, “is that Lord Alrecht had no brothers or sisters.”

Fredrik listened lazily and suddenly stiffened as the butler’s meaning sunk in. He reached for his dagger that he was not wearing in his new outfit. Orthan indicated that he should relax and sit back down. “I say that so we both know where we each stand,” Orthan said calmly. “I think with your cooperation, my Lord, we shall all get what we want out of this charade.”

Fredrik smiled cautiously as he realized all was not lost already. “And what is it that my butler wants out of this?” he asked.

Orthan pulled up a chair and sat down. “Our Lord, that is to say, Lord Alrecht, had no living kin. I can prove that and you two would be hung for the impersonation. Unfortunately, that would gain me nothing and I rather like you.”

Fredrik snorted at the last statement, but still managed to sound sincere when he asked, “And you have a plan, no doubt. What is your plan, Orthan?”

“The maids and myself have no desire to find permanence on the streets as beggars,” Orthan stated. “What I propose is a partnership. I will help you establish your right to remain as our Lord. You will execute documents giving me complete authority in financial matters. I know enough about Lord Alrecht’s holdings that I will make us all wealthy. We will continue to serve you as servants and you will promise that we will not be mistreated. We will wish for you to remain here as our Lord and protector and you will wish for us to remain safe as your humble servants. Everybody wins.”

Fredrik sat studying the elderly swindler. He had to admit the plan had great merit and he had nothing to lose. The servants needed him or some other person with a claim to inheritance if they ever hoped to stay employed. Obviously, the servants were not about to just hand over everything without some safeguards for themselves. That is why Orthan insisted on holding the purse strings. That was purely a minor matter anyway. Whatever document he signed would be void if Orthan should suddenly die. Orthan could not do the same towards him or the estate would be empty again and the servants would be back in the position of being tossed out into the street. All in all, the agreement was fair and slightly in Fredrik’s favor.

“Well, partner,” Fredrik smiled, “it looks like we will have a mutually beneficial relationship for some time to come. If you will fetch some brandy, perhaps we can toast our new relationship.”

“Certainly, My Lord,” Orthan smiled. “It will be my pleasure.”

Orthan retrieved the brandy decanter and two glasses. Expertly pouring the liquid into the two

glasses, he picked one up and offered a toast. "To the new Lord of Alrecht Manor, Lord Wason, may he live in splendor 'til a ripe old age." Orthan sat back in the chair as they sipped their brandy. "Will the new Lord be available for company around the noon hour today?"

Fredrik squinted at the old man. "That can be arranged, Orthan. What do you have up your sleeve?"

"A painter friend of mine will be calling to ask for a sitting," Orthan chuckled. "He will be painting a portrait of Lord Alrecht with his favorite and only nephew. He will be most discrete for as long as I wish."

Fredrik laughed. "You certainly have thought this out well, Orthan. Why have you figured to leave the Lady out of the portrait?"

"No one will believe you brother and sister, Sir," Orthan stated. "People will accept her as the Lady of the Manor believing that she is your kept woman, but not as your sister. I hope that is acceptable."

"It will have to be, Orthan," Fredrik replied. Niki could get to be a problem in this whole affair if he didn't handle her well. It was obvious that she had set off on the wrong foot with the servants, but she was so bull-headed that she would never back down if confronted with their knowledge. Best if he tried to head off her objections with some positive news. "Orthan, have my things moved to the Master's Suite. I need to have a talk with my Lady."

Orthan nodded as Fredrik rose and left the room. He walked to Niki's room and knocked. Niki answered dressed in a beautiful, red satin gown and a red bow in her hair. "What do you think?" she asked.

Fredrik closed the door and sat in one of the chairs. "It is perfect," he replied. "You look absolutely gorgeous, turn around."

Niki twirled with a broad, beaming smile on her face. She strode over and gave Fredrik a kiss. "I am so happy," she declared. "This is going to work out perfectly."

"There is a problem that I wanted to talk to you about," admitted Fredrik. "It seems that the servants know that Lord Alrecht did not have a niece. They are willing to accept me as his nephew and you as my . . . woman. If we go along with this, we will be accepted by the whole community and have great wealth. Orthan knows a great deal about Lord Alrecht's finances and I have asked him to handle them for us."

Niki looked stunned. "Why don't we just get rid of the servants?" she asked.

"No," Fredrik quickly said. "No, we can not do that. Without their acceptance, we will have no claim to the inheritance. It is only because of the servants that we have any chance at all of holding on to this mansion. Niki, we must take care not to upset them."

"Upset them?" Niki shouted. "You expect me to care about upsetting the servants? They were born to serve us and we to rule them. You can't be serious?"

Fredrik needed a way to keep Niki quiet and docile long enough to get the inheritance taken care of. "Niki," he lectured, "if you want to rule somebody, we will be ruling from Beggars' Corner. If you want to live in splendor and wealth, you will treat the servants civilly. I don't know how to be more clear about this, Niki, but if you get the servants mad, we will be running for our lives. If you keep them

happy, we will be very happy. Do you understand?”

“I will try,” Niki pouted. “At least for a while, but I expect you to find a way around this problem. I cannot be a proper Lady when I have to go around worrying about whether or not the servants are thrilled to be servants. When are we going out to see the town?”

“Tomorrow at the earliest,” Fredrik answered. “I need time to make sure that we are on solid footing before we chance answering the inevitable questions about our late uncle. I need to learn all about him and the servants know a great deal. I will uncover some more about him in his study and library. I also ordered Orthan to move my belongings into the Master’s Suite to get them used to the idea of a new Lord. You may join me there or keep your present suite whatever pleases you. Either way, you are to give the appearance of being my lover. We have a great chance here, Niki, but it will require constant attention to details if we are to pull it off.”

“I will put on a great appearance,” nodded Niki. “Don’t you worry about me, but remember your promise to discover a way to replace the servants eventually.”

Fredrik shook his head as he left Niki’s suite. The best way to clear his head would be to concentrate on learning more about Lord Alrecht. Orthan came into the study with a paper for Lord Wason to sign and to announce that the artist had arrived. Fredrik looked at the paper, which gave Orthan the powers that he was looking for and he signed it. The artist proved to be quite capable and quick, as well. Within three hours he had completed a portrait of Lord Alrecht and his young nephew, Fredrik Wason. He had painted Fredrik a year or two younger than he was now, but everyone would believe now that Fredrik was the nephew of Lord Alrecht. Orthan showed the artist out and returned with Fredrik to hang the painting in the Lord’s study.

“Your artist appears quite competent,” Fredrik remarked.

“He is that, My Lord,” smiled Orthan. “I think it is best to bring you up to date on the life of Lord Alrecht this evening. I have arranged for a barrister to come tomorrow at noon to secure your rights to the inheritance. The man knew Lord Alrecht well, so he will not be easy to fool, but I happen to know that he was gone from the town for three months two years ago. That is why I had the painting made with you being slightly younger. The story will be that you visited during that time frame and that is the only time you and your uncle ever met. The barrister will, of course, state that your uncle never mentioned you. You will laugh and explain that he was probably very embarrassed about your existence because of the way his sister shut him out of her life.”

Orthan poured another round of brandy and sat down. “You will point out how Uncle Amos had made advances to his own sister when they were young and how she hated him for it. Explain that your mother never wanted you to even know about Uncle Amos’s existence and that Uncle Amos probably felt the same way. Then about two years ago, your mother died and you learned of Uncle Amos by going through her things and decided to visit. You had a very nice visit after a very rocky start and you returned home after a few months, promising to tie up affairs there and return to live with him.”

Orthan downed the rest of his brandy and continued. “As things turned out, you met a young woman while closing your affairs at home and that delayed your trip back here until now, only to find that you had returned too late. A little emotion of losing your only relative at this point would certainly be helpful.”

Orthan continued laying out a plan that covered every little detail until the wee hours of the morning. He would not let Fredrik take notes and demanded that the young Lord repeat everything back to him until he was satisfied that the story was solid. During the session, Fredrik began to think of Orthan fondly

and the butler appeared to return the emotion.

Fredrik would have enjoyed sleeping late the next morning, but Orthan got him up with the coming of lightness and started grilling him about his uncle. By the time the barrister arrived, Fredrik almost believed that Amos had been his real uncle and the interview went quite well. The barrister was extremely skeptical at the start of the interview, but as he fired questions at the young man, he slowly became convinced that Amos had kept a grand secret from him. The testimony from the servants about the time that Fredrik was to have been there two years ago, sealed the case in the barrister's mind.

Papers were drawn up certifying Fredrik as Lord Wason of the Manor and legally transferring all of Lord Alrecht's property into his name. The barrister hoped that the new Lord would continue to use his services as Lord Alrecht had in the past and Fredrik assured him that Uncle Amos's faith in his barrister's services was enough to ensure it.

After the barrister left, Orthan broke out a bottle of champagne and all of the servants joined the new young Lord in celebrating their good fortune. That was when Niki walked into the room.

"Just what has gotten into you, Fredrik?" she demanded. "The whole town would die laughing if they could see you now. How do you expect the servants to respect your authority if you spend your days cavorting with them."

Fredrik just laughed. "Come and join the celebration, Niki. I have just been confirmed as the new Lord Wason of the Manor. Orthan, see to the Lady's glass, please."

Orthan poured Niki a glass of champagne, but the rest of the servants quietly slipped out of the room. Orthan handed Niki the glass with a slight bow. "It is very gracious of our Lord to allow us to share in his good fortune, My Lady. I assure you that the servants will not take this as an excuse to become overly friendly or to forget their station."

"If they do," Niki clearly stated, "I will be sure to remind them. Fredrik, I think it is high time we got out and saw our town. Orthan, ready a carriage, the Lord and Lady are going out."

Orthan shot Fredrik a glance before bowing and making his exit to get the carriage ready. Miranda came in and cleared away the glasses and the bottle of champagne as Fredrik and Niki were leaving. Miranda took the glasses into the kitchen and Alicia turned on her.

"How can you stand that woman?" Alicia cried. "She treats us like dirt and she is as phony as a marriage proposal from a seaman. Do you have any idea of what she has put me through today?"

"Now, now," grinned Miranda, "you'll just have to learn to grin and bear it."

"Perhaps I deserve that from you," Alicia sobbed, "but I do not deserve anything of the sort from her. She had me bring her tea six times this morning. Not six different times, but six times because each cup of tea I brought her was not to her liking. It was too sweet, too tart, too hot, too cold, and finally the wrong blend of teas. The last cup I managed to leave in her room and slip out before she noticed me. Before that it was a whole series of problems with her rooms. She found dirt here and dust there. The curtains were crooked, crooked mind you. All this from a girl who has probably never seen a room with curtains before. And all of the time she treats me like dirt, like I should kiss her arse because she is allowing me to serve her. I don't think I can take it much more, Miranda."

"I'm sorry, Alicia," Miranda apologized. "I was bitter when you made that comment to me, but I am

willing to let that go. Still, we need to do something about her. I will speak with Orthan when he returns. Perhaps he will have some ideas.”

“I hope he does,” Alicia said as she dried her tears. “That Fredrik is not so bad a boy. He’s the one that’s been given the goods and yet he treats us right properly. Maybe Orthan could talk him into dumping her.”

Orthan climbed up into the carriage and drove out through the gateway. He took the couple on a grand tour of the town, waving to many of the residents as they passed. Fredrik was impressed at how many people smiled and waved at the carriage as it passed. The old sea captain must have been fairly popular in Cidal. Everyone treated the carriage and its occupants with respect including the mercenaries. Fredrik mentally set himself to ask Orthan about them later. The tour lasted about an hour and, thankfully, Niki did not demand to stop anywhere and get out. Fredrik was not sure that Cidal was ready for her yet.

Orthan helped Niki down out of the carriage and she didn’t even nod to him as she swept in through the front door of the mansion. Fredrik hurried after Niki while Orthan took care of the carriage. Niki was excited as she walked to her suite. “Did you see how the people loved us, Fredrik? Just about everybody waved at me. It’s probably been a very long time since a Lady resided here. One of the maids told me that the old sea captain lived a quiet life alone. They are likely as excited about us as we are.”

“I am sure they are, Niki,” Fredrik sighed, “but we must remember to go slow here. If we proceed too quickly, we will lose it all.”

Fredrik left Niki to get ready for dinner and went downstairs to ask Orthan about the mercenaries and what type of relationship they had with the town. Orthan was just coming in through the kitchen and when he saw Fredrik he headed towards him.

“Lord Wason,” he started, “I think we may have a problem. I’m afraid your Lady Niki is causing some grief with the maids. I just passed Alicia, and Miranda has told me that the poor woman has been in tears ever since we left for the tour. She thinks your Lady has it in for her and is trying to drive her to quit. Now, we both know that Alicia is not going to quit and there lies the problem.”

Fredrik looked wearily at Orthan and nodded. “I don’t know what to do with her, Orthan. I’ve never seen her like this. She has always been headstrong and stubborn, but she has never been so foolish. I will try to talk some sense into her, but we should all try to make this thing work.”

“I agree, Lord Wason,” Orthan stated, “but part of our agreement was that the servants would be respected and treated fairly. I do expect you to hold your end of the bargain. We all agree that you are a right fine young man to serve and we have no grievance with you, but you must do something to nip your young Lady before things get out of hand.”

Fredrik grimaced and headed back for the stairs. Somehow the task of dealing with Niki right now did not make Fredrik smile.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 9

Gypsy

Arik and Tedi halted when the wagon came into sight, not knowing who or what lay ahead. Garth caught up to them and motioned them forward. "It's okay," he said, "the wagon is Kalina's. She'll be happy to see you again."

Arik was about to say that he had never seen Kalina when the woman stepped into view and waved to them. "That's the woman who wandered into our campsite," Arik whispered to Tedi.

Tedi nodded and whispered back, "I told you I didn't believe in coincidences." The boys kicked their horses forward and entered the clearing, followed by Garth leading the extra horse.

"Is everything okay?" Kalina asked. "I can tell by the horses that you ran into some Dark Riders."

"I suppose they are busy counting their dead," Garth stated. "They had these boys surrounded and they seemed pretty determined to get their hands on them. Can't say as I ever recall hearing of Dark Riders wading in the surf to capture anyone."

"Take care of the horses, Garth," Kalina instructed, "I will get some food and blankets for our guests. They must be hungry with what they have been through and I can see that they are soaked. Stoke up the fire some more after you're done with the horses and we'll see if we can dry them out."

"Excuse me," Tedi interrupted. "I appreciate your hospitality, but I am not a believer in coincidences. You wandered into our campsite in Lorgo and now you just happen to send this bandit after us to protect us from Dark Riders. Who are you really and what do you want with us?"

Arik looked stunned at Tedi's impertinence, but Kalina just smiled. "I would be sorely disappointed if you believed that I would risk Garth's life just to play games with you. You boys are destined to greatness and any person who would stand by and allow you to fall into the hands of the Dark One is a person whom I would not want to associate with. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Kalina. I am a gypsy and have some sense of foretelling. When I walked into your campsite the other day, I was struck with an aura of greatness and goodness, which emanated from you two boys. I mentioned this to Garth and he told me that one of you had tried sneaking into our campsite before we reached Lorgo."

"I wasn't trying to sneak in," protested Tedi. "I thought you were a gang of bandits and I wanted to know your intent with regards to Lorgo."

Garth laughed out loud as he was securing the horses and Kalina smiled. "I am sure," she continued, "but I also do not believe in coincidences. When Garth told me about the witch who was interested in you, I vowed that I would look after you until you were capable of protecting yourselves."

"So, if we decided we were capable of protecting ourselves, you wouldn't stop us from leaving?" Arik asked.

"I would never stop you from going your own way," Kalina declared adamantly. "Did Garth force you to come here? If he did, I will have words with him."

“No,” Arik admitted, “he did not force us, although our choices were slim at the time.”

“Well, your choices are not much better now,” Kalina said, “but you are free to leave at any time. Before you decide to up and leave, though, let me give you some advice. I doubt that you boys have ever been out of Lorgo before, because you seem totally unaware of what is waiting for you out there. Garth can train you to take care of yourselves. He can teach you how to ride a horse, use a sword, be quieter in the forest, lay false trails, and read the trails of others. There is so much that Garth can teach you that I would think you foolish if you did not avail yourselves of the opportunity to learn from him, but the choice is yours. Should I bring you dinner, or will you be on your way?”

“As long as we are free to leave when we wish,” Arik said forcefully, “we will stay and appreciate your generosity.”

Garth strode over and stood before the boys. Reaching down slowly he took the sword and scabbard from Arik’s hand. “I can stitch the belt on this for you,” Garth uttered. “Unfortunately, I was in a bit of a hurry when I cut it loose.”

Arik let the sword go and Garth turned to Tedi and took his sword, as well. Kalina emerged from the wagon with several blankets, which she draped over the boys like a caring mother. “Slip out of your wet clothes and I will dry them over the fire,” Kalina added as she turned to prepare plates of dinner for Garth and the boys.

Tedi could smell the turkey and realized that it had been some time since he and Arik had eaten a meal. The boys managed to wiggle out of their clothes and Kalina collected them as she handed the boys mugs of hot coffee. Both boys shivered slightly as their skin finally realized that it was cold and wet. They pulled the blankets close around themselves as they sipped their coffee. After a short period of time, Garth came over and sat by the fire just as Kalina was bringing plates of food. Tedi tore into the turkey, turnips and some kind of green, leafy vegetable that he had never seen. The boys cleaned their plates quickly and Kalina gave them another serving of everything.

Arik could not believe it, but by the time they had finished dinner, the boys' clothes were dry and warm. They wiggled into their clothes under the blankets and eventually let the blankets drop from their shoulders. Garth finished mending the scabbards and returned the swords to the boys. “Tomorrow we will begin instruction on how to use those,” he commented.

“What about the Dark Riders?” inquired Arik. “Won’t they track us to here? Shouldn’t we be moving on?”

“They will first assess the damage that has been done to them,” smiled Garth as he stripped off his scabbard straps and shirt and refastened the sword to his back. “Then they will suspect that a large group ambushed their men and they will send for reinforcements. If we leave in the morning, we will be well ahead of them. As for them tracking us to here, it will not be as easy as they are used to. There are tricks to covering your path that I can explain to you when the time is right.”

Arik looked around the campsite and saw Kalina doing something at the back of the wagon, safely outside the range of hearing. “Garth,” he began, “you seem to be quite capable of taking care of yourself and you don’t seem to be too fond of Tedi and me. Why would you risk your life to save us and then offer to teach us your tricks? Surely, it is not just because Kalina thinks we are destined for greatness, whatever that means.”

Garth smiled grimly and stared at Arik. “Kalina is a great woman,” he said quietly. “If she sees

something special in you two, then there is something special. Frankly, I see nothing but two fisherboys who have run away from home and wish to play at the games of men as if they knew the rules.”

“Your compassion is heartwarming,” snipped Tedi. “Perhaps, if you looked, you would see two young boys whose mothers were stolen from them and forced to leave their fathers because Dark Riders and bandits won't let them live in peace. Perhaps if you lost something or someone you love, you wouldn't be so damn aloof about other people's troubles.”

Garth's face grew visibly taut and the veins of his temples and neck bulged considerably. He rose silently and walked across the campsite to a clear area well away from Kalina and the boys and whipped his sword out of the sheath on his back. Slowly he began moving his sword back and forth as if fighting some invisible foe. His arms and feet moved surely like the fine steps of a choreographed dance. The sword moved high and low, varying from sweeps to lunges, from checks to severs, slowly picking up speed until the blade became hard to focus on.

Kalina came out of the wagon with a tray of small, dried sweet cakes, which she brought to the boys. She looked over at Garth and sat next to the boys. “What were you talking about?” she asked.

“I get the feeling that Garth is not real happy about us being here,” remarked Tedi. “I told him that he should have more compassion for other people instead of only thinking about himself.”

Garth was moving faster now. His arms and feet began moving so fast that it appeared he was just jumping around at random, but closer inspection revealed that each stroke of his sword was centered on the same invisible foe. At a speed that Arik thought would make most people dizzy, Garth's every movement was sure-footed and precise. While the hit with his sword might be high, low or in between, they all would have hit the invisible foe.

“You truly do not understand Garth,” Kalina said softly. “He has lost more than any man I know and he bears the responsibility for each and every loss. He does not dwell long on his own problems because the weight of them would crush him. Instead, he devotes his life to other people's problems. He helps those who are incapable of helping themselves. Sometimes they are grateful, sometimes they are not, but always they think that their problems are the worst in the world. None of them have ever thought to ask about his problems, not that he would discuss them if anyone did ask.”

Kalina sighed and looked back at Garth. He was now fighting a circle of invisible foes, twirling round and round and varying the stroke so that no opponent could foretell the stroke that would be aimed at him. Sweat poured down his body in rivers, yet his breath appeared even and measured. Arik and Tedi stared at his rippling muscles and sure steps and were amazed at the variety of strokes he could deliver with the sword. Kalina rose and went back to the wagon.

“Perhaps, you spoke hastily,” Arik chided. “It did not appear to me that the man who killed ten Dark Riders that were after us was thinking only of himself.”

“He got me mad,” responded Tedi sheepishly. “He was treating us like little boys that had stolen some candy and gotten caught.”

“Maybe that is how we appear,” commented Arik. “What does he know of us? You tried to sneak into his camp and he scared you off. One sight of him in town and we both ran into the woods. Then he overheard me bragging about how quiet I was and I didn't even know he was there. Finally, we get ourselves caught in a trap with no way out and we just ran, mindless of how we were going to escape. Maybe that is what we are, a couple of kids who think we know more than we do. Maybe our

problems are not so bad after all. It might be that we just don't know how to handle them."

Garth was now fighting an ever bigger force of imaginary foes. One that was spread out farther apart. Garth would slash and leap towards another member of the attackers or roll across the intervening ground and strike out with his feet as he swung at yet another. It was hard to determine how many foes Garth was facing, but however many there were, Arik would not like to be one of them.

"I guess I was hasty," admitted Tedi. "The man did save our lives no matter how ill I feel towards him. I would have said that he could have died saving our lives, but in watching him, I don't think those Dark Riders had a chance."

"It only takes one slash or one arrow to kill the best warrior, Tedi," Arik reminded. "Any time you go into battle, there is a chance you won't come out. He may be quite capable, but he risked his life to save ours. Not only do we owe him a chance to explain, I want to learn some of what he can teach me. I'm going to stick around for a while, at least until I feel a little more comfortable about defending myself."

"I won't say that I like the thought of staying," declared Tedi, "but I will agree to stay if you are not stubborn when it comes time to go."

"Agreed," Arik stated and turned to watch Garth, who was now using the terrain to aid him in defeating his foes, from backing his foe into stumbling over a rock to swinging from a low hanging branch to disable one foe while slashing at another. It was a marvelous display to watch until you realized that it was the dance of a man dealing out death to other men.

Garth continued on for over half an hour before Kalina emerged from the wagon with a towel and a clean shirt for Garth. Arik rose and intercepted her before she reached Garth. "Would it be all right if I took it to him?" Arik asked.

Kalina looked at the boy and finally smiled. "I think that would be a good idea, Arik. Let him see you approach, though."

Arik nodded and took the towel and shirt from Kalina. Slowly, he walked towards Garth and stood outside the circle of imaginary foes. Garth gave no indication of having seen Arik, but ended up rolling directly to the boy's feet while sheathing his sword as he rose. Silently he stripped off the sheath strapping and reached for the towel. Arik had expected the man to be gasping for breath after the workout, but Garth was only panting slightly. After a quick wipe down, Garth wrapped the towel around his head and took the shirt from Arik and put it on. Without thought, he strapped the sword to his back. "Thank you, fisherboy. That was thoughtful."

"I would prefer that you call me Arik," the boy responded, "and I would be pleased if you would teach me some things that will help me survive."

Garth nodded thoughtfully. "I would be pleased to teach you what I can in the time you allot to stay with us, Arik. We will begin in the morning."

Garth walked past the fire and squatted next to Tedi. "I owe you an apology," Garth declared. "I should be more sensitive about other people's feelings. I sometimes believe that acknowledging a problem as being severe is giving an edge to your enemies. I refuse to do so with my own problems, but I should not expect others to feel the same way. Still, do not think that your problems are so bad that you have no say in your future. Your actions will determine what becomes of you, not the actions of others. Always keep faith in yourself and always strive to better yourself."

Tedi sat stunned by Garth's comments as the man got up and strode out of the campsite. Arik came over and sat next to his friend. Tedi turned to him and shook his head. "I wonder if he is playing with my mind," Tedi mumbled to himself. "First, he's a bad guy, then good, then bad again. Why can't anything be simple? Why can't he be one or the other?"

"He is who he is," philosophized Arik. "Neither of us is a simple creature, why should he be?"

The boys sat quietly gazing at the campfire. After an hour had passed Garth returned to the campsite looking refreshed. "There is a stream out that way about a quarter of a mile in case you are in the mind for refreshing in the morning," Garth said. "Now it is time for us to retire. Tomorrow will be a hard day for you. I assume that Tedi will be receiving lessons as well. We will begin in the morning with learning to ride a horse properly. After breakfast, you will get a chance to practice on the trail as we move south from here. Tomorrow evening we focus on caring for the horses and simple self-defense. Good night."

"Shouldn't we set a sentry?" Arik asked. "The Dark Riders are not that far away."

"It won't be necessary tonight," assured Garth and then he disappeared behind the wagon. The boys were tired enough to have no problems falling asleep.

The boys woke at early light and looked around the campsite. Nothing seemed to be moving and they rose and gathered their blankets into a roll. Tedi was startled when Garth walked in from the woods without making a sound.

"Good morning," Garth announced. "I hope you are ready for your lessons."

Arik stifled a yawn and seemed to be looking around for something to eat. Garth gathered the two horses the boys had rode in on and led them towards the pile of saddles. For two hours the boys learned the rudimentary facts of horse caring and how to properly mount and guide the horses, before Kalina called that breakfast was ready.

Kalina served a bountiful breakfast of some kind of eggs, too large for chicken eggs, and bacon that was saltier than any Arik had ever tasted. Only the bread was a disappointment, being hard and crusty. Coffee was served with a half lemon and Arik watched how Garth devoured this before attempting it himself. Biting into the lemon was like a shock to his nervous system, but the taste of the coffee afterwards was superb. Arik couldn't help comparing it to the wonderful relief you felt after pulling out a hook that was stuck in your hand.

After breakfast everyone helped to clean up the campsite and Garth hitched two horses to the wagon. He also tied two horses to the rear of the wagon, a beautiful white mare and the dun stallion he had acquired from the Dark Riders. The boys rode the geldings that Garth had given them to escape on. Arik's was solid black and Tedi's was black with a white blaze. Garth, of course, rode his black stallion.

There wasn't much of a trail at first, but Garth led them slightly southwest until they hit a seldom used but decent path southward. For hours they rode mostly in silence with only the sounds of the birds or an occasional word from Garth on their riding skills. Kalina passed out some dried beef and crusty bread and they ate lunch while riding. Just as the sky began to darken, Garth shot forward without explanation. Ten minutes later, he returned and spoke with Kalina and then announced that they would be stopping for the night.

Garth led them to a clearing alongside a brook and motioned for the boys to follow him as Kalina

positioned the wagon where she wanted it. Garth dismounted and instructed the boys on their duties in caring for the horses and then jogged off to collect firewood. After the fire was started and the animals tended to, Garth produced a couple of wooden lath swords and started instructing the boys in the basics of swordsmanship. He worked the boys for an hour before Kalina indicated that dinner was ready.

The dinner consisted of fried river trout and turnips and some more of that leafy green vegetable. When Kalina saw the boys examining the trout, she laughed.

She nodded towards the brook and chuckled. "You didn't think I was darning socks while you men played with your swords, did you? They are probably a bit smaller than your typical salt water fish, but I assure you they are quite tasty."

After dinner Garth lit a pipe and leaned his back against a large rock. "We'll rest a bit before we start instructions again," Garth announced. When the boys stifled small groans, Garth looked at them with an arched eyebrow. "If you wish me to make warriors out of you before you leave, we do not have much time to spare. Why, you already spent most of the day just sitting."

Tedi actually chuckled until he tried to change his sitting position and the pain shot through his thighs. "I'm not sure what is worse," he said, "being killed outright by the Dark Riders or being killed slowly by you."

Garth just smiled and leaned his head back against the tree. "The first few days are the worst," he offered softly. "You'd be surprised at how quick the body adjusts to accept pain. You're not going through anything that your fathers didn't go through."

"My father never had to ride a horse or swing a sword," laughed Arik.

Garth leaned forward and looked at the boys. "Your fathers did both and I'm sure they did it well."

Both boys looked in amazement at Garth, but it was Tedi who took the bait. "What do you know about our fathers that we don't?" he asked.

"I know that they were both soldiers before they took up fishing," Garth stated. "And from the courage they both exhibited, I would think they were very good soldiers."

"How do you know that?" inquired Arik. "And what courage are you talking about?"

"And now I can tell that they are not boastful men," Garth laughed. "As for them being soldiers, it is obvious. When a man enters an army, the army breaks the man down to subservience and when he has learned to obey, they bring him up to leadership so he knows how to command. This conditioning marks a man for life. He will never slouch again. He will never walk down a street in a daze oblivious to his surroundings. His eyes will learn to evaluate without conscious thought. Both of your fathers learned their lessons well. As far as their courage, not many men would mess with the likes of me, yet Master Markel shadowed me for an entire day. He knew that I knew he was watching me, yet he refused to be scared away. Very admirable and courageous. Master Clava walked into the Fisherman's Inn and sat in a seat that no one else in the entire town would sit in. The seat right across from me."

Garth was amused at the shock on the boys' faces. Their fathers were good men and the boys were so close to them that they did not see it as other men saw it. "Oh," Garth continued, "did I forget to mention that Master Clava threatened to kill me if I harmed his son or his son's friend?"

The boys' jaws dropped and their eyes grew wide. They knew that Arik's father went to talk to the bandit, but threatening to kill him? Had he really done that?

"Don't look so surprised, boys," Garth said seriously. "Your fathers love you very much and they would die to protect you. You should be proud to be their sons." Garth's eyes clouded over and he looked away.

Kalina suddenly came over and entered the conversation. "Garth said that Master Clava recounted the incident with the bandits and that your mothers were taken away. When did that happen?"

Arik looked from Garth to Kalina wondering what open sore Garth was trying to hide. "It was about three years ago," he replied absently. "The four of us were out fishing at the time. When we returned to port, our fathers left us at the inn and went out to find them. They returned weeks later with no news."

"You have my sympathies," Kalina assured them. "The loss of a loved one is a very bitter fruit to swallow. Do you think they still live somewhere?"

Arik's own eyes started to water and Tedi rose and walked away towards the horses. "I don't know," Arik conceded. "I hope they are and that they are well, but I really don't ever expect to see them again."

Kalina nodded sympathetically. "Your fathers must have been devastated as well as you. To lose your wife and have to work all day and still look after a young boy is no easy task. How old were you when it happened?"

Tears were forming in Arik's eyes now. "It was hard on them. Probably even harder than on us although we didn't realize it at the time. Taking care of us probably wasn't that bad on them, though. Even though we were only fourteen, we were still able to help with the fishing, but Tedi's father took it especially hard. It was only this last week that he finally came out of it."

Kalina smiled now that she knew she had two children who were born in the year of the Collapse. "Well, if you could give me descriptions of your mothers, we may be able to ask some questions. I don't want to get your hopes up falsely, but it never hurts to keep an eye out."

"I would appreciate that," Arik said thankfully. "I don't expect to find them, but I will never stop looking."

Garth seemed to have regained his composure and knocked his pipe out. "Enough talk for now," he said gruffly. "It is time you boys started to learn your skills. Grab your practice swords and we'll see how that trout affected your balance."

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 10

Trouble

Fredrik walked into Niki's suite and closed the door. "Miranda said you wanted to see me, Niki," Fredrik opened. "I was in the study. You can come see me anytime you want. Is there a problem?"

"A problem?" she snipped. "Why should there be a problem? I've done as you told me and not pestered the servants. Now every time that damn Alicia comes in here she has a smirk on her face. It is one thing not to pester the servants, but quite another to be laughed at by them. I really don't understand why you pamper them. We should fire the lot and get servants that are appropriately trained. I have waited all of my life for my destiny to be fulfilled and now that it is within my grasp, you want to spoil it for me."

"Spoil it!" Fredrik remarked incredulously. "You can't be serious. We are set up as Lord and Lady of the Manor at seventeen. This is a dream come true. If some writer made a story up about this happening, nobody would accept it as anything but fantasy. If the old sea captain had any children to receive his inheritance, do you realize how old they would be? Niki, we have got it made!"

"I don't know how you can be so happy," she pouted. "The servants act like they own this place and you think that you are the Lord. How long before the people in the streets start laughing at us?"

"Niki, I don't care if the whole town laughs," declared Fredrik. "We are rich and they are not. As soon as Orthan liquidates some of the out-holdings, we will have more money than we know what to do with. The people in the town will come around. I have a meeting with Captain Grecho this morning. Imagine that. The Captain of the Mercenaries coming to pay call on me. You said you wanted a private army, well, this is the man to start with."

"But everything is moving so slowly," Niki complained. "The people should already recognize me as their queen and you have me worrying about how I treat the servants. And why is the butler liquidating anything? It is our property and you are letting some old scam artist handle our finances."

"We've been through this before," Fredrik said impatiently. "Orthan knows more about the finances than I can learn in a year. It is only natural for him to handle the books."

"I think you are just being selfish," Niki exploded. "You do not really care if I ever become queen. You have some plot with the servants to cash in all of the assets and then desert me here with no support. That's why you spend evenings in the study plotting with Orthan."

"Okay," Fredrik conceded, "I promised not to tell a soul, but I will explain everything. The morning after we arrived, Orthan cornered me in the study. He explained that the servants have served the old sea captain for many years and they knew for a fact that the man had no brothers or sisters."

"The nerve of the man speaking that way to his Lord," Niki admonished.

"Niki," Fredrik pleaded, "please pay attention. I was not his Lord and he knew it. If Amos had no brothers or sisters, he certainly could not have any nephews or nieces."

"Then why didn't he go to the authorities?" Niki asked.

"Because," Fredrik explained, "if there was no heir to become Lord of the Manor, there would be no jobs for the servants. Orthan saw a way for all of us to share in Lord Alrecht's misfortune. He promised to have me legally accepted as Lord Alrecht's nephew and heir if I would make certain concessions to the servants. I promised to allow him to handle the finances and to treat the servants with respect and kindness. It really is a good deal for all of us."

“I can’t believe that you were really taken in so easily,” she chided. “You allowed the Lord to be dictated to by servants’ demands?”

Exasperated, Fredrik sat down. “The Lord was not dictated to by servants, Niki. A young boy was offered a scheme by some servants that allows him to become rich and assume the title of Lord which does not belong to him. One word from any of the servants and we would be running for our lives.”

“But now that you have legal title,” Niki schemed, “you can get rid of them and it will be only servants’ words against the word of the Lord.”

“I have no intention of going back on my deal, Niki,” Fredrik insisted. “I have no need to. From what Orthan says, the estates are plentiful and we will have more wealth than we can spend. If the servants had any idea that I would not honor my pledge, I am positive that they could ruin us. Please, just keep being pleasant to the servants and everything is going to be better than you could ever hope for. I have to see Captain Grecho now, but we will talk more of this later.”

Fredrik rose and left and Niki just sat there lost in her own little world of scheming. Hopefully, the meeting would not take long and he could convince Niki to play along with the servants. Fredrik walked to the study and Captain Grecho was already there and Orthan was dutifully serving him a glass of brandy. “Ah, the Lord of the Manor, Lord Wason. Sir, this is Captain Grecho of the Cidal Mercenary Company. If you have no further need of me, Lord Wason, I will withdraw and await your call.”

“Thank you, Orthan, that will be fine,” Fredrik said. “Captain Grecho, I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Lord Wason,” the Captain greeted, “I apologize for not coming sooner, but I had a small matter of contract negotiations to take care of. I wish to offer my sincerest condolences on the loss of your uncle. I want you to know that your uncle was certainly not considered a sorcerer by the people of this town. The townspeople have no stomach for magic and would never have put up with a Lord who even condoned its use, never mind practiced it. No, I feel sure that the charges were merely expedient to the Black Devils to have their way. Certainly, if my company had found out what they were up to, we would have slain the bunch of them.”

Fredrik gulped as he nodded his head. The Captain talked on for an hour and a half, welcoming him to town and explaining as much about Cidal as he could. He offered the services of his company to the Manor if the need arose and thanked him for the Manor’s generous help in the past. Fredrik half listened as he fretted about Niki’s temper and her foolish willingness to use magic carelessly. At the end of the discussion, Captain Grecho demanded that Lord Wason accompany him to review the fitness of his Company and see the plans he had for enlarging his garrison. It was clear to Fredrik that to refuse would be starting the relationship off on a very bad foot.

Fredrik informed Orthan that he was going out and caught a glimpse of Miranda and Alicia arguing as he passed through the entrance hall. Fredrik began to wonder again if his life wouldn’t be simpler without women in it. Orthan also shook his head at the two maids and went out to get away from it as much as he did to check on the horses.

Miranda looked flustered. “Alicia, you have to curb your temper more. I know the woman is difficult, but even you have to admit that she has been better these last few days.”

“Aye, she’s been better,” pouted Alicia. “She’d be better still if you took care of her. If I go in there

with a smile, she complains that I'm laughing at her. If I don't smile, she complains that I'm scowling at her. Either way, she treats me as if I were a dog. Master Wason and Master Alrecht never had any problems with me. I do my job all right, I do."

"Your work is fine, Alicia," soothed Miranda. "If I suddenly take your place, the Lady will complain about you running the place and that will start another row. I will talk with Orthan about giving you a holiday. Perhaps a bit of time away from each other will calm you both down. I am sure that Lord Wason will readily agree."

"Well, I could use a bit of a holiday," Alicia cheered. "A couple of extra pence would help a bit, too," she pushed.

Miranda nodded as the bell rang again. "But, first, you will have to finish today at least. Whatever she throws at you, just bite your tongue and swallow it. We have a good thing going here and I'll not have you spoiling it."

"Yes, Miranda," Alicia said as she scurried up stairs to answer Niki's bell.

Alicia knew she was in trouble when she entered Niki's suite and the woman was standing there tapping her arm with a grim determination on her face. "My Lady rang?" Alicia said.

"Yes, I rang and you took long enough to get here," scowled Niki. "Where is my lunch? I asked for lunch an hour ago."

"Begging My Lady's pardon," Alicia trembled, "but you said you didn't want any lunch today."

"Fool!" shouted Niki. "You offered me crab meat or salmon for lunch and I said if I couldn't have lobster, I wouldn't eat. Don't you know a demand for lobster when you hear one? Do you expect me to starve while you and the others stuff your pockets with my money?"

Alicia lost it and exploded. "How do you expect me to read your mind?" shouted Alicia. "You said you wouldn't eat and now you wonder where your lunch is? And as for the money, you don't have a pence to your name. You are here at the sufferance of Lord Wason and mercy knows why he puts up with you."

Niki's face grew bright red and before she knew what she was doing, she straightened her arms and lashed out with a Force Bolt. Alicia flew back and was suspended about a foot off the floor with her back pressed hard against the wall. The fury slowly drained from Niki's face and after a few moments she released the spell with the intention of apologizing to the maid. As soon as the maid had her feet on the ground, she spun and ran out of the room screaming at the top of her lungs that there was a witch in the house.

Alicia ran down the stairs and out the side door of the mansion, almost colliding with Orthan. Orthan grabbed the woman and Miranda appeared through the door.

"Whatever is going on?" demanded Miranda.

"I have no idea," confessed Orthan as the maid continued screaming, but no longer understandable. Orthan shook the woman to get her to come to her senses and Fredrik arrived just in time to see Miranda slap her.

“What is the problem?” Fredrik asked.

Alicia looked at him with eyes wide with fear. “She’s a witch.” She screamed. “She’s a witch and she tried to kill me. I have to report her. Let me go.”

Fredrik and Orthan eyes locked. “Miranda, hold her until I get back,” Orthan commanded and dragged Fredrik inside.

“There is going to be great trouble,” Orthan confided. “Many things we could cover up, but this is not one of them. The Company will be out for blood. They may not bother you if you can prove that you did not know, but they will kill her, for sure.”

Fredrik nodded sadly. “Orthan, I want you to detain her as long as possible. It won’t be for very long because her screaming was quite evident from the street. If I die, you are out of a job and I am out of a life. Neither of us wants that. I am going on a long trip. Handle everything while I am gone. If I do not come back, just continue as if you expected me to be gone for a very long time. You will think of something; at least you will be cared for. As for Niki, say that she became possessed after some bad food. Make any excuse you can think of. I will get her far away from here. Tell the Mercenaries that I was chasing her south, trying to catch her and kill her. The Captain will believe that. Throw saddles on the two fastest horses and I’ll get our little witch down here as quickly as I can.”

“I’m truly sorry, Sir,” responded Orthan. “I’ve grown to like you. We really pulled off a good one and I think we could do more. Do come back, your Manor will be waiting.”

Fredrik smiled at the old man and ran up the stairs. Niki was waiting at the top of the stairs with the two travel bags that Fredrik had demanded they keep ready. “I’m sorry, Fredrik, I couldn’t help myself.”

“I know, Niki,” he stated sadly. “We probably didn’t belong here anyway. We have to hurry. They will kill you on sight.”

They each hefted one bag and hurried down the stairs and out the back door towards the stables. Orthan was standing ready with two horses and a sad face. He helped Niki up onto one of the horses and she bent and kissed his head. “I’m sorry, Orthan, I guess I made a mess of everything. I thought you were all the enemy, but I heard what you said to Fredrik while I was at the top of the stairs. Forgive me.”

Fredrik mounted up and instructed Niki to ride as fast as she could northward. After she took off, Fredrik followed at a distance that might look like he was chasing her if anyone was looking. After they got a mile out of town, Fredrik caught up with Niki and they took a small trail westward to get away from the road.

Arik and Tedi finished up their sword practice and sat down leaning against the wagon wheel. Garth hadn’t been seen in an hour and they were bushed from the exertion of their mock battle with wooden swords. Garth’s instructions over the past few days had been unending. When they were too tired to practice swordplay and too sore to practice riding, Garth would teach them about tracking or which type of plant life was edible and which was poisonous. He was a merciless instructor. If the boys didn’t learn the lesson to his expectations, he started the lesson over again until they got it right. Several times Tedi threatened to walk away, not in front of Garth, of course, and Arik had persuaded him to remain. Arik seemed to revel in the fighting skills while Tedi was more interested in the woods lore. Both of the boys

enjoyed tracking and riding. Neither of them enjoyed the task of chopping firewood, but Garth was insistent that it would develop the very muscles they would need in swordplay.

The wagon shook slightly as Kalina exited the wagon on the opposite side from the boys. "You have been gone longer than is normally necessary," Kalina could be heard saying. "Is there something amiss?"

"It is very puzzling," said a voice that the boys recognized as Garth's. "I am sure that someone is following us. All of the signs are there. They are not excellent trackers and stray off the path now and then, but there can be no mistaking that they follow us."

"Can you tell who it is?" Kalina asked with a touch of worry in her voice.

"That is the puzzling part," conceded Garth. "I circle around them to determine who they are and no one is there, yet I am positive that my skills are not failing me."

Arik's mouth dropped open at the statement. Arik had begun to believe that Garth could track a fly across the night sky with the skills and tricks he had been teaching the boys. For him to admit that someone was following them and he could not find them defied the imagination.

"How many days now?" Kalina asked.

"Three days," Garth stated. "They seem to know where we stop each night, but they never come close enough for their fire to be discovered. I have also varied our heading several times each day and always they follow. There are times when they lose our track, but they always manage to pick it up again with some uncanny luck."

"How are the boys coming along?" Kalina asked, suddenly changing the subject.

"They spend way too much time resting and listening to other people's conversations," Garth said sternly.

Arik and Tedi snapped their heads up and saw Garth staring at them. They both scrambled to their feet. "It was not our intention to listen," Arik spat out with a sheepish grin. "We were too tired to continue with our swordplay and you had not returned. We only meant to rest a while."

"Tired, are you?" growled Garth. "If that doesn't sound like a plea to cut some firewood, I've never heard one. Get moving."

Tedi stood to argue and Arik ran into him as he turned to beat a hasty retreat. Both boys tumbled to the ground and when they finally untangled themselves, Garth was gone again.

Tedi rose and brushed himself off. "Why is he always so mean?" questioned Tedi. "We weren't doing anything wrong and he gives us punishment. We already have more wood than we can possibly burn. I'm ready to be on my way."

Arik chuckled and turned to his friend. "You just don't listen that well," smiled Arik. "One of the first days that we were with him, he described how the army handles new recruits. That is what he considers us. He is breaking us down to be obedient. When he is confident that we know how to follow orders, he will begin building us up to lead. I don't think he means for us to lead, but that is the way the army taught him to train. Remember, he gets nothing out of training us. As you just pointed out, he doesn't need the wood we are about to chop. We need the discipline and muscle building. He knows we are

tired and he is forcing us to go beyond our own thoughts of endurance. Come on, it is not going to kill us.”

Tedi grumbled about never having volunteered for any army as he followed Arik towards the woodpile.

The next morning the wagon never moved. Garth started the boys off with their morning workout and after breakfast the training continued. Garth observed the boys’ archery skills and then gave them pointers on improving their accuracy as well as the speed required to reload another arrow. After archery practice, it was swordplay until the boys were exhausted. While they were recuperating he taught them tricks with a rope and the various type of knots and their uses. When they were somewhat refreshed it was back to swordplay. The next rest period was assigned to horse care and covering their tracks in the forest.

The routine continued until about an hour before dinner when Garth set them to more swordplay and disappeared. Garth returned just as Kalina was serving a dinner of pork and carrots with a green pea soup. Arik had downed the hog himself during one of the tracking sessions the day before and that had led to a lesson in butchering. The boys were almost too tired to eat. Every other day was broken up by the necessity of moving the wagon from one campsite to another, but this day had been brutal.

Garth sat down and took his plate from Kalina without a word. Everyone ate in silence until the meal was over. Garth, as usual, lit his pipe after dinner and gazed at the boys before he spoke. “Whoever they are, they did not move their camp today. It would appear that they wish to know where we are going.”

“Where are we going?” demanded Tedi. “Arik and I had plans to reestablish ourselves in another town, but since we have joined up with you, we have had no idea where we are heading.”

“Where were you heading?” Kalina asked.

Tedi glanced at Arik and the taller boy just shrugged. “We weren’t sure,” Tedi said. “Just some place south of Lorgo. Any town that would accept us as apprentices would have been acceptable.”

“Have you given any thought to changing your names?” Kalina inquired. “There can be little doubt that your names are now being circulated along the coast.”

Tedi blushed but stated defiantly, “Of course we have. Surely you do not think us so stupid as to announce ourselves in each village?”

“Certainly not,” Kalina replied dryly. “I think you should shave your face every morning until your facial hairs stiffen, then you should grow beards. It will make you look older.”

Now it was Arik’s turn to blush. Tedi at least had the start of some facial hair though it did not require any shaving, but Arik had not a hint of any. “I don’t think I could grow a beard,” admitted Arik.

“Sure you can,” Kalina insisted. “Follow my instructions and in a few weeks you will have a fine face of hair. The single, most important thing that you two can do to avoid close inspection is to be older and wiser. Garth’s lessons will help you only after the inspection has already been too close.”

“Why are the Dark Riders after us?” Tedi asked. “Master Clava related the tale that Garth mentioned to him, but it all sounds ridiculous.”

“The tale is not ridiculous,” Kalina stated sternly. “It is to be taken with deadly seriousness. The Dark One is real and his interest in children born in the year of the Collapse is real. If the Dark One can destroy certain children born that year, he will reign for a thousand years at which time the Great Demon, Alutar, will be released from his prison to rule forever. If he cannot locate these certain children, he can destroy all of the children born that year and still succeed in his goal. The threat is quite real.”

“How can he tell which children are the ones whom he seeks?” Arik asked.

“I am not sure,” sighed Kalina. “There are many prophecies that deal with the Collapse or the Darkness, as these times are called, but they are confusing at best. Tell me about your own family, Tedi. What do you know of your parents and their brothers and sisters?”

Tedi’s eyes narrowed and he stared at Kalina with barely concealed suspicion. “Why do you want to know about my family?” he asked.

Kalina met his gaze evenly. “Are you ashamed of your family?” she quipped, “or are you embarrassed that you do not know about them?”

“I am not ashamed of my family,” Tedi asserted. “I just want to know why you want to know. We know practically nothing about you and Garth and you expect us to tell you everything. You could be working for the Dark One for all we know. The fact that you killed some Dark Riders means nothing to me. If these children are as important as you say, I am sure that the Dark One would sacrifice some men to find the right children.”

“Fair enough,” Kalina smiled. “I look for anything that stands out from the ordinary. The necklace you are wearing is finely crafted and worth more than your entire town could scrape together. Yet you claim to be a simple fisherman’s son. I merely want to know how you came by it. If your uncles or aunts were wealthy nobles, it would not be so outstanding anymore. That is why I ask.”

“You still didn’t say who you and Garth are,” reminded Tedi.

“How many Dark Riders do you need us to kill before you will believe that we do not serve the Dark One?” asked Kalina. “A hundred? A thousand? Ten thousand? If you think we serve the Dark One, no number of dead Dark Riders will ever convince you. If we wanted you dead, you would have been dead a thousand times already. You will have to come to trust us for ourselves. If you are not there yet, then decisions will have to wait.”

“Hope that whoever is following us, allows us time to wait,” Garth remarked glumly.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 11

Paths of Fate

Fredrik and Niki rode side-by-side down the dusty trail heading north. It had been a week since they

left Cidal by heading westward towards a seldom-used north-south trail. The north-south trail was pretty barren and the only food they were able to procure had been coconuts, some kind of berry and a chicken they stole from a farm. The chicken had almost cost them Fredrik's life when an arrow streaked past his head. With no target to aim his magic at, Fredrik had simply run off with the chicken.

Niki was miserable. She was hot, tired and dirty. Her days in the mansion in Cidal seemed a distant memory and she kicked herself every time it surfaced. She always knew that she was destined to be a queen someday and when her chance finally came, she had thrown it away. The worst part of it was that Fredrik had become extremely quiet since they left Cidal. She could have accepted him yelling at her for her rash behavior, or even if he laughed about it, but he never mentioned it. His only talk was of where to stop for the night or where they should look for some food. If he didn't say something about it soon, she was going to scream.

Fredrik sat up straight in his saddle and cocked his head slightly. "There is a wagon up ahead," he announced. "Let me do the talking. Maybe we can get something to eat."

Niki perked up at the mention of food and the two magicians rode steadily up to the wagon that was stopped at the crossroads of two dirt trails. An old man and a young boy were sitting under a tree alongside the wagon having a food break and Niki's eyes lit up when she read the sign on the canvas of the wagon. It read, "Boris Khatama Merchant".

Fredrik and Niki dismounted and Fredrik tied the two horses to a low branch of a nearby tree. Slowly, they walked over to the merchant. "Greetings, Merchant," Fredrik said. "I see that you are having a meal break. I wonder if two hungry travelers might join you?"

"If the two hungry travelers are peaceful and courteous, they are welcome to share what little we have," greeted Boris. "How are you called?"

Fredrik thought quickly about how he should respond. Finally he decided that he would be truthful, but vague. "I am Fredrik and my traveling companion is Niki. We are from the south and have been some time without proper food."

Boris nodded as if he understood the necessity of being vague these days. "I am Boris, the merchant, and I am traveling with my niece, Tanya. Welcome to our poor table."

Fredrik looked around for the man's niece and flushed when he realized that who he had taken for a young boy was the niece. He bowed slightly and held Niki's hand as she lowered herself to the ground. Fredrik quickly sat next to her and the niece rose and went to the wagon and came back with two plates of bread and cheese and some dried beef. She returned a moment later with two glasses of wine. Niki sniffed the bread and cheese as if it might be moldy, which earned her a nasty glare from Tanya. Both men managed to miss the exchange and seemed to be measuring the other's mettle.

Boris broke the silence first. "Collapse children, I suppose. You won't want to be going west, then. There are several score of Dark Riders who are camped out about two hours from here."

Fredrik and Niki exchanged surprised glances. "What makes you think we are Collapse children?" Niki asked.

The old man's eyes twinkled. "You appear the right age," Boris began. "You are obviously running from someone and you just verified it by not denying it," he chuckled. "Do not be afraid of me. I do not stomach the Dark Riders or their kind very well and what you are and where you are going is none of my

affair. At my age, all I have left is my curiosity. Which one of you is a Collapse child or are you both?"

"Both," offered Fredrik. "You have a keen eye, Master Khatama, and a generous heart. Niki and I do thank you for the food. I am afraid my funds are pitilessly poor, but the few coins I have are yours for the asking."

Boris waved his hands. "That is not necessary, traveler. Your coins are better kept for your next meal. The road east goes to Toresh. Avoid that town, as it is a major staging point for the Dark Riders. I fear you must continue north and there is not much that way in terms of food unless you know how to live off the land. You strike me as city children and the next few days will be hard on you. I am sorry to say that we are eating the last of our food, so I can not fix you up something to take with you."

Niki suddenly felt ashamed at sniffing the food now that she knew it was all they had left. She removed her cloak and laid it on the grass as she finished the last piece of bread. She looked at the young girl who, dressed in brown leather shirt and pants with a brown leather cap that came down to her ears, very much resembled a boy. "Is there somewhere where I might clean up a bit, Tanya?" she asked.

Tanya removed her hat and volumes of long, flowing, golden hair fell down her back. "There is a stream just beyond those trees," she replied. "I will get towels and show you the way."

Niki stared at the girl's beautiful hair and face and suddenly wondered how she could have mistaken her for a boy. "Thank you, Tanya. I would like that."

Fredrik and Boris talked about different places they had been when the merchant said he was heading south and asked Fredrik how conditions were down there. "I am glad that we have met," Boris said. "I think I shall change my plans and not head south, after all. The picture you paint is not one that would be very lucrative for a merchant. Spare my old bones, Fredrik, and get the bottle of wine at the rear of the wagon. I think we need another glass if we are to wait on the women."

Fredrik chuckled and rose to get the bottle. When he returned, he found Boris fondling the cloak that Niki had left on the grass. "A very interesting design," Boris commented, "but I fear that fire has marred its perfection. How did she come by it?"

Fredrik looked at the merchant suspiciously. "She likes it very much, Boris. Niki is sure that she is destined to become a queen one day."

Boris chuckled as he placed the cloak back where he had found it. "Who knows," he said. "Perhaps she will be. This is the last bottle of wine, as well. This trip has not been very prosperous."

The old man's casual attitude put Fredrik back at ease and the girls soon returned from the stream. Fredrik and Niki mounted their horses and prepared to leave. "Will you be heading north, as well, then?" Fredrik asked.

"I expect so," Boris replied. "I am not much of a one for living off the land, though. I may head into Toresh for supplies before I head north. Safe journey to you both."

Tanya turned and finished cleaning up after the midday meal. "There were no Dark Riders west of here," she stated. "Why did you lie to them?"

"There are many hazards in life, Tanya," Boris said softly. "Those two are not ready to face them. Nobody is really ready to face them, but that group north of here is where they need to be, at least for

now. It should prove to be quite interesting.”

Tanya continued cleaning up and Boris rose to walk off the stiffness of sitting before he climbed up on the wagon again. Boris walked around in circles and suddenly saw something that he had not seen in seventeen years. Through the gray sky overhead, a small hole appeared and a sunbeam lanced down into the intersection of the two roads. It disappeared as quickly as it came and Boris walked over to the center of the intersection where it struck. Looking down he found a small, flat rock. Burned into the face of the rock was the following inscription:

From North and East and South and West

The children gather towards unknown

The whole world's saviors they are blest

The seeds of True Light now are sown

Shall Darkness win or Light prevail

The outcome's not foretold or known

On brink of Fate's fluttering sail

They'll win and live or hear Death's moan

Boris studied the inscription over and over and finally put the rock in his pouch and returned to the wagon. He climbed up onto the wagon just as Tanya finished and joined him. He started the wagon rolling along the dusty trail and at the intersection he turned onto the trail to the north.

“I thought we were going into Toresh for food,” Tanya said

“There has been a change in plans,” Boris replied glumly. “The day you have prepared for is fast approaching. You must remember all that you have been taught by the others and me. It is time that I sent you into the viper's den.”

Arik and Tedi were utilizing their tracking skills to follow Garth's path. The trail had become increasingly hard to follow, but the boys were still managing to track it correctly. “I heard Garth telling Kalina this morning that our mysterious followers have not been around for over three days now,” Arik said softly.

“Maybe it was all in his imagination,” retorted Tedi. “There might not have been anyone ever following us. I wonder why Garth never has us take turns on sentry duty? You would think that if he was really concerned about somebody being out there, he would post a sentry all night.”

“There are only three of us,” Arik reminded Tedi as he pointed to a leaf on the ground with a fine layer of dust on it. “Not to mention that two of us can hardly keep our eyes open through dinner.”

“What is it that Garth does in the woods every night and every morning?” Tedi asked. “He does it every day and it is the only time that he will not allow anyone to accompany him.”

“I don’t know,” Arik conceded while pointing out the peculiar way the slant of the blades of grass alternated between pointing right and pointing left as if someone had swept something across the grass back and forth to remove footsteps. “I suspect that he is making sure that no one is near. Or, at least, it must have something to do with the security of the campsite.”

Suddenly, the trail totally disappeared and the boys stood up, puzzled. There was not one clue as to which direction Garth had taken next.

“You forgot one of the most important lessons in tracking,” Garth said from behind them.

The boys spun around and faced the length of Garth’s long, sinuous sword wavering between their throats. “What lesson was that?” croaked Tedi.

“The first one that I taught you, fisherboy,” Garth said grimly. “Maintain silence at all times. Why do you think I taught you to use hand talk? Do you think it was to give your idle fingers some exercise? Your tracking skills are coming along fairly well, but you would be dead now because of a very foolish mistake.”

“But this is only practice,” complained Tedi.

“There is no difference between practice and real life,” sighed Garth. “What do I have to do to convince you? If I kill you, you will have finally learned that lesson, but I will have wasted my time teaching it. Do you think we are in some park where no bad people exist? We are but a few miles from Toresh where the Dark Riders have a major garrison. Their own practice sessions use these very woods that you are frolicking in and yet you walk around as if there is no danger. There is danger every moment of your life. Never forget it. Never.”

“What did we miss here?” Arik asked as much to break the tension as to hear the answer.

“Look at the tree bark,” Garth explained. “I jumped up and grabbed that branch, but my feet disturbed the bark there and there. You would have trouble following from there, but if you checked surrounding trees you would eventually find where I came down. Enough tracking for now. You boys are due for some more sword practice. Today you two get the chance to kill me. It should be fun.”

Garth turned and headed back towards the campsite leaving Arik and Tedi shaking their heads. Arik watched the way Garth walked as he followed him. The careful, if subconscious, placement of every step. His feet always coming down on the quietest, most solid surface the path provided. Arik wondered how many years Garth had been walking that way. It was so second nature to the man that Arik was sure he did it without thinking.

The afternoon was as full of activity for the boys as every day for the last two weeks had been. While they still had trouble keeping their eyes open during the late dinner, the aches in their muscles were becoming less each day. Garth came into the campsite late for dinner and sat down with a frown on his face.

“Your friends are still looking for you,” he said to the boys. “There are about thirty Dark Riders several miles to the North and your friend, the witch, is with them.”

“Should we leave tonight?” Tedi asked nervously.

Garth chewed a mouthful of rabbit before answering. “Traveling by night is too dangerous unless you know the country well or you are very desperate. Neither case applies here. One of the hardest tracks to hide is a wagon. I think we can avoid any problems with them as long as you two are out of sight when they come.”

“What about their horses?” asked Arik. “They are bound to recognize their horses and saddles.”

“Not necessarily,” Garth stated. “And if they do, I will tell them that I purchased them from a gang of bandits that headed south. Gypsies are known to trade with anyone. If they argue too much, I will offer to sell them back to them.”

“I can’t believe that you are taking this so lightly,” Tedi burst out.

Garth put down his plate and leveled his gaze on the boys. “I take nothing lightly,” he declared. “I do not always seek a fight when there are other ways out of a situation. I do not shun a fight, but it is better to choose when you wish to fight and not let others decide for you. You would do well to remember to face every problem with calmness and logical thought. Emotion can kill you as quickly as a sword.”

“Is there anything that we can do to prepare for tomorrow?” questioned Arik.

“Get some sleep,” ordered Garth. “If all does not go well, you may be called upon to exercise your new skills and I would like you well rested for the occasion.”

The boys nodded and headed off to their blankets. Kalina and Garth sat talking softly for an hour before they, too, retired.

Niki was practically falling asleep in the saddle. “Why do we have to keep riding, Fredrik? I’m tired and I want to go to sleep.”

“I want to ride a little longer,” answered Fredrik. “We have been too long without something substantial to eat. If we keep stopping early, we will die of starvation. We need to find a village or small town and the longer we ride each day the sooner we will find it.”

“We haven’t seen so much as a farm since that place you stole the chicken,” Niki complained. “I don’t think anyone lives along this road.”

“You may be right,” admitted Fredrik, “but I thought I smelled smoke a little while ago and I wouldn’t mind some food before I fall asleep.”

They rode on for another ten minutes and Fredrik perked up again. “I know it is smoke this time,” he said hopefully. “If we don’t find some food at wherever the smoke is coming from, we go to sleep anyway, okay?”

Niki didn’t answer and Fredrik led them off the road and onto a small dirt path that led into the woods towards the East. The smell of smoke was still very faint, but Fredrik followed it until it got stronger. Finally, he saw the shape of a wagon far up the dirt path. He thought he heard a slight sound like two pieces of metal tinkling against each other, but ignored it. When he reached the edge of the

clearing where the wagon was parked, he dismounted and told Niki to get down and hold the horses. He surveyed the campsite and could not see anyone moving. Other than the wagon, the campsite held a string line for horses and Fredrik could see around a half dozen horses. He thought he could pick out two shapes over by the horses that might be men sleeping.

“I’m going in to see what I can find to eat,” whispered Fredrik.

Niki nodded and tied the horses to a small tree. Fredrik crept toward the wagon, keeping an eye on the two sleeping forms. He successfully reached the back of the wagon without waking anyone and began to ease the door open. The tip of a sword touched his throat from alongside the wagon.

“Don’t you know it is polite to knock before you enter a woman’s wagon?” the steely voice asked.

Fredrik raised his chin and the sword followed it up. He let go of the door to the wagon and raised his hands. “Sorry,” he croaked, “I was just looking for food. I haven’t eaten in days and I am very hungry.”

Garth looked at the boy before lowering his sword and sheathing it. As he started to open his mouth to speak, he caught the glare of a magical projectile screaming in from the woods. He threw himself to the ground and kicked Fredrik’s feet out from under him. Quickly twisting his body as the projectile screamed by overhead, Garth wrapped his muscular arm around the boy’s neck.

“One more mistake like that and this boy’s life is ended,” he shouted. “Come out of the woods so I can see you.”

Arik and Tedi leaped to their feet, their bows ready and arrows nocked. The door to the wagon opened and Kalina stepped out. She looked at the boy carefully and then gazed into the woods as if trying to determine who would be helping the boy.

“Whether you value the boy’s life or not,” she called, “do not use any more magic. There is a company of Dark Riders only a couple of miles away and they have a witch with them. Your magic will call them down here quicker than if you sent a rider to tell them you are here. If you want food, we will feed you. If not, you may leave.”

She nodded to Garth and he released the boy and stood up. The boy rose slowly and looked all around the campsite. He saw the two boys with their bows ready. He saw Kalina standing next to the wagon in a black sleeping robe with her hands on her hips and he saw Garth standing seemingly at ease, or at least as at ease as a predator gets. Garth motioned to the boys with a hand signal and they reluctantly lowered their bows and returned their arrows to their quivers.

For a long moment, nobody moved and nobody spoke. Finally, Garth turned to the boy. “Either eat in peace or leave in peace, but make up your mind,” Garth demanded. “I do not fancy losing sleep while your friend takes the night to decide.”

Fredrik finally made up his mind and waved Niki into the campsite. Everyone watched the redheaded girl lead the two horses into the clearing.

“Tedi,” Garth called, “see to our guests’ horses. They look like they have been ridden since first light. Arik, light the fire and get some coffee going.” Turning to Fredrik and Niki, Garth looked them over before he indicated that they should sit by the fire.

“You could have just asked for food,” Garth commented. “No one but Dark Riders and bandits would refuse you if they had any to spare. Who are you and where are you heading that you travel at night?”

Niki, even though frightened, appeared ready to fall asleep sitting up. Fredrik appeared to be calming down and spoke. “We are Fredrik and Niki and we are from the south. We are traveling at night because we have not eaten in days and I wanted to push on in hopes of finding a village. I smelled your smoke and followed it in to the clearing. I saw no one awake so I thought I would just grab whatever food I could find without waking anyone. It was wrong and I apologize.”

“It was wrong because you got caught, you mean,” Garth frowned. “Your apology is accepted, just the same.”

Kalina emerged from the wagon with plates of cold food for the new couple and they tore into it as if they were really hungry. Kalina watched them eat and looked at Niki’s cloak with interest and suddenly frowned. Garth caught the look, but gave no indication. She looked over at Garth and said, “It would appear that we are becoming a magnet for Collapse children. We need to keep these two from the Dark Riders, as well.”

Fredrik looked up in surprise and then looked over his shoulder at Arik and Tedi. Niki just kept on eating and mumbled, “How does everyone know?”

Kalina had been watching their reactions closely and just smiled. Arik and Tedi stared at the redheaded witch whom Garth and Kalina had just welcomed into their campsite and Garth strode out of the clearing to fix his tripline without anyone noticing.

Fredrik and Niki finished all of the food that Kalina brought out. Garth started a pipe as he sat and watched them finish up. Kalina made another trip into the wagon and came back with blankets for the visitors.

“We may be having visitors tomorrow,” he began. “The Dark Riders that Kalina mentioned are only a few miles north of here. We may have to wake you early so that we can arrange to hide you. They do have a witch with them and any use of magic, no matter how small, could result in death for all of us. Will you listen to my orders in the morning?”

“We have little choice,” sighed Fredrik. “There are Dark Riders to the East and to the West and I know that we cannot survive the trip back south. If you are correct about Dark Riders to the north, we are stuck with you or you with us. We will not resort to magic unless our lives depend on it.”

“So, you are both magicians?” Garth asked.

Fredrik shrugged. “I have been told that you should not submit to interrogations when you are tired,” he chuckled. “Now, I know why. Yes, we both have the ability and, yes, we will behave.”

Garth nodded. “Then you should both get some sleep. You look like you can use it.”

After Fredrik and Niki were settled in their blankets, Garth and Kalina spoke in private. “Let me guess, the cloak has a spell on it?” Garth asked.

Kalina nodded. “The same type of spell that I detected on the necklace. You did get a good look at the cloak didn’t you? Including the burn marks?”

“I saw it,” Garth said. “This has turned into quite a fishing trip. The Dark One would be thrilled to know where we are right now. In fact,” Garth smiled, “he would give almost anything to know.”

“There is something else,” Kalina added. “The boy has the ability to gather the power. He was doing so when you held him. That ability is very rare. I do not know if she possesses it, as well. If she does, she wasn’t using it tonight.”

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 12

Discovery

Tedi rose early and looked around in the pre-light darkness of the campsite. He was sure that he had heard something, but nothing seemed amiss. Suddenly, he heard it again and looked towards the sound. Someone was doing something just outside the clearing. Gently, he nudged Arik awake and held his finger to his lips. Arik took a few moments to acclimate himself to his surroundings in the dark. Slowly the boys tiptoed towards the sound, always keeping the trees between them and the mysterious person in the woods.

Arik, who was the quieter of the two boys, used a hand signal to tell Tedi to stay back and continued slowly forward. After gaining a few more trees, Arik stiffened and shook his head. Cautiously, Arik turned around and retraced his steps back to Tedi. He signaled for Tedi to follow and led the way back to their sleeping areas. “It’s Garth,” Arik whispered, “and he is digging graves. He is just finishing the second grave, but I can see two more outlined in the dirt.”

“We have to tell the newcomers,” Tedi whispered. “Maybe with their . . . their powers, they can help us escape.”

Arik nodded his head in agreement and the boys headed across the clearing to where Fredrik and Niki were sleeping. The first light was already appearing when the boys reached Fredrik’s side. Gently, Arik shook him and held his finger to his lips so Fredrik did not shout.

“We have trouble,” Tedi said softly. “Get your friend up quietly and quickly.”

Fredrik half rolled and half crawled the short distance to Niki’s blanket and simply put his hand over her mouth. Niki’s eyes popped open widely and she stared up into Fredrik’s face. When Fredrik was sure that she understood his warning, he withdrew to a sitting position.

Niki sat up and looked around and saw the other two boys. “What is going on?” she whispered.

“Garth is digging four graves,” Tedi explained softly. “We may need your special talents to get us out of here before he discovers that we are awake.”

“Are the Dark Riders really camped close to us?” Fredrik asked softly.

When Arik nodded his head, Fredrik continued, "That would not be a good idea. Kalina is correct that they would detect us if we cast anything major or more than one minor spell. We should just sneak off and hope to lose them both."

"You will never lose Garth by sneaking off," Tedi assured the newcomers. "He can track the wind through the branches of a tree by the scent it left behind. And for some reason, I expect that he would follow us until he found us, no matter how long it took."

"Even so," Niki interrupted, "if we got enough of a lead on him, we could use magic to stop him cold once we were away from the Dark Riders and their witch."

Arik smiled and nodded his head. "That just might work," he agreed.

Just then, the door to the wagon opened and Kalina stepped out. She looked around the campsite and her eyes stopped on the four children. "It is good to see the four of you getting along so well," she commented, "but it is time to start the day. Arik, get the fire started. Tedi, get water for coffee. Has anyone seen Garth this morning?"

Four quickly shaking heads met Kalina's blue eyes. "Very well," she said. "Fredrik, observe Arik and the fire so you will know what to do in the future. Niki, you can help me with the food."

Arik quietly started building the fire and Tedi nervously grabbed buckets and headed off towards the stream. Niki followed Kalina as though she was going to be prepared for cooking instead of the breakfast. Fredrik walked over to Arik and whispered, "We will have to play along until the right moment and breakfast will be welcome if we have to spend days on the trail trying to shake Garth. He can't really do anything until all four of the graves are done, anyway, and you said he had completed only two."

Kalina and Niki quickly had breakfast going with more of the strange, large eggs and slabs of bacon. The smell of the campfire and the cooking bacon lured Garth out of the woods and he came over and sat by Kalina. The four others huddled together on the other side of the fire and everyone ate in silence.

Finally, Garth put his empty plate down and looked across the campfire at the others. "Today is going to be an unusual day," he began. "As you can see we are eating earlier than normal and there will be no practice sessions. Arik and Tedi, you two have a special task ahead of you. I need you two to finish digging some holes for me, very large holes."

Tedi and Arik looked at each other with their mouths hanging open. "I am not feeling well today," Tedi quickly blurted out.

"Perhaps it was something we ate or the effects of the magic last night, but I don't feel really well, either," Arik got out.

Garth looked at the two boys suspiciously as well as the almost concealed grins of the other two children. Something was going on with the four of them that he did not understand, but he would not allow it to get in the way of the plan he had for them this morning. "It is unfortunate that you two do not feel well," he said slowly, "because it will make the digging appear worse than it really is, but make no mistakes, you two will finish the digging if it kills you."

Niki leaped to her feet, spilling her plate and her second helping of food on the ground. Placing her hands on her hips, she glared at Garth and Kalina. Fredrik slowly rose and placed his hand on her

shoulder, but this time it was in a show of support rather than a reprimand.

“Niki is right,” Fredrik stated clearly. “We both have powers that we would prefer not to use right now because of the Dark Riders, but we will if we have to and damn the consequences. You are not going to order Arik and Tedi to dig their own graves.”

Arik and Tedi also rose and placed their hands on the hilts of the swords they had managed to get on while doing their breakfast chores. Kalina stood with a smile on her lips, but Garth rose with a scowl on his face.

“They are not digging their own graves,” Garth said flatly, “they are digging yours. I have already finished theirs. If you children are quite finished with your mutiny, I will describe my plan.”

The scene around the campfire appeared frozen and nobody spoke. Niki, who would have already attacked by now, felt patience and reassurance from Fredrik’s hand on her shoulder. Arik and Tedi knew the minute they drew their swords, Garth would strike them down. They had been practicing two on one with Garth for several days now and they knew they were not even close to being ready to take him on.

“The Dark Riders will most certainly be here this morning,” Garth continued. “If any of you are seen, we will have to do battle and destroy them all. The graves that you speak of are holes for you to hide in. I have already cut strips of wood to hold canvas over the holes, so that the dirt piled on top of you will be very thin. You will be able to easily get out if something should happen to Kalina and myself. I have cut long reeds for you to breath through and the excavated dirt will be spread evenly over the ground just before I reposition the horses to ring the area. The Dark Riders will not give it a second glance.”

Fredrik and Niki looked stunned and the two boys from Lorgo sported deep red faces as they sat back down. Kalina went around and refilled the coffee mugs as Fredrik and Niki also sat back down.

“Niki cannot stand enclosed spaces,” Fredrik stated. “We will have to devise something else for her.”

Garth nodded thoughtfully and resumed his seated position. “Just as well,” he finally said. “We have already wasted too much time arguing about the two incomplete holes. I think I can arrange to strap the two of you up underneath the wagon so that you will not be noticed. The only danger is if they ask us to move the wagon. The strapping would hurt severely and perhaps even break if we had to move it over any distance. It will have to do, though, and we had better get to it.”

Arik was sent off to arrange a string line for the horses that would screen the two holes, while Garth slid under the wagon and began fastening leather straps that would hold Fredrik and Niki tight to the floor of the wagon. Kalina and Niki cleaned up the campsite and removed all traces of anything that might indicate that there were more than two people here. Tedi and Fredrik worked to spread the dirt that was extracted from the two holes.

Everything took around two hours and after the children were all secure, Garth collected his black stallion and the white mare and tied them gently to the side of the wagon. Less than half an hour later, three Dark Riders rode into the campsite and stared at Garth and Kalina who were sitting idly at the campfire.

“What brings gypsies this far inland?” asked one of the Dark Riders.

Garth looked up lazily from his cup of coffee. "Lack of people chooses our path," Garth said. "If you wish a moment's rest on your journey, you may have a cup of coffee before you depart."

One of the Dark Riders dismounted and walked over to Garth while the other two let their eyes roam over every inch of the campsite. "I am called Klarg," the Dark Rider announced as he sat by the fire and waited for Kalina to get him a cup of coffee. "Have you seen any people come by this way?"

"We are gypsies," Garth stated. "We have not even seen you come by."

Klarg did not smile at Garth's remark, but seemed to be studying the man in black. "You are rather well armed for a gypsy. Do you not fear traveling alone?"

"The world is an unsettled arena," Garth reflected. "We all know fear from time to time, but fear does nothing to change the facts. You travel this same land with only three of you and you are also well armed. This only shows that we both know that to travel this land in small numbers requires at least a show of strength."

"I do not care for riddles, gypsy," Klarg stated impatiently. "Where have you traveled from? Have you been near the coast?"

"We have been here for some time now," Garth answered. "I have seen the coast before, but not on this trip. There are too many people along the coast and bandits congregate where people live."

Klarg chewed his lip and stared back at his men. One of the Dark Riders nodded towards the woods at the far side of the clearing and Klarg's eyes followed the direction indicated. Even from where he was, he could see the stand of horses once he knew where to look. Klarg rose and walked across the clearing to the horses. He stared at the string of horses and returned to the campfire.

"You have many horses, gypsy," Klarg declared, "and unless my eyes grow weary, I recognize some of them as having belonged to associates of mine. How is this possible?"

"All things are possible," Garth stated dryly. "We have been fortunate on this trip to run across horses roaming free. Some of them did, indeed, have saddles. Gypsies are known for taking what other people abandon. If your associates care to claim their horses and come to us, we will be glad to return their animals for the cost of caring for them. For that matter, we will gladly sell you the horses and you can deal with your associates as you like."

Klarg snorted at the comment of the gypsies finding the horses. Gypsies were well known for stealing horses and reselling them to their previous owners. The occupation of horse thief suited this armed man more than traveling gypsy, but he would let Wolinda decide.

"You two will accompany me to our camp," Klarg stated authoritatively. "We shall let others decide what to do with you."

Klarg's two men immediately became alert to the possible outbreak of trouble. Garth casually stood up and turned towards the two men.

"We will favor you with our company," Kalina said, "but we will not be gone from our wagon for a great period of time. There may be bandits around and we do not give up our belongings easily. You will assure us that the questions will be asked quickly so that we may return in a short span of time."

Klarg did not reply, but waited for the gypsies to mount up. “You will respond to Kalina,” Garth prompted, “or we will not travel with you. You have assurances to give.”

Klarg snorted, “You are assured.” Klarg silently laughed at the gypsies’ demand for assurance. Any fool who took the word of a Dark Rider was a fool indeed.

Garth and Kalina untied their horses from the side of the wagon and mounted them bareback. Klarg led the procession while his two men rode behind Garth and Kalina. Several moments after Fredrik heard the horses ride out of the campsite, he undid the straps holding him tight to the bottom of the wagon. Fredrik looked around the campsite from under the wagon before quickly undoing Niki’s straps and the two of them stretched their muscles. Fredrik jogged over to the horses and peeled back a small section of canvas from each of the holes. Arik and Tedi climbed out and inhaled deeply.

“I will never feel comfortable breathing through a tube,” Arik quipped. Looking around he added, “Where are Garth and Kalina?”

“The Dark Riders took them away,” Fredrik said. “They asked about the horses and whether they had seen anyone since camping here.”

“You were able to hear the conversation?” Tedi asked, shivering with the thought of being that close to Dark Riders.

“All of it,” Fredrik declared as the three boys headed towards the wagon. “Garth and Kalina certainly sounded pretty calm in front of the Dark Riders. I’m not sure if they will be coming back.”

“Where is Niki,” Tedi asked. “Didn’t you untie her?”

Fredrik froze by the campfire and started looking all around the campsite. “I did untie her before I came to get you two,” he exclaimed. “Where has she gone off to?”

Just then, the three boys heard a thump from inside the wagon. They scrambled over each other in their attempt to open the wagon door. Arik was first to get there and threw open the door. Niki shot bolt upright at the sound and finally let out her breath when she saw who it was.

“Are you trying to scare me to death!” Niki exclaimed as she returned to her searching.

“What are you doing?” demanded Arik. “She will skin us alive if she catches you in there.”

Fredrik and Tedi crowded into the doorway, craning their necks to get a good view of inside of the wagon. “This may be our only chance to find out who they are,” Niki asserted. “Why don’t the three of you go back outside and watch to see if they are returning?”

The three boys tumbled out of the doorway and paced around outside. “I can’t believe she is doing that,” declared Arik.

“I think it is a good idea,” remarked Tedi, “if she knows something good when she sees it.”

Niki came out of the wagon, struggling to carry a long package wrapped in canvas. “This was too long to unwrap inside,” she smirked, “but I think it is important. It was so well hidden, that it must be very valuable. The wagon had been modified just to hide this.”

Tedi smiled and thought he might grow to like this red-haired girl. The four of them gathered to help unroll the canvas wrapping. The article had obviously been wrapped for years and the ties were old and brittle. When they had succeeded in unrolling the canvas, they discovered an ancient sword in a jewel-bedecked scabbard. The hilt of the sword was gold with intricate carvings, but it was also devoid of the gems that so obviously once adorned the hilt.

“Somebody has already stolen the gems from it,” Tedi remarked. “This probably once belonged to a king. Do you think Garth and Kalina stole it?”

Four pair of hands probed the empty sockets in the hilt as if measuring the huge size of the gems that used to be there. “I’ll bet if they were diamonds, one of them would have been worth enough to live like a prince for a lifetime,” Fredrik spoke.

“What are a pair of gypsies doing with something like this?” Arik mused, unaware of the pair of eyes that were watching him from the woods.

One of the boys turned the sword over to look at the other side. This side of the hilt was similar to the other side, except in place of the large holes where the gems used to reside, was a single line of glass beads and one of them was missing. Niki looked down at the canvas and found the missing glass bead. “Look what you oafs have done,” she scowled holding up the bead.

“Why blame us?” Fredrik asked. “You’re the one who brought this thing out of the wagon. Maybe we can just stick it back in and wrap the sword up again.”

Niki tried to stick the bead back into the sword hilt, but it would not stick. “It is no use,” she sighed. “I think we ought to wrap it back up and plead ignorance if they ever notice it was disturbed.”

“That is if they ever return from the Dark Riders,” Fredrik mentioned.

As if summoning a great evil would call it down on yourself, the four children looked up at the sound of horses entering the clearing. Garth and Kalina continued to ride towards the group of children and the expressions on their faces were not friendly. Niki was still holding the glass bead and she immediately put her hands behind her back.

“So,” Kalina admonished, “this is the type of children we protect from the Dark Riders. Children who rifle through someone’s belongings the moment they are out of sight.”

“Perhaps we waste our time on these vagabonds,” Garth added. “Surely, the Children of the Prophecy would not be the type to steal from people who are devoting their lives to protecting them.”

The four children backed themselves up until their feet were pressed against the stone ring around the campfire and, still, Garth and Kalina rode slowly towards them. The pair of eyes in the woods opened widely as they watched the scene below in the clearing.

Garth and Kalina dismounted and let the horses roam free. Together they continued forward towards the children. Kalina looked down at the sword and gasped. She noticed the missing glass bead and her face contorted in fury. “Garth,” she steamed, “they were vandalizing it for the stones.”

Garth stopped and bent down and picked up the ancient sword. He turned it over and looked at the jewels in the scabbard and then turned it over to examine the glass beads in the hilt. Seeing the bottom glass bead as the only missing piece, he slowly lowered the sword to the canvas.

Straightening up, he approached the group of children who were standing with their backs to the fire. The children tried to cringe away from the imposing gypsy, but there was nowhere to go.

“We didn’t mean to harm it,” Arik blurted out. “It was an accident. Honest!”

“He’s telling the truth,” Fredrik offered. “Besides, Arik and Tedi had nothing to do with it. They didn’t even know that Niki and I were looking through your wagon and we were only doing it to try to determine who you are.”

“Nothing gives you the right to go through our belongings,” Garth bellowed. “Nothing! If Tedi and Arik had nothing to do with it, at least they could have stopped it.”

Niki brought her empty hand out in front of her and prepared to hurl a Force Bolt at Garth. As her arm straightened in front of her, it grew cold and blue. Niki stared at her arm in disbelief as it grew colder and bluer and ice began to form on it. She looked over at Kalina and saw the thin smile of satisfaction on Kalina’s lips.

“She’s a witch!” Niki screamed. “She’s a witch and she’s frozen my arm.”

The three boys looked at Niki’s arm and turned their horrified gaze towards Kalina. Kalina simply continued to smile at them.

Fredrik glared at Kalina. “Release her from your spell, witch,” he demanded. “Release her at once.”

When Kalina made no move to restore Niki’s arm, Fredrik reached for the power to teach the gypsy the meaning of real power. His face turned to wonderment and continued its transformation to a mask of rage when he found out that something was blocking his ability to reach the power. No. Not something, someone. He looked over at Kalina again and, still, she stood smiling.

“Do not try any more of your tricks,” she said softly. “I find them offensive and inhospitable.”

Fredrik realized that if Kalina could shut him off from the power, any other spell he might try on her would result in disaster. “So, you do work for the Dark One,” he said. “Your little ruse about the Dark Riders being after us, was just an excuse to make us think we were safe until you could get out of us whatever it is you are after. Well, you will get nothing out of me. I would rather die than serve you.”

Garth stepped forward and thrust out his hand. “Give me the glass bead,” he demanded.

Niki tried to lean back away from his outstretched hand and tripped over the rock ring of the campfire. Garth’s hand shot out and grabbed her tunic just before she fell into the fire. Niki’s hand opened in a reflex action to break her fall and the glass bead rolled off her fingertips into the fire.

The glass bead exploded in a shower of sparks and a great cloud of smoke erupted over the campfire. Arik and Tedi each dove to one side of the campfire and Fredrik turned around and fell on his back. Garth pulled Niki towards him and squatted as she turned to face the fire. Everyone stared in amazement as the smoke billowed up and radiated every color imaginable. The center of the cloud of smoke cleared and the distinct image of a blue fairy appeared next to a large, blue sapphire. The fairy appeared to be addressing a large gathering of green and blue fairies gathered in front of a huge oak tree. Only the oak leaves gave size and dimension to the fairies, which looked like they could ride an oak leaf like a magic carpet.

The blue fairy next to the sapphire had wings on her back and spoke to the assembled audience. These are the words that she spoke:

Your blood will flow 'til none is left

While darkness around you descends

On Holy Sapphire all you have

Fate of the Fairies do depend

The Crown of Light the Fairies' Life

Without it all are doomed to die

The Holy Sapphire just a patch

Redemption only just a lie

The vision slowly faded until only the blue sapphire remained and then it, too, winked out. The cloud congealed and was sucked into the fire. As the stunned watchers gazed, the fire erupted in sparks again and a blue glass bead flew out of the campfire and struck the ancient sword exactly at the place where the glass bead had been. The sword vibrated with melodious metal tones and started spinning around and around until it finally stopped with a jerk, pointing north.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 13

Children

Everyone sat and stared at the sword as Kalina walked over and picked it up. She held it out in front of her and turned in a circle. Each time she passed the position at which it stopped spinning it vibrated in her hands. She quickly realized that the sword was acting as a compass, but if she was correct in her guess, it was not merely pointing north, it was pointing towards the Holy Sapphire of the fairies.

Kalina looked over at the cowering children and focused her eyes on Niki's arm. Immediately, it began to warm and return to the normal color of flesh. "Fredrik," she called, "come over here and hold this sword. Turn in a complete circle holding it out before you and tell me what you think. Tedi, get some coffee going. I think we all need to have a good talk."

Tedi scampered off uneasily and Fredrik slowly came over and took the sword. Niki rubbed her arm

as if trying to speed the cold away. Fredrik confirmed what Kalina had felt and she had each of the children repeat the process.

Out in the woods, the pair of eyes climbed down out of the tree as Tedi put the coffee over the fire. Arik took the reins of the two horses that Garth and Kalina had ridden and tied them to the wagon. Nobody seemed anxious to talk about the prior events except for the display that took place in the campfire.

Garth disappeared and finally Fredrik broke the dreaded silence. "Will the magic call the Dark Riders back or are you really working for them?"

Kalina looked at Fredrik and smiled. "I do not work for the Dark One and the magic I used was extremely small. Their witch will not notice."

Fredrik looked at Niki with a stunned expression. He could not imagine being cut off from the power being considered small, but that was not what he had meant. "I mean the fireworks display over the campfire," Fredrik explained.

Kalina's face frowned. "I hadn't thought of that," she admitted. "I was so involved with watching and listening, I don't know how powerful a broadcast it might have made. Did either of you feel anything?"

Niki and Fredrik shook their heads and Kalina looked around for Garth. When Kalina's eyes saw Garth, he was marching a young boy before him into the clearing. The boy was obviously not happy about having Garth prod him on. Fredrik, Niki, Arik, and Tedi immediately recognized Tanya, but Kalina had no idea whom Garth was corralling.

"I found this one spying on us," Garth declared, "and a feisty one he is."

"I was not spying," Tanya proclaimed as she took off her leather hat and let her long golden hair cascade down her back, "and I am not a he."

Kalina tried to hide a smile and failed and Garth was obviously taken aback by the display of hair. "So you're not," Garth corrected. "Still, I would say climbing a tree and watching a group of people certainly constitutes spying."

"I was looking for food and saw your campfire is all," Tanya stated.

"Where is your uncle?" Niki asked. "I thought he was going into Toresh to get food."

Kalina looked back and forth between the two girls in confusion. "We were attacked by Dark Riders," Tanya sobbed. "They killed my uncle and burned the wagon. I only got away by hiding."

Niki went over and comforted Tanya and Fredrik explained to Kalina whom Tanya was and how they had met. Arik added that they met Boris and Tanya in Lorgo before Garth came to town. Kalina was so confused with everything that was happening that she sat and sipped at her coffee.

Fredrik stared as Niki took Tanya by the hand and got her food. He had never seen Niki be nice to anyone, himself included. Women, he figured, the world's greatest mystery, and created only to confuse men. Garth walked over and untied the two horses that Arik had tied to the wagon, then helped himself to coffee and sat down. Eventually, everyone gathered at the campfire with a mug of coffee. There were

many unanswered questions, but Arik chose to go first.

“Kalina,” he began, “you once told us that we were free to go whenever we wanted. Do you still say that?”

“I will not hold you against your will, Arik, but truthfully, I hope you will stay,” Kalina said. “We all have many questions that go begging answers. We will spend today discussing what we have seen and what it means to each of us. If you still wish to leave after that, I will not stop you.”

“That is acceptable, Arik answered. “I must tell you that I am not comfortable in the company of a witch.”

“Not many people are, Arik,” she sighed, “that is why I hide it. I should point out, though, that you are in the company of three people who can wield magic.”

“What is going on?” Tedi asked. “Why are the Dark Riders after us? What was all of that smoke and images with the sword? I don’t understand any of this and, frankly, I don’t like it.”

“Let me ask a question first,” Kalina interrupted. “Who among you actually touched the sword?”

“We all did,” Niki answered. “I was the one who took it out of the wagon, but once we unrolled it, everyone touched it. What is it?”

Ignoring Niki’s question, Kalina continued her search for information. “Who caused the glass bead to fall out? Was it you, Niki?”

“We are all to blame,” Fredrik stated. “Do not pick on Niki when we should all share in whatever punishment you mete out.”

“I am not talking about punishment or blame,” Kalina insisted, “but I do need to know which one of you caused the bead to fall from the sword.”

“We don’t know,” Arik answered. “The bead was on the bottom of the sword because we were looking at the side where the gems belong. When we turned it over, the bead was not in the sword. There is no way we could determine which one of us broke it. We are all to blame.”

“Okay,” Kalina said exasperatingly, “let me say this again. There is no blame or punishment involved. The sword is not broken. The sword is behaving exactly like it is supposed to. I will admit I was excited when I saw the missing bead, but I was wrong when I accused you of stealing it. I know that now. What I do not know is which one of you was the cause of it coming loose.”

“And we shall never know,” declared Tedi. “Everything that has been said is true. We do not know how the bead came loose. We all touched the sword. Niki had the bead in her hand because she was trying to put it back on the sword. Why does it matter who was the cause?”

“Okay,” Kalina began, “I am going to tell you some things that very few people in the world know, but to tell you, I need your pledges not to repeat it to anyone if you decide to leave us.”

One by one, the children gave their pledges and Kalina finally continued. “In the time before your birth, there was an evil magician known as Sarac. Sarac had visions of ruling the world and he did not care how he achieved that goal. He caused wars and strife in which tens of thousands of people died

and still he failed. He created an organization called the Black Devils and taught them magic. One of the spells he taught them tied them to his will with eternal allegiance. In effect, he created a private army that held no allegiance to country, but only to him. In a great battle, good magicians created a new Universe and exiled him to it.”

“Who were these good magicians and why didn’t they just kill him?” Tanya asked.

“Who they were is not important,” Kalina declared, “but the reason they didn’t kill Sarac is because they were not capable of killing him. Sarac surrounded himself with a hundred Black Devils and there were only three good magicians. The hundred Black Devils’ job was to provide Sarac with shields to protect him.”

“The three magicians were Kirsta, Jenneva and Egam,” Fredrik interjected. “Kirsta and Egam died in the battle, or so the Black Devils say. They still search for Jenneva this very day, but most believe she died during the Collapse.”

“You know very much for a Collapse child,” Kalina said.

“I learned many things from spying on the Black Devils in Trekum,” Fredrik said proudly.

“Well,” Kalina continued, “you are correct, except Egam did not die in the battle. It was thought that he was dead, but he survived that battle to supposedly die during the Collapse. Anyway, to get back to the story, they were unable to kill Sarac and he was slowly killing them, so Jenneva did the only thing she could think of. She created an empty Universe and banished him and his hundred Black Devils to it.”

“But I heard that Sarac is the Dark One,” objected Fredrik.

“And so he is,” confirmed Kalina. “You see, Sarac did not possess the knowledge of creating and collapsing Universes, so he was trapped. Only Jenneva knew and she would never let him free. Some of the Black Devils who were left behind organized under a sorcerer known as Mordac. Mordac was an assistant to Sarac and schemed to bring him back. He amassed thousands of followers and began looting temples and libraries to find the knowledge that would free Sarac.”

“Was this Jenneva foolish enough to write the information down?” Tedi asked.

“No,” replied Kalina, “but she did not invent the information. She learned of it in old scrolls and there was a volume called the Book of the Beginning that also contained the information. It was this volume that Mordac sought. Again the Black Devils caused thousands of lives to be lost through wars and murder, but eventually Mordac and the Black Devils were defeated by the Targa Rangers and everyone thought the threat was over.”

“Who are the Targa Rangers?” inquired Arik.

“The Rangers were an elite fighting force conceived and organized by Alex Tork,” Kalina answered. “They fought for Targa which was a large country north of here. By all accounts, they were the finest fighting force ever assembled in the history of the world, but we are getting off topic. Two Black Devils out of thousands survived, Dalgar and Aurora. By a quirk of fate, these two Black Devils were the only two to have read the Book of the Beginning in the extremely short time that the Black Devils possessed it.”

“Perhaps fate decreed that they should be spared,” offered Niki.

“Perhaps,” Kalina grimly agreed. “They used their knowledge to open a Junction to Sarac’s Universe. The story is unclear here, but somehow they got this new knowledge to Sarac and he opened a Junction to Alutar, the Great Demon. The Mage had imprisoned Alutar for over a thousand years and the Demon’s freedom triggered a prophecy. According to the Ancient Prophecy, Alutar chose Sarac to become the Dark One. This made Sarac immortal and guaranteed him rule of the entire world. There were a couple of twists in the Ancient Prophecy, though. Sarac collapsed the Universes and brought darkness and havoc to the world in preparation for his armies, but Alex and Jenneva managed to imprison him in his castle before he could conquer the world and that is where he still exists today.”

“What does all of this have to do with the sword?” Tedi asked.

“The twists in the Ancient Prophecy,” explained Kalina. “The sword before you is the Sword of Heavens. It is older than the oldest mountain range and it is tied to the Ancient Prophecy. It is the sword that will kill Sarac and end the Darkness. There are two conditions that have to be met before Sarac dies with this sword and neither is assured to happen.”

The children looked in awe at the sword and there were quite a few red faces around the fire.

“The first,” Kalina detailed, “is that the seven missing gems must be restored to the sword. Each of the gems represents one of the original Universes. Until all seven of the gems are restored, the Sword of Heavens is just a sword and will not kill Sarac. The second twist is that the Sword of Heavens must be wielded by a descendant of Sarac and only after the ancient kingdom of Alcea is ruled by its rightful King.”

“I have never heard of Alcea,” declared Fredrik.

“And who is a descendant of Sarac?” quizzed Tedi. “I think most people would deny it if they were.”

“Very good questions,” admitted Kalina. “The Children of the Prophecy whom everyone seeks are the descendant of Sarac and the rightful King of Alcea.”

“Are you sure it says the King of Alcea and not the Queen?” Niki queried.

“So, for these two people, everyone who is seventeen is to be killed?” Arik quipped.

“If Sarac has his way, yes,” Kalina responded. “You can see why it is so important to the Dark One to find these children.”

“Sure, it’s important to him,” remarked Tedi, “but what does that have to do with us?”

Kalina looked at the faces of the children around the campfire before answering. “Because the Sword of Heavens will be inactive until touched by one of the Children of the Prophecy,” she stated.

Silence fell over the group as the children all glanced at one another. For almost five minutes no one spoke as each person was lost in his own thoughts about what they had witnessed and what it might mean to them if they were the one who had set the sword off. Eventually, Garth interrupted the silence.

“You will see now,” he began, “why it is important that we do not split up. Any one of you could be one of the Children. Any of the others could provide a description of the other four and make the Dark One’s work easy for him. The fate of the whole world lies in the hands of the people in this campsite.

None of you can walk away from this and hope to lead a normal life as if none of it has happened. You must all train to be as skilled as you can become, both in the arts that I can teach and in those that Kalina can teach. Together we can restore Light to the world, though it will be no easy task. Are we agreed?"

"Can it really happen?" asked Tanya. "I mean, the great Jenneva did not have the magical skill to kill Sarac and the great Alex Tork did not have the military skill to destroy the Black Devils. How can you propose that five children can do what the great people of the last age failed to do?"

Kalina looked at the young girl who was probably still wrapped in remorse over the loss of her uncle. "Who could fail to try?" Kalina quipped. "Would you live in a world of fear and hatred and never embrace hope? Would you live and die in Darkness without ever trying to see the Light? Because others have failed before you, do you curl up and die with your insignificance? Your uncle saw the Light in his lifetime. What do you suppose he would have given to allow you to see it in your lifetime?"

"I know that I am not one of the Children whom you seek," stated Arik, "but your goals are what everyone's goals should be. Whichever of you is the one, I offer to stand by you until the Dark One is vanquished."

Tedi nodded vigorously. "I agree. Arik and I know our parents well and they could not be related to the Dark One, but our fathers would be the first to urge us to accept this challenge. I, too, will stand by the Child of the Prophecy until the Dark One is vanquished."

Garth smiled at his two pupils. Over the past few weeks, they had shown themselves to be excellent students with strong skills, although he never told them such, but now they were showing that they were men of substance, as well.

"Do we know whether the one among us is the future King or the descendant of the Dark One? Niki asked.

"Does it matter?" snarled Fredrik. "Is a child supposed to carry the sins of his father just for being his son? Whichever one he is, he will be doing the world a great service and I will pledge my support. My parents were poor, but good people. I cannot fathom them being of the stock of the Dark One and my wildest imagination cannot conceive of them being royalty, but I join with you until the end. There is nothing for me to go back to and Kalina offers much to learn. Count me in."

"I know I am not really a part of this group," Tanya smiled sheepishly, "but I have nowhere to go. I can fight and if it involves fighting the Dark One, I can fight eagerly. If you will have me, I will pledge you my support until the end."

Everyone looked at Niki who was biting her nails. She suddenly looked up at the silence and reddened. "I know my fate is to be a queen," she said. "It has always been my fate, I know it. I did not know my parents and it is possible that the country I am to rule is this Alcea. Are you sure the prophecy specifies a King?"

Kalina just nodded sadly, but Garth caught Niki's attention. "Perhaps," he began, "you are destined to marry this King of Alcea."

Niki blushed but she quickly looked at the three boys and smiled. "Perhaps you are right, Garth. I only know that I am to be a queen. I have nowhere else to turn, so I guess I will go with you."

Kalina smiled grimly. It was not the strong commitment that the others had given, but perhaps that

was as close as Niki could come. “Okay,” she confirmed, “we are all in this together, then. The first thing we need to do is create uniforms like Garth’s. We will all dress in black leather with many pockets. The boys will grow beards so they look older. Tanya, you will get a black leather cap to replace your brown one. I think when you let down your hair by removing that cap, it will unnerve your audience enough to make them forget they were questioning your age.”

“We will get rid of the wagon and no longer be gypsies,” Garth added. “The wagon would cause us to move too slowly and leaves tracks which are too readable. Tanya, you will join Arik and Tedi for instructions. Fredrik and Niki will also get instructions from me so they will be useful in situations where magic would not be a good idea.”

The boys looked enthused, but Niki was sadly staring at the ground. “What is the matter?” Tanya questioned.

Niki looked up at Tanya and gave a weak smile. “All of the boys here knew their parents,” Niki mused. “That means that the Child we have with us is the descendant of the Dark One.”

Garth caught her eye. “Your logic is not as good as it appears,” he interjected. “The descendant of the Dark One whom everyone seeks was the child of the Empress of Sordoa. The child was born in the year of the Collapse.”

Niki caught her breath at the implication. Garth had not said the son of the Empress of Sordoa and all of the boys knew their parents. A chill ran down her spine and she shivered. Who would accept the daughter of the Dark One for a queen and how could she possibly kill her father? Niki threw herself into Tanya’s arms and cried.

“What of this King of Alcea?” Fredrik asked. “What do you know of him?”

“He would have to be descended of the royal line of Alcea,” Garth explained. “Alcea was a very ancient country that grew and took up a large part of the continent. Somewhere along the line, its name was changed to Targa. In the royal line of Targa would be a descendant of John Secor, a great painter who never assumed the throne. In the years before the Collapse, Mordac murdered King Eugene. King Eugene’s heir was John Secor, but he refused the throne. In a compromise, Duke Whitley became King Byron. King Byron’s adopted son was Prince Oscar Dalek, who was married to John Secor’s daughter, Princess Callie. So the rightful King’s daughter married the actual King’s son. The child of their marriage would be the rightful heir to the throne. They had a child who was lost when the ship they were on was sunk in the Sordoan Sea. He was born in the year of the Collapse.”

“Wasn’t Oscar Dalek the boy merchant who became rich by creating a private army to deal with bandits?” Tanya asked. “Uncle Boris used to tell stories of him.”

“The same,” chuckled Garth. “Oscar Dalek became the richest man in the world with schemes which always benefited the other party. He started Targan shipping on the Targa Sea with a new type of boat he designed. He had the Great Canal built and he introduced his mother to Duke Whitley who went on to become King of Targa. That is how he became a Prince.”

“Sounds like quite a character,” Tedi grinned. “Someone should have had him sell land in a peat bog for Sarac’s new home.”

“How did the Empress of Sordoa get involved with Sarac?” Arik asked. “I mean, Sarac wasn’t royalty or anything, was he?”

“No,” Kalina explained, “Sarac had a plan to take over the four great nations of the continent by replacing their rulers with his own people. The Empress of Sordoa was none other than Aurora.”

Niki started crying again and Tanya hugged her.

Kalina continued as if she hadn't noticed. “Aurora befriended the Sultan of Sordoa and eventually they were married. She already carried Sarac's child before the marriage and the Sultan believed it was his own. Aurora convinced the Sultan to declare himself the Emperor and her the Empress, which he did shortly before she killed him and took over the throne.”

Niki broke out in hysterics and Tanya shot Kalina a foul look. Kalina eyed Tanya directly and continued. “Everyone who is involved in this party has a right to know these facts, Tanya,” Kalina lectured. “Niki is getting hysterical for no reason. If she does not wish to hear this information, you may take her for a walk.”

Tanya tried to raise Niki and take her for a walk, but Niki refused. “I have to hear it sometime,” Niki sobbed. “I might as well hear it now.”

Kalina nodded and resumed. “When Sarac learned of the Ancient Prophecy, he sent his Black Devils to assassinate Aurora and her baby. The assassins did manage to kill Aurora as she was running away with her baby before the crowd closed on them, but the baby disappeared. Nobody knows if the child was male or female.”

Niki looked up at Kalina. “You mean Sarac tried to kill Aurora and the baby and Aurora tried to save the baby?” Niki asked.

“As misguided as Aurora was,” Kalina explained, “the Sordoans loved her. Alex and Jenneva were there to save Aurora's baby and they helped to kill the magician assassins that Sarac sent. The Palace Guards tried to take Alex because they knew he was a Targan Ranger. Then the crowd attacked the guards because Alex tried to save their beloved Empress. Somehow, in the commotion, someone grabbed Aurora's baby and disappeared.”

Niki sat up and wiped her eyes. “Well,” she stated bitterly, “that is reason enough for him to die.”

Everyone looked at Niki and saw the hatred in her face. If she had been the weakest member to pledge support before, she now looked like she would be willing to rip Sarac apart with her bare hands.

Garth suddenly sat upright and cocked his head. “Everybody gather their gear and saddle a horse. We are leaving immediately. If you can't get it together in two minutes, leave it. We are about to have company, Dark Riders to be exact.”

Garth leaped to his feet as the last words left his lips. He quickly wrapped the Sword of Heavens and raced to the wagon to select which items he would be taking with him. The whole camp followed his lead and ran silently gathering their belongings.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 14

Young Warriors

Tremors of fear and determination rang through the campsite as the gypsies and the children prepared to evacuate the camp before Wolinda and the Dark Riders arrived. Evidently, the magic display given off by the Sword of Heavens was sufficient to alert the witch, Wolinda, who was leading the group of Dark Riders. Events of the day had been sufficiently unusual that no one had thought to question Garth on how he knew the Dark Riders were approaching and everyone scrambled to secure the things they each wished to bring.

Garth rummaged through the wagon selecting the items he did not wish to leave. He piled up several long lengths of rope and several quivers of arrows before reaching for the heavy canvas satchel. The satchel was divided into two compartments and Garth was relieved that the children had not thought to search through it. One side of the satchel held a large number of Lanorian Stars that he had purchased from a source in Ongchi the last time he was there, but the other was packed with deadly myric quills. A touch to the point of one of those quills would have meant instant death to the children who touched them, something he would cover in his next lesson. He had purposely exaggerated the two minutes that it would take the Dark Riders to arrive so the children would not dawdle. He knew they had closer to ten minutes, but that was still cutting it close when it came to fleeing from servants of the Dark One.

Tanya appeared at the back of the wagon. "Is there something I can do to help you?" she asked. "I never unpacked my belongings and Arik has already shown me the horse that I will be riding."

Garth stared at the young girl who enjoyed dressing as a boy. He handed her the coils of rope. "Use one of these to create a lead for the two wagon horses. We will be taking them with us. Then secure the other coils to my horse." She turned to go and Garth reached out and held her arm. "Do you have any fighting skills?" he asked.

Tanya looked up at the imposing gypsy and grinned. "More than any of your boys. Uncle Boris often bartered for lessons for me. I can handle myself with sword, knife and bow, although I do not own a bow."

Garth reached into the wagon and grabbed three bows and handed them to her. "Take these and choose one when you have time to test them out. The large one will probably not be suitable, but we will take it anyway." He also handed her a quiver of arrows before she left.

Garth shook his head in amazement at how things had developed and bent to complete his task. Within two minutes of his warning the group was ready to go. Garth smiled broadly as he called for the assemblage to mount up and ride northward. Kalina took the lead on her beautiful white mare that looked suited to leading a grand parade down the street of a great city during festival time. Niki and Tanya rode behind Kalina, with Fredrik and Tedi behind them. Arik pulled in alongside Garth at the rear, as Garth looked back over the campsite and the wagon that had been his home for so long.

Kalina kept to a strong pace as she kept her eyes on the path for a good spot to stage an ambush, something that Garth had instilled in her repeatedly over the years. Garth was busy playing with the leads on the two spare horses.

"What are you up to?" Arik inquired.

Garth separated the two leads and handed one over to Arik. “There is a small canyon coming up in a half hour at this speed, and we are going to surprise our followers. Tie this to your saddle. You and I are going to be diversions, but not just yet. Keep an eye behind us and if you see anything, shout.”

Garth moved his stallion up between Fredrik and Tedi. “Do you and Niki know how to shield against magic spells?”

Fredrik looked at him and nodded. “Somewhat,” he explained. “I am better at it than Niki, but she knows the concept. We have had precious little chance to practice and I’m not sure how effective they will be.” Fredrik laughed. “A couple of days ago, I would have boasted that I could stop any spell. After the little display with Kalina, I realize that I know very little of my craft.”

“We are going to plan a little reception for our friends,” Garth explained. “I will need you to create a shield around you and Tedi. Can you handle it?”

“I will try my best,” Fredrik stated.

“I can ask no more of any man,” Garth smiled. “If you feel the shield coming down, you and Tedi will run away from the fight. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” declared Fredrik. “I will do nothing stupid.”

“Good,” replied Garth. “In a half hour we will be coming to a canyon, Tedi. Just before the walls start to rise, you and Fredrik will bear to the right and find a way up to the rim of the canyon within eyesight of a small cave where the path below turns. I want you to keep hidden until the Dark Riders attack, and then you will shoot at the Dark Riders in the valley. If you get the chance, without moving your position, to shoot the witch, take her first. Fredrik, keep the shield on the two of you as long as you can and then both of you flee.”

The boys nodded and Garth started to move ahead, but dropped back quickly. “Tedi, I don’t want you to veer off the path where your tracks will show. Wait until the ground is rocky, even if you have to backtrack a way. I don’t want them to know that you have split off.”

Garth rode up between Niki and Tanya and repeated the instructions, but sending them to the left. He had to grill Tanya about her understanding of tracking and leaving tracks before he was satisfied that she understood. Niki’s attitude bothered him a bit. She seemed eager to use offensive magic against the Dark Riders and he had to keep stressing that the only magic she was to use was shielding.

Garth rode up to Kalina and explained his plan before dropping back to Arik. After telling Arik what he told the others, he launched into the diversion plan for himself and Arik. “As soon as we can see the canyon rising in the distance, you and I will head off at angles from our current track. We will lead our pursuers into believing that the group has split into three groups. They will be forced to divide their men. After you have gone out about ten minutes, turn enough so you are headed directly at the canyon mouth. At this point, cut the spare horse loose. Try to chase him to continue the way you had been heading, but don’t waste any time if he chooses a different way. Then gallop as fast as you can to the cave in the canyon. You will have to hurry because your false trail will have shortened the distance between you and your pursuers.”

Arik nodded solemnly. “I understand, Garth. I will make tracks that are easy to follow right up to the point where I turn. I will make it to the cave. Do not worry.”

Garth placed a firm hand on Arik's shoulder and smiled. As soon as he caught sight of the canyon rising in the distance between the trees, he indicated for Arik to move out. Garth veered sharply to the left with his horse kicking up large clumps of grass while Arik veered to the right. When Garth had ridden out for ten minutes, he cut the spare horse loose and chased him off. The free horse went more westward than Garth would have liked, but it didn't really matter much. Garth dismounted and chose the best tree for this part of his plan.

Klarg and Wolinda halted their column by the two trackers who had stopped on the path. "What is it?" Klarg demanded.

"The group split up here," one of the trackers supplied. "Two to the right and two to the left. The rest continued straight."

"What does it mean?" Wolinda asked. "Why would they split up?"

"I would suspect," Klarg mused, "that they plan to siphon off the children a little at a time with instructions for them to meet in some town, like Lorgo. I would expect to see another split-off about ten minutes down the path. If we follow only the main trail, we will end up behind only the gypsies and they will plan to disappear on us."

"I don't care about the gypsies," Wolinda snapped. "I want the children."

"We will have them all," declared Klarg. "Five men to the right and five to the left. The rest will continue on. Trackers, continue down the main path." Klarg laughed. With thirty men at his disposal, they could split up as much as they wanted and he would still get them all.

The five men detailed to take the left track took off at a gallop. With any luck at all, they could capture their two runaways and still make it back for the battle with that gypsy devil with the wicked sword on his back. Once it had been determined that the gypsies had been hiding the children, Klarg placed a high bounty on the gypsy warrior. Klarg was convinced that the gypsy was part of the group of armed men who had helped the boys escape the trap by the seaside cliff. That made Klarg want him more than the children.

Garth heard the thundering of the Dark Riders' hooves a full two minutes before he got first sight of them. Perched on a sturdy branch with an excellent view of the track, Garth had one arrow already nocked and three more stuck in the tree within easy reach. He quickly pulled another arrow from his quiver and slammed it into the tree. There was not much chance that he would be able to down them all from here before they got wise, but he would be prepared if they gave him the chance.

The first shot would be the trickiest, as Garth planned to take out the last rider first. If it worked, it would confuse them as to where the attack was coming from. One or two of the other riders might notice that the arrow had come from in front of them, but there would be no time for them to tell the others. When the front two riders went down, the confusion just might give him a chance for the remaining two.

Garth pulled back and let the first arrow fly. He immediately nocked the next arrow and sighted on one of the leaders. Garth heard the piercing cry of pain as he let go the second arrow and nocked the third. Garth knew that the Dark Riders had not bought the deception and they started to split up as the third arrow found its mark. The last two men were going to eat up valuable time now and Garth grabbed

the two remaining arrows and returned them to his quiver. Quickly, he climbed down out of the tree and crept off at an angle to the track the Dark Riders had been following.

Garth nocked an arrow as one of the Dark Rider's mounts passed in front of him. He wasn't sure where the remaining two men were, but they had each chosen a different side of the track. They had dismounted by now or he would have heard them high-tailing it back down the trail. Getting closer to the area of the attack, Garth discarded his bow and took two Lanorian Stars out of a pocket as he dropped to his belly. Lying quietly, he listened for sounds. One of the men on the trail was not dead. Garth could hear him moaning and realized that it must have been his third shot and the man had turned to flee into the woods while the arrow was traveling.

The noise of the horses was also distracting and Garth could not pick up the sounds of his enemies. Precious moments were ticking by, but Garth remained motionless and listened. Finally, he heard the sound of the man on the other side of the trail. The man was creeping towards the tree where Garth had been shooting from. Still, the warrior had to eliminate the man on this side of the trail first or risk exposing his back. Garth continued to wait patiently.

Soon he heard the sound of a crawling man and the sound was coming closer. Garth laid the Lanorian Stars on the ground and silently extracted a reed and myric quill. Fitting the quill into the reed he held the blowpipe to his mouth and waited. Several tense seconds later, the Dark Rider's head appeared not three feet in front of Garth and he blew the quill into the side of it. The man collapsed and Garth shoved the reed back into his pocket. Picking up the two Lanorian Stars, Garth crawled to where he could see the trail and lay quietly again.

Less than a minute later, he saw the last man dash across the trail to the foot of the tree that Garth had used. Garth quickly and quietly made his way back to where he had dropped his bow. Hiding behind a bush that shielded him at ground level, Garth nocked an arrow and sat waiting for the man to climb the tree. He still kept the Lanorian Stars on the ground, one on each side of him, in case the man decided to come back this way, but Garth was pretty sure that the man would find his old perch too inviting. It offered good cover for an ambush and afford an excellent view in all directions. Unfortunately for the Dark Rider, it was exposed if somebody was expecting you to be there.

As if on cue, the Dark Rider pulled himself onto the sturdy limb and Garth let his arrow fly. Quickly, Garth rose, gathering his Lanorian Stars and went to check on the wounded man. The arrow had missed the mark that Garth had aimed for, but the man had died, anyway. Garth jogged down the trail and found his horse waiting for him. He grabbed onto the mane and swung himself onto the horse and took off for the canyon.

Klarg halted the column at the mouth of the canyon. "I do not like the looks of this," he speculated. "It is too convenient for an ambush."

"From children?" Wolinda complained. "Don't tell me the Dark Riders are afraid of these children."

"Not from the children," Klarg spat. "I am sure that this gypsy and his men were the ones who ambushed us at the sea cliff. This is probably where his men are hidden. The fact that the rider came back to meet the main group supports me. It was an attempt to lessen the amount of men they would have to attack. Our left flank group never returned. They are probably ten miles from here by now chasing a nonexistent enemy."

"Does this canyon go through?" Wolinda pressed. "And if so, how long to go around it?"

“The canyon goes through,” Klarg admitted, “and it would take an extra day to get around it.”

“Then we have no choice but to follow,” Wolinda ordered. “You shouldn’t worry. My magic will protect you. Of course, if you want to run for reinforcements, you have my leave, but your men are going in.”

Klarg clenched his fists in anger. He could not be seen as a coward in front of his men or they would refuse to follow him, yet he felt as if he wouldn’t have any men left if he followed the witch’s orders. “Let me at least take a couple of men up each side of the canyon to provide cover,” he insisted.

“Fine, Klarg,” Wolinda patronized, “play the grand strategist if you wish, but use the men from the left flank when they get here. These men are going in with me to get those children.”

Wolinda gave the order to move forward and Klarg felt like putting an arrow in her back. Instead, he turned his mount and galloped westward to find the men of his left flank.

The trackers led the procession into the canyon and followed the evident tracks. They rode deeper and deeper into the canyon at a cautious pace until the trackers hit an invisible wall. They stopped, dumbfounded, and looked down the canyon trail at the cave where Kalina and Arik stood waiting for them. Arik started firing arrows over the invisible wall into the Dark Riders. At the same time, Tedi from the right side of the canyon rim and Tanya from the left, started showering arrows down on the assembled troops.

The Dark Riders dismounted and sought cover. They started returning arrows at the three targets, but they were not able to reach the rim of the canyon and most of the arrows directed at the cave slammed into the invisible barrier. Wolinda started blasting at the invisible barrier and the two bowmen on the rim with her magic. Each time one of her projectiles struck the barrier or one of the shields, it burst into radiant colors and dissipated, but each hit weakened the shield. Wolinda ordered the Dark Riders to start scaling the sides of the canyon and directed most of her magic at the two rim bowmen.

Tanya kept trying to aim at the witch with the bright green dress, but every time she let an arrow fly, a Dark Rider or a horse got in the way. She was trying to conserve her arrows and make each one count for a hit, but the pandemonium below made that difficult. If the horses would clear out of the canyon, she would have a much easier time of it.

“I’m not sure I can hold this anymore,” Niki complained. “Every time she hits my shield, I can feel it, just like she was punching me. She must be very powerful.”

“Just keep holding it,” Tanya demanded. “I want to kill that witch and if your shield fails, we must retreat.”

“I’ll try, Tanya,” Niki wheezed, “but you don’t know what it’s like. It really hurts.”

Across the canyon, Tedi was not trying for the witch because there were too many Dark Riders a lot closer. “How are the shields holding up, Fredrik?” he asked.

“Okay, so far,” Fredrik replied. “I’ve never really done this for any period of time. It’s strange. Every time she hits my shield, I feel it more. At first it was like a distant thump, now it is more like a jab with her fist. Not hard enough to hurt, but annoying to my concentration. This is something I am going to have to practice more when I get the time.”

“You are getting practice right now,” Tedi chuckled.

“Yeah,” Fredrik laughed, “but I am concerned about Niki and Tanya. She’s not nearly as strong as I am and she is getting hit just as much.”

“Don’t worry about them,” Tedi said. “If it gets too tense, they will withdraw.”

“I hope you are right,” Fredrik grunted with another jab from Wolinda. “With women you never know, though.”

The arrows were starting to take a toll on the Dark Riders with fifteen of them dead or dying in the canyon below when Fredrik announced that he could no longer maintain the shield. “We have to retreat, Tedi. Garth was clear with his orders and I never want to feel his wrath or displeasure. Let’s go.”

Tedi backed away from the edge of the rim and Fredrik gazed across the canyon and saw that Niki and Tanya were still there. The two boys took off running and Fredrik hoped that Tanya wasn’t as stubborn as Niki. If she were, both girls would likely be dead before the battle was over.

The Dark Riders were not making much progress at climbing the walls because Arik was concentrating on the climbers. Any time a man got higher than the level of Kalina’s invisible barrier, Arik shot him down. He no longer concerned himself with the men on the canyon floor. It felt strange to him to see armed men trying to kill him and not be concerned about them. He began to think that magic did have some good benefits.

With the thinning ranks of Dark Riders Tanya finally got her shot at Wolinda. Her arrow ran true and struck Wolinda in the left side of her chest. The witch tumbled to the ground and the Dark Riders below started shouting.

“My shield just went down,” Niki shouted. “I don’t understand it. I felt it getting weaker and weaker and then it stabilized and her punches didn’t hurt anymore. Then, all of a sudden, it just collapsed.”

“It doesn’t matter any more,” Tanya replied, watching the Dark Riders heading for the mouth of the canyon. Those that could find live horses mounted and rode back the way they had come. Those without horses ran. Tanya managed to get one more as he was running away.

“Damn!” Tanya shouted. “I didn’t want any of them to get away. Now they will just get more men and come after us again.”

Garth rode into the mouth of the canyon hoping he wasn’t too late. The sound of shouts echoed off the canyon walls with the wail of men in retreat and Garth drew his sinuous sword. Garth slowed his steed to a stop a little ways from a bend in the trail and waited. He didn’t have long to wait before two riders came flying around the bend. The enemy approached while trying to draw their swords and Garth swung into action. Garth swung his sword and decapitated the first rider. Stopping the swing short, he lunged at the second rider with his sword and it cut cleanly through the man’s armor and pierced his chest. Yanking his sword free, Garth saw two more riders round the bend. The second set of riders immediately halted their horses, nearly colliding with each other, and drew their swords.

Garth slowly approached them and they tried to sandwich him between them. Garth’s steed suddenly rose up and turned towards one of the Dark Riders, its hooves lashing out at the man’s head. As if this was a practiced maneuver, Garth chose that very moment to swing his mighty sword at the other Dark

Rider. Garth's sword cut a long rent in the man's body from his neck to his waist as Garth was sliding off his horse to the ground. Ignoring the man he had just severed, Garth turned to the rider who had been knocked off his horse by the beating hooves. Garth halted his swing at the man on the ground when he saw a pair of lifeless eyes staring up at him. Garth's horse had crushed the man's head.

Garth stepped around the bend in the canyon trail and saw three men running towards him on foot. He placed himself squarely in their path with a stance that indicated that the men were not getting past him and they slid to a halt. Eyeing his blood-drenched sword, the Dark Riders drew their own steel while looking for another way out. Garth furtively slipped his hand into a pocket and grasped a Lanorian Star. He stood with his sword point on the ground in front of him, hilt in his right hand, with his left hand concealing the Lanorian Star.

"You wanted to serve the Dark One, didn't you?" Garth sneered. "Well, come, let your blood flow for him."

The three men screamed as they rushed as one. Garth waited until they closed the distance before tossing out his left hand and sending the Lanorian Star into the leftmost man's eye. A second later, he brought his right arm up and the tip of his sword caught the center man just under the right side of his jaw. The sword continued upward and sliced through the man's nose and left eye. Dropping to one knee, Garth felt the shock of the third man's sword striking his sword. He allowed the blow to push his sword back by withdrawing it in a smooth arc that came around and sliced through the third man's legs. The man lay screaming and Garth plunged the sword into his heart.

Garth rose and looked down the canyon for more adversaries. Seeing none, he wiped his sword clean on one of the bodies and sheathed it. He recovered his Lanorian Star and wiped it clean, also. He walked with his horse down the canyon towards Kalina. Kalina lowered the barrier and walked out to hug him.

"Arik," Garth said over Kalina shoulder, "I need a count of the bodies. I want to make sure that we got them all."

The two teams that had been on the canyon rims came riding in, and Garth ordered them to retrieve arrows and anything else that they could find which would be useful. When Arik came back with a count of twenty-six, Garth frowned. He left Kalina's embrace and went to examine the bodies.

"Klarg is missing," Garth sighed as he returned. "Everyone is accounted for except Klarg. He will organize a new troop and pursue us. Loot what you can. We move out in half an hour."

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 15

Melbin

They stopped for the evening in the pine forest. Tedi got a fire going while Tanya helped Arik with the horses. Niki helped Kalina with dinner, while Fredrik helped Garth butcher a deer that Garth had killed. Everyone was tired from the stress of battle as much as the long day of riding.

“How come you didn’t want any offense magic during the battle?” Fredrik asked.

“I had hoped to kill all of the Dark Riders,” Garth answered. “If we had gotten them all and left no trace of a magic battle, anyone who discovered the bodies would attribute the scene to a bandit gang who were hiding in the canyon. If we left blasted boulders and scorch marks that would not be believable. Bandits generally don’t have anything to do with magic. The fact that Klarg escaped means we will be hunted. It is unfortunate because all of you need a lot more training before we start getting into battles.”

“Do you think there will be a lot of fighting?” Fredrik queried.

“There will be more than any of us will want,” Garth sighed. “After dinner we must all train and hone our combat skills. You, Niki and Tanya will join in. Have you ever used a sword?”

“No,” Fredrik admitted, “I have never even touched one until today. I shot a bow quite a bit when I was younger and I learned to throw knives. That is about the extent of my warrior skills.”

Garth examined the boy’s wiry frame and delicate hands and nodded. “Knives may do fine,” Garth commented. “That and some hand-to-hand techniques that I can show you.”

Garth heard laughter and turned to look. Tedi was coming from the stream with a long pole over his shoulders with four small buckets of water suspended on it. Arik and Tanya were laughing at Tedi, but Garth was impressed with the boy’s balance. The buckets were not discharging their contents. “And maybe the staff,” Garth added absent-mindedly.

Kalina signaled that dinner was ready so everyone washed up and gathered around the campfire and started eating the venison and apples that Tanya had picked on the way from the canyon.

“How do the King of Alcea and the descendant of the Dark One relate to each other?” Tedi asked. “I mean we have at least one of them with us and maybe both. Should they be working together?”

“Absolutely,” Garth affirmed. “The Kingdom of Alcea will be devoted to bringing the end to the Dark One’s reign and the descendant will be working to bring an end to the Dark One, himself. They are not necessarily the same thing. The Dark One has many followers. The Black Devils are a group of magicians devoted to the Dark One. There is also a group called the Servants of Sarac who are not magicians, but also devoted to him. There are races from the other Universes that worshipped Alutar, the Demons, Goblins, Yaki and Ogres. They will want Sarac to succeed because it will mean the return of Alutar. People who wish Sarac to succeed may well run some of the rogue armies. Whomever the King of Alcea is, he will have to marshal whatever forces he can to fight Sarac’s horde. It is imperative the King and the descendant work together to accomplish their goals.”

“So, in effect,” Fredrik offered, “we have just joined the Alcea Army.”

“Yes,” Garth said grimly. “More accurately, we probably are the Alcea Army.”

“Doesn’t Alcea already have an army?” Arik inquired.

“I don’t really know,” Garth answered. “I have not been there in many years. At the time people were still calling it Tagaret, which was its name when Targa existed. The Collapse, the war with Sordoa that was going on at the time, and the attacks from Sarac’s Army, all decimated the Targan Army. After

the Collapse, all that was left of Targa was the city of Tagaret. What was left of the Army probably settled in wherever they were.”

“What of Alexander Tork and the Targa Rangers?” queried Tanya.

“Alex and Jenneva left to imprison Sarac in his castle,” Garth answered. “They haven’t been seen since. The Targa Rangers were only a thousand strong at their peak and Captain Mitar Vidson ran them. I would assume that they remained loyal to King Byron and rallied to him. If so, some of them may still exist.”

“You paint a pretty bleak picture,” commented Niki. “It sounds like this King of Alcea doesn’t even have a country.”

“He doesn’t,” Garth sighed, “but between Kalina, me, and you children, he will, and we will see that it grows strong.”

“You really need to stop calling us children,” Tedi stated. “I know you mean it as Collapse Children, but we still find it offensive.”

There was a general agreement to Tedi’s remark and Garth nodded. “You certainly proved today that you are not children. I am proud of the way you all followed orders, but what shall we call you, then?”

“We should be called the Alcea Rangers,” offered Tanya, “and that includes you and Kalina.”

Calls of agreement went around the campfire and Garth smiled. “Okay,” he said, “I will be proud to serve with each and every one of you in the newly formed Alcea Rangers. However, as proud as I am to serve with you, I would rather feel safe serving with you, so I think it time to start our training for this evening. Niki, you will train with Kalina this evening. Tedi, I want you to cut another pole like the one you used to carry water. I want you and Fredrik to start learning how to handle a staff. Tanya, you get to prove you are as good as the other boys against Arik. Let’s go.”

Everyone started to get up and Garth turned back towards the fire. “Forgot a couple of things,” he stated. “Everyone in the Rangers will be required to be proficient in using a knife and throwing a Lanorian Star. These are two weapons that are easily concealed and deadly if used by someone who has been trained. See me when you can and I will supply you with enough to start training. You should train with these two weapons whenever you have nothing else to do. One more important thing, seeing as we have people in camp who see nothing wrong with going through others’ belongings. I have a satchel that contains Lanorian Stars and myric quills. Do not go in it. Myric quills are deadly poisonous. One touch of the tip and you will be dead before you hit the ground. I will instruct you in their use when you are ready.”

A few red faces appeared as the Rangers headed to their appropriate training spots. Garth walked around and observed or instructed as needed. Fredrik was awkward at first with the staff, but Tedi had a fine sense of balance and handled the stick with excellent control. With a little training and a lot of practice, Tedi would be deadlier with the staff than he would be with a sword.

Tanya was indeed giving Arik a contest. Of the two Lorgo boys, Arik was definitely the better swordsman. Tanya was very good with a sword and was besting Arik, but it was obvious that she had received some good instruction. Eventually, Arik would beat her constantly because the boy was so powerful, but for training, Tanya would prove to be an excellent sparring partner for him.

Raised voices from Niki and Kalina drew Garth towards them and he stopped to listen.

“It just is not possible, Niki,” Kalina was saying. “A shield never remains stable or levels off, it keeps getting weaker each time it is hit. That is the very basic nature of the shield. It is probable that you just became numb and didn’t feel it getting weaker. Now I want you to list every spell you know and I will start to teach you spells which are closely related to the ones you already know.”

Tedi gave Fredrik a good hit to the ankle and Garth hurried over. He knelt down and examined the ankle. “It’s okay,” Fredrik declared. “It hurts a bit, but that is my own fault.” Fredrik limped to his feet and picked up his staff and continued his practice with Tedi.

For the next several weeks, the Rangers traveled half days and spent the other half days and evenings practicing. The results of the training were promising. Fredrik was modest when he said that he had played with throwing knives. He was already better at throwing knives than most men Garth had met, and he took to throwing the Lanorian Star fairly well. He still had quite a way to go in hand-to-hand combat with a knife, but if he could throw them quickly enough, his assailants wouldn’t get close.

The old merchant, Boris, got his money’s worth on the instructions that he had purchased for Tanya. She was good with knives, bow, and staff, as well as the sword. She also enjoyed tossing the boys around in hand-to-hand combat. She picked up the knack of using the Lanorian Star very easily, as well.

Arik was an eager and fast learner. His muscular body was in excellent shape and he had an amazing endurance. Tanya still beat him most of the time in swordplay, but he was getting better. With the bow, nobody could beat him and his keen eyesight seemed to help him with the Lanorian Star as well. Tedi, Fredrik, and Tanya could beat him with a staff and Arik generally avoided using one.

Tedi excelled with the staff, getting better every day. He now took on Tanya and Fredrik at the same time and won most of the time. He was also turning into a good tracker, better than Arik, which surprised both of them. Garth also learned that Tedi had an excellent set of ears, hearing many things that Garth did not, and Garth’s hearing was excellent.

Niki was having trouble with both the knife and the Lanorian Star, the only two weapons she was training with. When Niki practiced throwing, everyone cleared out of the way. Kalina said she was progressing well with her magic, though. She was not as strong or as talented as Fredrik, but she had some unusual talents. She could smell things that no one else was capable of smelling. Her claim had led to an interesting evening when the boys volunteered to hide things in the woods and make her find them blindfolded, and she did. She also knew some types of magic healing that Kalina had never heard of. She claimed to have learned them by accident and Kalina promised to secure a book on healing spells for her when she could.

Garth combined horseback archery lessons with hunting and food was always plentiful. Kalina combined her lessons on edible plants with instructions on gathering plants and minerals necessary for some magical potions. She began to accumulate some stock to teach Fredrik and Niki how to make potions and what they were good for. For the most part, Garth was very pleased with the progress that the Rangers were making. Already, the four warriors, Arik, Tedi, Fredrik, and Tanya, would have been welcome recruits to any army. Garth had plans of making them much more than recruit material, though.

Arik and Tanya rode into the campsite with a large buck and were arguing about whose skill contributed more towards the kill.

“It was my shot that took him down,” insisted Arik.

“Only because it was your turn,” Tanya protested. “I am the one who tracked him down.”

“Tracked him!” laughed Arik. “He practically stood and waited for us.”

The bantering continued as the two Rangers dropped the buck for Fredrik and Tedi to prepare and took care of their horses. Kalina observed Garth smile and shake his head and came over and embraced him.

“I haven’t seen you smile in a long time, warrior,” she teased.

“Nor you, witch,” Garth said softly as he returned her embrace. “Out here with the children, one could almost forget the death and destruction that continues in the world.”

“Almost,” Kalina uttered as she broke the embrace. “We are going to have to make a trip into town soon. Tanya told me that some of the horses need their shoes tended to.”

Garth sat by the fire in a thoughtful mood and Kalina sat down next to him. “Melbin is less than a day’s ride,” he finally offered. “I will take the horses in tomorrow and get them taken care of.”

“Can I come with you?” Fredrik asked as he also sat down. “I have been making knife sheaths and most of the knives we have are a little too large for concealment. I would like to shop for something a little smaller and a bit more balanced.”

“The knives we have will do the job,” Garth stated. “Where are you trying to conceal them that they have to be smaller?”

“You have never been a dainty woman,” Niki laughed as she sat next to Fredrik. “Would you believe that Fredrik has eight knives on his body right now? You, Garth, have created a monster. Besides, I will keep an eye on him for you. I need to do some shopping as well. Just this morning, I broke my last comb.”

“I wouldn’t mind getting some news on the situation in Lorgo,” added Arik. “We don’t know what has happened since we left.”

Garth looked up at Arik, Tedi, and Tanya standing across the fire. Garth turned to Kalina for help and she smiled at him. “I did promise to try and find books for Niki and we could use some more leather and dyes,” she shrugged.

Garth laughed heartily. “What is the matter, Tedi?” he quipped. “Didn’t they let you in on this con?”

“I’m quite happy here,” Tedi remarked. “Though I have no objections to helping Tanya with the horses. You really can’t handle them all by yourself.”

Garth looked around at all the smiling and eager faces. “Okay,” he consented as he threw his hands up. “I don’t need a mutiny on my hands, but . . .” Garth grew deadly serious as he continued, “but we have to be very careful. There are dangers in the cities and one loose word will endanger us all. Arik, you will be in charge and you will keep everyone safe. I will need to pick up some information while I am in the city and it will not be safe for all of you to be around me. Kalina and I are known by different names in Melbin. Do not use them unless you are in dire trouble, but we are known as Mikal and

Yolinda Obanik.”

“Why do you use different names for different places?” asked Tanya. “Are you wanted criminals?”

“We have broken no laws,” Kalina answered, “but, still, we have many enemies. For your own safety, you will pretend not to know us in the city unless we approach you and then you will use the new names Garth has just told to you.”

Everyone nodded in agreement and the evening was filled with excited plans for the outing to Melbin. In the morning everyone except Garth shed their black uniform and donned clothes that would fit the city. The entire campsite was cleaned up and the group was ready to leave at first light.

By midday, the walls of Melbin rose in the distance and Arik and Tedi stared in awe. While the boys were impressed by the size of the city, Fredrik, Niki, and Tanya were only curious about what Melbin would be like.

As they rode on, Garth explained a bit about Melbin. “The city was not always this large,” he began. “Before the Collapse it was a little larger than Lorgo because it was a seaport for Targa. The Sordoan border was only a few miles south of here. During the war Melbin was attacked by both sides repeatedly and what they didn’t destroy, the Collapse did. After the Collapse, the citizens began to rebuild the city and one of them, Alfred Krakus, declared himself King of Melbin. He had the old garrison destroyed and a wall built around the city. Other than the seacoast, there are only three gates to get in and out of the city, one on each side of the city. In the center of the city he built himself a grand palace. The times were very troubled then and the wall around Melbin attracted many immigrants. The city is now filled to overflowing and construction is occurring outside the walls. The King taxes the people heavily, but they seem willing to pay his tribute because crime is almost nonexistent in Melbin. The laws are very strict and many minor offenses result in the death of the violator. Do not steal or cheat a merchant during your stay in Melbin.”

Garth paused to make sure everyone had heard his last statement. “Magic is forbidden,” Garth continued, “but like a lot of things, magic is used in private with no consequences. The Black Devils maintain a house in Melbin openly and no one complains. I suppose that I do not have to remind you to stay clear of the Black Devils, but remember that if you use magic inside Melbin, you will draw their notice. Kalina and I are going to use the West Gate to enter. The rest of you will use the South Gate. There is an inn on the coastal highway called the Fluttering Jib. That is where you will stay. We will be staying in the Bosun’s Chair across the street.”

After they had ridden on for a mile, Garth and Kalina veered off towards the West Gate and the rest of the group continued on towards the South Gate. Their excitement rose as they neared the walls and approached the massive South Gate. Streams of people were entering and exiting the city. Tedi felt uneasy passing before the stern looking guards in their orange and black livery, but the guards paid the group no more than a passing look.

Once inside the city walls, smells and sounds assaulted the group’s senses. Arik and Tedi savored the salty air of the seaport, while Fredrik and Niki inhaled the scents of the merchants and food sellers. Hawkers cried out to them as they passed, offering deals at favorite inns and restaurants, or offering to take them on a city tour. The Rangers ignored the offers and strode on towards the Fluttering Jib. Fredrik had to pull Niki along several times as she stopped to inspect a merchant’s wares.

Even the street in front of the Fluttering Jib was busy with street-side jugglers and musicians. Arik turned and looked across the street to the Bosun’s Chair as they turned down the alley alongside the inn

to the stables. The stables were large and well cared for and Arik inquired about a blacksmith and was told that the inn had a working relationship with one. Arik could make his arrangements with the blacksmith and leave the horses in the stable. The blacksmith would collect the horses as needed and have everything ready in the morning.

Satisfied, the group entered the Fluttering Jib through the back door to the common room. The place was busy, but the innkeeper saw them and came right over. Arik was staring at the size of the common room, so Fredrik spoke to the innkeeper. He requested two rooms and the Rangers turned to look at him as he gave his name as Lord Wason of Cidal. The innkeeper, however, showed the proper respect due a Lord and escorted the group upstairs and showed them their rooms. The rooms were large enough to be comfortable, but small enough to prohibit spending any more time in them than necessary.

Once the boys entered their room, Fredrik stripped off his traveling clothes and donned the red velvet suit, which he was wearing when he left Cidal. Arik and Tedi began teasing him about it, until they noticed his serious look as he started fastening knives to his legs and arms. Another sheath was strapped to his back at his waist and one between his shoulder blades. Two more went into his waistband in the front, one to each side and Fredrik arranged his jacket so they were not visible.

“Are you planning for a battle?” Arik asked.

“I want to try them out and see if anyone detects them,” Fredrik explained. “People in cities are used to hidden weapons and one game they play is to try to spot a newcomer’s hidden cache. I plan to fatten my private coffers with a little gambling. Would either of you care to join me?”

“I promised Tanya that I would join her in a trip to the weapons merchants,” declined Arik.

“No, Thanks,” Tedi said. “I think I will just walk around and see what a city is like.”

Arik left soon after Fredrik, and Tedi went down to the common room to get a bite to eat. The inn was still serving the midday meal and the common room was fairly crowded. Tedi found a seat at an empty table and waited for someone to offer him food. A guard in the orange and black livery of Melbin and a man in a light green woolen tunic occupied the table next to Tedi and he listened to their conversation as he waited. The conversation was fairly boring as it centered on women, gambling, and crude jokes and Tedi was glad when a young girl finally came to offer him some food and drink. Tedi was elated that fresh fish was one of the food choices and ordered a plate of flounder and potatoes with a green salad. The price was a bit high, but all of the Rangers had a fair bit of coin taken from the bodies of the Dark Riders and Tedi desired a good fish dinner.

Tedi let his eyes rove over the crowd in the common room while still listening to the conversation at the next table. The men started talking about other people and Tedi had no idea who they were talking about, but every once and a while he picked interesting comments about other places. He heard them mention a mercenary company from Cidal in a favorable light. There was talk of two rival factions fighting for control of Trekum and some game that was played in Tagaret called, The Game of Power, that was killing people. There were mentions of places that Tedi had never heard of and creatures that sounded impossible to imagine.

Tedi’s food arrived and he savored the smell and flavor of the seafood. He had never thought that he would miss eating fish, but the mere flavor of the flounder brought a smile to his lips. He thought about Fredrik’s comments before leaving the room and looked at the people in the common room anew. There were all sorts of people about. Most of them were travelers, of course, but the room seemed to be favored by locals, as well. Tedi saw several tables where the people kept coming and going, but

those who were already at the table always knew the newcomers. This obviously marked them as locals having the midday meal.

Others looked around cautiously as though they were unfamiliar with their surroundings and fearful of everything and everybody that came into the room. These were obviously new travelers and Tedi laughed to himself that he probably looked just like them. Still others had the look of being separate but familiar. This group was used to traveling and staying in strange places, perhaps they had even stayed here before, but they were still wary. They didn't shun the companionship of the others, nor were they eager to invite it. They gave the impression that this was a normal occurrence in their profession and, therefore, familiar, but had had enough experience to know that danger always existed, even in familiar territory. They were probably messengers, merchants, and couriers.

Tedi had seen much of the same behavior in the Fisherman's Inn in Lorgo when he spent several weeks there following his mother's disappearance, but the Fluttering Jib presented it on a much larger scale. From the number of inns they had passed on the way to this one, he knew that Melbin must be a city of considerable importance for quite a distance around.

Tedi finished his meal and sat drinking his weak ale. He watched as a guard in the orange and black livery entered and began searching the room. The man was obviously looking for someone and when he looked in Tedi's direction, his eyes widened and he started forward. Tedi felt a moment of fear as the guard marched towards him and he relaxed only when he realized the guard was interested in the table next to him.

Tedi berated himself for being so foolish, as the newcomer joined the guard and man at the next table. Tedi drained his ale and prepared to leave when the conversation at the next table caught his ear.

"So, there you are, Hanjel," the newcomer said. "The Captain will have your throat if he finds you in here. You are still listed as on duty."

"Easy, Lomar," the seated guard replied. "He thinks I am delivering a message and when I get back my shift will be over. Join us for a bit."

"Did I just hear you offer to buy me a drink?" chuckled Lomar.

"Now, why would I do that?" Hanjel coughed.

"Because I know something that will interest you," smirked Lomar.

Hanjel signaled the serving girl and said, "Sit and convince me that you know something interesting, Lomar, before the serving girl collects my money."

"I just saw Mikal Obanik walk into the Bosun's Chair," Lomar grinned.

Hanjel choked and spit ale across the table. "The devil, you did!" he cursed.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 16

King Alfred

When the serving girl arrived and Hanjel had ordered Lomar an ale, Tedi ordered another one for himself and continued to listen.

“Sure, he did, Hanjel,” Lomar said as he drank his ale greedily. “I saw himself not five minutes ago. I’ve been looking for you ever since.”

“Who is this Mikal Obanik?” the third man asked.

“An old friend of Hanjel’s, Chekst,” Lomar chuckled.

“Friend, my foot!” Hanjel spat angrily and Chekst looked confused.

“He is an ex-Targa Ranger,” Lomar supplied. “Supposedly was a personal friend of Colonel Alexander Tork. I never met Tork, but this Obanik is the meanest, toughest son of a mother that ever walked the face of the earth. Hanjel and two of his friends had the displeasure of meeting him about five years ago and you can tell that Hanjel still remembers him, fondly, of course.”

Hanjel smashed his mug down on the table, drawing attention from all over the common room. “I’ll fondly you, Lomar, if you don’t wipe that grin off your face,” Hanjel growled. “The man’s a bandit and a liar and deserves to die. Friend of Tork, indeed. Tork is just a myth, and a dead myth at that, but seeing as they was friends, maybe Obanik ought to go see Tork, whatever hell he is in.”

“Oh, Tork is no myth,” Chekst objected. “I had a friend in the Sordoan Royal Guard that was in the Royal Palace the day that Tork assassinated the Sultan. He saw him again the day the Empress died. No, Tork is no myth, but why does this Obanik bother you so much?”

“Obanik was supposedly passing through town about five years ago,” Lomar began. “Three men started getting on him about him having been a Targa Ranger and how King Byron of Targa was the cause of the Collapse. When Obanik tried to ignore them, they got rowdy. Obanik got up and left the inn and three fools followed him out into the street and drew their swords on him. Most amazing display of swordsmanship I ever saw. Obanik drew his sword and fended off the three men and called for the guard to arrest the fools so he wouldn’t have to kill them. Well, the guard showed up, all right. Three senior guardsmen came and one of them was Hanjel here.”

“I think you’ve said enough for one day,” threatened Hanjel.

Lomar ignored the other guard and continued. “The three guards started taking bets on the outcome instead of intervening. Finally Obanik shook his head and in one twirling motion, cut the three fools in half. Hanjel and his two buddies arrested him for murder and took him before King Alfred who sentenced him to death. Some of the citizens objected and the King ordered an investigation. When King Alfred discovered what had really happened, he offered Obanik a choice, become the General of the Melbin Army or leave the city and never return. Either way, Obanik would be required to teach the three guards, who had not broken up the fight, a lesson. Obanik chose to leave the city and said that his sword was already too bloody to use against the guards.”

“Well, Hanjel should at least be happy about that,” Chekst said.

Hanjel threw his ale mug at the wall and stormed out of the inn. Lomar shook his head and continued the story. “The King was not pleased with either of Obanik’s responses. He decided to throw Obanik in the ring against the three guards, anyway, but without Obanik’s sword. Hanjel and his friends were thrilled and they all gleefully drew their steel to kill Obanik, but it didn’t quite turn out that way. Obanik beat the three of them without his sword, killed one of them even, and knocked the other two unconscious. Hanjel and the other guard were demoted to new recruits and Obanik was shown the gate out of the city.”

“Will Hanjel arrest him for returning to the city?” Chekst asked.

“I don’t think so,” Lomar answered. “Hanjel curses the day he arrested him the last time. I fear he will try to kill Obanik and that, I am sure, will result in Hanjel’s death. I would arrest Obanik myself to save Hanjel, but I think the King might impose his original sentence on the Ranger and he doesn’t deserve to die for killing those fools.”

“You said you saw the fight,” Chekst asked, “why didn’t you stop it?”

“I wasn’t in the guard then,” Lomar stated. “It was Hanjel’s poor performance that made me want to join the guard. I was ashamed of his performance and thought the Kingdom deserved better than that.”

Tedi rose and casually walked out into the street, eyeing the door to the Bosun’s Jib. Hanjel was nowhere in sight, so he marched across the street and entered the common room. He found the innkeeper and inquired about Mikal Obanik and was told that he had gone out. Tedi wanted to alert Garth, but he did not want to leave a message with the innkeeper, so he left.

Arik was amazed at the wealth of merchandise available from the weapons merchants. There were swords of every shape and size, battle-axes, crossbows, longbows, horse bows, staffs, pikes; the list was endless. The variety of knives alone would keep Fredrik busy for a week just picking out the types he wanted. There were weapons that Arik could not name, or even guess what they were, or how they were used, and these were the ones that Tanya was interested in. She had already purchased five finely polished and balanced fighting staffs and something called a bola, which looked like a heavy cord with a ball on each end. The bola confused Arik until the merchant demonstrated its use. Still, he had no idea what Tanya intended to use it for. Perhaps she would give it to Niki and Niki could use it to snare herself a King.

Arik found himself fondling a longbow and the merchant asked him if he would care to try it out. Arik nodded and the merchant handed him a bowstring and three metal-shafted arrows. Arik bent the longbow, which was much stiffer than his Lorgo bow, and attached the bowstring. The merchant was on the edge of a practice field and there were several targets erected across the field at even intervals. The merchant suggested he shoot at the closest target.

Arik stuck two of the arrows into the ground and saw the merchant wince. He held the third arrow and felt its smooth finish and fine balance. He had never seen a metal arrow before and shuddered at the thought of leaving a dozen of them in enemy bodies after a battle. Killing could get to be an expensive hobby, at the price of these metal arrows.

“Remember,” the merchant said softly, “your drawback will be half again greater than your country bow.”

Arik nodded thoughtfully as he nocked the metal arrow. He mentally adjusted for the difference in

force and smoothly let the arrow fly. His arrow struck lower than he would have thought and he quickly pulled an arrow from his own quiver and repeated the procedure. His wooden arrow hit dead center and the merchant smiled approvingly. Arik plucked a second metal arrow from the ground and, after mentally adjusting for the extra weight of the metal arrow, sent it sailing into his wooden arrow.

Taking the third metal arrow, Arik adjusted for the furthest target. The merchant saw the elevation Arik was applying and shook his head with his eyes closed. Arik smoothly let the metal arrow fly and it sailed into the target, not a thumb's width from the center. Applause broke out and Arik turned to find several people had become spectators to his display.

The merchant beamed as he said, "Excellent shot, Sir. If you can repeat that last shot, I'll gladly give you a tenth off the price of that longbow."

Arik laughed at the merchant's attempt to sell his longbow. He was well aware, from watching Tanya, that any of these merchants would give you a tenth back to make a sale. Still, the longbow felt good to his hands and it was extremely accurate.

"I will repeat it three times," boasted Arik, "if you will give me three tenths off the price and a quiver full of these metal arrows."

The merchant was taken aback by the audacious request, but the crowd, which had swelled greatly, applauded again and he quickly acquiesced to Arik's request. He handed Arik three more metal arrows and Arik again stuck two of them in the dirt while he waited for the boy to clear the targets. When the field was clear Arik nocked his first arrow and easily sent it through the air, driving it into the center of the distant target. The crowd that had become very large applauded.

"What happens when one of these metal arrows strikes another?" Arik questioned.

"It is the same as a hit," answered the merchant, "but it may damage the arrow. I will have the boy remove the arrows after each shot if you think that it is a possibility."

Arik nodded and the merchant signaled the boy as murmurs ran through the crowd. Arik's second arrow flew as true as the first and Arik noticed that a man in the crowd was collecting money and making wagers on the final shot. The merchant was sweating now and wringing his hands as Arik nocked his third arrow. A hush fell over the crowd as Arik's third arrow sailed through the air and pierced the center of the target. If the second arrow had been left in, the third would have hit it. The crowd roared its approval and many a hand slapped Arik on his back as the crowd dispersed.

"You are as fine a marksman as I have ever seen," the merchant admitted, "and I have seen a few. Still, a deal is a deal and you have won your discount fairly. It's safe enough to say that my shop will be the talk of the town for a week, at least, and that brings paying customers around."

Arik paid the merchant and also purchased a fine, soft leather case for the bow. Tanya was suitably impressed not only with his shooting, for she knew him as a good shot, but with his negotiating skill. He and Tanya spent the rest of the day shopping and Tanya made a few more purchases of items, which Arik had no idea what she was going to do with.

Fredrik's luck was fair with cards as well as any other game, but the young gambler earned his money at dice and wheel games where his magic could affect the outcome. Fredrik's attire marked him as a wealthy man and saw him admitted to the more lucrative games where the stakes were higher.

Fredrik had played this game for so long, he knew the rules well. He did not win too much at any one establishment, but moved on to the next before people started howling about his luck. With a city the size of Melbin, Fredrik could gamble for a month before anyone would get wise to his extraordinary ability to win. Still, he kept in mind Garth's warning about cheating the merchants and he was sure that applied to gambling as well. By working his way from the poorer establishments to the richer, Fredrik had managed to amass several thousand crowns for his several hours of work. At the last establishment he had encountered two other gamblers he had run into earlier in the afternoon and decided to end his gambling for the day.

Fredrik made his way back to the Fluttering Jib and noticed Arik and Tanya in the common room. He worked his way over to them and sat down.

"Where are Tedi and Niki?" greeted Fredrik.

"We haven't seen either one of them since we arrived," Tanya stated. "We spent all day at the market. I picked up some knives for you at the market in case you didn't get a chance to get there before they closed."

Fredrik kicked himself for forgetting about the market. When he started gambling he always lost track of time. He was thankful now for the conversations he had had with Tanya about what he was looking for in knives. "Thanks, Tanya," he said. "I lost track of time and didn't make it to the market. I'll look at them after dinner, but I'm sure that what you bought will be just what I want. If you haven't eaten yet, it will be my treat. I've had an exceptional run of luck today."

Tanya grinned knowingly and Arik gritted his teeth. Tedi came into the common room looking harried and slid into a seat at the table. "We have some serious problems," Tedi whispered.

Arik looked around the common room to see if anyone was paying too much attention to their table. Satisfied that no one was paying any attention to them, Arik asked the obvious question. "What kind of trouble is serious?"

"There is a Melbin guard trying to kill Garth," Tedi whispered, "and Niki was arrested."

Ale slopped out of Arik's mug as he lowered it to the table and his jaw almost dropped as low. Looking around again, Arik suggested that they retire to one of the rooms to talk.

The four Rangers beat a hasty exit from the common room and went upstairs to the boys' room. Everyone found a spot on one of the beds to sit before Arik demanded an explanation.

"Garth, or rather Mikal Obanik, is not welcome in Melbin," Tedi began. "He was shown the gate by King Alfred five years ago after killing four men and wounding two others. Three of them were Melbin Guards. One of those guards is out to kill him. I overheard him and another guard talking earlier and I've spent the day trying to find him. While I was down in the Oddities Market, I saw two guards escorting Niki to the Palace. She did not look happy."

"Great," exclaimed Fredrik. "I wonder if she was stupid enough to use magic here."

Arik and Tanya both shot Fredrik a wicked glare and he turned red when he realized what he had said. He smiled weakly and shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry," he apologized. "I really meant stupid enough to get caught using magic."

Arik and Tanya were not impressed with the subtle distinction Fredrik was making. “Niki is the more important of the two,” Arik stated. “Garth can take care of himself and Niki is likely to use magic on the King and get herself killed. How can we find out where she is and what she has done?”

“I know a guard,” suggested Tedi, “who appears honest and might tell us. I don’t really know him, but I know his name and what he looks like. He is the one who was talking about Mikal Obanik and what happened five years ago. His name is Lomar.”

“If this guard is honest and knows Mikal is in town,” Tanya asked, “why is he not arresting him?”

“He thinks what Mikal did was correct,” Tedi said. “The King was mad because Mikal refused to be his General of the Army. That is what got him thrown out of the city and Lomar won’t arrest him to face the King again.”

“That is a story I want to hear more of,” Tanya said, “but right now we have to get Niki to safety. In most cities, you can just go up to the Palace Guard and ask them if somebody has been arrested and what for. I’ll go try that and come back.”

Tanya left as Fredrik said, “It is most likely that she used magic. If that is the case, they will execute her. We have to find out where the prison is and how to get her out.”

“I am not enjoying my first trip to the big city,” Tedi remarked. “I’ve spent all day frantically looking for Mikal before someone kills him and now we have to plan a prison break.”

The boys sat and pondered their situation for a short time before Tanya returned. “She was arrested for something she did in Caldar. Something about using magic to take clothes from a woman,” Tanya informed them. “The woman is here in Melbin and recognized her.”

“Can they arrest her for something she did in another country?” Fredrik asked.

“The King can do whatever he wants in his country,” Tanya explained.

The four Rangers sat lost in thought for some time. Garth would be furious with them if they didn’t get Niki free and this would probably be the last city they ever saw for the rest of their lives.

“If this woman can have Niki arrested for something that happened in Caldar,” Fredrik stated forcefully, “then I can have her arrested for something she did in Cidal.”

The others looked at Fredrik like he was crazy. Fredrik smiled and explained, “I am known as Lord Wason in Cidal, the Lord of the Manor. We had to leave the town rather swiftly because Niki used magic to hold one of my maids off the floor. She was in a rage and they would have killed her. She rode out on a horse and I pretended to be chasing her. As far as anyone in Cidal knows, I am still chasing her. I will go to the King and demand her arrest. He will turn her over to me and we can leave.”

“That sounds pretty good,” Tedi admitted, “but will the King even see you?”

“If he is really Lord of the Manor in Cidal,” Tanya speculated, “the King probably will see him. Do you know anybody there that the King might know?”

“Just before we left town, I was in a meeting with Captain Grecho, head of the Cidal Mercenary

Company. The King may have heard of him,” hoped Fredrik.

“I heard about them today in the same conversation,” Tedi exclaimed. “They are known here in Melbin and have a good reputation.”

“Well, Lord Wason,” bowed Arik, “it would appear that you are about to see the King of Melbin.”

Fredrik straightened out his clothes and headed for the Royal Palace, which was an imposing mansion in the heart of the city. The Palace itself was set back quite a bit from the road and Fredrik feared he would look foolish walking in from the street. He turned around and headed towards a carriage house he had seen earlier in the day. For twenty crowns, he rented a large, ornate carriage for the trip to the Royal Palace.

The carriage pulled up to the gate to the Royal Palace and the driver announced Lord Wason of the Cidal Manor having just arrived in the city to seek audience with the King. The guard looked inside the carriage and nodded. A runner was sent to the Palace and he returned several minutes later with a message. The guard opened the massive gate and waved the carriage through.

The carriage rode up to the front of the Royal Palace and stopped. A Palace servant dressed entirely in white, except for an orange and black sash, opened the carriage door. Fredrik stepped out as proudly as he could. The servant closed the carriage door and then led Fredrik inside. The Palace was fairly new and very well decorated. The entry was large and spacious and sported large plants to give the room an outdoor feeling. Paintings lined the walls of the tiled corridors and the doors were made from excellently carved woods with gold scrollwork.

The throne room was large and the floor was completely covered with carpeting as fine as any Lanorian rug Fredrik had seen. Spaced along the walls were large murals of the seacoast and statues placed between them. The throne, itself, was a gaudy gold chair with orange and black cushioning. Seated on the throne was a small, plump man with a receding hairline. Behind the throne were two women dressed in orange and black dresses. The servant announced Lord Wason and Fredrik realized he was speaking to the King.

Fredrik bowed to King Alfred and waited for a signal to approach. Fredrik had never been before a King and he had no idea what the protocols were, but he behaved as if the King were a god and hoped that whatever he did would not create an offense.

“King Alfred, I greatly appreciate you taking the time to see me without an appointment. I am afraid that our first meeting is marred by my need to ask something of you.”

“Lord Wason, please, I do not stand a great deal on the formalities of the old ways. The last I had heard the Lord of the Manor in Cidal was Lord Alrecht. As your name would indicate that you are not his son, may I ask how you have come unto your Title?”

Lord Alrecht was my uncle, Your Highness. He was murdered by Black Devils passing through Cidal and I am his only heir.”

“You have my sympathies,” the King offered. “I trust the Cidal Mercenary Company avenged his death?”

“Actually, Your Highness, Captain Grecho informed me that the company was unaware of the murder until it was long over and the Black Devils had moved on.”

“A pity,” the King sympathized. “Well, what is it that you wish from me, Lord Wason?”

“I have been chasing a young woman who was staying in my mansion in Cidal,” Fredrik gambled. “It has come to my attention that she was arrested here in the city this very day.”

“It seems to me, if I recall correctly, your uncle used to chase women, as well,” the King joked, “but I think I know of the woman whom you are referring to. A Lady of Caldar has charged her with sorcery. The Lady told me an interesting tale about having her dress ripped off her on the main street of Caldar.”

“That could very well be the same woman, Your Highness. The woman I am after used sorcery on one of my own maids in my own mansion and I have been chasing her ever since.”

“Well, at least I no longer have to feel guilty about executing her for sorcery,” chuckled King Alfred. “Of course, the Lady of Caldar’s word was enough to satisfy me, but your word assures me beyond doubt. I will allow you to witness the execution and then we shall have a great feast for the Lady and yourself.”

A shiver ran through Fredrik’s body. He had not known that the woman whom Niki disrobed in public was the Lady of Caldar. The woman had seen Fredrik with Niki and if she saw him here, he could also be arrested and executed.

“Your Highness,” Fredrik pleaded, “I would request that this woman be turned over to me so that I may have her returned to Cidal to stand trial for her crimes against me and the people of Cidal.”

The King lost his entire jovial mood and went silent. For several long agonizing moments, the only sound in the large, cavernous room was Fredrik’s own breathing.

Finally, the King of Melbin spoke. “You present me with a difficulty, Lord Wason. I have before me a woman who has committed serious crimes in two jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction is a potential ally and vassal of Melbin. Caldar appeared before me first, but Cidal is closer and has the backing of the Cidal Mercenary Company. This is a difficult choice. Would you care to look at the woman and confirm for me that we are, indeed, dealing with the same woman?”

“Certainly, Your Highness,” Fredrik agreed.

A servant and two guards led Fredrik out of the throne room and along a corridor to the rear of the Palace and across the yard almost to the far wall of the estate. Not far from the wall was a large, square plot of land surrounded by a moat, with a flagpole being the only structure above ground. The guards worked a winch that moved a narrow bridge out across the moat and the servant led Fredrik across. The entire island was a series of cages built into the ground, which were exposed to the weather. The servant stopped at the first cage and Fredrik’s heart sunk as stared down at Niki in the cage. She was sleeping and Fredrik did not have the heart to wake her.

Fredrik returned across the bridge and the guards withdrew it. The four men marched back to the throne room and Fredrik addressed the King.

“Your Highness, just seeing the woman again makes me plead that you give preference to my claim towards her.”

King Alfred nodded and laughed. “My Lord Wason, my advisors have come up with a plan to

please both Caldar and Cidal. You will be given the woman to take back to Cidal as you requested.”

Fredrik’s heart leaped with joy at avoiding this close call over losing Niki.

“That will be, of course,” the King continued, “after we have executed her to satisfy Caldar’s claim.”

Fredrik’s heart sank and he begged leave from the King’s presence. On the way back to the Fluttering Jib, he tried to think of what he would tell the others.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 17

Breakout

When Mikal Obanik emerged from the basement of the leather shop, the sky had blackened and the alley was dark. As dark as the alley was, the news from Alcea was even darker. Instead of Alcea preparing to receive its new King, it sounded like the petty interests of rival Lords had taken precedence. Worse than that, King Byron had been assassinated and Queen Marta had fled the city.

Mikal waited a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness and moved down the alley to his next contact. Sounds far behind him in the alley caught his attention and Mikal refused the temptation to turn and look. If someone was following him, there was little he could do until they got closer. Care would have to be taken to make sure that no one knew his contacts, though. Long after Mikal had left the city, his contacts would have to continue living here.

At the end of the alley, Mikal stepped out on the wide street and watched the passing people. Gauging the proper moment, Mikal stepped out and merged with the flow of traffic, hoping to lose his follower. It was only a half-hearted attempt as Mikal was taller than most of the citizens of Melbin and his head would be visible above the crowd, still, the tail would know only the general location when he left the crowd. He worked his way patiently to the opposite side of the street and suddenly ducked into an alley. Walking quickly, Mikal reached the end of the alley and entered another broad street. He turned right on the street and right into the next alley. Halfway up that alley was a door and he opened it and slipped in.

The corridor on the other side of the door was unlighted and Mikal walked cautiously to a doorway at the end. Mikal tapped on the door with a distinctive knock that alerted the occupant on the other side as to whom was calling on him. The dim light that showed under the door was extinguished and Mikal heard a bolt being thrown back and the door opened a crack. Mikal slipped into the room and closed the door. A voice from the other side of the dark room called softly to him. “You have been away for a long time.”

“Matters of importance caused my delay,” Mikal replied softly. “I understand the situation at home is not well. Do you have any information on Mother’s whereabouts or what happened to Father?”

Mikal heard the other occupant of the room trying to use a striker and said, “I need to keep my night vision. The alleys of Melbin are full of rats tonight.”

“Very well,” the mysterious voice answered. “Father’s illness was just part of the Contest. I have no knowledge of the gambler who threw the dice. No one knows the whereabouts of Mother. Some are planning to ask King Alfred to provide a home for her if she can be located.”

“I would think that there are safer places for her to visit,” Mikal said gruffly. “Still, someone must look after her.”

“There is some degree of bitterness in that statement,” chuckled the voice. “The invitation will be offered. She may choose to accept or decline.”

“What else have you heard?” Mikal questioned.

“There is no longer a safety net at home,” came the answer. “The dungeon is filling up and there is the threat of emptying it in a harsh way. Your Cousin is one of them. That is all I have for you, I’m afraid. Don’t stay away so long next time.”

Mikal quietly offered thanks and a farewell as he slid out the door into the dark corridor. Cracking the door to the alley, Mikal peered out looking for any passersby. Seeing none he stepped out into the alley and made his way towards the busy, wide street. The alley was dotted with small, black alcoves and Mikal was halfway to the street when he heard a scrape on the ground from one he had just passed.

Mikal immediately stooped as he spun around to face his attacker. The knife just barely passed over his head and Mikal threw a forceful punch up between the attacker’s legs. A whoosh of breath smelling of cheap ale was expelled from the attacker and Mikal grabbed the man’s legs and straightened his own, tossing the large attacker over his shoulder. Mikal spun around and knelt on the man’s neck as he grabbed both of the man’s wrists with his large callused hands. Smashing the man’s hands against the ground, Mikal was rewarded by the sound of the knife falling to the ground.

The man tried to struggle beneath him and each time, Mikal put pressure on the man’s neck with his knee. Eventually, the man stopped struggling and Mikal said only one word softly, “Name?”

When the man didn’t answer, Mikal increased the pressure of his knee and asked the question again. Finally, the man answered, “Hanjel.”

“I should have known it would be you,” Mikal said grimly. “First, you had no pride in your position. Now, you have too much pride, or is it hatred? This will make the second time that I have spared your life, Hanjel. There will not be a third. Make no mistake about it. Even if you stand in the presence of King Alfred, if I see you again, I will kill you.”

Mikal quickly snatched the fallen knife, rose and walked out of the alley to continue with his contacts, without looking back.

Fredrik returned to the Fluttering Jib and walked up to his room. The other three Rangers were waiting anxiously. The disappointed looks on their faces were obvious when Fredrik entered the room alone.

“Wouldn’t the King see you?” asked Tanya.

Fredrik slumped down on his bed and shook his head. “The King saw me,” he answered. “I thought

I had him ready to release Niki to me, but all he offered was her body after she is executed. The woman whom Niki attacked is the Lady of Caldar and she demanded her execution. The King has agreed to please her.”

The room went suddenly quiet and Arik started pacing the floor. After the continuous sound of Arik’s pacing drove everyone to irritability, the others made him sit down.

“There is no option left but to break her out,” Tanya concluded. “If only we could figure out where they are holding her.”

Fredrik perked up at his chance to offer something useful. “I know where she is,” he chirped. “I saw her, but she was sleeping. There are cells dug into the ground on the Palace estate. They have a moat around a large area with cells and a mechanical device that extends a narrow bridge over it. They took me to verify that Niki was the woman whom I was after.”

“Where about on the estate is this island?” Arik demanded.

“It is as far from the Palace as you can get and still be on the estate,” Fredrik explained. “There is a large wall around the entire estate, but I did not see any guard towers. I did pass two roving patrols while they had me out, but I didn’t see anyone stationary at that end of the estate.”

“Great,” exclaimed Arik. “We can scale the wall and get her out.”

“Why would they leave prisoners so exposed?” queried Tedi. “They must put some value on keeping their prisoners locked up. There is something missing here.”

“There is quite a bit missing if you will let me finish,” scolded Fredrik. “The bridge mechanism is locked with a key the guard carries. It also makes a tremendous noise when it is operated and if we try to use it, we will be killed or captured.”

“Can’t we just swim across the moat?” asked Tanya.

Fredrik shook his head tossing his dark brown hair over one eye. “I wouldn’t advise that,” he sighed. “The moat is filled with hungry reptiles. Some of them were twenty feet long. I heard the guards laughing about feeding time, which, I gather, is seldom, but their gnashing teeth could easily tear your legs off. Also, the cell, itself, is locked and the pit is too deep for her to climb out of. Even if it wasn’t that deep, you would have to wake her up without her screaming her head off.”

“Why hasn’t Niki used her magic to get out of the cell?” quizzed Arik. “Does she know any spells that would help her escape? I mean, why is she just sleeping when she should be raging to get out?”

“A good question,” added Tedi. “Are you sure she was alive, Fredrik?”

“I thought she was just sleeping,” Fredrik replied thoughtfully, “but you are right. That is not like Niki at all. She would be screaming and cursing and throwing any spell she could conjure.”

“The King would not hold a public execution with a dead prisoner,” Tanya postulated. “They must have drugged her or knocked her out. They were probably afraid of her magic powers. Now we have to add to the list our need to carry her once we open the cell.”

“Whatever we do will have to be done later tonight,” declared Arik. “Let’s split into two teams. One

team will eat now while the other tries to get a look at this island from the outside. When they return, we will switch. When the second team comes back we will meet here and discuss ideas for getting her out.”

“Tedi and I will eat first,” declared Tanya. “You two go and get a look. Fredrik can show you where it is and you can draw us a map when you return,” she said to Arik.

They all agreed and Fredrik led Arik to the spot where he thought the island might be. The wall was a good twenty feet high and the boys could not see over it. The trees in the area were not tall enough to get a good look over the wall and there were too many people in the area to start climbing the wall even if they could.

Fredrik looked around the area and his eyes stopped on a three-story house across the street. Fredrik tapped Arik on the sleeve and marched across the street and knocked on the door. At first he thought no one would answer, but when he was about to open the door and go in, a middle-aged woman opened the door.

“What is it?” she demanded. “If it’s something you’re selling, be off with you.”

“Madam,” Fredrik puffed up, “do I look like a lowly merchant? My agent sent me by to examine the house.”

The woman gave Fredrik a looking over and eyed appraisingly at his red velvet suit. “Agent? What agent? Whatever are you talking about?”

“The property agent, of course,” snapped Fredrik. “Look, I am offering an outrageously large sum of money for this house and I don’t appreciate my time being wasted with foolish games. Are you going to let us in or should I buy your neighbor’s house?”

“I don’t know nothing about . . .” faltered the woman. Her eyes sparkled as she changed her tune. “I mean to say that your agent was not gracious enough to inform me that you would be coming this evening. Come in, please.”

Arik hid his smile well as Fredrik led the way into the tall house. Fredrik saw a few poor pieces of furniture and some crates in the entry hall. He swept past them into the receiving room and stopped when he saw no furniture at all. “I am afraid that I forgot your name, Lady,” Fredrik stated.

“Mabel, My Lord,” she replied as she bowed. “As you can see, I have already moved the furniture out except for these small pieces. I can have them removed in the morning. How much was your offer, Sir?”

“Twice what you were asking,” Fredrik calmly replied. “I think this will do well, Lady Mabel.”

“Perhaps, you could show your good faith, Sir,” Mabel hesitantly suggested. “A small deposit would guarantee that your offer is accepted, as generous as it is.”

The house was really in deplorable condition. The floors were cracked, the doors hung poorly and didn’t close, and the walls had holes in them. The truth of what he was seeing began to dawn on Lord Wason. He walked back into the entrance hall and looked at the crates. Nodding his head, Fredrik retrieved some coins from his pouch and counted them out.

“I must have men in tonight to take measurements and I will not want them disturbed,” Fredrik

ordered. "Here is one hundred crowns deposit. The belongings in the entry hall will not be available until tomorrow after midday. If you can carry them, you can take them now, otherwise, do not send for them until that time. I will have my agent draw up the papers tomorrow and by nightfall you will be a very wealthy woman. Good night, Lady Mabel."

The woman bowed with a grin on her lips and hefted a crate on her way out the door. Arik started to ask for an explanation as Fredrik dashed up the stairs to the top floor. Arik pounded after him and looked out the window at the Palace grounds.

"What was all that about?" asked Arik. "Do you know that not going through with the purchase of this house could be considered cheating a merchant?"

Fredrik was studying the lay of the grounds as he spoke. "This house is not for sale, Arik," he chuckled. "And that was no Lady. I can't be sure, but I think this house held rooms that were rented out. Each of the crates in the entry hall had a different name written on them. That woman was probably one of the renters who received an eviction notice. Look at this place. It has probably been condemned and is scheduled to be torn down. The way the woman bowed proved she was no Lady."

"Then why did you give her the money?" quizzed Arik.

"The money was well spent," laughed Lord Wason. "She will be scurrying around to the other evicted renters offering to have their belongings brought to them for free just to stop them from coming here and alerting me. This place will not be disturbed during the night. Now, we not only have a good view of the grounds, we have a new base for the rescue."

Arik shook his head in amusement as he studied the layout of the island prison. Fredrik watched a piece of wood fall from the window as he withdrew and headed for the stairs.

The two boys returned to the Fluttering Jib and sat at the table occupied by Tanya and Tedi. He quickly described the house and told them that Arik and he would bring their belongings to the house when they had finished eating. The second team left for the abandoned house and Fredrik and Arik ordered a healthy meal that had been put off too long.

After the meal, Fredrik spoke to the innkeeper and explained that part of his party would be leaving and he no longer required the smaller room. He paid for both rooms for the night and the innkeeper was well pleased by the sudden change in plans. Fredrik left his belongings and, together with Arik, collected everyone else's and carried them down to the stables. The horses had been cared for as the blacksmith promised and leaving Fredrik's horse they loaded the rest and rode to the abandoned house.

The house had no stables and Arik led the horses inside to the parlor. The boys ran up the stairs and found Tanya and Tedi sitting on the floor, drawing diagrams in the dirt. Arik plopped down alongside them but Fredrik stood not wanting to subject his apparel to the dirt.

"We have a few things worked out," Tanya offered. "The climbing claw I purchased today will get us over the wall and we can make a rope ladder to get us down into the cell. That still leaves the problem of getting across the moat, the roving guards, and carrying Niki."

"You forgot about the lock," Fredrik mentioned.

"I can take care of the lock," Tedi chuckled and Arik looked at him queerly. "Fredrik, can you make a shield like Kalina did in the canyon?" Tedi asked.

“No,” answered Fredrik. “How would that help you?”

“It was just a thought,” Tedi sighed. “Tanya told me about our archer’s new bow and his abilities. I figured if you could create a shield like Kalina did, only make it curve back around, Arik could shoot an arrow with a string tied to it. He could shoot the arrow to one side of the flagpole and the shield would make the arrow curve back on the other side of the flagpole. That way we would have a string wrapped around the flagpole and we could attach a rope to it and pull it around so that we had a rope stretching across the moat.”

“And what good would that do you?” Fredrik inquired.

“I could walk across the rope to the cell,” Tedi assured him.

“Can you really do that?” Tanya asked. “Because I know how to get a rope across the moat. I can use the same climbing claw that we will use to get over the wall. I am sure that it will catch on the bars to the cells.”

“Can you walk across the rope with Niki on your back?” Arik asked. “From what Fredrik said, she will be in no condition to help herself escape.”

“If you can figure out a way to keep the rope taut with our weight on it,” Tedi declared, “I can walk across it with anything that I can carry.”

“I can make Tedi a harness to carry Niki,” offered Fredrik. “That way his hands will be free.”

“Okay,” Arik commanded, “Fredrik, you get started on the harness. Tanya, try to time the roving patrols so that we have a sense of how long we will have to get Niki and get back. Tedi, you get to make the rope ladder. I’m going to search this house for something we can use to tie the other end of the rope to.”

The Rangers split up and went about their individual tasks. In a couple of hours everyone had reassembled and changed into the blacksuits. “I wasn’t able to find anything suitable,” Arik admitted, “but I did think of how we can accomplish the task. After Tedi gets to the island, he can tie the rope to one of the cells and throw the grappling hook back to us. We can affix it to the other end of the rope and dig it in to the ground. As long as the rope doesn’t flex too much, it should work.”

“If not,” Tedi commented dryly, “you three can take off.”

“The four of you will have to leave the city right away,” Fredrik stated. “I will stay at the Fluttering Jib because the King will check to see if I left with his prisoner. I will also have to tell Garth where you have gone.”

“There is a cove about four miles north of here along the shore,” Tanya nodded. “I will lead them there and wait for the rest of you.”

The three Rangers descended the stairs and exited the old house. Fredrik, still in his red velvet suit, remained at the window to lend magical assistance if everything fell apart. The trio quickly crossed the street and hid in the extra darkness that the wall provided. Tanya watched the window of the old house and when she saw a small sparkle of light, she threw her climbing claw up at the wall. It took her two tries to seat it and she cursed over the first attempt. Arik was first up the wall and he signaled Tedi to

follow and then hung by his hands and let go to fall to the ground.

Within moments the three Rangers were over the wall and inside the estate grounds. Quickly, Arik grabbed the grappling hook that Tanya had lowered and ran across the field to the moat. He hurled the hook towards the cages and missed. As he hauled it back in, the hook fell into the moat and got stuck on something. Arik pulled feverishly and something pulled back almost causing him to lose his balance. He called softly to Tanya and Tedi and they each grabbed onto the rope. The three of them pulled and the beast on the other end pulled back. The tug-o-war lasted only seconds before the hook was free and the three Rangers were sprawled on the ground, but it felt as if it had lasted for ten minutes.

Arik tossed the hook again and this time was rewarded with a clang as the hook snagged a bar on one of the cells. Arik wrapped the free end of the rope around his back and sat with his feet dug into the ground. Tanya placed herself a couple of feet in front of Arik and also grabbed the rope and dug in. Tedi walked to the edge of the moat and tested the flex in the rope. It seemed taut and time was running quickly, so Tedi put his faith in his partners and hopped onto the rope.

Tedi's balance was excellent and his fear did not emanate from the thought of falling, it came from the flexing of the rope as it dipped close to the water's surface. One thing he hadn't thought of was that the beasts might actually rise up out of the water to eat him. Tedi tried to concentrate on gaining the other bank and off of the moat. He felt the rope firming as he neared the far edge and soon he was on land again. He looked into the cell that the hook had caught on and his heart skipped a beat. The cell was empty.

Even as he was feeling doomed and wondering what to do next, his hands were untying the hook and tying the rope to the bar of the cell. Without thinking he threw the hook across the moat to Arik and Tanya. Tedi untied the rope once more and shimmied up the flagpole. Swiftly, he tied the rope to the metal ring at the top of the flagpole and slid down to the ground. He quickly ran from cell to cell looking for Niki. It was hard to see in the dark and then he remembered that Fredrik had said that she was in one of the corners. He ran to the closest corner cell and peered in. There was definitely something in there and Tedi bent to pick the lock.

The lock was not particularly hard and Tedi soon had the cell opened and the rope ladder fastened to the top. He let the ladder drop and scrambled down as he heard the patrol's boots scraping along the ground. The bottom of the cell was black and, hoping Niki would forgive him, he began feeling around. At least he was sure that the woman in the cell had curly hair. He lay on his stomach and pushed her on top of himself. Shifting her body around on his back to allow the straps of the harness to secure her, he kept listening for the sounds of the patrol.

Once she was secure, he started up the rope ladder. When he reached the top he stuck his head out to look for the patrol and saw no one. A moment of dread ran through him when he thought he might have been abandoned by his friends in the Royal Prison. A feeling of shame quickly followed as Arik and Tanya ran forward from the wall where they had hidden while the guards were in sight. The guards did not make a complete circuit, but came down the path towards the cells and then turned around. Thankfully, they did not see the rope.

Tedi almost lost his balance as he stooped to retrieve the rope ladder and lock the cell. He rose and threw the ladder across the moat. Adjusting Niki's weight, Tedi stepped to the edge of the moat and jumped up to grab the rope, which was tied to the flagpole. He decided if the rope was going to fail, he wasn't going to spend time dreading it. Straining against the weight of Niki and himself, Tedi began swinging to get his feet up on the rope. By the time he got his feet wrapped around the rope, Tedi's arms were aching. As quickly as he dared, Tedi started moving his hands along the rope towards the other

side of the moat. Each hand movement was a strain and his arms felt like they would be ripped out of their sockets. Slowly and agonizingly, Tedi put one hand in front of the other until finally he and Niki were safe on the other side.

Tanya ran up to the edge of the moat and cut the rope to leave it dangling in the water. Arik pried the climbing claw out of the ground and coiled the remaining rope. The three Rangers met at the wall and Arik caught the top of the wall with the hook. Tanya climbed the rope first and stayed on top of the wall. Tedi and Niki went next and Arik had to help by pushing. When Tedi reached the top, he managed to straddle the wall without falling. Arik was close behind and pulled the rope up and switched the hook to let the rope dangle on the outside of the wall. Arik descended first and allowed Tedi to place his feet on his shoulders to ease the way down. When they were safely down, Tanya tossed the hook down and then dropped herself to the ground.

Fredrik was downstairs waiting when they entered the house. They changed Niki into her blacksuit and Tanya pushed her leather hat over Niki's red hair. The three of them mounted their horses and Fredrik hefted Niki up to Arik, who held her in front of him. Tanya took the reins to Niki's horse and they set out for the North Gate.

Fredrik made it back to his room at the Fluttering Jib on foot and tossed himself on the bed to get a few hours sleep before the guards arrived.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 18

Mutiny

It was barely past first light when the pounding on the door woke Fredrik. He struggled to sit and the pounding continued. Sleepily shuffling over to the door, Fredrik threw the bolt back and two Melbin Guards rushed in, their heads swiveling to search the room. Fredrik could see two more guards waiting in the hallway beyond the door. "Lord Wason," one of the guards declared, "you have been summoned to the Royal Palace. It is well that you are dressed, King Alfred appears impatient this morning."

As fearful as he was, Fredrik walked over to the basin and wet his face. "I shall just be a moment," he said through the towel wiping the sleep from his face. The guard tapped his foot impatiently while Fredrik tried to smooth his red velvet suit. At least, Fredrik realized, he was not under arrest. The guards would not wait for him if they had orders for his arrest.

When Fredrik was as presentable as he could be after sleeping in his clothes, he turned and walked out the door. The guards had a carriage waiting for him and, once he was in, they rushed him to the Royal Palace. Fredrik was escorted directly to the Throne Room where King Alfred was waiting. The guard escorting him whispered something in the servant's ear and the servant scurried up to the King and relayed the information.

"I see the lodging in our inns is not to your liking, Lord Wason," the King stated. "Perhaps I should extend rooms in the Palace for your comfort."

A shiver ran down Fredrik's back as he thought the King must know about the house he had occupied last night. Slowly it dawned on him that the King probably was referring to the state of Fredrik's clothes. Some travelers slept in their clothes and armed because they did not trust the innkeeper to keep them safe while they slept. "I am afraid it was a long day yesterday, Your Highness. I know that Melbin is a city where travelers are safe, but I was so tired I must have fallen asleep before I could undress."

"Understandable," the King laughed. "You probably indulged yourself in a bit of merriment last night to toast the conclusion of your hunt for the witch."

Fredrik noticed that the King's laugh had been forced and the body language of the servants and the guards, who had not been withdrawn, told him that he was a suspect in the escape. "Actually, it was simple fatigue," Fredrik stated. "The witch has led me on a merry chase for some weeks and I must admit that many of those nights did not afford a bed as comfortable as the Fluttering Jib."

Frowning, the King tried a different approach, "I am told that you had a party of four with you when you arrived and they left you late last night. Did they have some urgent task to fulfill for you?"

This part Fredrik had rehearsed in his mind last night. "They were not my servants," Lord Wason declared. "They belong to Captain Grecho of the Cidal Mercenary Company. They are on their way north to negotiate a contract. They had agreed to be my escort while I was chasing the witch. When I informed them last night that my search had ended, they took their leave and continued on their mission."

The King's frown grew as his brow knitted and his eyebrows lowered, darkening the monarch's eyes. "Then I am to believe that they did not effect the release of your witch last night?" King Alfred said with a rising voice. "The very professional escape, I might add."

Fredrik knew it would come to this and realized the next few moments would decide his fate, whether it be death or freedom. "What do you mean escape?" he shouted. "You can't have let her escape."

The room grew very tense and the guards appeared to tighten their hands on their weapons. "I am sorry for my outburst," Lord Wason said softly while consciously clenching his hands to appear furious with the King's poorly guarded prison.

"I beg the King's pardon for words spoken in haste, but the thought of her being free again boils my blood," Fredrik humbled with the sound of forced softness. "The men of Captain Grecho obey my command and are loyal to the Lord of the Manor. They would not take it upon themselves to free a witch that I wished imprisoned."

The comment about loyalty had been meant to impress King Alfred that if he detained Lord Wason, he would be striking out against the Cidal Mercenary Company, which, while not true, would cause the King to tread more lightly towards Fredrik. "May I ask if the woman could have possibly used magic to escape and if Your Highness has any indication of where she has gone?" Lord Wason queried.

The King, after a minute of studying Fredrik, motioned for the guards to leave. "This has never happened before," conceded King Alfred. "The witch was drugged which should have made it impossible for her to use magic and there was a stub of rope found attached to the flagpole which would indicate a mundane rescue. Although, the cell was still locked and the purpose of the rope makes no sense. It was long enough to reach the bottom of the cell, but it was next to the wrong cell and the loose end was not in the cell. I am afraid that there is little information that I can supply to help you locate her. If I receive further news, I will send a messenger."

Fredrik bowed and left the throne room. He spurned the carriage, which was waiting for him and walked backed to the Fluttering Jib lost in thought. As he entered the common room, he noticed Yolinda Obanik sitting by herself at one of the tables. He nonchalantly walked over and sat down. The crowd was sparse for the morning meal and the serving girl appeared promptly. He ordered a concoction of eggs and cheese and turned towards Yolinda.

“You are alone,” Yolinda whispered while holding her mug of coffee to her lips. “Where are the others? What has happened?”

Fredrik acted like he was having pleasant conversation with a stranger. “They rode out last night and are waiting for us north of here. I can’t explain it all now, but if your business in Melbin is complete, I would suggest that we leave.”

“Is everyone all right?” Yolinda demanded.

“Niki has been drugged to keep her from using magic,” Fredrik explained. “She was unconscious when she left. Everyone else is okay.”

“Be ready to leave in fifteen minutes,” Yolinda whispered. “I will get the ingredients needed to help Niki. We will meet you at the stables for the Bosun’s Chair.” Yolinda placed her coffee mug on the table and disappeared out the door of the inn.

Fredrik finished his breakfast and went to his room to gather his belongings. He removed the red velvet suit and dressed in a gray woolen tunic and matching breeches. Carrying his gear down to the stables, he paused to inform the innkeeper that he was leaving. When he reached the stables of the Bosun’s Chair, Mikal was waiting for him holding both his black stallion and Yolinda’s white mare. Yolinda hurried along the alley and mounted without a word. Silently the three rode through the streets of Melbin and out the North Gate.

When they were well away of the gate, Garth demanded an explanation of the events of Melbin. He told Fredrik to start at the beginning and leave nothing out. Fredrik was just finishing his tale when they left the coastal highway and headed for the sea. “I think I know the cove that Tanya is speaking of, although it is not a particularly safe spot to wait,” Garth commented.

Garth was pleased to see that Arik was at least alert to the danger when the young warrior jumped down from his hiding spot in the rocks to welcome them. “I guess everything went okay,” Arik smiled at Fredrik.

Arik led them into the cove to where Niki was stretched out on a blanket. Kalina quickly dismounted and knelt at the girl’s side to examine her. “Get a fire going and put some water on to boil,” she demanded.

“This is not a safe place for a fire,” Garth cautioned. “Can it wait until we find a more suitable place?”

“No,” replied Kalina. “The drug can be very harmful, especially if they were not careful administering it. The fact that she was about to be executed could be enough reason for them not to care how much they used. I must get some tea into her.”

Kalina removed a parcel from her pouch and handed it to Tedi. “Mix half of this into a tea and see that she drinks all of it. Return the unused half,” Kalina ordered.

Kalina went to her horse and removed the long, canvas wrapped package and laid it on the ground. Stopping, she unwrapped the Sword of Heavens and picked it up. Holding it out from her she started to rotate in a circle and finally stopped when it tingled.

“It is as much west as it is north,” Garth surmised.

“Yes,” replied Kalina dryly, “and you want to take us further north.”

“The children are getting better every day,” Garth explained, “but they are hardly ready to battle the world. The delay of a week will not matter in the course of the Prophecy and they will be one week better trained for it. Besides, if we let the situation in Alcea totally crumble, the Prophecy can not be fulfilled. Remember, one of them is supposed to lead Alcea to greatness. How can that be accomplished if Alcea doesn’t exist anymore?”

“So, the children will be better trained, will they?” Kalina snorted. “And you expect me to believe that your plans won’t get them killed in Alcea? We could have lost them all for only one day in Melbin and there is no one there who particularly cares if they live. In Alcea, everyone will want them dead.”

“If you are so opposed to my plans,” Garth stated, “I will go to Alcea alone. I know what must be done and I will have it done.”

“And abandon the Children of the Prophecy,” mocked Kalina. “I think not. You have waited all your life to get your hands on them. You will not leave them now.”

“I will find you wallowing your way across Targa when I am done,” Garth smiled.

“Let us not fight about this, Garth,” Kalina sighed. “We will talk about it later.”

Kalina wrapped the sword back up in the canvas and went to check on Niki. Garth wandered down to the surf and removed his boots to let his feet feel the cool saltwater wash over them as he paced along the beach. A barefooted Tanya appeared alongside him and Garth shivered as he realized how complacent he had become about the children’s presence.

“Something is troubling you, warrior,” Tanya suggested. “I have never seen you two have a harsh word for one another. Is it because of the difficulties we got into in Melbin?”

“No,” confided Garth. “The Alcea Rangers performed admirably in Melbin. I am proud of all of you, not just for using your abilities well, but because you worked as a team. I learned some very disturbing information while in Melbin and feel that the problems in Alcea need to be addressed now. Kalina feels that we must hurry to fulfill the Prophecy and she has a point. Even though the Rangers are not yet battle worthy, every day we delay is an opportunity for Sarac to get at you.”

Tanya reached down and plucked a shell from the surf, letting the water rinse the sand from it. “Can’t the problem in Alcea wait for us to return from wherever we are going?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Garth. “The situation may wait, but some very good people will die in the meantime. They are friends and people whom I admire, as well as being influential to affairs in Alcea. When it comes time to place the heir upon the throne, they would be good people to have alive.”

“You will work it out, warrior,” Tanya chirped as she sprinted across the sand to a blanket against the

rocks.

Garth turned around and headed back towards his boots. He looked and saw that Kalina had Niki sitting up, drinking tea. He picked up his boots and strode across the sand towards the rest of the group. Niki was talking and Garth deduced from the smile on Kalina's lips that Niki was going to be all right. He sat down on somebody's blanket and dusted the sand off his feet before putting his boots back on. Tedi was missing from the group and Garth assumed he was on sentry duty.

Kalina got Niki up and walked her back and forth to assure herself that there was nothing wrong with her. Once she was satisfied, she ordered the campfire extinguished and announced that they would be leaving in five minutes.

Everyone got their belongings packed back on the horses and mounted up. Garth let Kalina lead while he pondered which way he would go when they got to a road that led westward. They rode for half a day before the road westward appeared. Kalina halted at the crossroads, but the children kept on going. Kalina started to say something, but Arik cut her off.

"The Alcea Rangers are bound for Alcea," he proclaimed. "It is about time that we saw what we are fighting for. If you and Garth don't hurry along, you will miss dinner."

Kalina looked dumbfounded as Garth caught up to her and he just shrugged his shoulders and grinned. Kalina shook her head in dismay, but Garth saw the corners of a smile appearing on her lips. "You orchestrated this, didn't you?" she accused.

"This was not my decision," he chuckled. "Our Rangers are becoming more of a tight-knit group than either of us would have suspected. I only mentioned my concern to Tanya because she asked what we were arguing about. I do think they have a valid point about seeing what they are fighting for, though."

"You would," laughed Kalina. "It is funny to have two strong-willed people ignored by a group that we still call children. You better move along, I do not intend to miss dinner."

For the rest of the day they rode on, and nobody mentioned the incident at the crossroads. Arik chose the campsite and Garth watched with amusement and pride as the Rangers efficiently set up camp and started dinner and practice as if this was their daily routine. The episode in Melbin, without Garth and Kalina to guide them, had melded them into a working team, dependent on each other and seemingly independent of anyone else. Garth knew better, but it filled him with admiration for the five of them.

Kalina mixed the rest of her concoction into a tea for Niki, while Garth went to observe the practice sessions. Arik and Tanya were using the bolas that Tanya had purchased in Melbin. The pair of balls attached by a strong cord was thrown at the legs of a person or animal. If thrown properly, the weight of the balls caused the cord to wrap around the legs and fell your opponent. They were using a pair of sticks for the practice and were getting better with each throw.

Fredrik and Tedi were battling with the new staffs acquired in Melbin and Garth had to admit that the staffs made a difference in their effectiveness. Seeing no need to intervene, he walked over to check on the stew that was cooking over the fire.

Niki recovered well from the drug and was rattling on to Kalina about her captivity and how she had been good in Melbin and how it wasn't her fault. Garth smiled broadly and announced that dinner was ready. Dinner was fairly quiet as the stew was ravenously devoured. After dinner Garth lit his pipe and the questions started about what they should expect when they arrived in Alcea.

“I am not really sure,” Garth admitted. “It has been years since I was there. The information that I am getting leads me to believe that things have gotten progressively worse. King Byron was assassinated and Queen Marta fled the city. I do not know who rules it now. There has been a power struggle in Alcea since the time of the Collapse. Many refuse to accept Alcea as their new country. They prefer to call the city Tagaret, which was its name when Targa still existed. I think many would prefer to resurrect Targa to its former greatness. They, of course, would not be the ones whose blood was shed doing it.”

“You mentioned patriots in prison,” Tanya stated while checking Kalina’s reaction to her acknowledgment that Garth had spoken to her. “Who are they and why are they important to Alcea?”

“I do not know the full scope of the problems in Alcea,” Garth declared. “One of those who is captive is General Gregor. He was the General at the time of the Collapse and supported the move to rename the Kingdom to Alcea. He was the strongest supporter of King Byron and I suspect his imprisonment was meant to keep him out of the way while the King was killed. They probably are now afraid to release him because he would be steadfast in bringing to justice whoever killed the King.”

“This power game that they are playing . . .” quizzed Arik, “wouldn’t one of them point out who had the King killed? I mean . . . wouldn’t it be to someone’s advantage to reveal the killer?”

“It would, indeed,” Garth agreed. “The problem is that it would be to so much advantage that everyone is probably claiming it was everyone else. The name that they have given to their petty scrambling is the Contest of Power, and they do see it as a game. Alcea, like Targa before it, has a Council of Advisors who meet with the King to determine what must be done for the Kingdom. I have heard that this Council has somehow made their powers equal to the King’s and I would suspect that most of our Contest players have a seat on it. Actually, I should say that the Council members are probably big players in the Contest. There are probably twenty Contest Players for each seat on the Council.”

“So they would not have to replace the King to rule,” summed Arik. “They would just need the agreement of a majority of this Council.”

“Exactly,” Garth agreed. “Someday we will have to face this Council, but that is not for this trip. I mean to get General Gregor out of prison and possibly find the Queen and get her to safety. The General may well be instrumental when the heir returns to Alcea.”

“The Queen may be the grandmother of one of us,” proclaimed Niki. “We have to see to it that she is safe. Do you know if she has red hair?”

“Is your face well known in Alcea?” asked Tanya.

Garth looked at the young woman as if seeing her for the first time. “I suppose it is to some people,” Garth answered. “Why do you ask?”

“It may be too dangerous for you to get General Gregor out of prison,” explained Arik. “This may be a job better suited to the younger Alcea Rangers.”

Garth looked at the young faces around the campfire and groaned. Certain that he had created a monster, he voiced his objection. “Look,” he said authoritatively, “you all did a great job in Melbin and I’m proud of the way you handled yourselves, but you can not just go throwing yourselves into danger at every opportunity. There are people in Alcea who will recognize me, but that is something I can deal

with. There were people in Melbin who knew me and hunted me. That didn't stop me from doing what I went there for."

"What did you do with Hanjel?" Tedi asked.

Everyone must have seen Garth's mouth drop open because they all started laughing, even Kalina. Garth quickly shut his mouth and began to speak, but Arik cut him off.

"We know that Kalina and you are trying to protect us and train us at the same time," Arik began. "That is not an easy task, but hear us out. We are not trying to step mindlessly into danger, nor are we trying to keep you out of it. We are doing what you have taught us and what you are not doing yourself. We are approaching the problem considering all of the assets available to us. We are asking you to do the same. You may look at us like children, but we are the ones the Prophecy talks about and it is our responsibility to do what is necessary."

"We are not trying to revolt or chase you away," added Tanya. "In fact, we realize now, more than ever, how much we need you. Just try using us as fellow soldiers and not precious artifacts that need to be preserved."

The silence lasted for several moments before Garth spoke. "It has been many years since any of my men gave me a dressing-down," he chuckled. "This one has been well deserved. I think some of your particular talents may well prove to be useful."

"Do you mean like Lord Wason going before the Council to seek better relations with Targa?" Fredrik asked.

"Or someone with lock-picking ability getting thrown into the dungeon?" added Tedi.

"A magical diversion," suggested Fredrik.

"Or better, a beautiful diversion," Tanya chuckled as she threw her long blond hair over her shoulder.

"I like them all," laughed Garth and noticed that Kalina was laughing so hard, she was doubled over.

Niki pouted about not having anything to offer to their grand plan and left the campfire. Nobody took special notice of her leaving. Garth instructed Fredrik to spend some time with Kalina for magic tutoring and then he challenged Arik, Tedi, and Tanya to try him with their practice swords. The three warriors readily agreed and raced to the open area to get their wooden swords.

The three young warriors proved that they could work as a team and Garth got a decent workout from them. He was tempted to protest when Tanya got his legs wrapped up with the bola, but realized that practice was best when it came close to simulating the real world. Instead, he spread his legs as far apart as the bola would allow, and swung his sword to sever the cord. Tanya let out a yelp when she saw that her bola would have been sliced into pieces if Garth had more than a wooden sword, but Garth did not give her time to cry. He threw his body to the ground and quickly rolled into her and Arik, knocking them to the ground. Garth was up again quickly enough to fend off Tedi, who had leaped over the two bodies. Eventually, the cord around his legs did Garth in and the three young warriors converged on him for the kill.

"I'd like to replay that with a real sword," chuckled Garth.

“What made you think of cutting it?” Tanya asked. “If you had a real sword, the bola wouldn’t have even slowed you down.”

“I don’t know that it is something I can teach you,” Garth answered. “You train your body to react to threats. With enough practice, you do things by instinct. I don’t know what instinct would make me react to a weapon, which I have never faced, but it did. The only advice I can give you in this area is to keep practicing. Even after you are the best there is, keep practicing.”

The warriors returned to the campfire discussing different portions of the practice and sat down to cups of coffee. They were discussing plans for Alcea when Kalina and Fredrik returned to join them. They discussed contingency plan after contingency plan until sleep started to overtake them and one by one they drifted off to their blankets.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 19

Tagaret

Niki was in despair. Arik spent all of his time with Tanya, Fredrik hung on Kalina’s every word, and Tedi spent his time alone. Garth didn’t even know she existed. Niki was used to being the center of attraction, but ever since everyone else had such a grand time rescuing her in Melbin, nobody paid any attention to her anymore. She vowed that Tagaret would be different. She would find some way to make them pay attention to her again. Perhaps she would rescue this prisoner who everyone thought was so important. She would use her magic skills to break open the dungeon walls or freeze the guards and just walk in. She would do something grand.

Niki woke out of her musings when everyone started talking excitedly. She looked up and the city of Tagaret, or Alcea, whatever people were calling it, was spread out in the distance. It looked much larger than either Melbin or Trekum. There appeared to be at least three walls. The first wall must have been miles long and it appeared fairly new. Far beyond that, she could just make out a smaller wall, which was probably the size of Melbin’s. Yet up on a hill in the center of the city, she could see a third wall surrounding a large castle which must be the Royal Palace. Her despair gave way to excitement. Even if she could not rescue this General, there must be people in a city this large that would accept her as their Queen. Niki definitely began to get a good feeling about Tagaret.

“The arrangement we had in Melbin worked fairly well,” Garth said. “Kalina and I will stay at the Sword and Shield. Fredrik, Arik, and Tedi at the Palace Shadow. Tanya and Niki will use the Golden Sword. Remember, if anyone needs to get a message to the others, go to the Pawn Shop and ask for a book about growing turnips in a sandy soil. Leave your message in whatever book the clerk gives you. The message will be delivered.”

“What is this about turnips?” Niki asked.

Garth and Kalina exchanged glances. Kalina had noticed the way Niki was acting and believed it was a left over effect of the drug that was used on her in Melbin. “Tanya will explain it to you,” Garth answered.

As they got closer to the outer wall, Garth reached into his pack and extracted a gray hat, which he placed on his head and lowered it to conceal his face as much as possible. Next he extracted a gray cloak and fastened it around his neck. The simple disguise could not hide Garth if you were looking for him, but it changed his appearance enough to think him a stranger if you were passing him on the street.

“Fredrik,” Garth said suddenly, “you need to replenish your wardrobe at the first opportunity. One fancy suit will not go far in convincing people that you are a Lord. If you know the colors of Cidal, get Arik and Tedi appropriate clothes in those colors or have some made up. These people may be fools in some respects, but in others, do not underestimate them. If you run into anyone from Grecho’s company, you may be in trouble.”

“We will be all right,” supplied Arik.

The conversation ceased as they approached the gate through the outer wall. Garth’s eyes roamed everywhere. The guards on the gate wore standard Targa uniforms and they were very young. People roamed the streets with a casual attitude and there didn’t appear to be any omen of distress hanging over the city. Fredrik, Arik, and Tedi picked up their pace and put distance between themselves and Garth, while Tanya and Niki lagged behind. They were three separate groups traveling who just happened to have entered the city at the same time. Nobody would give it a serious thought.

The city had grown tremendously since Garth was here last. The outer wall did not exist then and most of the buildings between the two walls were new. Garth had seen similar things all over the continent. People were abandoning their farms and land and moving to the cities for protection. The bandits had become brazen and well organized and a single farmstead was too tempting for them to leave it alone for long. In normal times the results would have been disastrous because the farm output would drop precariously, but these were not normal times. The constant lack of sunlight since the Collapse had already destroyed most farming. Cows, pigs, and horses were now raised in cramped quarters close to the cities. Smaller animals were even raised in people’s yards.

Garth saw the three boys far ahead as he and Kalina turned down an intersecting street. The Palace Shadow that the boys were going to was probably the fanciest inn in the city and was next to the Royal Palace. Garth and Kalina would be staying in much more modest accommodations, with Tanya and Niki somewhere in between. The Golden Sword was not far from the Sword and Shield and the girls followed Garth’s turn.

Garth passed the Golden Sword and continued on a short distance to the Sword and Shield. After they dismounted, Garth told the stableboy he would be staying if there were rooms available. The young boy took the reins and nodded. Garth and Kalina entered through the back door, which led to a hallway instead of the common room like many other inns. Garth gazed down the hallway to the small counter where the innkeeper normally stood. A young man he did not recognize looked back at him. Garth signaled that the man should come to him and he did.

“Can I help you, Sir?” the young innkeeper asked.

“You are very young for an innkeeper,” Garth commented.

“Inheritance, Sir,” the innkeeper replied without emotion. “What can I do for you?”

“We require a room with a view out the front,” Garth answered.

“Sorry, Sir,” came the quick reply, “our rooms are mostly long term and the front ones are already occupied. May I have your name for the ledger, Sir?”

“Kyle Agrat,” Garth replied.

“Thank you, Sir,” the innkeeper said as he headed for the stairs. “If you follow me, I will show you to your room. My name is John and I will do whatever I can to make your stay more comfortable.”

John marched up two flights of stairs and opened the door to a room and promptly left. Garth and Kalina walked in and put their packs down. Kalina walked to the window and looked down at the street below. Garth gently took her arm and pulled her away from the window.

“This room is in the front,” Kalina said. “He said he didn’t have any front rooms.”

“They will always say that unless your name is Agrat,” Garth chuckled. “I wasn’t sure that this place was still run by the Spiders or not because I didn’t recognize any of the young faces.”

The Spiders were a secret spy organization for Targa before the Collapse. It was set up by Prince Oscar Dalek and General Gregor, who was a Colonel at the time, to gather information on the Black Devils. It was so secret that even King Eugene did not know it existed. Within moments of their arrival the door opened to admit a man and closed again.

“You old renegade!” the newcomer greeted as he walked over and embraced Garth and then embraced Kalina. “And you brought your lovely woman to embarrass the rest of the city ladies, too.”

“Some things never change and you, Larc, are one of them,” Kalina smiled. “We have missed friends like you.”

“You have been missed, too,” Larc sighed as he sat on the floor. Larc never sat above floor level in any of the front rooms since before the Collapse.

Garth and Kalina followed his example and ignored the chairs in the room. “Tell us what has changed, Larc,” Garth requested.

“Too many things have changed,” Larc let out. “I assume that you heard about King Byron and Queen Marta or you would not be here. The Contest of Power grows stronger every year. Assassination of Council members is the new fad and someone decided it was time to include the King in the list. We got Queen Marta out in time.”

“Where is she?” Garth asked.

“I don’t know,” Larc admitted. “You know how the Spiders work. I handed her off to a contact outside the city. He handed her off to another who was known to him, and so on. The only way to find her is to repeat the process and every one of those contacts would have to agree. The chance of one of them breaking is slim, two never.”

“Well, at least she is safe,” Kalina said.

“As safe as can be,” Larc stated. “The Council several years ago started this mess. King Byron was ill and the Council ruled in his place for several months. During that time they managed to change some of the laws that restricted their power and as a result they eliminated the King’s influence over the

country. I don't need to tell you that Alcea is a dead issue. They passed a proclamation that the official name of the country is Targa and the city is Tagaret. They have dreams of reestablishing the Kingdom of Targa in its entirety and the only thing that stops them is each other. As soon as one group gains prominence, another group cuts them down. We can't even keep track of who is in what group any more because they change their affiliations quicker than they change their clothes."

"Why does the Army stand for it?" Garth asked.

"The Army is a joke," Larc grimaced. "The Rangers were the first to be eliminated. They were folded into the regular Army by Council decree. Most of them would not accept it and quit. A year later, they did the same thing to the Red Swords. A lot of them accepted the change, but many others did not. Since that time, however, even the ones who accepted it have retired or quit. The Army is full of youngsters now."

Garth nodded as it confirmed his suspicions. "What happened to the leaders of the Rangers and the Red Swords?"

"Mitar Vidson and David Jaynes," Larc stated. "Why do you want to know?"

"You think you are a sly one, Larc," Garth laughed, "but you just told me that they joined the Spiders. I would like to talk with them. Their help is going to be needed."

"So you know about General Gregor, then," Larc said. "I will not let you talk those two men into committing suicide. I know they will gladly sacrifice their lives to free the General, but they are too good to lose."

"I do not want them to free the General," Garth stated. "I will do that with my own men. I want to talk with them about the heir."

"Your own men!" Larc exclaimed. "You have come up in the world. I can send any word about the heir to them, if it is important enough."

"Do not be stubborn with me, Larc," Garth said gruffly. "I have possession of the Prophecy Children."

Larc stared at Garth like he had grown wings. "How long have you had them?" Larc asked. "Do you have both of them? I should have known by now if you have had them for any time at all. Are you positive?"

"I have never seen you flustered before," Garth laughed. Turning more serious, Garth continued, "You are not the only one who can keep secrets, but you will keep this one until I give you leave otherwise. I mean it, Larc. One word and I'll cut your organization apart man by man."

"You haven't answered my questions," Larc reminded Garth.

"One, for sure," Garth said. "Almost positive that we have two. I have had them for a couple of months."

Larc was shocked and showed it. "It's true, then," Larc finally got out. "Nobody really believed in the Ancient Prophecy. Everyone thought it was just some talk so everyone would have something to hope for. I see why you want to talk with Mitar and David, then. Their help will be necessary to restore

the Rangers and the Red Swords. The General must be freed as well. What did you mean about your men? You have always been a loner.”

“I have formed the Alcea Rangers,” Garth answered. “We are small, but we will succeed where larger forces would fail.”

“I will arrange for Mitar and David to be here this evening,” Larc capitulated. “If you need anything in the way of support, you have only to ask for it.”

“Thank you, Larc,” Garth appreciated. “You should know what I will be asking them to do so you can spare them their other duties. The heir is not proclaiming himself now. He needs more training before that can be accomplished. I will be asking David and Mitar to find the locations of their loyal members who have either left or remained. The Rangers and the Red Swords will not be reactivated now, but someone must lay the plans for doing exactly that.”

“They will have my full support,” Larc promised.

The tailor gathered his belongings and bowed as he left the room. Once the door was closed, Fredrik remarked, “I could learn to like this style of living. I have never seen an inn as plush as this one.”

“Don’t get too used to it,” Tedi taunted. “We are not very far from the Targa dungeons and we could end up in them yet.”

“I think the tailoring took more than enough time for the word of our arrival to spread,” Arik announced. “Let’s go down to the dining room and have Lord Wason show himself off.”

Fredrik preened himself in front of the mirror, making sure his new, blue silk suit was not wrinkled or in disarray. Arik in his brown and gray breeches, white frilled shirt and brown leather vest waited at the door, as the Lord’s bodyguard should, his hand on the hilt of his sword. Tedi was attired as a servant with brown and gray breeches and shirt. Fredrik gathered up his straight, wooden walking stick, which was delicately carved with seashore scenes and topped with a small gold knob and walked out the door. Arik stepped quickly to stay on Fredrik’s heels and Tedi followed a distance behind.

As they stepped into the dining room, dozens of eyes turned their way. Fredrik asked for a table in the corner as Kalina had instructed him. Not being in full view of everyone would ensure that people’s curiosity about who was seeing the newcomer would be kept high. Fredrik sat fully in the corner with Arik on one side and Tedi on the other. A waiter came to take the order and Fredrik suddenly felt ill prepared. He had never eaten in so fine an establishment and the wrong choice of food could show him as an impostor.

Fredrik laid the menu back on the table without looking at it. “What is the best meal that is available in Tagaret?” Fredrik asked the waiter.

“With out a doubt,” the waiter happily replied, “it would be the Land and Sand offered only here at the Palace Shadow, My Lord.”

“Very well,” Fredrik smiled, “Bring us three of the Land and Sand and I shall tell you if your food withstands the standards of Cidal. And bring a bottle of your finest wine, as well.” Fredrik immediately turned his head to observe the room, pointedly ignoring the waiter as if he no longer existed.

The waiter gave a short bow and disappeared. "I hope I can stomach what you just ordered," whispered Tedi. "We don't even know what it is."

"It will not matter," Fredrik answered. "It will be finer than anything you have ever eaten, I am sure."

The stares continued as the waiter returned with a bottle of wine. Right behind him were three more waiters carrying large trays of food. They served Fredrik first and then Arik. By the time it came to Tedi there was almost not enough room for the plates of food. The Land and Sand consisted of a large lobster tail, scallops, shrimp, oysters, and a large portion of beef. Tedi thought his meal could probably last him for three days. Still, as he started devouring it, he had to admit that it was the best seafood he had ever eaten, and that was coming from a fisherman. He had never seen a portion of beef that was so large and yet so tender.

The boys deliberately ate slowly, expecting people to come over and introduce themselves, but no one came. Eventually, they were finished and the waiters came to take the plates away. As soon as the waiters disappeared, the first caller came. Fredrik looked past him and could see everyone jockeying for position and almost laughed. He had thought no one was coming but they were waiting impatiently for him to finish his dinner. Some of them must be furious by now.

The gentleman who was bold enough to come first was quite distinguished looking. He was dressed in a brown version of Fredrik's suit, but also sported gold bracelets and a gold necklace. He was probably three times as old as Fredrik with well-groomed gray hair and mustache.

"Welcome to Tagaret, capital of Targa, Lord Wason," he greeted. "I am Duke Everich, King's Advisor and head of the Council of Advisors."

Fredrik rose and extended his hand for the formal shake he had been informed was customary in Targa. Arik and Tedi rose and bowed. The Duke shook Fredrik's hand and seated himself. He kept looking at Tedi as if there was something wrong with him. When everyone sat back down, the Duke sighed and Fredrik knew he had just committed some small mistake in protocol.

"Duke Everich," Fredrik began, "I am pleased and honored by my reception to Tagaret. Forgive me for retaining my men. One, I dare not let out of my sight. The other refuses to let me out of his."

"Ah, that explains a lot, Lord Wason," the Duke declared. "I was not sure whether it was Cidal customs that dictated eating with your servant. I thought perhaps you were not made aware that there is a servant's dining room, as well."

"I am afraid it is a discipline problem, Duke Everich," Fredrik stated, glad that he had guessed the source of irritation to the Duke. "I fear that I came with only one servant and one bodyguard. Now I cannot spare my bodyguard to watch the servant and I cannot afford to get rid of the servant. Foolish on my part."

"You are young yet," the Duke chuckled. "You have learned a valuable lesson. I must say that hearing of you here has piqued my curiosity. What is it that brings you so far from home?"

"I have come to seek audience with your King," Fredrik declared. "My advisor, Captain Grecho of the Cidal Mercenary Company, believes it is time to seek alliances."

"Your advisor rules a mercenary company?" asked Duke Everich.

“Yes,” answered Fredrik, “the Company is loyal to the Lord of the Manor and serves as the Army of Cidal. It is useful for them to earn currency and experience in the service of others when there is no pressing need at home. I am surprised that you have not heard of them.”

“Oh, I have heard of them, my Lord Wason,” the Duke replied as Fredrik cringed. “I have used their services before. I am just surprised that their allegiance has been kept secret.”

“It has not been a secret,” lied Fredrik. “It is just not something that needs to be disclosed to every contract holder. If there was a conflict because of it, you can be assured that Captain Grecho would disclose it.”

“Of course,” nodded the Duke. “In any event, you are too late to speak with the King, I’m afraid. King Byron is dead.”

“My condolences,” offered Fredrik. “I do hope it wasn’t sudden. Has his heir been crowned yet?”

“Alas,” frowned Duke Everich, “King Byron had no known heir. The Council of Advisors rule Targa. I can guess what Cidal has to offer to an alliance, but what does it wish from Targa, my young Lord?”

“A common border, King’s Advisor,” Fredrik calmly stated.

A look of shock fell over the Duke’s face. There was an awful lot of territory between Targa and Cidal. If they were to have a common border, quite a few countries or cities would have to fall. The young Lord would have to be either a fool or have access to an army larger than a mercenary company. Either way, he would be very useful or very dangerous, perhaps both.

“I think we should speak more of this before I present it to the Council,” Duke Everich said. “Perhaps you would accompany me to the Royal Palace?”

“It would be a pleasure, Duke Everich,” Lord Wason replied.

Everyone rose and left the dining room, much to the chagrin of the other nobles waiting to interrogate the newcomer. The walk from the Palace Shadow to the Royal Palace was short. Fredrik was amazed at the sheer size of the Palace and had trouble remembering the path so he could retrace his steps if necessary.

Duke Everich showed them into a room that looked like a study. He again frowned as the two Cidal underlings followed Fredrik into the room. Fredrik seized the opportunity before it passed.

“Duke Everich,” Fredrik inquired, “I do not particularly want my fellow countrymen involved in this conversation. I would post my bodyguard outside the door, but not with the servant to look after. I wonder if I might indulge myself of your good graces and store my servant in your dungeon until I am ready to leave?”

“An excellent idea,” laughed the Duke. “I can arrange for some punishment while he is there if you desire.”

“That will not be necessary,” chuckled Lord Wason. “If you could just issue authorization for my man to deposit and collect him, that would be sufficient.”

The Duke scribbled an authorization and handed it to Arik. "I will have one of my men show him the way," offered the Duke.

Lord Wason leaned close to the Duke's ear and whispered, "Don't bother. Let him find it on his own."

After being dismissed, Arik gently shoved Tedi out the door and closed it. Looking at the authorization, Arik gave a smile and proceeded down the stairs he knew led to the dungeon. Garth had spent some hours trying to detail the inside of the castle to Tedi and himself and Arik felt like he had been there before.

They reached the dungeon quickly and showed the authorization to the outside guard. Without a blink he opened the door to the dungeon and let them in. Inside the dungeon were two more guards seated at a table. They looked up as soon as the door opened and watched as Tedi and Arik approached. Arik walked past Tedi to give the authorization to one of the guards and was reproached for letting his back to a prisoner.

"He is not a prisoner," Arik stated. "He is just a troublesome servant that needs to be kept out of my hair for a while. You need not even trouble yourself with getting up. I will shove him in a cell."

"Nobody goes into the cell block without one of us," the guard stated as he rose. "Servant or prisoner, he gets the same from me either way."

Arik began to fear that Tedi would be searched. Without his tools, this whole charade would be wasted and possibly worse if they found the lock picks Tedi had on him. The guard pointed the way and followed them into the cellblock. Arik's heart dropped when he saw no other prisoners in the cells.

Arik stopped and turned to the guard. "Is there a cell with a neighbor?" Arik asked. "This lout's snoring will add some punishment to the culprit's torment."

The guard laughed heartily and pointed Arik and Tedi towards another cellblock. "You have the makings of a Royal Tormentor, lad. The way you think makes me warm all over."

The guard let them walk down the corridor until they came to a cell next to another prisoner and ushered Tedi in and locked the door. The man in the cell next to Tedi looked too young to be the General.

The guard turned to Arik. "Now that we have your friend locked up," the guard laughed, "you'll come with me and answer some questions."

Arik's stomach turned as he looked at the massive guard with the wicked grin.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 20

Lady Wason

Tedi craned his neck in an attempt to see into the other cells in the block, but he was unable to see anyone other than the man in the next cell. Quietly, for a while, he pondered his options. He was supposed to talk with the General and arrange his escape, but if the man in the next cell was not Sergeant Trank, who was General Gregor's aide, he would call the jailers called down on him in a moment.

"What is your name?" Tedi hesitantly asked.

The man looked at him and pointedly ignored him. Tedi wasn't sure what the dungeon guards had up their sleeve with their last comment to Arik, but he didn't have a lot of time to deal with his neighbor's reluctance to talk.

"I had a cousin who looked a lot like you," Tedi probed. "People often told him that he looked like General Gregor's aide. Say, you wouldn't happen to be Sergeant Trank, would you?"

"You wouldn't even know anyone who had ever seen a General's aide," the neighbor sneered. "Why don't you do us both a favor and let me get some rest? Tell Duke Everich he will have to come up with a better scheme than sending you in here, so save your breath."

Tedi was taken back at the man's hostile attitude, but clearly the Duke wanted something from this man and, just as clearly, this man didn't want to give it. Tedi was going to get nowhere fast following his coy little approach.

"I don't know if you are Sergeant Trank or not," Tedi gambled, "but my gut instinct tells me that you are. I do not work for the Duke, but I do need to talk to the General. I was hoping that they would put me in the cell next to him."

The man's hostility seemed abated and Tedi bet his life on his next statement. "I was told to tell the General that I was sent by Garth Shado to affect his release."

The man stared at Tedi for the longest moment without speaking. After rolling something around in his mind, the man asked, "Who told you to say Garth Shado sent you?"

"Garth himself," Tedi answered. "He is a tall man, extremely well-built with long black hair in a tail. He called General Gregor his cousin and travels with a woman named Kalina. Does that satisfy you that I am telling the truth?"

"Not hardly," the man laughed. "This friend of his, Kalina, she has a special trick she likes to pull on new acquaintances. Surely, if you ever met her you would know of it. What is the trick?"

Tedi had no idea what the man was talking about. Kalina had done nothing that stood out as a welcoming trick. How would he be able to convince the man without knowing her trick? In desperation, he threw up his hands.

"How am I supposed to know anything about her tricks?" Tedi blurted out. "I don't know anything about magic and everything a witch does is a trick to me. What trick are you talking about?"

Oddly, the man smiled. "Witch is a very derogatory term," the man scolded. "I wouldn't be surprised if Kalina filled your sleeping bag with worms for that statement. How do you plan to get the General out of the Royal Palace? Just waltz him past the dungeon guards?"

“That is for me to discuss with the General,” stated Tedi. “You still haven’t told me who you are or where they are keeping the General.”

“You are a brave fool,” chuckled the man. “I see no harm in admitting that I am Sergeant Trank and that the General is in the last cell down. The Duke didn’t want me close enough to him to converse. You will have as poor luck in trying to talk with him as you have of getting him out of here, now that you are stuck being my neighbor.”

“We shall see about that,” boasted Tedi. “We plan on getting you out, as well. Let me know by whistling if you hear the guards coming.”

Tedi moved to the cell door and pulled his picks out of a pouch. The cell doors were not very hard to unlock and he finished it quickly. The real protection of the dungeon lay in the three guards. One would have to get past them and they normally searched their prisoners. Tedi, of course, was only a guest. Quickly and silently, he made his way along the corridor to the last cell. Looking into the cell he saw an old, but well fit, man with gray hair that was sitting on his bunk staring at him.

“General Gregor,” Tedi said quietly, Garth Shado sent me to get you out of here.” Even while he was talking, he was working the lock on the General’s door.

“Save your breath, son,” the General replied. “I have no doubt that you and Garth mean well, but I will not endanger Alcea soldiers to make my escape and that is the only way that I can think of to get past the guards.”

Tedi withdrew a tin of dye and a rag and handed it to the General. “We will not harm anyone in getting you and the Sergeant out,” Tedi promised. “Use this dye on your hair and don’t leave the cell. If the guards come to check on you, pretend you are sleeping and keep your head covered.”

Tedi moved quickly back to the Sergeant’s cell and picked the door lock before retreating back into his own cell. Tedi sat down on his bunk and tried to hide the fact that he was shaking with the fear of discovery.

The massive guard ordered Arik to sit at the small table where he and the other guard had been when Arik and Tedi entered the dungeon.

“Now,” the guard growled, “the Duke may think you are a Cidal Mercenary, but I surely don’t. I’ve drank with the Captain’s men and their uniforms don’t look like yours, especially that soft hat. Every mercenary who I know wears a helmet same as we do. You probably don’t even know the Captain’s name. What game are you up to, lad, and who are we holding as a guest in our cells?”

“Game?” Arik got out in an offended tone. “You think being a member of Lord’s Wason’s personal guard is a game? Don’t let my young looks fool you. Three others and I were chosen from the ranks of Captain Grecho’s company for the honor of serving Lord Wason. If I have to prove myself to a Targan dungeon guard, you can well believe that I am ready.”

The last was said with Arik’s hand on his sword hilt and the guard was taken aback. If Arik was who he said he was, the guard was not about to spill the blood of a Lord’s personal guard and, on second look, he realized the lad was finely fit to be wearing some uniform. He placed his firm hand on Arik’s shoulder. “Don’t get riled up, lad,” the guard said. “I’ve never heard of Lord Wason, but it is obvious that you do know Captain Grecho. You can’t blame me for being suspicious, that’s my job.”

“I’m sorry,” Arik replied as he felt the tension lessen. “I have had to train twice as hard as the rest of the men to prove myself because of my youthful appearance. I guess I am a little touchy about it. Lord Wason was the old sailor’s nephew. Lord Alrecht died recently and Lord Wason has a good rapport with Captain Grecho. When he asked for a personal guard, the Captain not only readily agreed, he held a contest to see who would be chosen. I am very proud of the soft hat, which I wear. It is a symbol of my expertise.”

Both guards looked at Arik in a new light and offered to share the last of their ale over stories of Cidal. Arik politely refused, telling the guards that his Lord was expecting him to take up position outside the Duke’s study. They nodded and let him out.

No sooner had Arik left when two women approached the Royal Palace via the small gate near the old Red Sword barracks. One wore the uniform of the Cidal Lord’s personal guard and the other was adorned with a long dress with large hoops. The dress was red as her hair and the soldiers all stared as she was allowed entry to the courtyard. The picnic basket she was carrying was promptly inspected and snickered at.

“You must understand,” the sentry was saying, “that the prisoner will not be allowed anything in the basket. The dungeon guards will confiscate it if you don’t leave it here.”

The Cidal mercenary chuckled at the sentry. “And your men won’t confiscate it while we are in the dungeon?” Taking the basket from Niki’s arm, she looped it over her own. “Just point the way,” Tanya continued. “I will see that the Lady and her basket survive the dungeon guards.”

The sentry tried to hide his smirk as he detailed the path that the two women were to travel. Tanya and Niki followed the sentry’s directions and approached the outside dungeon guard. He looked curiously as the two women approached, but held his tongue at the sight of the basket.

“We have come to speak with Tedi Markel, Lord Wason’s aide,” Tanya declared firmly.

“If you don’t mind, Tanya,” Niki offered eyeing the outside dungeon guard, “I would rather not enter the dungeon. Say what you have to say to the boy and then we can be gone from here. I am sure that this strong man will keep me safe until you return.”

“As you wish, My Lady,” Tanya answered respectfully and indicated her desire to enter the dungeon.

The guard banged on the door, never taking his eyes off the two women. Tanya’s sheath was without her sword and her quiver without arrows, but his training required him to treat her as a potential adversary and he did so. The dungeon door opened and upon seeing the visitors, the guard’s eyes widened. He seemed disappointed that only Tanya entered the dungeon, but after the door was closed, she found him inspecting her closely.

“You are one of the chosen four,” the guard exclaimed incredulously as he reached for the basket on Tanya’s arm.

“I am one of Lord Wason’s personal guards,” Tanya affirmed as she grabbed the guard’s thumb and put pressure on it to bring him to his knees. “I am assigned to Lady Wason and if you wish the basket, it would be polite to ask first.”

The other guard was laughing at his partner’s predicament and the guard on his knees was very

embarrassed. Tanya immediately let go of the guard's thumb and apologized. "I am sorry. I guess Arik already told you how hard it was on the two of us, being so young and all. I was out of line and apologize for my behavior."

She handed the guard the basket and he took it while rising to his feet and backed to the table to put it down.

"Lady Wason thinks that Tedi will get that," Tanya smiled. "I will tell her that he did. She would not understand security provisions in a prison. Help yourselves."

The seated guard hurriedly inspected the contents and his cries of excitement caught the embarrassed guard's attention. Still watching Tanya out of the corner of his eye, he peered into the basket to see the rich meats, cheese, fruit, and a bottle of expensive wine. Rubbing his thumb, he nodded the way to Tedi's cell and sat at the table to get his share of the basket before his partner cleaned it out.

Tanya smiled as she made her way to Tedi's cell. She lingered at the cell door for about five minutes and went back to check on the guards. One of them was sprawled on the floor and the other had his head lying on the table. She moved quickly to the dungeon door and pulled it open. Niki was standing over the outside guard who was propped up against the wall. Niki entered the dungeon quickly and raised her hoops. Tanya stripped two Cidal personal guard uniforms from Niki's body where they had been secured.

"That man was a leech," Niki complained. "I think he would have felt the uniforms if he had any more time. What took you so long?"

Tanya just pointed at the two large men sprawled at the table and hurried the uniforms to the General and Sergeant. Tedi sprang from his cell and hauled the prostrate guard into a chair and laid his head on the table like his partner. Tanya returned to the large room while the General and Sergeant donned their new uniforms. The two girls waited just long enough to see the two soldiers appear before they exited the dungeon with the empty picnic basket and returned towards the courtyard.

The Sergeant looked surprised at the two guards sprawled on the table and asked about the outside guard.

"These two should not have drank the wine," Tedi grinned. "They will wake up in an hour so we need to be well on our way. The outside guard got his mixture through Niki's ring. He may be out for even less time. Garth told us about the exit from the Palace that the servants used before the Collapse. He said it is still passable, but it has been unused for many years. I can lead you there. There will be two horses outside. You can use them to get out of the city. Go to the field where the Rangers waited to enter the city before King Eugene was unmasked and Garth will meet you there. I hope you understand, because it means nothing to me."

The General put his hand on Tedi's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "You will make a fine soldier someday," General Gregor stated. "You have the guts and determination already."

Tedi nodded at the General and smiled. "I already am, Sir," he replied proudly. "I am an Alcea Ranger. Let's get out of here."

The General grinned and shook his head as he followed Tedi out of the dungeon with his Sergeant close behind. Tedi led them through the corridors of the Royal Palace as if he had spent time there before. If anyone saw them at a distance, it would look like a foreign servant and his two unarmed

foreign escorts. It was Tedi's job to make sure that no one got a close look.

They made it without incident to the half collapsed corridor that led to the old servants' entrance. Only two servants had seen them at a distance and they paid no particular interest to the foreign men. The corridor was barely passable in spots and the going was slow, as they had to climb over portions of crumbled walls. When they reached the end of the corridor, the door was jammed tight. Tedi almost panicked as he put his shoulder to the door and it refused to budge.

The Sergeant chuckled politely and tapped the pouch that Tedi held his picks in. "It's locked, Ranger," he prompted. "Work some of the skills from your misspent youth."

Tedi swore as he extracted his picks and went to work on the door lock. They had already exhausted too much time getting out of the dungeon and Fredrik should be done with his meeting soon. Even if the guards did not wake up for an hour, somebody could discover them at any time. The door unlocked was still hard to open, but Tedi cracked it enough to peer outside. There was more debris from the Collapse past the door, which had never been cleaned up, and Tedi soon realized why Garth chose this doorway. They were able to make it easily across the unoccupied courtyard to a small gate in the wall. The gate was locked only with a beam laid in metal braces, which was easily removed, and the three escapees stepped into a street where two horses were tied to a tree.

The few passersby looked oddly at them for using a gateway, which had not been used in years, but the tethered horses and foreign uniforms on the men, with the apparent lack of weapons, caused them to go about their business. Tedi saw the two military men mount their horses and then turned to walk the short distance to the Palace Shadow.

Fredrik led Duke Everich into a prolonged discussion of how the two countries might be of benefit to each other. The Duke seemed to be uninterested in most of the conversation with the exception of the Cidal Mercenary Company, but he was patient enough to let Fredrik rave about the great nation he was going to carve out of old Sordoa. The Duke probably thought Fredrik a young fool, but was trying to find some angle to get control of the mercenaries for his own benefit. Fredrik was sure that the Duke would use the mercenaries in some grand scheme of the Contest of Power.

It suddenly dawned on Fredrik why the Duke was being so patient. As long as Lord Wason was tied up in his study, the other players in the Contest could not talk to him. Even the length of time spent with Lord Wason would probably be used to some advantage. Fredrik was mulling over these thoughts when he heard the bump of something against the door. That was Arik's signal that the escape was underway. Arik had hidden where he could observe Tedi's group leaving and shadowed behind them to make sure they got off all right. The signal meant it was time to flee.

"Well," Fredrik began, "I think this talk has given me much to think about, Duke Everich. I would like to meet with some of the other Council members tomorrow if you can arrange it, but I must be going now. I am afraid that as good as the Palace Shadow is, I did not sleep as well as I would have in my own bed."

Duke Everich snapped his head up as if he had just heard Fredrik speak for the first time. "I could arrange for quarters here in the Palace if you wish," he offered. "The other members of the Council have very busy schedules and I may not be able to arrange your meetings for a few days."

"That is unfortunate," Lord Wason declared. "I must start my journey back home tomorrow at the latest and the Palace Shadow will do for one more night. Perhaps there will be time for another meeting

with you before I go. We can continue our plans by courier if that is not possible.”

“A pity,” grinned the Duke. “Well, I should send a guard down for your man to spare your bodyguard the trip while I see you out.”

Fredrik showed no sign of panic as he replied. “That won’t be necessary, Duke Everich. If you don’t mind, I will leave him there overnight. Perhaps he will be more understanding in the morning. I can easily find my own way out of the Palace while you check with the other Council members about their schedules for tomorrow.”

The Duke merely nodded, lost in thought, as Fredrik opened the door and stepped into the corridor where Arik was waiting. As quickly as they could, without appearing to be in a hurry, Fredrik and Arik made their way out of the Palace to the Palace Shadow where they met with Tedi and all checked out with great haste. Within minutes of each other, the three groups of Alcea Rangers started their journey out of the city towards the field where General Gregor and Sergeant Trank awaited them.

Garth, Kalina, Niki, and Tanya were waiting for Fredrik, Tedi and Arik a short way from the city and the group reformed into one. The field where the General waited was not far away from the city, but it was between the main road westward and the main road northward, which placed it in the forest where few would go. The General and the Sergeant were already talking with Mitar Vidson, head of the Targa Rangers, and David Jaynes, head of the Red Swords of Targa, when the Alcea Rangers arrived.

Garth introduced everybody and sat by the campfire as the rest of the group joined him. “General,” Garth began, “I am sure that your old friends have brought you up to date on why we are all here. I believe that you have met most of the Alcea Rangers already today. We will be leaving in the morning, but you four will have much to do before we return.”

“I must not have been told everything,” the General prodded. “Why have you formed the Alcea Rangers? Where are you going? When and why are you coming back and what is it you expect us to do?”

“Many questions,” mused Garth. “Still, you have the right to know what you are getting yourself into. First, I must ask a harsh question. Is your Sergeant Trank trustworthy?”

“I have staked my life on it in the past,” the General declared, “and I have not regretted it. You may speak of anything in his presence that you wish to speak to me about.”

“Very well,” Garth continued. “You four must prepare for the rising of Alcea which will occur when next you see us. Targa’s Army is young, weak, and untrained and, yet, a tremendous army will be coming to crush us. You must round up the remnants of the Red Swords and the Targa Rangers and get them ready for battle and you must do it covertly. No one is to know that you are forming this army. Let our enemies believe that Targa is ill-prepared to fend off their attack.”

The General looked around the campfire examining the faces before him. He understood the reference to Alcea rising because he had heard of the Prophecy and had been told to prepare for it or train a successor to prepare for it. What he did not understand was the great army that would be descending on Alcea. Nobody had mentioned that before.

“You lead me to believe that I should be kneeling before one of your Rangers,” the General stated. “May I know which one?”

“Not until I do,” Garth stated. “We know the Prophecy has begun, but little more. When I return, it will be with your King.”

“I will accept you at your word,” General Gregor acceded. “What is this talk of a great army descending on Alcea? This was never mentioned before in conjunction with the Prophecy.”

“The Dark One will soon know that the Prophecy has begun,” Garth explained. “If my plans go well, he will be unable to find us. His only recourse will be to eradicate Alcea to see that it never rises again. He has many under his control and he will not hesitate to use every last one of them. If he attacked Targa today, do you think your Army would stand any chance at all?”

“No,” conceded the General. “And if Targa gets wind of the building army, the battle will begin before the first of the Dark One’s minions even get close. I understand the urgency now, but you must buy us time. Many of those we will recruit are past their prime years. They can still fight, but they will make better officers and trainers for whatever young we can induct.”

“We will buy you whatever time we can,” Garth responded, “but every day we delay increases the risk to our party. Make haste with your efforts, General.”

Duke Everich was enraged with his Sergeant’s report. General Gregor and Sergeant Trank had disappeared from sight. His dungeon guard had been dealt with by children from all accounts, children! He picked up the paperweight from his desk and hurled across the room.

“I want those three guards hung in the morning,” the Duke screamed. “And I want it done in full public view with the entire Palace guard in audience. I want those children found and brought to me, all five of them. Now get out!”

Duke Everich’s words echoed through his head. There were five children running around his Palace as if they owned it. His face turned red at the thought of him falling for the child’s story about being a Lord. It was obviously a ruse to gain them access to the dungeon to free the General, but why? He was sure the three whom he had seen were not Targan. They were as Sordoan as any he had met. Why would Sordoan children want to free the General of Targa’s Army? Or should that be Alcea’s Army?

Unbelievable as it was, Duke Everich knew it was something that had to be reported immediately, but it had to be reported in such a fashion that his Master would not realize that the Duke had been tricked himself. He wasn’t about to lose his rank because of one slip. There would always be someone else he could blame.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 21

Elves

The seven Alcea Rangers left the campsite at first light and headed northwest as the Sword of Heavens demanded. Garth had spent most of the night speaking with General Gregor and his three men,

but showed little signs of fatigue. Niki had raved for an hour about her major role in the plot to free the General and Garth caught Tanya's wink during the dissertation. Tanya revealed that Niki talked in her sleep and that the redhead had been feeling mischievous about not having a major role to play. Garth changed the plan for the escape to include Niki's participation and Tanya had built up the importance of the role. Niki had been so wrapped up in her own importance that she seemed unaware of the efforts the others put into the plan. That Fredrik had found a way to get into the Palace or that Arik had found a way to signal Tanya that the time to approach the Palace had arrived seemed of little importance to Niki. Most of the Rangers left the campfire during her boasting, but she did not seem to notice. She had continued to retell her tale to the four captive Targans.

When the forest path widened slightly, Garth dropped out of the lead and signaled to Tedi to take over. Garth brought his black stallion alongside Kalina's white mare and talked softly to Kalina. "How sure are you that the cloak she wears was Aurora's?" he asked.

Kalina looked over at her mate with a wry grin. "Positive," she answered. "There has been only one Empress of Sordoa and the symbol on the cloak is the one Aurora chose for the position. Also, the burn marks are magical in nature, but the most telling of all is the stitching of Aurora's name on the inside of the hem. I doubt that Niki has ever noticed it, or if she did, the name meant nothing to her. It was a good idea of yours for me to check it out while they were inside the Royal Palace. Why are you so concerned about it?"

"It is not the cloak that I am really concerned about," confessed Garth. "It is Niki that I am concerned about. She is so childish and unpredictable. It is hard for me to picture her wielding the Sword of Heavens against Sarac. Right now, she cannot even hold the Sword, never mind use it. So much depends on our ability to control the Children that I worry about Niki being uncontrollable."

"Garth, you worry about things that you cannot change," smiled Kalina. "We do not get to choose the Prophecy Children. We can only work with whom the Prophecy has delivered."

"That may be easy for you to accept," Garth returned, "but a warrior must make plans for all contingencies. Have you tried asking her where she got the cloak?"

"Several times," sighed Kalina. "She always reacts the same, as if I am trying to steal it from her. She insists that it is hers and refuses to discuss it further."

"Well, at least Tedi is controllable," Garth said changing the subject. "You are fairly certain that he is the heir?"

"I am positive that the necklace belonged to either Prince Oscar or Princess Callie," Kalina corrected. "As with Niki, he refuses to discuss it except to insist that it was his mother's. It seems unbelievable that Princess Callie ended up married to a fisherman in Lorgo, though. That would mean Prince Oscar died and we know from the General that he survived the Collapse."

"Not necessarily," Garth interjected. "General Gregor said that Prince Oscar was last known to be searching for Princess Callie. Maybe he never found her and she somehow survived the sinking of the Princess Lydia. Maybe this fisherman rescued her and married her."

"It is as plausible as any other story," mused Kalina. "Certainly, the Children do not know the truth themselves. Tedi's description of his mother does not make her sound like Princess Callie, but I am sure about the necklace."

“Well, perhaps it was the child who was rescued by the fisherman, then,” continued Garth. “I guess there is no real way of knowing. You are right. We will just have to accept what the Prophecy has given us and go from there.”

Arik whistled softly and caught Garth’s attention. Garth dropped back to Arik’s position to see what was troubling him.

“We are being followed,” Arik said nervously. “I can’t see anyone, but I know they are there.”

“Elves,” Garth simply stated. “You have done well noticing them. They are known for their silence in the forest. We are traveling a line that cuts between the Kingdom of Klandon and Elderal, Land of the Elves. They should not bother us if we continue traveling in this direction; still, you shall keep a close watch and let me know of any changes.”

Garth rode to the front of the procession and came in alongside Tedi. Tedi looked over at him quickly and returned his eyes to the path ahead.

“So, you have heard them, too,” Tedi stated. “They seem to be curious more than threatening. I just wish that I could get a glimpse of them so I would know what they are.”

“They are elves,” declared Garth. “We travel the edge of their homeland. They should not bother us if we do not stray to the right of the path. The left side of the path is the Kingdom of Klandon, but their patrols seldom come out this far. If you have to diverge from the path, choose the left side.”

Tedi’s eyes opened wide in amazement, but they never left the path ahead except for quick darts to either side. Garth dropped back behind Tedi and rode in silence. His mind wandered from pride at the incredible level of skills most of the Children had obtained to the dismal feeling he got when he thought of Niki as Sarac’s descendant. As far as Garth was concerned, Niki was a child in a woman’s body. Before he was aware of the passing of time, Tedi had led the group into a clearing on the left side of the trail to camp for the night.

The Rangers quickly divided up the chores required to get the campsite set up. Garth volunteered to hunt so that the rest of the group could practice. Spring was already turning into summer, yet the forest felt cool. He remembered a time when the cool of these woods would have been a welcome relief at this time of year, but those memories were not recent. Of course, there were no elves nearby then and they were the reason Garth volunteered to do the hunting. He told the boys that the elves would not bother them, but he wasn’t too sure of that himself.

Garth was dressed in his blacksuit and the darkening hour brought little light into the forest. Quietly, he moved away from the camp and deeper into the forest on the left side of the trail. After moving about a mile along the parallel of the trail he turned and crossed over the path into Elderal. He quietly plunged deeper into the woods, moving away from the trail and then doubling back towards the direction the Rangers originally came from. When he felt he had gone about a mile, he turned towards the trail again and crept forward.

Slowly and silently, Garth made his way towards the trail until he finally saw what he was searching for. Directly ahead of him was an elf in a brown tunic and twenty horse lengths to his left was another. Garth waited for a few moments to observe them and to search for others that might be nearby. Satisfied that there were only two observers close by, Garth moved silently up behind one of them and nocked an arrow in his bow.

Garth squatted five paces behind the elf and spoke softly so his voice would not travel to the other elf. "There is no need to spy, my friend. You are welcome to join our campfire and share whatever meager rations we have."

The elf did not spin around abruptly as most humans would have. He turned slowly and focused on Garth and the arrow pointing at him. "Would a friend point an arrow at another friend's back?" the elf quizzed.

"Only the threat of a signal to your brethren required the arrow," Garth said as he lowered the bow and returned the arrow to his quiver. "It has been many years since I walked within the Elderal and I do not know much of what has transpired since then."

Garth stood erect and the other elf immediately swung his attention to the stranger in black. The elf nearest Garth squinted his oval eyes as if measuring the character of a man who could move like an elf. Garth could feel the second elf moving into position as the first elf spoke.

"How is it you move like an elf?" he inquired.

Garth casually moved to one side of the first elf to delay the other's approach. "I was taught many years ago by one who is like my brother," Garth stated.

The first elf signaled his partner. "I am Garong," he announced. "My partner is Rhula."

Garth watched as the second elf came to join the conversation and was mildly surprised to notice that she was female. "I am known as Garth Shado," Garth stated. "My party means no harm to the elves and we shall be out of Elderal on the second day from today. We travel this trail for it is the shortest path to our destination."

"It is also the trail that draws little notice," Rhula chimed in. "Only those seeking to hide use this trail. Is that supposed to endear us to your good character?"

"You have watched my party all day," Garth stated. "Does it appear to offer harm to the great nation of Elderal? I travel with children who are hunted and I have offered them my protection. I know the ways of the Elderal and we have respected them."

"You did not respect them when you came at us from behind," reminded Rhula.

Garong gave her a glare to cease her talk. "You have acted with skill and knowledge," Garong said. "Your party may travel the trail in safety as long as you remember the ways of the Elderal. We shall decline your gracious offer to share your camp and offer you these rabbits so your time in the woods will not have been wasted. Remember, brother of the elf, you are responsible for the behavior of your party. We shall watch you progress through Elderal."

Garong handed Garth four rabbits, two from his belt and two from Rhula's. Garth tied the rabbits to his own broad belt and nodded to the two elves.

"My thanks for your generosity," Garth said. "I also offer my compliments to King Galever for utilizing scouts with honor and compassion. May he know peace and a good neighbor to his south when Alcea rises."

The elves sported puzzled looks as Garth walked across the trail to his campsite. They would not

understand his parting comment, but Garth knew it would be relayed to King Galever. The elves could be powerful allies when the time came and elfish ways dictated that they would not help others who had not sworn friendship before a crisis began. Hopefully, the King of the Elves would remember hearing of the potential for a good neighbor in Alcea and be predisposed to discuss an alliance.

Garth entered the campsite and laid the rabbits down for Niki to clean and prepare. Fredrik and Tedi were battling with their staffs at a furious rate. Garth watched them for a moment as they twirled, jabbed, and smacked with their long, wooden poles. Tedi was definitely the better of the two, but that did little to lessen Garth's respect of Fredrik's ability. Both boys handled the staff with confidence and skill.

Garth gazed over to the area where Arik and Tanya had been practicing swordplay. Kalina and Tanya were hovering over Arik who was sitting on the ground. Garth hurried over when he saw the large red smear on Arik's chest, fearing that Tanya had seriously injured the boy. Garth bent down and was relieved to see that there was no serious cut to Arik's chest.

"What is it?" Garth inquired.

"I'm not sure," Kalina answered. "It appears to be some kind of rash, but nothing that I have ever seen before."

"When he removed his shirt," Tanya interjected, "I was afraid that I had wounded him."

"Ha," chuckled Arik, "there is small chance of that. It started bothering me the first night we were in Tagaret. It has grown steadily bigger and more irritating since then."

"We have tried all the cremes and ointments that I can think of," Kalina supplied. "Niki even gave a try with her healing ability. She has been pouring over the books I got her in Melbin and showed me some interesting spells."

Garth cocked an eyebrow at the thought of Kalina learning anything from Niki, but soon realized that Kalina spoke the truth. The girl had some type of ability with health magic that was hard for Kalina to grasp. As with most things, magic was easier to learn from somebody who knew how to do something than it was to learn from a book.

"Well," Garth summarized, "if we can't do anything about this rash, we should stop wasting time examining it. You two should get back to practice before I get my wooden sword out."

"Whenever you are ready, Garth," Tanya quipped.

Garth ignored the taunt and walked with Kalina back to the campfire. Arik stood and picked up his practice sword. "You shouldn't tease Garth that way," Arik cautioned. "He is probably the greatest warrior that has ever lived. What if he took you up on your taunt? You would be sore for a week."

"Garth is not the greatest warrior who ever lived," corrected Tanya. "Oh, he was definitely a Targa Ranger, I'm sure, and that makes him a great warrior, but you forget about Alexander Tork. He created and trained the Rangers. He is undoubtedly the greatest warrior of all time."

"Maybe where you come from," Arik stubbornly stated, "but I never heard of this Tork before this trip. So, he created the Targa Rangers. Garth has started the Alcea Rangers."

"It does not matter where one comes from," Tanya insisted. "Alex Tork is a legend. I have heard

stories from all over this continent about Alex. Targa created two new armies for him to command as he saw fit, the Frontier Division and the Rangers. They reported to no one except Alex, not even the King of Targa. One time he was falsely accused of killing the King of Targa and his men stood with him to the man and helped him prove the accusation false. The Sultan of Sordoa was placed in power by Tork after the man witnessed Alex behead the old Sultan who had declared war on Targa. And that was in the Sultan's Palace surrounded by thousands of Sordoan soldiers."

"Well," Arik argued, "Garth is not old yet. He may accomplish much more before he quits."

"Old?" Tanya laughed. "These are tales about Tork when he wasn't much older than you. He had his first battle when he was fifteen and put in charge of his village when the Yaki attacked. He led the village to the other side of the Boulder Mountains to relocate."

"Why are you so wrapped up in this Alexander Tork?" Arik demanded. "If he is so good, then why is it left to Garth to save the world by protecting and training us? Maybe your Alex Tork wasn't up to the job."

"I am not wrapped up in him," snarled Tanya. "I just believe in putting things in their proper perspective. Alex hasn't been seen since the Collapse. He and Jenneva surely died then or the Dark One found them and eliminated them. Uncle Boris said that every Black Devil had been ordered to hunt for them because they had imprisoned the Dark One. Oh, what is the use in trying to educate a fisherboy? Let's practice before Garth does take me up on my challenge."

Arik shook his head and raised his wooden sword to meet Tanya's attack. He still didn't understand women. He got along with Tanya because she acted less like a woman than any girl he had met, but every so often she went and did something that made absolutely no sense at all.

By the time Arik and Tanya completed their practice, Arik was tired. Tanya went to help with the dinner and Arik walked over to join Fredrik and Tedi who were getting lessons from Garth on knife fighting. Garth invited him into the lesson and Arik just sat down and shook his head. He watched Garth instruct the other two boys and was amazed at the man's speed and adaptability to any situation. It was hard for Arik to comprehend anyone who could be better than Garth. Arik waited until the lesson was over to approach Garth.

"Garth," Arik opened, "what do you now about Alexander Tork?"

Garth looked at him for a moment and then swung his gaze towards Tanya. Eventually, he sat down next to Arik and the other boys joined them. "I know a great deal about Alexander Tork," Garth began. "He created, trained and led the Rangers up to the time of his marriage to Jenneva. I used to be a Targa Ranger. The techniques that I use in fighting are his techniques. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it is just that some people have such a great deal of admiration for him and I've never heard of him," Arik answered.

Garth smiled and nodded his head. "Tanya mercilessly bombarded me with questions about him," Garth said. "I imagine that she heard stories about him from her uncle and was disturbed with the way I downplayed Tork's accomplishments. She has seemed to be pretty angry with me ever since."

"Why would you belittle Tork's accomplishments?" Arik asked. "Are the stories about him untrue?"

Garth picked up a pebble and began rolling it over in his hand. "Most of them are true," Garth

explained. "Alexander Tork never meant to be a hero. He always did what he thought had to be done because there wasn't anybody else who would or could do it. He was not the type of man who did something and then turned to others with a smile on his face and boasted about what he had done. That would be totally out of character for the man and I would not be kind to him to do what he himself would not do. He was a good fighter and he used his skills to right what wrongs he could."

"Was he more skilled than you?" Arik asked.

"I would never draw a comparison between myself and Alexander Tork," declared Garth. "I do not claim to be better than he was and I do not wish others to do it for me. What we do is not a competition, Arik. Each of us should use whatever skills we have to defeat the Dark One. If Alexander Tork were here today, he would be telling you the exact same thing. Forget about Tork. Forget about me. You have to spend whatever time you have to sharpen your skills and think about the consequences of what we have started. We have no idle time for wondering about a man who hasn't been seen in seventeen years."

"What is so wrong about having a hero to emulate?" asked Tanya who had come up behind the boys without anyone noticing.

"Alexander Tork may have been a hero to you, Tanya," Garth sighed, "but he was not a hero to himself."

Garth rose as Tanya pushed onward. "Well, he should have been," she declared. "He did more for the world than any ten other men and you seem to think he was nothing."

"Yes," sighed Garth bitterly. "He did wonders for the world. He saved the world from the sun. Don't you love his parting gift? A world without sunshine, without safe roads to travel, without farms that are free of bandits. He left a world where people can only cower in the cities and hope the tyrant rulers don't order them hung."

Tanya slapped Garth so hard that his head spun and his face sported bright red marks from her fingers. "How dare you talk that way about a great man," Tanya spat. "Alexander Tork gave everything he had to try and save the world from all of this."

"Yes, he did," agreed Garth with hatred in his voice. "He was so wonderful that he must have saved the world a dozen times over. He was so wrapped up in saving the world that he gave his only child to the Black Devils for slaughter. You want to worship a hero, Tanya? Worship the man who didn't have time to save his own child."

Garth stormed off before Tanya had time to deliver another blow. Tedi jumped up and grabbed Tanya before she took off after Garth. He held her tight until her body stopped quivering.

"What was that all about?" asked Fredrik. "I never heard those stories about Tork."

"They are all lies," screamed Tanya. "Filthy lies spewed by a coward who can't stand being compared to a real man."

Kalina approached the practice area and stood firmly in front of Tanya.

"Dinner is ready," she announced. "Why don't you boys go eat while Tanya and I have a little talk?"

The boys quickly scampered away, more to avoid the coming confrontation than their need for food. Tanya tried to go with them, but Kalina grabbed her arm. Tanya easily broke Kalina's grasp, but she stayed to talk.

“Why didn’t you use any of your fancy magic to make me stay?” Tanya demanded.

“I don’t use magic to hurt friends,” Kalina replied. “You misunderstand Garth and you hurt him deeply.”

“I hurt him?” Tanya said incredulously. “You expect me stand there and listen to him trash Alexander Tork and you blame me for hurting him?”

“You never knew Alexander Tork,” Kalina persisted. “We did. I personally agree with your description of Alex, not Garth’s, but that is part of the problem. Garth has heard so many tales about the greatness of Alexander Tork and the Targa Rangers that one would think that everything in the world is wonderful. Garth is torn up inside about his own inability to make the world a better place and disgusted with what the world has become. He was a Ranger, too. He shared Alex’s vision of a better world and he has spent the past seventeen years listening to these wondrous tales while watching the world fall apart. Add to that the fact that I have always adored Alexander Tork and his wonderful accomplishments and it is easy to see why Garth doesn’t want to hear any more about it.”

“Well, why did he have to say those nasty things about Alex abandoning his own child?” cried Tanya.

“He is just echoing Alex’s own feelings,” Kalina answered. “Alex Tork’s child was abducted by Black Devils while Alex was running around the world trying to save the Prophecy babies. Alex never forgave himself for that and became a very bitter man. Do not take Garth’s statements literally. Every Ranger idolized Alexander Tork and would have laid their lives on the line for him. Garth would have done the same as Alex in the situation that existed at that time. That should help you understand his bitterness. That anger will fade when Alcea rises. Until then, please don’t push your views of Alex on Garth. I have learned not to and I think you are a stronger woman than I.”

Tanya nodded and wiped her tears as Kalina escorted her to the campfire. The boys looked up sheepishly as they approached and their conversation stopped. Kalina dished some rabbit stew onto a plate for Tanya and then helped herself. Nobody said anything about Garth’s absence over dinner, but the usual quiet time after dinner when Garth would light his pipe and talk to the Rangers was missed. Instead the Rangers went back to practice and Tanya worked off her fury and hurt.

After practice when everybody was tired and drawn they turned in and went to sleep. Only Kalina stayed up and stared into the forest. When Arik woke in the morning, Kalina was still sitting there and still staring into the forest.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 22

Sagina

The smell of breakfast cooking aroused the rest of the Alcea Rangers and one by one they rose and began their morning exercises. Kalina finally stopped staring into the forest and relieved Arik of the cooking duties so he could join the exercises. Nobody spoke about Garth or the confrontation the previous evening. Kalina served breakfast and left the cleanup to the others. She wrapped up her gear and secured it on her white mare and Garth's black stallion. When she was finished, Garth's horse turned and walked into the forest.

"Ten minutes," Kalina called. "Everybody secure your belongings and make ready for the trail."

Tanya started to say something and everyone stopped and stared at her. Flushing, she bent back to the task at hand and left her thoughts hidden. Quietly the Rangers mounted their horses and Arik led the group along the trail. The midday meal was eaten while riding and Tedi took the lead and Tanya the tail of the procession. Tedi still detected the elves tracking them, but he said nothing. In fact, nobody spoke. The Rangers rode on in silence until the darkness came upon them.

They set up the campsite as efficiently as always, but there was a gloom that hung over the campsite that had nothing to do with Sarac's darkness. The Rangers practiced as always, but Tanya felt as if the blows directed towards her were slightly more deliberate than during normal practice sessions. The Rangers broke for dinner and ate quietly. After dinner, the time when Garth would light his pipe and talk for half an hour, Tanya tried to apologize to the rest of the Rangers, but they walked to the practice areas and began honing their skills in silence.

Kalina approached Tanya who was throwing Lanorian Stars with more anger than skill. "Tanya, do not blame yourself for Garth's actions," soothed Kalina. "It is not your fault."

Tanya turned and snapped at Kalina. "It's not my fault?" she ridiculed. "How can you, of all people, say that? Everyone here knows that it is my fault. I have taunted and needled Garth until he ran off and abandoned us. Everyone knows it is my fault. I will be lucky to live through the next practice session. How can you even look at me with sympathy?"

Kalina wrapped her arms around Tanya and hugged her. "I, of all people, know Garth," she stated. "The words you spoke were true, too true. Sometimes the truth hurts and people have a hard time accepting that. Garth is slow to anger and even slower to cool off. He is not gone from us, but he is hurting deeply. He needs to work the hurt and anger off in solitude. It is the only way that works for him. He will come back when he is better able to accept your feelings for Alexander Tork. In the meantime, he is quite capable of handling himself alone in the woods."

"If he is so capable," Tanya sobbed, "why do you spend all of your time staring off into the woods for him?"

Kalina turned and gazed at the endless trees surrounding them. "He will not suffer at the hands of a predator out there," Kalina declared. "My fear is for the enemy within himself. He pushes himself to the limit for others and even beyond. When that is not enough to help the others, he blames himself. He does not consider it heroic when he succeeds. When you idolize Alexander Tork as a hero, he thinks to himself that there are no heroes. He has seen thousands of good men die trying to help others and, in his mind, they are the only heroes and even they are failures because they are no longer around to help people. You should not feel sorry for Garth nor should you feel anger for his beliefs. He believes in them deeply, as you do in yours."

Tanya picked up her Lanorian Stars as Kalina left to sit near the fire. Tanya renewed her practice, but this time with more skill than anger. Eventually, the Rangers finished practice and drifted off to sleep.

Tanya closed her eyes on the figure of Kalina still sitting and gazing into the forest.

Tanya awoke with a stabbing in her ribs and the smell of breakfast in her nostrils. She looked up to see Fredrik poking her with his staff. Biting back a sharp remark, she followed Fredrik's gaze and saw Garth cooking breakfast. Hurriedly, she got to her feet and headed towards Garth. Fredrik and Tedi were awakening the rest of the Rangers as she approached the campfire. When she got close to Garth, she started to speak and Garth looked up at her and held his hand up to halt her words.

"I must apologize to you," Garth said loudly. "To all of you. You are young enough yet to know great optimism and enthusiasm. It is wrong for me, in any way, to dampen that bright outlook you hold on life. I can warn you of the pitfalls which you will face on your journey towards death, but the attitudes you carry with you on that journey are yours, and yours alone."

Tanya started to say something and Garth halted her again. "To you, pretty warrior, I owe an extra apology," Garth smiled. "You are right to seek a person who you think represents the ideals you would wish for yourself and I was wrong to water the fire of your search for excellence. My views may differ from your own, but I will no longer attempt to lessen your ideals. Please forgive me."

Tanya did not try to speak, but threw her arms around Garth and hugged him. An embarrassed smile clouded Garth's face as he returned the young warriors hug. After a few moments, he broke the embrace and laughed.

"Now for the fine breakfast I negotiated out of a Klandon farmer," he chuckled. "Fresh eggs and bacon with bread and a pitcher of cow's milk."

The campsite turned festive as the Rangers devoured the breakfast. Kalina stood behind Garth and placed her hands on his broad shoulders and smiled. Within twenty minutes the breakfast was eaten, the campsite cleaned up, and the Rangers were back on the trail.

The days that followed were free of tension within the group. Tanya still showered the other Rangers with tales of Alex and Jenneva, but Garth did not object, he merely walked away from the talk and performed other duties that required attention.

As they approached the Boulder Mountains, Garth began to hear the Rangers speak of Lavinda, the settlement Alexander Tork led his villagers to when he was a boy. The villagers had named it Lavinda in honor of Alexander's mother who died during the trip in a misfortunate accident. Tork had taught the villagers to think in terms of defense and the village was designed to repel attacks. The design saved the village from the Yaki, goblins, and bandits. The village had become famous and the term "Lavindan" was used to describe someone who was wary and defensive and usually sat with his back to the wall and an eye on the door.

Tedi was chosen to ask Garth if the group could stop in Lavinda for an overnight stay. Garth smiled grimly and explained that Lavinda had a reputation for not accepting strangers and that their path lay in another direction. While Tedi spread the word of Garth's answer, Garth made the decision to ride later than usual and camp on the other side of the pass, effectively eliminating the need for any further questions about Lavinda.

That evening during the talk session when Garth lit his pipe, there were a lot of questions about Lavinda, the unnamed village where Tork grew up, and the cave of Alex's first battle with the Yaki, which was somewhere nearby.

Garth looked at the eager faces around the campfire and pointed with his pipe at the Boulder Mountains. "That is what should occupy your thoughts," Garth proclaimed. "Mount Kalas, the highest mountain of the Boulders, is where the Dark One is imprisoned. We are at the center of Sarac's domain and on a trip that will lead to his death, or ours. If this were a pleasure trip, we could all get excited about seeing sights where legends were born, but the longer we stay in the vicinity of Sarac's castle, the longer we dare death to visit us. Let's get our practice going early. I plan to move out of here before first light."

The Rangers split into groups and began their practice sessions with Garth supplying instruction as needed. Tanya chose to battle Fredrik with the staff and Tedi challenged Arik with knives. Niki and Kalina worked on health magic. The practice was especially long and tiring and the Rangers worked up a sweat. Fredrik and Tedi were soon stripped to the waist, but Arik kept fighting with his shirt on. Garth wondered if Arik's rash was still bothering him. Since the first night out of Tagaret when the rash was noticed, Arik had not removed his shirt except to change it, which he managed to do when no one was around.

"Break," Garth called to Arik and Tedi. "Arik, why don't you shed your shirt? You are going to create a muddy pool on the practice area."

"I'm all right, Garth," Arik replied sheepishly.

"Has that rash gone away yet?" Garth probed.

"It's still there, but I hardly notice it anymore," Arik answered. "We're going to switch to throwing knives soon anyway and I'll just catch a chill."

The boys went back to fighting and Garth noticed that Kalina and Niki had split up. He strode over to Kalina and spoke to her in a low voice. "Have you checked Arik's rash lately?"

"He won't let me near it," Kalina replied. "I think all of the fuss involved with trying to clear it up embarrasses him. It's not serious, Garth. It is just a reaction to something. Perhaps the Palace Shadow has vermin after all."

"More likely the Royal Palace," chuckled Garth. "I know there are vermin residing there. The Children are progressing better than I could have hoped for. Their skills rival many soldiers whom I have served with. At this rate, they will soon be able to rightfully call themselves Rangers. How are Niki and Fredrik doing with their magic skills? Are you getting enough time with Fredrik or should I curtail his staff practice?"

"Fredrik is doing fine with the time we spend together," Kalina commented. "He is a fast learner and he picked up more than he knows from spying on the Black Devils. Many spells he has already seen performed, but didn't understand how they worked. Once I explain it to him, he is fine."

Kalina lowered herself to a sitting position and Garth slid down beside her. "Niki is another story," Kalina continued. "She is very stubborn and refuses to accept my direction. Her ability is not as strong as Fredrik's and she insists it is much greater. Sometimes I think that reality doesn't exist in her mind. Even in the area of health where she has some special gift that I have never seen before, she will not take my word for anything. I have to get the book out and show her before she will accept what I am teaching."

"How about the cloak or her parents?" Garth inquired. "Have you gotten anything further out of

her?”

“Not a thing,” Kalina sighed. “Every time I bring it up, she develops a bad mood and stalks off. That is what happened to our session today. I was probing about her mother and whether or not her mother had magical ability. She got moody and claimed she had a headache. Then she just got up and walked away. It is so damn frustrating working with her.”

“You should try showing her how to fight with a knife as I have,” Garth laughed. “I think she might stab herself in the arm trying to get her knife out of the sheath.”

“Maybe I am just expecting too much too soon with her,” mused Kalina. “Your push to get through the path to avoid Lavinda did not fool the Children, Garth. They know there was time to detour through Tagaret and one night in Lavinda would not have been far off the track.”

“You know I have a hard time dealing with some things, Kalina. So they know it now, too. Does it really matter? We have a task before us and the sooner we get to it, the sooner we will get to our goal.”

Kalina laid her hand gently on Garth’s arm. “No, I suppose it doesn’t really matter. You cannot hide the truth about the end of Alex and Jenneva forever, though. Some day we will have to atone for our sins.”

“Perhaps, but that day is not today,” denied Garth. “I am not ready to live with mine yet. I am going to halt the practice for tonight. I think we should get an even earlier start tomorrow. We are very exposed this close to Sarac and I want to put some miles between him and us. Is the Sword of Heavens still providing direction?”

“It is actually getting stronger,” Kalina acknowledged. “It is swinging more West than North now. I suspect we will be going over the West Mountains and into what was Cordonia.”

Garth nodded as he rose to break up the practice sessions.

The early morning start allowed the group to be within sight of the West Mountains before stopping the next night. Early practice consisted of tracking, camouflage, and stealth. During the after dinner talk session, Garth got tired of hearing about Alexander Tork again.

“Why do you not ask questions about Oscar Dalek?” Garth inquired of Tanya. “Your uncle must have been full of stories about him, being a traveling merchant.”

“Oh, he was,” conceded Tanya. “Most of Oscar Dalek’s life is fairly open and well known, though. You can not be the Prince of Targa without having books written about you.”

“I’ve never read anything about him,” Tedi interrupted.

“Nor I,” Arik added. “Was he a friend of Alex’s?”

Garth groaned and shut his eyes. “Yes, they were very good friends,” Garth sighed. “Oscar’s fame did not have anything to do with his friendship with Alex, though. He could have been a great warrior as well, but he never trained his skills in those areas. Instead, he used his head to amass a great fortune while benefiting Targa. In fact, his contribution to Targa far outweighed Tork’s. Without Prince Oscar, there would have been no Targa ships on the Targa Sea, no canal connecting the Targa Sea with the Sordoan Sea, and probably no victory in the war with the goblins. His ships and wagons allowed the

Targa Army to move quickly to entrap the goblins.”

“That hardly sounds as exciting as the life of Alex and Jenneva,” Arik said.

“No?” chuckled Garth. “When Oscar was young he lost his father to bandits and his mother was so poor that they could not put food on the table. He rose from that miserable disadvantage to become the richest man in the world and the Prince of the mightiest nation in the world. Killing goblins is easy work compared to that. A thousand men could grow up to lead armies and kill their foes, but I do not think anyone will ever duplicate Oscar Dalek’s tremendous feats. And what is even more exciting about him is that one of you is his son.”

“But he was not a warrior,” protested Arik. “We are training to be warriors, not merchants.”

Garth sighed again. He dared not tell them of some of Oscar’s contributions to Targa because they were still too secret. He could not tell them that while Alex was creating the Rangers, Oscar was creating the Spiders, because the Spiders still existed and still gathered sensitive information.

“Oscar Dalek was no merchant,” Garth insisted. “He started out as a merchant, but that is akin to calling Alex an infantry trainee. Besides, you are already warriors. Imagine being an Oscar Dalek and a great warrior.”

The boys perked up at that and started eyeing each other, looking for the signs of greatness that a king would exhibit.

“Oscar Dalek had visions inside his head that no other person had ever possessed,” Garth continued. “When he saw opportunities, the glee in his eyes was not only for himself, but for Targa. Imagine being able to have that vision to shape your country and the skills of a warrior to demand the respect of your enemies.”

The boys were clearly excited at the prospect of being a warrior and a king. Garth smiled to himself at successfully changing the topic of conversation for several days.

“Do you know which one of us is Oscar’s son?” Fredrik asked.

“I don’t know for certain,” confessed Garth, “but I believe he is among us. Would you really want me to tell you if I knew?”

Affirmative response rang from everybody’s lips and Garth was actually surprised. Being a Prince was a heavy burden and Garth would not want to know if he was in their position. “Very well,” Garth replied. “I will tell you the only clue that I possess. Remember that what I am about to say is not proof of a claim to the throne, but Prince Oscar and Princess Callie were given very special gifts from Jenneva. One of you carries that gift today. How it was come by, we do not know, but its identity is certain.”

“Do you mean a magical gift?” Arik asked. “That would have to be Fredrik. Tedi and I have no magical gift whatsoever.”

Garth watched the boys’ expressions to see if there was resentment created by Arik’s statement. Fredrik appeared shocked and both Tedi and Arik seemed pleased for Fredrik.

“I do not mean a gift of magic,” Garth finally said. “I mean a physical gift. The necklace that Tedi wears belonged to either the Prince or the Princess. We do not know which.”

Tedi turned bright red and Arik and Fredrik slapped him on the back. Tanya looked curiously at the heir to the Alcea Crown, but Niki actually moved to sit between Fredrik and Tedi and examined the necklace.

The next few days were a welcome relief to Garth. The questions about Alexander Tork had ceased and Prince Oscar became the topic of conversation. The most dramatic change in the Children was in Niki. She would not leave Tedi alone. Instead of magic lessons with Kalina, Niki started challenging Tedi at knives and the Lanorian Star. She even tried to battle him with a staff, but that lasted as long as one swing in which Tedi disarmed her and she complained of a broken wrist.

The Sword of Heavens was vibrating so vigorously now that Kalina could not control it. Tedi took over the job of using the Sword of Heavens to point towards their destination. The terrain of the headwaters of the Black River changed from mountains to rolling hills and eventually flattened out to forested woods just outside the village of Dani. The group had a discussion about entering Dani for provisions and after Kalina pointed out that this area had very few visitors and they would surely be talked about, they decided to bypass the town.

Just west of Dani, the pine forest gave way to an ancient wood of old oak trees. At this point the Sword of Heavens was vibrating so wildly that only Garth and Arik had the physical strength to handle it. Garth gave the job to Arik so he would not be encumbered if trouble arose. The woods were dark and whatever light the day brought was quickly fading, so Garth announced that they would camp for the night and start fresh in the morning.

The camp was full of excitement as everyone realized they would probably meet the fairies in the morning. During the talk period after dinner, everyone had questions about the fairies and what they were like. Unfortunately, nobody had any answers. No one had ever seen a fairy, not even Garth and Kalina. Garth cautioned about being overly excited.

“You must remember,” Garth stated clearly, “that the Universe inhabited by the fairies was also inhabited by ogres. If we are near to finding the fairies, we may also be in the vicinity of ogres and they are ferocious fighters. An ogre is typically stupid, but they are large, strong, and will eat people. If we have to fight ogres, the bow is your best weapon. Their strength will make sword fighting dangerous because their blows, even if they are blocked, can knock your sword from your hand. Knives will be useless unless you score a direct hit in a vital area like the throat or eyes.”

Everyone’s attention was riveted on Garth. No one expected to find the land of the fairies to be a dangerous place, but the thought of fighting ogres had sobered their jubilation.

“You will have to aim at the same vital areas with your arrows,” Garth continued, “but you may do so from a greater distance. As far as I know, the ogres have no magicians, but do not depend on that. If we get into an attack, defense shields will be the first priority of those with magical capabilities. If you can maintain a shield and attack at the same time, do so. There is no such thing as a surrender in a battle with ogres. We either kill them all or they eat us.”

The mood had turned rather gloomy as the Children went to the practice area, but the practice itself was tough. All four of the warrior Rangers practiced their archery skills, each trying to outdo the others. Arik with his longbow was clearly the winner, with Tanya second. Each of the Rangers practiced as if the skills they honed today would be used in battle tomorrow. Garth called an early halt to the practice and stated his intention that everybody get as much sleep as possible. They would search tomorrow until they located the fairies, even if they had to proceed after the darkness came.

Garth let everyone sleep until first light and then canceled morning exercises. The Rangers had breakfast and took to the trail. The oak forest got thicker and the coming of light did little to improve visibility. The group rode through the morning with two stops for Arik to check on the direction shown by the Sword of Heavens.

Shortly after their stop for the midday meal, they started seeing live, healthy apple trees. Tanya started to gather apples for dinner until Garth told her to keep her hands free. The light also started to penetrate the forest better as the oak trees thinned. Excitement started to percolate again as there were several false sightings of fairies. Garth did not share in the excitement. Instead he started to grow tense with a premonition of danger and his eyes started scanning the forest.

Tedi was in the lead when his horse just stopped. Garth rode to the front of the procession and asked Tedi why he was stopping.

“I didn’t stop,” Tedi said. “My horse just stopped. Tedi lowered himself from the saddle and checked on his mount.

“He’s sleeping!” Tedi exclaimed. “I can’t believe it, he is just sleeping.”

Garth also dismounted to verify Tedi’s statement. Arik came walking forward from the end of the column.

“All of the mounts are sleeping except yours and Kalina’s,” Arik stated. “What is going on? We didn’t push them hard yesterday. They have never acted like this before.”

Garth shook his head and started looking around at the forest when he heard the shouts behind him. He quickly pivoted and saw Fredrik and Kalina rushing to where Niki had fallen to the ground. His senses reeling, Garth searched for some sign of his enemy. He watched as Fredrik collapsed to the ground and heard either Tedi or Arik falling behind him with a shout.

“It’s magical!” Kalina shouted as she hurriedly tried to erect a shield over the entire party.

Tanya dropped to her knees as Garth heard another thump behind him and turned to find both of the Lorgo boys stretched out on the ground. He pulled his sword from its sheath as he turned back to see Kalina collapse. His arms grew heavy under the weight of the sword and it dropped to the ground as the trees above his head swirled in flashes of green and gray. He struggled to grab onto something to hold him upright as his eyeballs rolled up into his head and his body collapsed beneath him.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 23

Fairies

Nothing moved on the forest trail where the Rangers lay crumpled in heaps on the ground. Down from the sky floated a small, blue fairy no taller than a man’s index finger. The fairy’s wings fluttered as

she landed on the back of Tedi's horse and surveyed the sleeping party.

"Why did you attack them, Pixy?" the blue fairy asked. "They would have passed through without ever knowing we were here."

A green, and slightly larger, fairy swooped down and soared along the trail over the unmoving forms, finally landing next to the blue fairy with a dazzling flourish of outstretched wings.

"Bah, Nixy," he grumbled. "Humans are always trouble. It is better that we have stopped them before they went any farther."

"I think you just enjoy being mischievous," Nixy pestered. "What if they are friends or an envoy from another land?"

"The fairies have no human friends," rebutted Pixy. "It will be best for all if we dispose of them now. We can levitate them into the acid pits of the ogres."

"Do you speak for Queen Mita now?" Nixy persisted. "Besides, we can never levitate them that far by ourselves. We will need a great deal of help, especially with that big one. You had trouble getting him to lie down."

"It would have been easier if you had decided to help earlier," growled Pixy. "That female with the long, black hair was trying to use some magic to shield herself. She distracted me. If I hadn't been distracted, the big one would have gone down easy enough."

"I'm sure," Nixy drawled sarcastically. "Still, I think we need to get them into the Stay Bushes as soon as possible. If one of them has the power to break your sleep spell, they could be dangerous to us. I will get others to help with the levitation."

"I'll go," Pixy offered. "You keep a watch for any signs of waking and don't let any of them get away."

Without waiting for a reply, Pixy forcefully spread his wings and soared down towards the trail below before fluttering off through the apple trees. Nixy stood watching the strange party of humans for what seemed to be a long time before Pixy returned with scores of other fairies to help transport the invaders to the Stay Bushes.

"You are taking them to the Stay Bushes and not the acid pits, aren't you?" Nixy inquired.

"Yes, yes," Pixy sighed. "I think they ought to be disposed of, though. One human in the Stay Bushes is all right, but all of these can be dangerous. Midge found out somehow and demanded that they be taken to the Stay Bushes and that I report immediately to Queen Mita. You will have to supervise the moving. Make sure they are kept asleep even after you have delivered them."

Pixy left the mass of fairies assigned to deal with the invaders and flew into the orchard. Soaring between apple trees which held the homes of his fellow fairies, Pixy angled towards the very center of the orchard where the great Father Tree stood, the tree that the Mage had used to restore the orchard after the blight caused by Alutar and his ogres. Father Tree had a hole through its bark, level with a human's head and sporting a wide protrusion outside of it. It was on this lip that Queen Mita held court and Pixy set down on it with the precision of an acrobat.

“Your Highness,” bowed Pixy to the blue fairy. “We have captured a large band of humans bent on invading our homeland. Nixy, at this very moment, is escorting the interlopers to the Stay Bushes. There is one among them that uses outlander magic and I think we should send them off to acid pits at our earliest opportunity.”

“I did not know that your head was large enough to accommodate an ogre brain, Pixy,” Queen Mita rebuked. “Would you send every human who comes close to our home directly off to the acid pits? Would you have handled the Mage in a like manner when he showed up to restore this orchard?”

Flushing with embarrassment, Pixy responded, “Of course not, Your Highness, but these invaders are warriors and come heavily armed.”

“What do the humans look like?” quizzed the Queen.

“They are all dressed in black and carry great swords and large bows,” Pixy answered.

“And what were they saying when you observed them?” prompted the Queen.

“He does not know,” answered a green fairy upon landing on the platform. “According to Nixy, he issued the Sleep Spell before any of them had uttered a word.”

“Thank you, my son,” Queen Mita greeted Midge.

“Of course they were saying nothing,” protested Pixy. “They were trying to sneak up on us.”

“We have a further complication, Queen Mita,” Midge interjected. “We have transported six humans, but there are seven horses and they were all being ridden.”

Nixy arrived at that moment and settled down next to Pixy. “The blond female is the one that is missing, Prince Midge,” she said as she bowed to the Queen.

“How could you lose her?” Pixy blurted out. “The Sleep Spell you put on her must not have been strong enough.”

“I did not put a Sleep Spell on her,” frowned Nixy. “I thought you had already done so.”

“I was,” Pixy responded sheepishly, “until I got distracted by the witch. I thought you realized that and finished her.”

“Enough!” demanded the Queen. “Midge, we are losing light already. Send out patrols to locate this missing human and retrieve her. Have them be careful. Pixy says that they are dressed in black and use outlander magic. We may be facing a band of Black Devils. I would prefer that she be subdued and placed in the Stay Bushes, but kill her if you must.”

Prince Midge threw himself off the balcony in a dive and soared towards a large group of green fairies clad in shiny mail and tiny helmets. The Queen turned to Nixy and fixed her with a look of despair.

“Nixy this is not the first time that you have lost a delivery,” rebuked the Queen. “You shall be in charge of watching over the captives to ensure that they do not wake. Pixy, you shall have the dubious honor of determining who they are and why they are here. I will not accept any mishandling of the prisoners, but you will remain within the Stay Bushes until you have accomplished your task.”

With a wave of her tiny hand, Queen Mita dismissed the other two fairies.

Tanya lay under the windswept pile of oak leaves from last fall's dropping and watched with fascination as the fairies levitated the other Rangers away. She wasn't sure why she had not fallen prey to their magic, but it was apparent that her friends were being taken captive and not harmed. She started to fall asleep like the others, but suddenly the feeling had just departed. At first she had thought to lash out at the fairies and free her comrades, but, thankfully, she remembered the reason for their journey. It was the Sapphire of the Fairies that they were after and they had found the fairies, no matter their current predicament, so Tanya slid off the trail and quietly crawled away.

Tanya cringed involuntarily as another slimy thing crawled across her leg. The half-year-old leaves still held the moisture of winter and decomposition and she shuddered at the thought of what type of creatures inhabited them.

When the last of the fairies left she thought about following them, but quickly decided to wait for the coming darkness. She spent the time trying to remember Uncle Boris' tales about the fairies. She shoved her face further out of the smelly pile of leaves and was rewarded with the sweet, fresh smell of the apple orchard nearby.

Uncle Boris had told thousands of tales, but not many stories that involved fairies. All of the tales he did tell seemed to indicate that the fairies were a good and well-intentioned people. She could only remember one specific narrative and it dealt with Prince Midge, the son of Queen Mita, and the Great Mage traveling to imprison the Great Demon, Alutar. In the story the Mage created a homeland for the desolate fairies and centered it around a giant apple tree. She was wondering if this was that same orchard when a dozen mail-clad fairies marched by scanning the forest.

She froze as the fairies passed and pulled her head farther into the leaves when they were out of sight in case they doubled back. An hour passed and the small fairy army had not returned. Darkness had fallen over the forest and Tanya yearned to be free of the decomposing pile of leaves and the tiny creatures that lived in it. Slowly she pulled herself out of the pile of leaves and looked around. The forest was dark and eerily quiet. Slowly she crept in the direction her fellow travelers had been taken. Within a few dozen paces the oak trees thinned and the apple orchard began.

Tanya deeply inhaled the sweet scent of the orchard and squinted her eyes to make out the little figures moving among the trees. Subconsciously, she stuffed her long blond hair under her leather cap and sat behind a bush to observe the fairies. She watched for several hours and saw several armed parties returning, but no sign of the Rangers. She did observe the return of the patrol that had passed her pile of leaves, but they came into the orchard from another direction.

The amount of activity in the orchard started to diminish as fairies flew into holes in the apple trees and did not return. Remembering the lessons that Garth had given the Rangers on penetration of hostile encampments, Tanya started a methodical circuit of the orchard. Remaining in the darkest shadows of the oak forest, Tanya worked her way around the circumference of the orchard. When she had almost completed the circle, she stopped at the sight of Garth Shado.

She had seen Garth first because of his height, but the others were there, as well. Each Ranger was tied to a vertical pole in the center of a dense, circular bush. There were more bushes than Rangers and it appeared that whatever security the bushes provided, the fairies could accommodate a few more intruders. The bushes had large, sharp thorns, but Tanya failed to see how a few cuts and bruises would

ensure that a prisoner did not escape. Given enough time, she was sure that Garth would be able to escape the rope that bound him and then he would be able to push his way through the bushes to free the others. Tanya saw one small blue fairy sitting on top of one of the bushes looking bored. Every once in a while, she could spot a green fairy flying from one prisoner to another.

Tanya ducked her head down as a pair of fairies came walking by between her and the bushes that held the Rangers. Only the fact that both of the fairies were looking the other way saved Tanya from detection. Holding her breath, she heard the voices of the two fairies.

“I did not know that Nixy’s head would hold the brain of an ogre,” the first fairy chuckled. “She sits on the Stay Bush without a thought to the consequences. One prick of those thorns would kill an ogre and she sits among them.”

“She will be there all night,” the second fairy laughed. “Queen Mita was very annoyed that she allowed one of the humans to escape. They have had patrols out looking for her for hours, but . . .”

The voices trailed off and Tanya could hear no more, but she had heard enough. Whether the fairies meant to kill the Rangers or not, no longer mattered. Tanya knew that the Rangers would attempt to escape and they were not aware of the poison in the thorns. One by one, the Rangers would die and she was not going to stand by and let that happen.

Tanya slid back into the oak forest and searched for the largest oak tree. When she finally found it, she started climbing. She continued climbing until the thin branches threatened to break under her weight. Clinging to the trunk, she gingerly settled herself down to a tenuous sitting position on a thin branch where it met the trunk. She gazed down at the orchard and had a clear view of the layout of the village. The Stay Bushes were very visible and she could now see the green fairy flitting from one prisoner to another. The fairy seemed to be searching the many pockets and pouches of the prisoners. The rest of the orchard was less visible. Tanya could detect the placement of the trees and could easily see the trunk of the largest one in the center, as it had a clearing around it, but the branches and leaves of the apple trees obstructed her view of a good deal of the orchard floor.

She clung to the trunk for a while watching the Stay Bushes. Every once in a while her vision was drawn to returning patrols. Each returning patrol sent one fairy to the large center tree and on a platform partway up the trunk the fairy bowed to a blue fairy that came out of the hole behind the platform. Tanya surmised that she was observing Queen Mita receiving the reports of the returning patrols and an idea formed in her mind.

Tanya continued watching the village until no more patrols returned and the only movement below was around the Stay Bushes. Unaware of how many hours she had been sitting in that awkward position, Tanya flexed her muscles and quietly climbed down the large oak tree. Slowly and silently, she maneuvered her way around the orchard to the point that would offer the shortest distance to the large apple tree.

Slowly, step-by-step, Tanya inched her way towards the Queen’s tree, stopping every few steps to listen for any sounds. Half-way there, Tanya had to press her back against a tree and hold her breath as a fairy came out of his hole and flew to another. Two many hours of being cramped up in a tree or behind a bush caused Tanya to feel weary, but the adrenaline of sneaking into the fairies’ stronghold kept her alert. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Tanya reached the Queen’s tree. She put her ear against the tree, but nothing could be heard. Steeling her courage, Tanya scrapped her finger along the underside of the platform on the other side of the tree. Leaning so she could just see around the large tree’s trunk, she waited. Nothing happened.

Tanya stuck her finger out and, as lightly as she could, tapped the underside of the platform. Hearing a distant rustling of cloth, Tanya got ready. Queen Mita walked out on the platform and stared around. As quickly as she could, Tanya reached out and grabbed the Queen of the Fairies.

Surprisingly, the Queen did not cry out. Tanya held one finger to her lips and brought the fairy up to her face with her other hand. Tanya quickly realized why the Queen had not cried out and shifted her grasp so the Queen could breath.

“I am sorry,” whispered Tanya. “Make no sound and you will be safely returned.”

The Queen glared at Tanya and spoke in a dignified voice. “You will gain nothing by taking me. The Fairies will not bow down to your kind for the life of their Queen. Another will take my place and your friends will be killed.”

“I wish to talk with you without ending up in your Stay Bushes,” whispered Tanya. “Will you be quiet and come with me or must we have unnecessary bloodshed on both sides?”

“I will talk with you,” declared the Queen, “but we will do so right here. If you manage to get me out of the orchard, my armies will pursue you and we will not have a chance to talk. I guarantee that when our discussion is over, you will be allowed to walk out of here freely.”

“And then be pursued with a vengeance,” Tanya snorted. “You will pledge your son’s life as my guarantee of safety. Swear on Prince Midge’s life that I will not be pursued or harmed.”

“As long as you do no harm to my people,” Queen Mita affirmed, “you have my pledge on my son’s life.”

“Very well,” Tanya accepted as she placed Queen Mita on the small balcony. “I have heard stories of your dealings with the Great Mage and he is said to have believed you an honorable and trustworthy people. I will chance my life on his words.”

“You know the Great Mage?” Queen Mita questioned.

“No,” replied Tanya, “but my uncle knows of his stories including the one where he restored this orchard and had Prince Midge accompany him to imprison Alutar.”

“So that is how you knew my son’s name,” reflected the Queen. “Why have your people come into our orchard?”

“We were captured before coming to your orchard,” Tanya corrected, “but we would have come here anyway. My friends and I seek to end the Dark One’s rule and our journey requires us to speak with you about the Holy Sapphire.”

“What does the Holy Sapphire have to do with ending the Darkness?” queried the Queen.

At that point a shout rang out from somewhere in the orchard that was quickly followed by more shouts. Tanya swung around and saw hundreds of fairies emerging from all over the orchard. As she turned back to grab the Queen, she saw Queen Mita holding her hand up to the gathering fairies.

“Hold,” the Queen shouted. “This human is my guest and will not be harmed. All of you go back to

sleep, but send Midge here.”

The fairies reluctantly turned and disappeared. In an amazingly short time, Prince Midge landed on the platform. “As you can see,” Queen Mita stated, “the Mage told the truth. You may trust the word of the fairies. Son, this is the missing human and I have guaranteed her safety with your life.”

Prince Midge just nodded and stood on the platform next to his mother. “You were talking about the Holy Sapphire,” reminded the Queen.

“Yes,” began Tanya while shaking her head. “The Prophecy states that the Dark One will be killed by the Sword of Heavens which we possess. Before the Sword may be used, the seven gems in its hilt must be restored. Your Holy Sapphire is one of those gems.”

A green fairy suddenly landed on the platform, startling Tanya. He quickly whispered something in Midge’s ear and they both flew off. Dismissing the interruption, the Queen sat down.

“The fairies’ very existence is dependent on the Holy Sapphire,” the Queen explained as Prince Midge returned. “We cannot just turn it over to you even if we had a desire to do so.”

“The Sword of Heavens gave us a vision before it led us here,” Tanya explained. “The vision showed the Sapphire and a blue fairy reciting a verse. That verse said that the Sapphire was a lie. Surely you know the verse that was spoken by the fairy in the vision.”

“I know the verse very well,” confided the Queen. “This is the verse you speak of:

Your blood will flow ‘til none is left

While darkness around you descends

On Holy Sapphire all you have

Fate of the Fairies do depend.

The Crown of Light the Fairies’ Life

Without it all are doomed to die

The Holy Sapphire just a patch

Redemption only just a lie.”

Prince Midge stared off into the forest as he said:

“The Bringer knows not what he does

But fate has chosen only he

Who bears the mark upon his chest

The Winged Serpent death doth flee.”

Queen Mita snapped her head to glare at her son, but the Prince returned her glare with determination.

“He is here,” Prince Midge proclaimed. “He is one of the humans which we captured today. That is what brought Pixy to the platform moments ago.”

“Wake him and bring him here,” snapped the Queen.

“What is happening?” Tanya asked. “What is this about a Bringer?”

“You have heard only the beginning of the Fairy Prophecy,” Queen Mita explained. “The rest deals with someone known to us as the Bringer. We have always assumed that the Bringer would be a fairy, but my son believes that one of your companions is meant to fulfill the Prophecy. We shall see soon enough. You have asked for my peoples’ restraint. I now ask the same pledge from you. I am having one of your companions brought here in an awakened state. You will ensure that fairies do not come to harm through his actions.”

“I shall,” Tanya agreed as she watched Arik annoyingly march towards the tree.

“What is going on?” he demanded of Tanya. “Why have they freed us and not the others?”

“Arik, please restrain your temper,” Tanya suggested. “I want to know the answers to that and many other questions. Queen Mita has agreed to talk with us in peace and I have promised our cooperation and their safety. Let us hear what the Queen wants with you.”

“So, your name is Arik,” greeted Queen Mita. “This is my son, Prince Midge. Arik, would you kindly bare your chest?”

Arik look stunned and turned to look at Tanya, who was obviously confused about where the Queen was leading. “I would prefer not to, Your Highness,” Arik finally declared.

Tanya was shocked at Arik’s answer to the Queen, but Queen Mita merely smiled. “If you have any chance whatsoever of even seeing the Holy Sapphire, you will have to comply. I am told that you bear a strange mark on your chest and as the Queen of the Fairies, I must make decisions based on what I see. I assure you that I am not asking to embarrass you.”

Tanya nodded and Arik opened his shirt as little as he could and turned so that Tanya could not see but the Queen could. The Queen’s eyes grew wide and she started shaking.

“Son,” she ordered, “free the prisoners and invite them here. I will offer them my apologies when they arrive, but yours may be needed at the time they are released. They are to be treated as guests, but I fear they may take offense at the way they have been treated already.”

After Midge had left to free the Rangers, the Queen returned her attention to Arik. “I am sorry if I

have embarrassed you, Arik,” she apologized. “You are a special person to the fairy people and a very honored guest. If you wish not to be embarrassed by this in front of your people, you have only to request it and I will make sure it is not mentioned. As for Tanya’s lips, that is your own problem.”

“What does it all mean?” Arik asked. “It is only a rash which I picked up in Tagaret.”

“It is not a rash, Arik,” the Queen assured him. “It is the mark of the Bringer. You have been chosen to return the Crown of Light to the fairy people. Who chose you or how you were chosen is unknown to me and does not matter. The Prophecy foretells of your arrival and the task that awaits you. If you want the Holy Sapphire, you will have to return the Crown of Light to the fairy people.”

“Where do I find this Crown of Light?” Arik asked.

“I have absolutely no idea,” confessed the Queen. “It has been lost for ages and if any fairy knew where it existed, we would already have it in our possession. It is the very symbol of the Fairy Monarchy.”

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 24

Reflections

Garth, Kalina, Fredrik, Niki, and Tedi were brought to the Father Tree in the apple orchard to meet Queen Mita of the fairies. Tanya smiled openly at their arrival, but Arik seemed distant and lost in thought. Queen Mita stood regally on the platform and welcomed the humans.

“Greeting to you all and welcome to the land of the fairies,” she intoned. “You have my deepest apologies for the treatment given to you upon your arrival. While I did not order your capture, I did know about it afterwards and consented to your imprisonment. For that I can only offer apologies that are insufficient to compensate you. You are now free and are welcome as my guests. We will extend every courtesy to you during your time with us. I am Queen Mita, Queen of the Fairies, and this is my son, Prince Midge.”

Kalina stood with a tight grimace on her lips. Fredrik and Tedi looked around as if to determine whether or not they were in some kind of dream. Niki peered at the small Queen as if examining her wardrobe. Garth stepped forward and bowed.

“If the thoughts of your soldiers were that we were coming to attack you, then they behaved admirably,” Garth offered. “We had no way of announcing our arrival, but we have ridden far and long to seek your audience. We have a matter of grave importance that must be discussed with Your Highness. I am known as Garth Shado.”

Queen Mita smiled deeply. “You are a most eloquent and gracious guest, Garth. I have been discussing your adventure with Tanya and Arik. I know why you have come and what it is that you seek. The Holy Sapphire will be presented to Arik when he returns the Crown of Light to the fairy people. Introduce me to the rest of your group.”

Garth threw a puzzled look at Arik and Tanya as he introduced the Rangers to Queen Mita. The Queen apologized and welcomed each member of the group before addressing Garth again.

“I assume by the others’ deference to you, Garth, that you are the group’s leader,” the Queen began. “It is late and while you have slept, my people have not. Midge will help you set up camp and we will discuss things in the morning.”

Garth nodded and Midge flew down to hover before him. After inquiring about the Rangers’ requirements, Midge selected an area of the orchard that was not far from the Father Tree and still allowed for a campfire. The Rangers set up camp while flinging questions to Arik and Tanya. Arik ignored all of the questions and was the first down on his blanket to go to sleep. Tanya looked quizzically at Arik every time someone asked her what was going on. Eventually, she suggested that discussing it in the morning was a good idea and she also retired. With no one to answer their questions the rest of the Rangers drifted off to sleep.

Garth awoke early and retrieved water from the stream to make coffee. As soon as Garth got the fire going, Prince Midge appeared to offer his help. Garth’s questions were shrugged off with an explanation that Garth should learn of the discussion from his own people. Midge did prove to be pleasant company and Garth enjoyed stories about fairy life. Of course, Midge’s favorite story was about the time he accompanied the Mage and Garth detected the soul of an adventurer in the fairy Prince. Midge did explain to Garth what had happened on the trail with the casting of the Sleep Spell, the levitation of the prisoners, and the disappearance of Tanya.

Soon the smell of breakfast and the sound of voices awakened the Ranger camp. Many fairies were already roaming about the orchard and all of them sported inquiring glances, but no one bothered the humans. Garth invited Midge to join them for breakfast and the green fairy was elated. Over breakfast, Tanya explained how she avoided capture and planned the infiltration. Garth thought Midge’s eyes would fly out of his head when Tanya described how she grabbed the Queen. When she got to the part about the Queen’s determination to see Arik’s chest and some reference to the Bringer, all eyes turned towards Arik. Arik turned bright red and stalked off to his blanket.

“What is all this about?” Kalina demanded of Midge.

“It is not my place to talk about it,” Midge declared.

“The Queen said that she would forbid her people to talk of it if Arik requested her to do so,” Tanya prodded. “Arik did not make such a request.”

Midge stared over at Arik while he talked. “Our Prophecy foretells of the one who will return the Crown of Light to our people,” Midge finally got out. “We know Arik to be that individual whom we call the Bringer.”

“How do you know it is Arik?” pressed Kalina.

“He bears the mark foretold upon his chest,” frowned Midge. “Now that I have told you, will you spare him further grief and embarrassment?”

“What else do the Prophecies foretell?” Garth asked.

“I am only permitted to speak of the Prophecy as far as I have,” declared Midge. “To say more is to

betray my people. Please do not abuse the hospitality that we have extended.”

With that Midge flew off to sit near Arik. “You have no reason to be ashamed of what you bear,” Midge told Arik. “I would gladly bear it for you if that were possible. It is a sign of greatness to my people. You should remove your shirt and wear the mark as a badge of honor because you have been chosen for an honorable task. There is not one among my people that would look upon it with anything but envy and awe. You are to be respected and revered.”

Arik looked at the diminutive Prince and smiled. “Thank you, Prince Midge,” he said softly. “Your words are kind and I respect them, but I am not a fairy. My own people will find amusement in my disfigurement and I will be scorned as a freak. I just want it to go away. I want to return home and fish with my father.”

“Alas, Arik,” Midge sighed, “greatness can not be discarded. Destiny cannot be tossed by the wayside with careless abandonment. For whatever reason you were chosen to perform this great deed, only you can perform it. What comfort could you enjoy with your father, knowing that there were people who needed help, which only you could provide? Face it, my friend, you have been chosen and you will perform the task. Given that, make the best of it. Be proud of who you are and strive to do your best. I will help you in any way I can.”

“Thank you, Midge,” Arik said. “You have mighty words for one so small. Perhaps you can help me practice my swordsmanship.”

Midge turned a pale green and Arik laughed. “I am sorry, Midge,” he apologized. “Practicing helps me clear my head and I did not think before I spoke. Your words have helped me and I will dwell on them while I practice.”

Arik rose and called out to Tanya about practicing. She rose immediately and joined Arik in a clear area away from the fire.

“Practicing is a good idea,” she mentioned. “It will clear your mind and make you realize that we are all friends here and will help each other through whatever difficulties we face.”

Arik nodded and squared off with his practice sword. Once the swordplay got underway, Tanya noticed that Arik’s mind was still on his troubles. She pushed hard at him with a variety of strokes. Quickly, Arik responded to her vigor, first defensively, then with bold attacks of his own. The fighting between Arik and Tanya became so intense that Fredrik and Tedi stopped practicing with their staffs to watch. Kalina and Niki also abandoned their magic lessons and soon a crowd of people and fairies had gathered to watch the dueling pair.

Tanya tossed her cap to the ground and rolled past Arik while attempting a hit across his legs. Arik caught her movements just in time and leaped over her sword swing. Upon landing he rolled himself into a ball and continued away from Tanya so she would not catch him turning around. Jumping to his feet, he saw Tanya closing on him and raised his wooden sword to deflect her blow.

The two warriors continued on, oblivious to the crowd, focusing their entire attention on each other. His body aching and drenched with sweat, Arik subconsciously stripped off his shirt and threw it to the ground just in time to fend off another of Tanya’s attacks.

The fairies in the crowd gasped at the sight of the mark upon his chest. Niki hid her face with her hands and Garth and Kalina stared without expression. Fredrik and Tedi started to laugh and both felt

something hard strike the backs of their heads. Turning around they saw Midge and another fairy with slingshots and the fairies were not smiling. Their laughter died in their throats as they turned back to watch the match.

Arik and Tanya had noticed none of the reactions, as they were too intent on gaining an advantage over the other. Arik scored a couple of kill hits on Tanya, but the young woman ignored them and continued her attack. The match lasted for over half an hour before Arik had Tanya on her back with his wooden sword at her throat. Tanya submitted and Arik collapsed on the ground alongside her. Applause rang through the orchard from large hands as well as small and Arik and Tanya noticed their audience for the first time.

Arik realized that he had shed his shirt for the first time in weeks and stared at the faces around him. There was nothing but praise in those faces for a performance well done and he laid his head back down on the ground.

“That was the finest display of swordsmanship I have seen in years,” complimented Garth as he tossed a towel to each of the fighters. “Perhaps you two are ready for a session with me this afternoon.”

Many times Garth had used a sword session with him as a threat to those who were acting cocky, but Arik and Tanya knew that this offer was entirely different. They realized that they had impressed Garth with their expertise and that brought a smile to each of them. The crowd slowly broke up with some fairies lingering to catch a last glimpse at Arik’s chest, but he did not notice them. Midge flew over and landed on Arik’s upraised knee.

“I am certainly glad that I did not take your offer of practice,” Midge commented. “You both know how to handle a sword well. I saw some of our army instructors watching and a few of them took notes on your movements. You said your father was a fisherman. How did you learn such a skill at your age?”

Arik sat up and grabbed his shirt. “Garth has been teaching us,” Arik replied. “Tanya had professional lessons and I learn from her as well.”

Tanya reached over and put her hand on Arik’s arm as he tried to put on his shirt. “May I look at it first?” she asked softly.

Arik’s face reddened, but he nodded and Tanya sat up to examine his chest. Over his left breast was engraved a reptile, which resembled a snake with legs. The reptile sported a large pair of wings and had a forked tongue protruding from its mouth. What amazed Tanya most were the colors. The reptile itself was a bright green and the wings were black. The eyes and protruding tongue were a vivid red.

“It looks like an artist’s painting,” Tanya stated. “Not just any artist, but a very well skilled artist. This came from that rash you got in Tagaret?”

Arik nodded and started to put his shirt on, but Tanya reached out and ran her finger over the tiny dragon. “Amazing!” she commented. “I wonder how one of those would look on me?”

Arik turned redder than the reptile’s eyes and he quickly shrugged his shirt on. Tanya caught his reaction and blushed herself. “I didn’t mean to say that out loud,” she chuckled. “You will NOT imagine it on me,” she added as she playfully swatted his shoulder.

Midge leaped into the air as Arik jumped to his feet and extended a hand to Tanya to help her get up. “I will have trouble not imagining it, now that you have mentioned it,” chuckled Arik. “Let’s go see if

the others have any ideas on how we are to find this Crown of Light.”

Midge landed on Arik’s shoulder as they returned to the campfire and helped themselves to coffee. Garth, Kalina, and Niki were sitting and talking to Queen Mita and the conversation was centered on the Crown of Light.

“We had the Sword of Heavens to help us find you,” Garth was saying. “We have no such aid in finding the Crown of Light. I have no idea even where to start looking for it.”

“We can not have come this far just to fail,” sighed Kalina. “The Ancient Prophecy led us to the Sapphire of the Fairies. The Fairy Prophecy must have a clue to lead us to this Crown of Light.”

Queen Mita shook her head. “There is no clue in the Prophecy and no mention of anything that will lead Arik to it.”

Garth smiled every time the Queen mentioned Arik and the Crown of Light. She accepted all of the Rangers as being part of the expedition. She accepted Garth as the leader of the Rangers, but when it came to the Crown of Light, she never left any doubt that Arik was all who mattered.

Midge flew off in a hurry while Fredrik and Tedi returned from their staff practice. They had also gathered an audience who applauded, but the fairies’ enthusiasm was clearly for the swordplay exhibition.

“Perhaps if we knew what we were looking for, we would have a better idea of where to look,” Arik suggested. “Do you have any books that have pictures of the crown?”

Queen Mita tilted her head and looked at Arik. “I can show you a vision of it,” she offered. “I forget that you are not versed in the ways of fairies. We have the ability to create visions from thought. All I have to do is think of a picture of the Crown of Light and project it.”

Queen Mita turned towards the fire and a cloud of smoke congealed above it. The center of the cloud started glistening and as the smoke dissipated a shiny, gold crown adorned with sapphire gems appeared. Everyone gasped at the lifelike image as it rotated over the fire.

“How large is it?” Tanya inquired.

Queen Mita smiled and pictured herself wearing the Crown of Light. The added perspective brought realization of how small the article actually was.

Fredrik shook his head and frowned. “We are expected to find something that small and all we know is that it is somewhere in the world. If everything depends on us finding that, we might as well go home.”

Kalina stood and walked around the fire, slowly examining the crown. Garth watched her and shook his head. “It is the same from every angle, Kalina,” he stated frustratingly.

“Sorry, Garth,” she replied absentmindedly, “but something is tickling my memory. Queen Mita can you visualize it in the palm of my hand, or any hand around the same size?”

Queen Mita wrinkled her brow for a moment. “Open your palm,” she requested.

Kalina held her palm flat and Queen Mita landed in the center of it. Next she projected an image of

herself in Kalina's palm and projected it over the fire. The image shimmered slightly as she altered it to include the Crown of Light on her head. Then in an eye blink, Queen Mita disappeared from the vision and the Crown of Light rested on Kalina's palm.

"Does that help?" the Queen asked.

"Yes," shouted Kalina. "I have seen this crown and held it in my very hand not twenty years ago. I am sure it is the same one."

"Great," shouted Tedi. "Where is it?"

Kalina's face clouded with frustration. "President Suarez of Cordonia showed it to me just before Oscar Dalek's wedding. He thought it would make an unusual wedding band, but Callie declined it."

"Well let's go to Cordonia and get it back for the fairies," exclaimed Tanya.

"The Cordonian Royal Palace was buried under a mountain in the Collapse," Garth stated. "Actually that is not a correct statement. The Palace merged with the mountain is actually a better description. In all probability, the Crown of Light is now part of the mountain. Even tearing the mountain apart piece by piece would not recover the crown in any condition that we would recognize."

Despair fell over the group and everyone fell silent. Fredrik started moving a pebble around with his staff and Tedi tried to shift his seat a little farther away from Niki who kept trying to lean against him. Garth and Kalina stared at each other across the campfire and Queen Mita flew herself down to the ground. Arik looked around the campfire at the sullen group and rose to his feet.

"My father did not raise me to be a quitter," Arik announced, "and I know Prince Midge will accompany me if no one else will. Are the rest of you in this only when the way is easy?"

"Give the man a tattoo," scowled Niki, "and he thinks he can bring a mountain to its knees."

Garth stood and placed his hand on Arik's shoulder. "Pay no mind to whiners, lad," Garth smiled broadly, "and never doubt your abilities. The Rangers are bound for Kantor and if it is a mountain that must be conquered, then a mountain will fall before us."

Tanya leaped up and started rolling up her gear. Kalina gently touched her on the arm. "In the morning will be soon enough, warrior," Kalina smiled. "We have the chance to enjoy the hospitality of the fairies before we depart and you still have that session with Garth this afternoon. I look forward to watching it. It has been a long time since a woman made Garth cry."

Tanya laughed and turned to see Garth shaking his head and grinning. The atmosphere of the campsite turned to one of enthusiasm and the Rangers spent the rest of the morning roaming the orchard and observing the way the fairies lived. Individual fairy guides were assigned to each Ranger to answer their questions and explain the ways of the fairies to the humans.

Excitement spread through the orchard as the fairies learned of the journey to Kantor to recover the Crown of Light. Fairy families brought their children out to see the humans, especially Arik who was treated with awe and respect above the other Rangers. Fairies started coming up to the Rangers to offer good luck charms or supplies for the journey and all of the Rangers' spare clothing disappeared and was returned later, freshly washed and mended where mending was needed.

Queen Mita presented each Ranger with a small sapphire bar to pin on their black suits to signify their unity with the fairies of the Sagina Universe. Arik noticed an eighth sapphire bar that was much smaller than the rest, but dismissed it as another group of fairies came along to introduce their children to the Bringer. Prince Midge's words came back to Arik and he smiled as he thought of his irrational fear of being an outcast because of his branding.

Eventually, the Rangers broke from the pandemonium and returned to their campsite for the midday meal. The meal was quiet as each Ranger pondered the strange people who had opened their homes and hearts to the humans. The smiles on the faces of the Rangers proved it was a beneficial experience.

Tanya moved and sat down next to Kalina. "Did you really attend Prince Oscar's wedding?" Tanya asked.

"Yes," Kalina answered as she watched Tanya with her peripheral vision.

"You must have been friends with Prince Oscar to have been invited to his wedding," Tanya probed.

"He was not Prince Oscar then," Kalina remembered. "He was Duke Dalek at the time and he had many friends."

"You must have met many of the other guests as well," Tanya continued. "I understand Alexander Tork and Jenneva were in the wedding. Did you get to meet them?"

"Ah, yes," Kalina nodded. "The young Lieutenant who was best man and the beautiful woman who accompanied him. Of course I remember them. Who could forget such a fine looking couple? There was always such a crowd around them that most people couldn't get close. And all that attention with so many other celebrities present. They were a special couple."

Garth stepped up behind Kalina and put his hands on her shoulders. "Kalina, there are some things we need to discuss with Queen Mita and I would prefer to do that sooner, rather than later," interrupted Garth. "Tanya, I'm afraid our little session for this afternoon will have to wait for another time. I hope you don't mind, but the opportunity to speak with the Queen of the Fairies is not one to be wasted. Why don't you organize the practice rounds for this afternoon and make it something that will entertain the fairy watchers as well as provide a good workout for the Rangers?"

Kalina quickly rose with a smile to Tanya and escorted Garth towards the Father Tree. Tanya bit her lip and wondered if she could beat Arik with a staff.

The rest of the day was spent in practice and the Rangers took pride in showing off their skills. Tanya made sure that the practice rounds included archery, swords, staves, knives, and of course, Lanorian Stars. The archery impressed the fairies the most and they marveled at the accuracy of Arik's longbow. Each of the Rangers was given an ovation after each performance and soon the warriors started trying to outdo the performance directly before theirs.

Niki, however, felt left out. Kalina had disappeared with Garth and she did not possess any demonstrable warrior skills. Halfway through the practice sessions, Niki wandered off into the orchard. Before she got very far, she ran into Garth and Kalina returning to the campsite and they corralled her into returning with them.

When the practice sessions were over, a long parade of fairies swarmed into the campsite and spread long strips of cloth along the ground. Family after family came and placed a food dish on the strips until

there were several long lines of small dishes from end to end. Queen Mita explained that this was a traditional sendoff for an army marching to war and the Rangers were being honored as a fairy army.

The servings were extremely small, but the potpourri of tastes was exciting. No one was sure what they were eating, and even the explanations of the fairy host did not often clarify the dish, but each was savored as a delicacy. Tedi thought with amusement that while there were only seven Rangers marching off to war, they probably devoured the equivalent of a whole fairy army during the festival.

Toward the end of the festivities the fairy crowd roared with approval and suddenly parted as a small blacksuited fairy marched towards the seated Rangers. With a leap and a fluttering of wings, Prince Midge landed on Arik's upraised knee and posed in his miniature version of a Ranger blacksuit, complete with pouches and pockets and wide leather belt. The only deviation from the Rangers' uniforms was the holes in the back to accommodate the fairy's wings. Pinned to the shoulder of Midge's uniform was the small sapphire pin that Arik had seen earlier.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 25

Kantor

The fairy festival lasted into the darkness, but the Rangers still chose to leave before first light. When the fairy village learned the Rangers were setting out on their journey, the entire village assembled with thousands of tiny fairy lanterns and lined the path out of the orchards, singing a song about a coming battle and the glorious fairy army. Arik took the lead with Midge perched upon his shoulder talking nonstop into his ear. Midge told Arik that he was witnessing the proper sendoff for a fairy army marching off to war and signified that it was the greatest honor, which could be bestowed on anyone leaving the fairy village. After leaving the orchard and waving farewell to the fairies, the Rangers angled southward to pick up the trail that ran along the Black River and followed it westward.

The terrain grew less mountainous each day as they headed downstream towards the western coast of what had been Cordonia. Kantor lay at the mouth of the Black River and was the capital of Cordonia before the Collapse. The only major town between the fairy village and Kantor was Paso and the Rangers gave it a wide berth, keeping well to the north side of the river.

When they got within a day's ride of Kantor, a large mountain loomed over the flat coastal terrain. Garth recognized it as the mountain that he mentioned to the group during their discussion of Kantor, the mountain that had replaced the Presidential Palace. For the first time on their journey, the Rangers began to see other travelers. Most of them had been on the south side of the Black River and were ignored, but occasionally they passed travelers on the north side and drew strange looks because of their black suits. Midge usually hid in one of Arik's pockets whenever anyone got close.

When they got close enough to see the walls of Kantor, they started to see roving army patrols and avoided them. Garth suspected that there were not many armed groups of travelers in the area and the soldiers would want to know who they were and where they were going. The questions would have to be answered sooner or later, but Garth hoped to enter the city without incident.

They arrived at the city gates late in the day and were immediately surrounded by several dozen soldiers. An officer approached Tedi, who was in the lead, and started asking questions. Garth immediately rode to the front of the group and assumed the leadership position for the Rangers.

“Officer,” Garth greeted, “we seek entrance to your fine city and wish to do so peacefully.”

“We do not like bandits or armed groups within the walls of Kantor,” the officer stated. “You can leave your weapons here and retrieve them upon your exit or you can turn around now. It is your choice.”

“We can do neither,” Garth declared. “We seek passage to the Isles of the Sea from a ship in the port of Kantor and we wish to take our weapons with us when we leave the city.”

The officer hesitated and Garth realized that there were no firm orders to back up the officer’s request to leave their weapons at the gate. The soldier was merely trying to keep a band of bandits from entering and causing trouble.

“We also will require lodging for the evening,” Garth suggested. “Perhaps we could check our weapons with the innkeeper until passage is booked. We wish no altercations during our short stay in Kantor.”

The offer did not seem to convince the officer as he looked at the blacksuited party. “You will be escorted to the General’s office by my men and he will determine your fate. If one of you even touches a weapon, my men will slay you all. We give little advantage to the likes of you and you needn’t worry about a trial.”

Garth nodded to the officer and allowed the soldiers to escort them to the General. The escort of several dozen soldiers led them through town to a large mansion with a gate facing the street. Soldiers manning the gate opened it and admitted the Rangers and their large escort. When they had ridden down the wide pathway that led from the street to the front of the mansion, the column halted and the officer disappeared inside the mansion. Within a few moments, the officer reappeared followed by an older officer with short, gray hair cut in a military fashion. The man was distinguished looking, but sported a thin scar running from his temple to behind his ear, probably a sword scar. The man was obviously the General and Garth smiled when he recognized him.

“General Fernandez,” Garth greeted, “your hair has grayed since we last met.”

The General stopped and focused his piercing eyes on Garth and it took a few moments before his eyes lit up with recognition. “Colonel!” General Fernandez announced. “I never expected to lay eyes on you again. Dismount so I don’t have to break my neck looking up at you, and I’ve told you before that you can call me Julio.”

“As you wish, Julio,” Garth smiled, “and you can call me Garth. I am no longer a Colonel.”

The General switched his gaze to the rest of Garth’s party with a suspicious look as Garth was dismounting. He turned to the officer and said, “Keep a close eye on the rest of them while I talk privately with this man.”

The General turned and walked into the mansion with Garth on his heels. The General did not break his military stride until he reached an office with two guards posted outside. He opened the door and entered the office, allowing Garth entry before he closed the door, and then sat at his desk, waving Garth

to a chair.

“The years have not been bad to you,” General Fernandez smiled.

“The color of your hair appears to be the only change you have suffered,” Garth smiled back. “I assume that you are the control behind Kantor these days?”

“There was no one else I could trust,” laughed Julio. “Speaking of trust, I notice that you do not trust your own party. Are they a threat here in Kantor?”

“They are not a threat to you or me,” Garth answered. “Your men can safely stand down.”

“Then why do you hide things from them?” quizzed Julio.

“Habit, mostly,” Garth admitted. “The years since we last met have not been peaceful ones for Kalina and myself. We have been hunted for years and I am sure the hunt still continues today. It is safer this way.”

General Fernandez shouted for his door guard and the door opened to admit one of the men. “Sergeant,” Julio ordered, “bring me the papers we found on the Black Devil last week. Also, dismiss the escort and invite our guests into the sitting room where they will be more comfortable and see to their horses.”

The Sergeant disappeared and returned almost immediately. He handed some papers to the General and closed the door behind him as he left. Julio rifled through the papers and withdrew two that he handed to Garth. Garth accepted the papers and looked at them. His eyes widened, as he looked at pictures of Kalina and himself, complete with physical descriptions and notations about Arik and Tedi. The description of the boys was incomplete, as if made by someone who had heard about them but had never seen them. The Dark Rider, Klarg, immediately came to mind.

“What else did you find on this Black Devil?” Garth asked.

The General passed over the rest of the papers and Garth flipped through them. Most of them meant nothing to Garth, but he stopped at one sheet that mentioned Lord Wason. Reading the sheet thoroughly, Garth picked out the descriptions of the five Children as they had appeared in Tagaret, including Niki’s red dress, which she had worn only during the prison break in Tagaret. Oddly, there was no mention about General Gregor or Sergeant Trank, which led Garth to believe that someone in the Royal Palace was serving two masters.

“You always were good at gathering intelligence,” complimented Garth. “I can see now that Garth Shado will have to disappear.”

The General took the papers back and looked at the one, which had interested Garth. “This does appear to be your party,” noticed General Fernandez. “You have been traveling a great deal. Why have you come to Kantor?”

“We are on a fool’s mission,” sighed Garth. “There is an artifact which was in the Presidential Palace when Oscar Dalek got married. I need to recover it.”

“A fool’s mission, indeed,” agreed General Fernandez. “What is the artifact?”

“It is called the Crown of Light,” Garth answered. “It is a crown small enough to be a ring on a woman’s finger. It belongs to the fairies and has been missing for hundreds of years at least.”

“I doubt that you have become a jewelry merchant since we last met,” Julio stated. “Why do you need this crown?”

“Julio,” Garth admitted, “the Ancient Prophecy has begun. I do not know if you are aware of the Prophecy, but it foretells of the death of the Dark One. The Crown of Light is needed to help fulfill that Prophecy. I need to find it even if I have to take the mountain apart grain by grain.”

The General nodded and stared out the window at the mountain for a period. “I have read about the Ancient Prophecy,” declared the General. “Of course, I am not sure if I believe it. I suppose that the young men you have with you are the Children of the Prophecy?”

“Yes,” confided Garth. “We also have the Sword of Heavens which will be used to kill Sarac. The Prophecy is true, Julio, and it has fallen to me to see that these Children succeed.”

“There is a chance, Colonel,” General Fernandez suggested. “Most of the Palace no longer exists, but there is a section of the ground floor still accessible. More importantly, the section contains the library and the treasure room. The library has been gutted and the contents removed, but the treasure room has been inaccessible because no one could enter it. If President Suarez kept this crown in the treasure room, you have a chance. If not, you will have to dismantle the mountain and you will not live that long.”

“How is it possible that the treasure room survived and yet has never been opened?” Garth inquired.

“It is amazing,” granted the General. “I watched the mountain appear myself. It didn’t grow or fall into place; it sort of materialized from nothing. One corner of the Palace was left sticking out. When we went to search for survivors, we found that it extended into the mountain like a cave. In fact, that is what we think it is. Wherever the mountain came from, the cave was already in it and so was a dragon. I watched the dragon fly out of the cone of the mountain. I suppose the cave may have been his other entrance and that is why he never returned. You may be able to get in through the cone.”

“Has no one ever tried before?” Garth asked.

“Oh, yes, some have tried,” sighed Julio. “And they died trying. No one has gone into the cone and come out alive. Treasure does you no good when you are dead.”

“Is the treasure vault accessible from this cave?” Garth queried.

“If my theory about the cave meeting the cone is valid, it must be,” Julio suggested. “The problem with that approach is that the vault was built of solid stone many feet thick. A bunch of dwarf miners would take years to get through it.”

“I haven’t given my people any lessons in mountain climbing yet,” confided Garth. “It looks like I will have to go in alone.”

“We don’t train for mountain terrain in Kantor,” admitted the General. “With the exception of this one mountain, Kantor is as flat as a calm sea. Let me host your group for this evening and I will take you into the cave tomorrow so you can see for yourself.”

General Fernandez escorted Garth into the sitting room and was introduced to the Alcea Rangers. After General Fernandez explained the situation, the Rangers discussed the various approaches. After a lengthy discussion, they decided that General Fernandez would escort them into the cave in the morning so that they could assess the possibility of using magic to break through the stonewall. At the same time, Midge would fly into the cone and see if there was an opening through the center of the mountain. By the time the discussions were done, the hour had grown quite late and the Rangers opted to retire. Garth stayed up with General Fernandez for several additional hours discussing the events of the last seventeen years.

In the morning, the group assembled for the trip to the cave. Niki professed to not feeling well and decided to stay in town. Actually, Niki was depressed again. If the Rangers were going to use magic to open the vault, it would be either Kalina or Fredrik that would wield the magic. They certainly would not need to heal the cave, so Niki felt useless once again. Everyone else was too excited about gaining the Crown of Light to worry about Niki's feelings.

Midge was sent on his way and the rest of the group proceeded to the cave entrance. After they left, Niki decided to leave the mansion and do some shopping in the city. The General's men had been told that Garth's party were guests, so no one stopped Niki from leaving the mansion. Niki changed into a red dress and donned her cloak before strolling towards the waterfront and finding an open market with dozens of shops and stalls. Niki's spirits immediately lifted. Niki's red dress and red hair drew a lot of attention, which lifted her spirits even higher. She was drawing so much attention, as a matter of fact, that she did not notice the man with long black hair and black eyes who was following her.

The Rangers stood and stared at the massive rock wall. "I can certainly shatter the vault wall," Kalina said absently, "but the force necessary would probably bring the mountain down on top of us. It's not going to work."

Fredrik stared at her in amazement. The amount of control and power required to shatter the vault wall should take an army of Black Devils and Kalina had just said that she could do it herself. She hadn't even thought of asking Fredrik to join with her. He was inclined to write it off as being boastful until he saw Garth nodding and frowning.

"I was afraid of that," Garth stated. "Bringing the whole mountain down does not get us closer to retrieving the Crown of Light. I hope Midge is having more luck on the inside of the mountain."

"Was someone talking about me?" Midge called as he flew into the cave and settled on Arik's shoulder.

"What does the other side look like?" Arik asked.

"There is no way in," sighed Midge. "The vault probably is the reason that the dragon left, though. It protrudes into the bottom of the cone where the dragon had his lair."

"Can you show us?" inquired Tanya. "Perhaps we will see something that will give us some ideas."

Prince Midge nodded and closed his eyes. He started thinking of his journey and projected the images above a clear spot on the cave floor. The group watched as Midge flew down the cone and the scene grew dimmer. It seemed to take Midge a long time to reach the bottom and when he did it was quite dark. They watched as Midge created a fairy light and the image grew brighter. The floor of the cave was littered with gold and silver objects as well as several piles of bones. Tedi's eyes widened as

he saw the vast treasure the dragon had left behind. He also noticed what appeared to be a small tunnel burrowing into the side of the cave.

“That looks like a tunnel,” exclaimed Tedi. “Similar in size to the one at the back of this cave. I think we should explore it.”

Midge’s image flickered momentarily and then stabilized again as someone ordered quiet. Everyone focused their attention on the image as Midge rotated and looked around the dragon’s lair. Protruding into the lair were two sides and a corner of the roof of the vault. The sides of the vault were tilted slightly and the roof was cracked as if the weight of the mountain was too much for the vault to support. There were also several stalactites touching the roof. Most of them had been broken off, but one of them appeared to pass through the crack in the roof. The image of the crack in the roof came closer as Midge moved towards it and searched for a break that would allow him to enter the vault. While the roof was cracked, it was not cracked enough to allow entry even for one so small as Midge. The image of the lair continued for a while as Midge checked every inch of the exposed surfaces of the vault and eventually flew back up the cone.

“As you can see,” Midge declared, “I was not able to find even the smallest hole to gain entry.”

“Let’s go back to the mansion and get something to eat,” Garth said suddenly. “We can discuss our options tonight and retrieve the Crown of Light tomorrow.”

The group filed out of the cave and headed back to the mansion. Nobody noticed that Tedi had not emerged from the cave. Tedi stayed behind and was crawling into the tunnel in hope of finding an entrance to the vault.

Niki was enjoying the open market and when she saw a food peddler with a couple of tables set out, she decided to get something to eat. Niki sat down and the peddler handed her a chalkboard with the day’s specials. Niki could not read the script and sat there staring at the chalkboard.

“Perhaps I can help,” offered the man with long, black hair and black eyes as he sat at Niki’s table. “His specials are all seafood. Today he has crab cakes, jumbo shrimp, which are really quite small, I promise you, and mussels. I would recommend the crab cakes.”

“Why, thank you,” Niki got out. “You must live around here to know so much.”

“Actually, I am from Trekum,” the dark man said. “My name is Dalgar.”

“Oh, I am also from Trekum,” chirped Niki. “What a coincidence. Have you been here long?”

“I have been wandering ever since my wife died,” Dalgar confided. “I have been searching for my lost daughter.”

“Your wife died and you lost your daughter?” Niki exclaimed. “How terrible that must be for you.”

“It is terrible for everyone,” Dalgar explained. “You see, my daughter must be found so she can lead her people to greatness.”

“Lead her people?” Niki inquired. “Can’t you lead the people? Who would she lead in Trekum?”

“Ah, you have many questions,” Dalgar smiled. “My wife was the Empress of Sordoa and our daughter must be found to unite and rule over Sordoa once again. I cannot lead them because I am not entitled to. Only my daughter can do that.”

“I do not understand,” Niki queried. “I thought the Empress was married to the Emperor and her daughter was also the daughter of Sarac. What you are saying makes no sense.”

“Where ever did you hear such fairy tales?” laughed Dalgar. “Aurora was not married to the Emperor. She was the Emperor’s advisor and heir. The Emperor was unmarried and had no sons or daughters of his own. That is why he made Aurora the heir. She was so wise in advising him that he knew she would make an excellent Empress. As for Sarac and Aurora . . . I cannot imagine the swine that would spread such disgusting tales. Aurora hated Sarac with a passion. She would never bear his child. No, that Princess Callie of Targa, now that was more Sarac’s taste, but never Aurora.”

Niki’s head spun with the contradictions between Dalgar’s story and Kalina’s. Suddenly, it dawned on Niki where she had heard the name Dalgar before. He was the Black Devil who had escaped with Aurora from the Rangers’ attack on Mordac’s castle.

“I thought Aurora was a Black Devil?” questioned Niki. “Aren’t they servants of the Dark One?”

“Oh, yes,” laughed Dalgar. “Aurora and I were both Black Devils. We are the ones responsible for freeing Sarac from Jenneva’s trap. That does not mean that we follow Sarac without question. Aurora and I had made plans to rule the world before Alex and Jenneva killed her.”

“Alex and Jenneva killed Aurora?” Niki asked confusingly. “I thought Sarac killed Aurora.”

Dalgar shook his head sadly. “Someone has filled your head with nonsense,” Dalgar declared. “Oh, Sarac wanted Aurora out of the way all right, so he allowed the information on her whereabouts to fall into the hands of Alex and Jenneva. They did his dirty work for him.”

“I am really confused,” admitted Niki while holding her head with her hands. “If you and Aurora were plotting against Alex and Jenneva as well as Sarac, why are you willing to tell all of this to me? Aren’t you afraid I might tell somebody?”

“I do not think so,” smiled Dalgar. “You wear Aurora’s cloak and you have Aurora’s hair and face. You will not tell anyone because you are my daughter and with my help, you will rule the world.”

Niki’s head snapped up and she stared, openmouthed, at Dalgar. “You mean I am really going to be a Queen? Or Empress, I mean? You can make that happen?”

“Together we can make it happen, daughter,” smiled Dalgar. “We must not let anyone know that we suspect their lies just yet, though. You will continue to play along with your friends as if nothing has changed.”

“How will that help me become Empress?” Niki asked. “Suppose they find out about you?”

“You will not let them know about me,” ordered Dalgar. “They seek to destroy Sarac. We will help them do that, up to a point. When we are ready, we will destroy them and Sarac and there will be nothing to stand in our way. You must get them to lead you to Alex and Jenneva. We need to avenge Aurora’s death by killing those two and Sarac. You will learn everything you can about their plans and movements. I need to know everything I can about each member of your group and where they plan to

go next.”

“Well, I know they are looking for the Crown of Light right now,” offered Niki. “It is supposed to be at the bottom of that mountain.”

“What do they want with the Crown of Light?” puzzled Dalgar. “Wait . . . tell me everything you know about them already.”

While Dalgar sat attentively, Niki told him about the members of the group and how they met. She explained about the Sword of Heavens and the fairy’s demands for the Crown of Light. When she went into detail about how they rescued General Gregor from the Royal Palace in Tagaret, Dalgar smiled. He paid particular attention to the meaning and description of Tedi’s necklace.

“So, it would appear that their next stop will be back to the fairies if they manage to find this Crown of Light,” surmised Dalgar. “I will explain a number of ways for you to get information to me. The easiest will be for you to leave a message at the campsite when you leave in the morning. I’ll have someone following the group and they will be instructed to retrieve the messages. If you stay in a city and do not camp, you can leave a message at any Black Devil drop with my name on it. Now listen closely and I’ll explain how to identify a Black Devil drop in case you need to use one.”

Dalgar and Niki spent another hour talking and making plans to rule the world. Dalgar warned Niki that other Black Devils would ambush the group if they found out about them. Dalgar explained that there would be little he could do to intervene if that happened and she should be prepared to defend herself. After Dalgar left, Niki returned to the mansion in a happier mood than she had been in a very long time.

Sapphire of the Fairies

Chapter 26

Crown of Light

Everyone except Tedi was in the sitting room discussing the various approaches to getting the Crown of Light when Niki walked in humming to herself. Garth immediately turned towards Niki and frowned while shaking his head. No one sensed Garth’s displeasure at seeing Niki and everyone greeted her warmly when she asked what was going on. Arik summarized the events of the day for her and waited for some revelation on how they could retrieve the Crown of Light. Instead, Niki sat down on the floor and leaned her head against the wall.

When the discussion continued, Garth tapped Kalina lightly on her arm and led her outside. When they were far enough away from everyone, Garth stopped walking.

“I think the stalactite may be the key,” Garth declared. “If it passes through the roof of the vault, it is the only place where the vault is not solid. Is it possible to melt the stalactite without causing harm to the mountain?”

“It would certainly be easier to shatter it,” Kalina replied. “I can do that without causing the mountain

to drop on us. It will be extremely loud, but the vent looked big enough to allow the pressure to escape. I think I can do that.”

“It is just getting dark now,” Garth mentioned. “Why don’t we ride out towards the mountain so we are alone. As soon as it is dark we can enter the vent unseen.”

“Okay,” Kalina replied. “Get a lantern from the stables. I don’t want to waste any energy with a mage light while we are down there.”

Garth and Kalina mounted their large horses and rode towards the mountain. Within the hour, darkness was complete and Garth checked to make sure no one was around.

Okay, Kaz, we’re ready. Let’s go play where the dragons live.

Kaz snorted as the mindspeech registered and the black stallion’s wings appeared. Gone, too, was the illusion spell, which hid the unicorn’s horn. Alongside Kaz, Yorra was performing the same transition. Together, Garth on his black unicorn and Kalina on her white one, they rose into the sky and headed for the vent at the peak of the mountain.

It has been too long since you have let us spread our wings, Alex. Yorra and I have missed the thrill of flying.

I am not sure that I could stand the hero worship of the Children, Kaz. Even without Alex around, they can’t stop talking about all of those ridiculous tales they have heard.

It was Yorra’s turn to snort. *The tales are not ridiculous, Alex. Just because you refuse to acknowledge your contributions, there is no reason to belittle the Children for wanting to believe in someone good.*

Jenneva gave Yorra a pat on the neck. *Stop it, you two. Alex has enough problems with the Children and their hero worship. Don’t you two start on him. Just get us down the vent so we can do what we’ve come for.*

The unicorns circled the mountain peak once before Kaz led the way down into the vent with Yorra close behind. At the bottom of the vertical shaft, the unicorns landed in the dragon’s lair. Alex and Jenneva dismounted and Alex lit the lamp he acquired at the stables. Ignoring the piles of gold and silver objects, Alex hoisted Jenneva onto the roof of the vault to examine the stalactite.

After examining the stalactite, Jenneva shook her head. “I can’t tell if it goes through or not. The easiest way will be to shatter it and see what happens. Let’s find something to provide cover. When it shatters, pieces of rock will be flying all over the place and I won’t have any shields up.”

They scampered off the roof onto a pile of gold and slid to the floor of the lair. Alex found some full-length silver shields and dragged them to the opposite side of the lair.

“I can hold the two of these and we can hide behind them,” Alex declared as he indicated to Kaz and Yorra to leave the chamber. “Will they be sufficient?”

Jenneva nodded and focused on the stalactite. Suddenly, the hairs on the back of Alex’s head stood out and he looked around frantically to see if someone else was in the lair. High above him, he picked out a small pair of eyes just as Jenneva yelled, “Down!”

It was hard for Alex to tell which was worse, the concussion of air and rocks smashing against the two shields as he strained to hold them away from Jenneva and himself, or the absolutely deafening sound that reverberated off the walls of the lair. The reverberation lasted for over half a minute. The ringing in his ears lasted much longer. Jenneva ended up prone on the floor with Alex on top of her. The two shields lay on top of both of them. Pushing the shields off, Alex looked up to find the pair of eyes, but the chamber was so full of dust that he could see nothing past the shields.

Jenneva slowly got up and started another incantation. Within seconds, a whirlwind was created in the vent and started twirling violently. Gold and silver coins started to rise off the floor in the center of the lair to be caught up in the whirlwind, but quickly dropped back to the floor. What did get caught in the whirlwind was the dust and within moments Jenneva was able to see across the chamber again. She turned towards Alex and saw his lips moving, but all she could hear was a ringing in her ears.

Mind speech is the only way we will be able to communicate for a while, Alex.

You didn't mention that we would go deaf, Jenneva.

I've never quite done this inside a mountain before, Alex. It won't last long. Let's see if we have an entrance hole.

Alex again hoisted Jenneva up onto the roof of the vault and they crawled to where the stalactite had been. Alex smiled when he saw the hole in the roof. It was too small for him to fit through, but Jenneva would be able to make it. She obviously had the same idea because she was already lowering herself into the vault. Alex grabbed her hands from the lip and stretched his arms into the vault as far as the hole would allow him. She dropped the short distance remaining and Alex lowered the lamp down to her. She was soon gone from his view and Alex turned his attention back to the vent where he had seen the small pair of eyes. He hoped it had not been Kaz or Yorra coming back down the vent. He would know soon enough because the unicorns would return when the dust stopped flowing out of the vent.

Having nothing to do for a while, Alex slid off the roof and scooped a couple of handfuls of gold coins into his pouches. Kaz and Yorra returned and settled down on the floor.

How did you and Jenneva avoid getting hurt down here? inquired Kaz.

We hid behind some old silver shields. Did you see anyone in the vent on your way up? Alex asked.

Nobody, but the concussion blew a bird out, an osprey I think, though it was hard to tell. Poor little thing must have been frightened out of its wits. Is Jenneva in the vault? Yorra snorted.

I am and I would like to come out now, Jenneva answered.

Alex scrambled onto the roof and stuck one arm in as far as he could. He heard something scraping along the floor and then felt Jenneva's hands grab his arm. Steadily, Alex hoisted her up until she could grasp the rim of the hole. Repositioning himself so he was squatting over the hole, he reached down and grabbed her arms again and straightened his legs until she could stand on the roof of the vault. She reached into her pouch and extracted the Crown of Light and smiled at him. Replacing it into her pouch, she slid off the roof and mounted Yorra. Alex quickly followed her and mounted Kaz and the two unicorns leaped into the air and spiraled into the vent.

On the short flight to the top of the mountain, Alex's ears began to clear and he could hear sounds now, although the level was still low. Upon landing, the unicorns invoked the spells that hid their wings and horns and looked like large horses again. By the time Garth and Kalina returned to the mansion, their hearing was restored and the ringing was gone.

"I shall never belittle the ability to hear properly again," chuckled Garth. "I wonder how the Children are doing? What are we going to tell them, anyway?"

"I will tell them that we retrieved it magically," stated Kalina, "and when they ask how, I will tell them that they are not ready for that lesson yet. What does it matter, anyway?"

Garth and Kalina strode into the sitting room and found Arik talking with General Fernandez. "Where is everybody else?" Garth asked.

"We don't know," Arik answered. "Somebody noticed that Tedi was missing and everyone is off looking for him. We didn't realize it, but no one has seen him since we came back from the cave. Tanya thought he might still be there trying to figure a way to get into the vault. Fredrik and Niki left separately. I think Fredrik searched the mansion and then went outside. I am not sure where Niki went. I am supposed to stay here in case Tedi returns."

"I think that is an excellent idea," Kalina responded. "Garth and I will ride out to the cave and see if the others are there. If anyone returns here, tell them to stay put."

Garth and Kalina ran back outside and mounted Kaz and Yorra. Swiftly, they rode to the cave and entered. Tedi was laid out on the floor with Niki kneeling next to him. Tanya was sitting with her left sleeve and left pant leg rolled up and Fredrik was cleaning scrape wounds she had incurred. When Garth and Kalina dismounted, Fredrik rose to meet them.

"Thank goodness, you've come," Fredrik blurted out. "Tedi was stuck in that tunnel when there was an explosion of some type. We think he may be deaf. Niki is trying some spell that she learned from one of those healing books you purchased in Melbin. Tanya had to crawl into the tunnel and drag Tedi out. She got scraped up pretty badly."

Garth retrieved some ointments and bandages from his saddle pouch and tended to Tanya, while Kalina went to check on Tedi. Kalina bent down and examined Tedi's ears. Niki moved aside, but did not say anything. After the examination, Kalina sat on the floor of the cave.

"I think it is just a temporary nerve deafening," Kalina announced. "He should be all right in a day or so."

"Of course, he will be all right," announced Niki boastfully. "I have fixed him up with a healing spell. He will be able to hear fine in a day or two."

"What spell did you use?" Kalina asked as she shot Niki a sideways glance.

"Nerve Crescendo," Niki answered smugly. "He would have been deaf if I did not. The spell must be used before the nerves go totally dead. By the time you got here it would have been too late."

Kalina smiled grimly. "Very well, Niki," she said. "Let's get him back to the mansion and get him to bed. Are you well enough to ride, Tanya?"

Tanya just nodded and rolled her pants and sleeve back down over the bandages that Garth had applied. Everyone rode back in silence and Kalina dropped back so far that Garth went to see if there was something wrong with Yorra. When he got alongside Kalina, she put her finger to her lips.

“There was no damage to his ears,” Kalina whispered. “That fool girl may well have started him on the road to insanity. His ears were probably affected about the same as ours were. His hearing will improve now, slowly at least, but eventually it will be hard for him to stand the noise. His hearing is going to be so sensitive that his own breathing will be like the roar of the wind in a thunderstorm. If we do not find a way to deaden the nerves, he will go crazy.”

“Isn’t there a counter-spell or something that will put him back to normal?” asked Garth.

“If there is,” Kalina sighed, “I do not know of it. I certainly wouldn’t expect to find such a spell in a healing book. We must bear in mind that he will know what everyone in camp is saying. We will have no secrets from him unless we mindspeak. It may be time to reveal our true identities before they find out on their own. If they do not hear it from us, they will have reason to doubt whatever else we say. I know it will be hard on you, but you are going to have to learn to deal with it.”

“General Fernandez has already given me reason to let Garth and Kalina disappear,” Garth stated. “We are being hunted as Garth and Kalina as much as we are as Alex and Jenneva. We could probably adopt some new disguises, but they know about the Children, too. So, even though we might hide ourselves from Sarac and his minions, we cannot also hide the Children. The time for disguises and hiding is over. It will actually be a relief to become Alex and Jenneva again.”

“Not to mention getting this hair dye off our heads,” laughed Jenneva. “Did I tell you that I love you as a blond?”

“Does that mean I have not been lovable since I’ve had my hair black?” Alex teased.

The other riders were glancing back now that Alex and Jenneva allowed their voices to pick up so they quit their bantering and rode to join the rest of the group. When they arrived back at the mansion everyone assembled in the sitting room. Jenneva, in one of her last appearances as Kalina, announced that they would be leaving in the morning. She announced that they had what they had come for and suggested that everyone save their questions for the morning and get to sleep as quickly as possible. Without further words, Garth and Kalina retired to their room and began the arduous task of removing their hair dye.

In the morning Alex asked one of General Fernandez’s men to summon the General and have breakfast sent up for Jenneva and himself. The General smiled as he walked in and saw the old Alex and Jenneva couple. Alex told the General about the new hole in the vault and suggested that the tunnel, which Tedi had been stuck in, went through to the dragon’s lair. With a little work the tunnel could be widened and the General would have access to the riches of the vault. The General knew enough about Alex and Jenneva to not bother asking how they had accomplished their goal. Alex’s accomplishments had always impressed the General and Jenneva was known as perhaps the most powerful magician in the world. Neither of them would divulge how the task had been completed.

The General thanked them for coming and promised his support in any way that it would help. Alex knew the General was quite sincere and thanked him. The Rangers were already assembled outside when Alex and Jenneva came out and the reaction to their new look was astonishment. Alex and Jenneva both had beautiful, blond hair done up in braids that hung to their waists.

“It is time for you to know the truth,” Alex declared. “We have been traveling in disguise because the Dark One seeks to kill us and we could not accomplish our goal of finding the Children with Dark Riders following us. You have been found, and the Dark Riders are after you as much as they are after us. When they come we will meet them with steel. The Alcea Rangers ride with Alexander and Jenneva Tork. Let’s ride!”

Alex and Jenneva took off for the street and the rest of the Rangers followed with their mouths hanging open. Niki looked like she wanted to bolt and run away, but the rest of the Rangers just appeared dumbfounded. General Fernandez personally escorted them to the city gates and bid them farewell. No one spoke until they were well clear of the city. Tanya was the first to approach Alex and she had a hard time trying to determine what to say.

“Alex, . . .” began Tanya, “I am . . . so sorry for giving you such a bad time as Garth. I thought for some reason that Garth hated you and so I pushed all the more. Was your hatred of Alex part of your disguise?”

“It was not hatred that you were sensing, Tanya,” Alex sighed. “It was a dislike for people making things out to be more than they are. I am no more a hero than you or any of the other Rangers. We all face the same perils and we face them together. People like to make stories out of surviving these perils to live another day, but people just do what they must to survive. Am I a hero because I have survived, or are the men who gave their lives trying, the real heroes? I do not perform my tasks to gain fame or riches. I only do what must be done and because I am capable of doing it. You are the same type of person as I am. Do you yearn to have minstrels write songs about your achievements or do you kill people to live another day?”

“I guess I did not understand you as well as I thought,” admitted Tanya. “I have no great desire for fame, but I would not get angry with those who look up to me. You not only got angry with us, you sounded like you would like to take Alex’s face and rub it in the midden. Surely, that must have been part of an act.”

“Perhaps,” Alex sighed, “I am just not as thrilled with some of the decisions in my life as others are. Others get to hear stories about my great deeds. I get to view everything about my life, the bad as well as the good. You could not understand.”

“You mentioned something about giving your child to the Black Devils,” Tanya probed. “You do not appear to be the type of person who would give anything to the Black Devils except the point of your sword.”

Alex glared at the young woman and moved off towards the front of the procession. “You still push him too hard,” Jenneva advised. “A man will carry his own burdens whether or not you approve. I suggest that is one area which you should not mention again.”

“Well, it was your child, too,” pushed Tanya. “Do you really expect me to believe that you both gave up your child?”

Jenneva sighed and shook her head sadly. “We were busy trying to save the world when the Black Devils attacked our home,” Jenneva related sadly. “They killed a young girl who’s only crime was that she was in my house. They took our baby and Alex will never forgive himself for not being home at the time. You must not mention it to him again.”

“And how do you feel about it?” inquired Tanya.

“Damn you!” Jenneva shouted. “You want to know how I feel about it? I feel like I want to cast a Tree Mine into the throat of the next person who mentions it and perhaps I will.”

Jenneva galloped off to join Alex at the front of the procession. No sooner had Jenneva left than Arik pulled up alongside Tanya. “I don’t know any magic, Tanya,” Arik pointed out, “but the next time you press them on this, you had better be prepared for a practice session which you will never forget.”

Tanya watched, stunned, as Arik dropped back alongside Fredrik. Fredrik’s face told Tanya that he had heard the conversation, as well, and his feelings were the same as Arik’s. For the rest of the journey back to the fairy village, Tanya was fairly well isolated by the others. She was not excluded from conversations, but her actions had created a certain distance between herself and the other Rangers.

As the Rangers prepared to make camp the day before reaching the fairy village, Midge flew up to Alex’s shoulder.

“The village is not far from here,” Midge stated. “I think we should continue on tonight.”

“Returning the Crown of Light is important to your people,” Alex protested. “We should arrive in the daytime so everyone can see it.”

“It is important enough that everyone will forgo sleep to see it,” Midge pushed. “We should arrive there in a few hours and you must entrust the Crown of Light to Arik. He must be the one to present it to Queen Mita. He is the Bringer. It is to the Bringer that the Sapphire of the Fairies will be presented.”

Alex looked to Jenneva for her comments and she nodded. “Very well,” Alex agreed. “We shall ride on tonight. Take the Crown of Light to Arik and ask him to guard it well.”

Midge delivered the Crown of Light and explained to Arik what he must do with it. Several hours later, the Rangers rode into the fairy village. Midge must have flown on ahead because the entire village was awake and fairy lights lined the approach from the edge of the orchard to the Father Tree. Arik dismounted in front of the Father Tree and approached the platform where Queen Mita and Prince Midge waited. Queen Mita’s blue body was adorned with a blue robe with a silver lining. Arik bowed and held out his hand with the Crown of Light resting on his palm. Prince Midge gently lifted the Crown of Light and the entire fairy village erupted into a solemn song, the words of which were unknown to the Rangers.

Prince Midge gently approached Queen Mita and placed the Crown of Light gently on her head. The song ended and every fairy in the village dropped to their knees and bowed to the Queen. The Queen stepped to the edge of the platform and recited the Fairy Prophecy:

“Your blood will flow til none is left

While darkness around you descends

On Holy Sapphire all you have

Fate of the Fairies do depend.

The Crown of Light the Fairies' Life

Without it all are doomed to die

The Holy Sapphire just a patch

Redemption only just a lie.

The Bringer knows not what he does

But fate has chosen only he

Who bears the mark upon his chest

The Winged Serpent death doth flee.

From darkest night the Bringer comes

Restores the precious Crown of Light

The Holy Sapphire shall he own

Fairy fealty his due and right.

The Queen raised her hand and the fairies rose from their kneeling position. Prince Midge entered the Queen's chambers and came out holding the large Sapphire of the Fairies. The Sapphire was very large for a fairy to carry, but Midge showed no sign of distress in carrying it. He brought it to Queen Mita and she accepted it from her son.

Holding the large Sapphire in her tiny hands, she stood while Arik approached the platform. Arik stretched out his hand and the Queen placed the Sapphire of the Fairies in his palm.

"Arik Clava," the Queen declared regally, "you are the Bringer of the Crown of Light. Into your hands, we trust the Sapphire of the Fairies. Into your hands, we trust the Queen of the Fairies. Into your hands, we trust the very existence of the Fairy People. From this day forward, the Fairy People exist for your service. I, Queen Mita, and my successors, exist for your service."

The Queen dropped to her knees and bowed to Arik, the Bringer, and the whole fairy village fell to its knees and repeated the pledge. Prince Midge had not told this last part to Arik because it was forbidden to speak of the Fairy Prophecy to outsiders without leave of the Queen. Arik blushed deeply, but refused to let it spoil the fairy ritual.

"Queen Mita," he stated solemnly, "I accept your pledge of fealty. Rise." Turning to face the

villagers he continued, "Fairy People, I accept your pledge of fealty. Rise."

Feeling foolish, Arik pretended he was one of the kings he often dreamed about and tried to act accordingly. He stepped back from the platform and retrieved the Sword of Heavens from its sheath. He held its point in the dirt and laid the Sapphire of the Fairies in the spot that was made for it. The Sapphire snapped into place firmly and sparkled brilliantly. The Sword started to vibrate and Arik held it with both hands. Forcing against his considerable strength, the Sword swung upward. His attempts to hold it level with the ground were futile and the Sword kept moving upward until Arik's hands were stretched over his head and the Sword was pointing straight up.

A brilliant streak of lightning erupted from the tip of the Sword and arced high into the sky, piercing the Darkness created by the Dark One. In a blinding flash, the lightning exploded into the Darkness and created a hole. Like a wave upon the ocean, the Darkness rolled outward in a circle revealing a black sky encrusted with thousands of stars and still it continued rolling until there was no sign of the Darkness at all. Hanging in the eastern sky was a large ball of pale light and Arik heard someone mention the word "Moon." Arik stood transfixed staring at a night sky, which he never imagined he would live to see.

THE END

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The Sword of Heavens is a seven volume series that follows the *Targa Trilogy*. The series starts 17 years after the end of the Targa Trilogy and features the Children of the Prophecy. To save the world from Sarac's evil grasp, these uninformed and ill-prepared youngsters must embark on a series of adventures to restore the ancient Sword of Heavens to its full mystical powers. Only a full restored Sword of Heavens wielded by a descendent of Sarac can end the reign of the Dark One.

Each stone in the Sword of Heavens represents a race from one of the seven original universes and the stones are rare artifacts that will not be merely handed over to the Children. To accomplish their goal, the Children must learn the ancient arts of magic and warfare and become Masters to survive.

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Sapphire of the Fairies

Unicorns' Opal

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Amethyst of the Gods

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A devastating and senseless attack on her home and magic school leaves Lyra and two friends running for their lives. With her mother dead and her father kidnapped, Lyra sets out on a harrowing cross-country trek to reach her only relative, Uncle Temiker. Unfortunately, the raiders are chasing her and anticipating her every move.

With no one to turn to and even the government joining in the pursuit, Lyra is forced to enter the dreaded Sakova, the home of cannibals, strange magic, and ferocious animals. The Sakova is a land that does not allow its trespassers to leave alive, yet it is the only path open to Lyra if she is to have any chance of surviving.

Can Lyra's scant knowledge of magic help her survive long enough to escape? Will she ever learn who is behind the devastating attack that has ripped apart her world and what they are after?

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Seventeen years have passed since the end of the Targa Trilogy and the Children of the Ancient Prophecy have avoided detection, until now.

The Children have fled and the evil forces of Sarac are in hot pursuit. Gathered by a pair of gypsies, three boys and two girls join forces to wield the ancient Sword of Heavens, the only artifact that can defeat Sarac. The sword, however, must be restored before it can be used properly.

Not knowing whom they can trust, the Children embark on an adventure to seek the Sapphire of the Fairies as their first step towards restoring the Sword of Heavens.

Sarac and his forces of evil are alerted to the beginning of the prophecy and the existence of the Children, but nobody knows which two of the youngsters are the Children of the Prophecy, not even the

Children themselves.

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The Targa Trilogy details the trials and perils of Alexander, Jenneva, and Oscar as these special, gifted youngsters take on the diabolical Sarac and his minions.

Origin Scroll starts the series with three 15-year-olds who are thrust onto the world stage as the only hope to stop the evil Sarac.

Dark Quest, the second volume, finds our young heroes challenged by Mordac, Sarac's assistant.

Ancient Prophecy, the third and final volume in the series, forces our fearless trio to face a renewed and more powerful foe as Sarac is given new powers by the demon Alutar

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Visit the author's [Website](#) for maps and information.

Email the [author](#).

Placing the Sapphire of the Fairies in the Sword of Heavens cleared the skies over Cordonia. The end of the Darkness in that part of the world has alerted Sarac to the location of the Children and his evil minions are converging on the Rangers.

The Sword of Heavens has pointed the way to the Unicorns' Opal, but the Children must stay one step ahead of the forces of evil to complete their task.

Follow the adventure of the Children of the Ancient Prophecy as confusion, doubt, and betrayal infiltrate their ranks and threaten to bring an end to the hopes of the world.

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Fakara, once one of the greatest nations of the world, is a desolate wasteland inhabited by tribes of bandits who demand yearly tribute from the poor villagers. Life in Fakara is a struggle for the bandits as well as the villagers and now the evil tribal leader of the Jiadin is making his move to unite the tribes and destroy neighboring Khadora.

When his village is senselessly destroyed by the Jiadin, Rejji begins on a path that will move the young man into a confrontation with the evil leader, Grulak. Whichever opponent gains the upper hand, Fakara will be changed forever.

Discover a world of deceit as friends become enemies and foes may be the best allies. The Time of Calling has begun and the sands of time cannot be halted.

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Khadora is a strange and complex land where the truth may not set you free, but a lie can cost you your life. Marak is a soldier in the Situ Clan army under Lord Ridak. He excels at his chosen profession, but his loyalty to his lord is tempered because his mother is a mage slave to Lord Ridak. Dreaming of a culture where people are valued for their contributions rather than their worth as a tool, Marak gains a chance to alter that very culture.

Set up as a sacrificial lamb by his lord, Marak grabs the chance to create his own destiny and alter the culture he finds so reprehensible. The price of failure is certain death, yet the rewards of victory are undefined.

Pitted against the ferocious cat people, rival warlords, and even his own clan, Marak must tread carefully yet decisively.

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