

The Secret of
SHABAZ



JENNIFER MACAIRE

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DEDICATION

*For Ali, who found Shabaz,
and for Helen, who made Shabaz real*

CHAPTER ONE

SHABAZ

Snow fell all night long, a hard wind heaping it in long drifts along fences and hedges. When morning came, snow covered the thatched roofs of cottages in the village and hid the ruts in the road leading to a dilapidated castle crouched on a low hill beyond the village.

The castle had once been imposing, but neglect, war, and time had toppled two of its three turrets and eaten away at the tops of its stone walls until they looked like a gap-toothed grin. Its main building still held traces of its former glory—each window and door sported faded carvings of griffins and dragons, unicorns and rocs.

Once it had been a fortress. Heavy wooden shutters barred with iron bands still kept the wind and cold at bay, and the rusted and creaking front door was made of solid iron, studded with spikes. An empty moat, overgrown with weeds and scrub trees, encircled the castle. One entered the castle over a bridge and through an arched doorway facing east. At one time there had been a gatehouse defended by pike men and archers, but it had crumbled away. All that was left of it was a pile of stones the masons used to shore up the castle walls.

The stable and a cowshed were tacked on like afterthoughts inside the courtyard. Above them, two small windows faced the main building.

One of the windows opened, and a young woman leaned out and looked toward the fiery line of light where the sun was rising above the hills. The sunlight put color in her pale cheeks. Her face was angular and thin, with a high-bridged nose that looked like it had once been broken. She had soot black hair, and her dark blue eyes sparkled like gems.

“Hello, sun, it’s me, Tania,” she whispered, as she did every morning, and then she turned and blew a kiss to the west, where stars still shone in the lightening sky. “For you, Mother,” she said.

She gave one last look to the snowy courtyard and closed her window. In the stable just below her room, three cows snorted softly, steam puffing from their wet nostrils. Dressed in hand-me-down boys’ clothing, Tania pitched hay into their stalls then took a bucket and milked the cows. When she finished, her bucket was heavy, full of warm, frothy milk.

In the back of the stable in a stall by himself, stood a tall, white horse. His mane fell to his massive chest, his tail reached his hocks, and there was something majestic in the way he held his head. Tania whistled as she approached his stall. He whickered in return, nodding his great head in greeting.

“Good morning, Shabaz,” said Tania, scratching him softly behind his ears. She patted the old warhorse on his neck, then, making sure the cows had finished their hay, she turned all the animals out into the orchard where they could paw for frozen apples. Tania leaned on the fence and watched as Shabaz rolled. He lay down, forelegs folded beneath him, muzzle dipped in the snow, and for a moment Tania had trouble seeing him. He blended into the drifts. Only his dark eyes and his twitching ears gave him away. Then he snorted and heaved himself to his feet, shaking a powdery fall of snow from his broad back.

Her feet cold now, Tania carried the milk bucket across the courtyard. She opened the kitchen door and set it inside, calling, “Good

morning, Grandfather Birchspring!”

The kitchen was like the rest of the castle. Long ago it had boasted three cooks, six apprentices, two scullery maids, and a meat carver. They were long gone. The huge chimney that could hold a whole roasting ox stood empty, and the copper pots once lining the walls had been sold. The long table that used to groan beneath the weight of game and fresh fruit was bare, except for two wooden bowls. No more glasses left—only wooden bowls, pewter plates, and mugs had survived the passage of time. A black iron caldron still hung from a massive chain, but it held hot water for the laundry and an occasional bath.

Cobwebs festooned the massive ceiling beams, but otherwise the room was clean—the red floor tiles worn from repeated washings. A fire crackled merrily in a potbellied stove by the back door, a pot of porridge and a kettle of hot water bubbling on top of it.

A diminutive elf stood on a three-legged stool in front of the stove and stirred the porridge with a wooden spoon. He wore a faded blue coat, and his pants were held up by a piece of twine tied around his waist. He had white hair and, uncommon in elves, a white beard that reached to his chest. Bushy, white eyebrows nearly hid his eyes, which were keen and as merry a blue as the summer sky.

A pitcher of cream and a bowl full of eggs sat on a shelf by the stove. As Tania watched, he took an egg, cracked it into the porridge, and peered into the pot. “Finally, a good one,” he muttered. “Tania! Hurry, girl, breakfast will be cold.”

“I’m here!” She sat at the oak table in the kitchen, tucking her cold feet beneath the long wooden bench.

Her grandfather hopped off the stool, put a bowl of porridge in front of her, and said, “Eat!”

“The world looks lovely beneath the snow,” said Tania, picking at her food. “I hope it stays.”

“Humph.” Her grandfather poked at the fire, stirring up sparks. “Nothing but trouble, mark my words.”

“Trouble?”

“That’s what I said. First it snows early this year, and then when I cracked an egg this morning nothing came out.”

“Perhaps the chicken was ill.” Tania shrugged and finished her porridge. She set the bowl down and wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

The old man frowned. “Don’t wipe your mouth on your sleeve,” he said, clicking his tongue. “I promised your mother I’d do my best. She trusted me. But look at you. You haven’t combed your hair in a week; you won’t wear a dress; you eat like a swineherd; and you smell like the stable.” He wrinkled his nose and made a face. “When did you last take a bath, girl?”

“It’s freezing!” Tania shuddered. Baths in the winter, ugh! She ran her finger around the rim of the bowl and licked it. “This was good, even without eggs.”

“There was one egg. But the three others were empty—the worst sign I’ve seen in years. Why, I haven’t seen that since . . .” his voice trailed off.

“Since when?”

“Since your mother died.” The old man shook his head again, lines of worry on his face. “It can’t be though, he died with her.”

Tania looked up, startled. Her grandfather rarely spoke about her mother, except to say her mother would certainly be disappointed in her. Questions as to how she’d died and who she’d been were met with tightly pinched lips and a pained expression. He’d never once spoken a word about her father. Now he was muttering again. She held her breath, straining to hear.

“He died with her, so it can’t be the same man. Perhaps someone else has come. There have been whispers of war in the North, but who could

make the eggs empty like that except a . . .” Her grandfather looked up and noticed Tania’s face. “I’m sorry, child, what were you saying?”

“Whispers of war?”

“Aye. There’s been talk in the marketplace.” The old man ran a hand over his head, making his fine, white hair stand up in comical wisps.

“War! Won’t that be exciting? Do you think the soldiers will come this way?”

“I hope not! What do we need with a bunch of heavy-footed clods in chain mail tramping about the castle?”

“It would mean adventure! If I were a boy, I could be a soldier, fighting right in the thick of battle, stabbing enemies with my shining sword!” Tania jumped on the bench and parried with an imaginary enemy. “Take that!”

“Stop it, child! War is an abomination! It killed your mother, and . . .” He broke off and stared at Tania with something like fear.

“Who died with my mother? Was it my father?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Grandfather Birchspring shook his head. He picked up a broom and started sweeping the floor. “Get on with you. You have your chores to do. No more foolish talking about war, do you hear me?”

“You’re just a tiresome, old elf,” Tania said angrily. “What do you know about war and adventure? I’d like to have something interesting to do for once. Instead, I have to do chores. How exciting.”

“You have to set the breakfast table as well. Get on, girl, the cock will be crowing any minute.”

“Where’s Polly?”

“She’s got the flu. You’ll have to take over her chores until she’s well. Off with you now.”

Tania took plates from a cupboard and hurried through the castle. She ran up the steps to the first floor, and down an echoing hallway

where paler patches on the wallpaper showed where long-gone portraits had once hung. She rapped on a heavy wooden door and, hearing nothing, pushed it open with her shoulder. To her relief, there was nobody in the dining room. The lord and his wife liked to sleep late; their daughters lazed in bed until full daybreak; and their twin sons were probably still snoring off the effects of too much beer at the village tavern. Everyone would show up when the cock started crowing though.

Humming, Tania put the plates on the table and then hung the kettle on a hook inside the dining room fireplace. She fetched kindling and embers from the kitchen, and soon had a fire crackling in the grate. She opened the shutters and pulled back the tattered curtains, letting a shaft of sunlight in the room. It lit up motes of dust, and Tania sneezed. From the window she could see down the length of sloping fields to the river in the distance, where mist floated just above dark, swirling water. The river flowed through town, and sometimes boats laden with goods braved the swift current to trade. Today there was no one on the river. As Tania watched, a flock of crows flapped by, cawing noisily.

The door creaked open and Lord and Lady Enguarand came in, followed by two maidens wearing faded, velvet dressing gowns. Tania gave a little curtsy, pointed toward the bubbling kettle, and said, "Good morning, Lord and Lady Enguarand, Lady Melflouise and Lady Addlenett. You're right on time, breakfast is nice and warm."

"Good morning, Tania," cooed Lady Enguarand, as she stared at a spot on the wall. She was very nearly blind, and had to be held firmly by the elbow when she walked about.

Her husband, Lord Enguarand, eased her onto the middle of the bench and took a seat by her side. He looked around and asked, "Where's Polly?"

"She has the flu. I'm serving breakfast this morning."

Lord Enguarand said, "I hope she recovers soon. Be a dear and give me some of your grandfather's excellent porridge."

"I'd like some too," said Melflouise, the older daughter. She smoothed her shiny, golden hair. "Good morning, Tania. Isn't that my brother's old tunic? You should mend that hole under the arm. You look thin, are you ill? Doesn't she look ill to you, Addlenett?"

The younger sister, Addlenett, a pudgy girl of fourteen with hay-colored hair and squinty blue eyes, shrugged and held her plate out toward Tania. "She always looks ill, but Polly's the one sick in bed. Porridge, please," she said.

Tania sighed. She'd been hoping to avoid the girls. It seemed that ever since she could remember she'd been running from them. As a child she'd hidden for hours in the byre just to keep out of Melflouise's way. It didn't help that Melflouise looked as pretty as springtime, with creamy skin and sapphire eyes that sparkled with warmth. Where that warmth came from, Tania couldn't begin to imagine.

As Tania leaned over to get Melflouise's plate, the girl gave a cry and said, "Tania, you smell like a cow!"

Addlenett laughed and said, "That's because she's the stable lad, you gnome!"

"Gnome? How dare you call me a gnome!"

"Girls!" Lord Enguarand pounded his fist on the table. "Enough bickering. Tania, serve breakfast and be off with you!"

Tania shoveled porridge onto plates, gave another little curtsy, and fled from the dining room. "I am not their serving maid," she fumed, as she pulled her cloak on and headed out the door. She stopped suddenly as she noticed her grandfather. He huddled on his little three-legged stool next to the fire, his expression desolate. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, it's my fault," sighed the old man. He blew softly, making his long, white moustache float in the air in front of his lips. His

eyebrows, usually fluffy and perked like a terrier's, drooped mournfully. Beneath them, his pale blue eyes were watery with tears. "I told her I couldn't take care of you. I told her I didn't merit the responsibility. Now look at you, you're a serving wench, a milkmaid, and a stable lad. I've failed, failed miserably." He wiped at his eyes with the end of his beard.

Tania's hand slid off the door latch. "I'm not a serving wench. I'm a stable lad and a milkmaid, but I'm a good one. When Matilda's cow fell into the stream and wouldn't get up, who did they come to fetch? Me! So you did do something right. I'm needed here, and that's important, isn't it?"

"Those two harpy sisters run your feet off with their silly demands, the twins are pathetic, and their poor mother isn't much better."

"Grandfather, who would take care of Lady Enguarand if I didn't? Can you see her daughters hanging up her clothes or finding her flower press? As for the twins, they're not so bad. So don't worry about me."

The old man sighed and shook his head. "You're right, I shouldn't worry, but I do, lass. After I saw the white eggs, I had a long discussion with your mother in my poor ancient head. I told her I was doing my best, and that you'd promise to take at least one bath a month. Will you promise?"

Caught by surprise, Tania said, "Why, yes."

"You promised."

"You tricked me." Tania grinned and patted his knee. "But you win. I'll take one tomorrow night." She paused. "I promised to take a bath, so will you do something for me? Will you tell me about my mother? I know her name was Amylee, and that she was beautiful. That's what you always say, but who was she? What was she like?"

"She was like the morning star. She was brightness itself, and her wit could make anyone laugh. She had hair like spun silk, golden as

sunlight. Her eyes were the softest green of spring, and her voice could lure the nightingale.”

“I know all that, you’ve told me a hundred times! But if she was so special, how did we come to this miserable place?”

“Hush. This castle used to be the best stronghold in the North. Years ago, when it was still intact, people came from all over the country to admire it. There used to be another tower over there, where the orchard meets the west pasture. Now, there are only heaps of stones and a few splintered logs. Your mother lived in that keep.” He pointed.

Prickles ran up and down her spine, and Tania turned her head slowly. Her gaze followed the pointing finger to the window out over the courtyard, past the arched doorway leading to the orchard, and then past the orchard to a smooth pile of snow that hid a ruin. “My mother lived here?” she whispered. “I thought we came from far away. You always said we traveled for ages to get here, and that we were lucky Lord Enguarand took us in.”

“She didn’t live in this castle. She lived over there, in what used to be a lovely, high tower. I would see her sometimes, leaning out her window on the far side. She was staring at the mountains.”

“You never told me this,” Tania said.

“No, you were too young, and it would have . . . troubled you.”

“Why today? Why now?”

“How old are you?”

“Almost eighteen, you know that.” Tania tore her gaze from the window and peered at her grandfather. “Do you feel all right?”

Instead of answering her, he said, “I promised your mother to wait until you were old enough to understand. But how old is that? I fear I cannot wait any longer. The signs are back. Something’s not right, and something wicked is coming. I can feel it. Did you hear the crows awhile back?” Her grandfather looked at her, anxiety clouding his eyes.

Tania snorted. "You're always seeing bad signs."

"Sometimes I see things, like the time Rena fell into the river and drowned. I told her to be careful, didn't I?"

"I don't like speaking about that."

"No one does, child. But listen, you must." He patted her hand. "This was a mighty castle. There used to be a steady stream of folk going up and down that main road, passing through the village. The inn was always full and the marketplace bustled. Customers, traders, and merchants vied with each other for bales of fine cloth, fat cattle, fresh fruit and vegetables. It used to be that the sound of the smith's hammer rang morning 'til night. The courtyard was bigger then. That part of the wall didn't exist, and the stable and cow barn were in separate buildings outside. There was a proper swineherd to keep the pigs out of the courtyard, three milkmaids, thirteen servants, a falconer, four stable lads, and a smithy with two apprentices. The moat was full of pike, and there was even a magician's hut."

"I can't begin to imagine that," said Tania, sitting on the floor by his side and drawing her knees up to her chin. She looked out the cracked windowpane at the drooping line of the roof, the walls shored up with logs to keep them standing, and then at the mound of snow marking a fallen tower. "Tell me about my mother."

"I have to tell you about this place first, so you'll understand why she came here. The village was thrice as big as it is today, and ten times as many people lived here. The North had no great cities except the Towers, but this was as close to a city as you could get at that time.

"Lord Enguarand is a rather useless man, and his grandfather and great-grandfather were nothing but peaceful farmers, but his great-great-grandfather was a warrior. Lord Enguarand's great-great-grandfather was called Lord Ironstorm. In the war against the necromancers he led the Northern men to battle and won all the lands back the invaders had

claimed. Lord Ironstorm was a legend in his time, but after the wars he settled down quietly and made his fortress town into a profitable trading and farming community. His name faded into the same shadows as the memories of war. He became Lord Enguarand the first and spent most of his days in the orchard over there, sitting on a pile of stones.”

“The necromancers?” Tania shivered. “The old washer-woman claims her grandmother could remember the war, and she says the necromancers were never really beaten. She says her granny claimed they’ll come back one day and take all the lands they once held, and we’ll all be their slaves again.”

“Is Falbella still telling her grandmother’s tales down at the riverside?”

“You should hear some of them. According to her, the necromancers wore plastrons made of human bones, and they had cloven hoofs and horns. They could cast spells that turned mighty warriors into stone, and with a single word, they could tumble a castle.”

“If they were that strong, they would have won the war. No, child, they had normal feet, no horns, and their magic spells were less dangerous than their poison-tipped arrows. What made them so frightening were the hordes of undead fighting with them. They had spells that would knit together a man’s spirit for a time and enable him to fight. It iced a man’s blood to see his dead comrade standing and shooting arrows at him. No matter that the undead were poor archers; most folk fainted or threw their weapons down and ran. Lord Ironstorm stood fast against the hordes of necromancers and crushed their army. Afterward, he made sure the dead were all properly burned in funeral pyres, so that they would never rise again.”

“So what Falbella says is nonsense,” said Tania, still shivering. She closed her eyes, trying to imagine an army of undead stalking the land. “They will never come back, thank the heavens. What does all that have to do with my mother? This took place at least two centuries ago.

What does it have to do with her?"

The old man sighed. With a stick, he poked at the fire next to his little stool. "I confess I don't quite know how to tell you this."

"Try, please," Tania said. From outside came the snuffling sound the pigs made as they worked their way across the courtyard, shoveling snow aside with their snouts, searching for bits of grain, worms, roots, or whatever else they could find. Tania knew they would churn the snow in the courtyard into a muddy mess. Then the pigs would go into the forest to search for chestnuts, and she would have to go fetch them in the evening. She wondered why pigs never seemed to want to come home by themselves. They always waited for her to lead them back through the pasture. They would detour wide around the mound of mossy stones that her grandfather said had once been a lovely tower. She frowned. The stones were all worn with time, and moss grew five inches thick on them.

"Grandfather, how could my mother have ever lived in a tower here? That pile of stones has been on the ground for centuries."

"It fell exactly one hundred and seventy-seven years ago, killing both your mother and the Lord of the Necromancers, and ending the war for good."

Tania's mouth fell open, certain that he'd lost his reason. She gaped at the old man. "It would be best if Lord Enguarand didn't hear you say things like that, or anyone else, for that matter. Perhaps you'd like to lie down?" Her voice quavered. Her grandfather seemed so frail, suddenly. He was small, even for an elf. He'd always been so spry and energetic that he seemed everywhere at once in the vast kitchen. Now, as he huddled in front of the fire, Tania realized that he was barely bigger than a six-year-old child, and the firelight shone through his pointed ears. She blinked, sending two tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I knew you wouldn't understand, child. I told you we traveled for

ages to get here. It was the truth. I brought you here from beyond the ages. I lifted you from your mother's last embrace, and I brought you here. I carried you not across the country, but across time." He leaned forward and touched Tania's cheek. "I'm not your grandfather. I have no blood in common with you, Tania. I was simply an elf in the service of the Lord of Glen Hall. Your mother was no ordinary woman. Her name was not just Amylee, it was Lady Amylee of the Golden Forest, and she came from the mountains fleeing the Dark Lord. He caught up with her here, and she vanquished him. She killed the Lord of the Necromancers."

Tania watched as tears trickled down the old man's cheeks. "You aren't my grandfather?" she asked, finally, in a small voice.

"No, though I would give my life for you."

"Who are you then?"

"My name is Wander Birchspring, and I'm an elf. Look at you child—you have no elf blood. You're as tall as a young beech tree. Didn't you ever wonder about that?"

"Yes, but I thought nothing of it. Some horses have small foals, and pony mares can birth horse foals. I thought maybe . . . maybe I was one of Lord Enguarand's bastards. That would explain how I'm treated here." Tania bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. "How came you to be my mother's servant?"

"I had been in her service since she was a babe. My family has always been entwined with yours. My mother was the head cook in your grandfather's castle, my father was sword master, and as a lad, I was valet to the Lady Amylee.

"When the necromancer came to Golden Forest, he conquered the lands and took Glen Hall, your grandfather's castle. Then, suddenly, he ceased fighting. For a while, we thought he'd changed. He fell under your mother's spell and married her. Then, just before you were born, something happened, and the war started again. We managed

to escape with you. We traveled across the mountains, joining random troops of elves and rangers, until we managed to meet Lord Ironstorm and his mighty army. We joined forces. Your mother took refuge in this place. She thought she would be safe, but she was betrayed and the Dark Lord came to get her. In the end, she managed to kill him, but in doing so, she died.”

“My mother killed the necromancer king?”

“Aren’t you listening, girl?”

“Who betrayed her?”

“If I knew that, I would have strung his innards from one end of the keep to the other. But I never discovered the traitor.” Grandfather Birchspring bowed his head. Tears dripped off his long nose and fell with small plops to the floor. “I failed her, I did. I took you with me, as she begged me to, across time to here and now, to keep you safe. But I didn’t know we’d be in such misery, that the castle would be nothing but a heap of moldy stones, and that Lord Enguarand’s family had sunk to such depths that Lady Amylee’s daughter would be treated like a common stable lad.”

“Do they know who I am?”

He looked frightened and shook his head. “Of course not, child. No one can know, for if it were known that the daughter of Lady Amylee and the Dark Lord still lives, there would be some who would pay blood to have you at their sides, and others who would pay just as much to have you killed. No, the Dark Lord’s daughter is too dangerous a title to wear.”

Tania felt as if she’d just received a kick from a horse. “Wh- what did you say? Say that again? My father wasn’t Lord Enguarand? He wasn’t Lord Ironstorm?”

Her grandfather just looked at her, his eyes full of pity.

A thin wail escaped her throat, and she clutched at the old man’s

shirtfront. "It wasn't the Dark Lord!"

"I swear I never wanted to hurt you." Birchspring touched her hair. "But you must hear the truth. You are Lady Amylee's daughter and her blood flows in your veins, but your father was the accursed Dark Lord."

"How is that possible?" she whispered.

"Your mother was so beautiful, no one could resist her, not even the Dark Lord. He promised to change his ways if she married him. She wanted to believe him, thinking it would save her lands and castle, and so she became his bride. For six months they lived together and they seemed happy. But then something transpired to cause him to forget his promise. I have no idea what happened, to tell the truth. It happened too quickly. There was a fight, and he slaughtered everyone who stood against him. He locked your mother in the dungeon. As soon as your mother could escape she fled, taking me with her.

"When the Lady Amylee met Lord Ironstorm, you were already a babe in her arms. He tried to keep her safe. We all loved her." His voice cracked and he shook his head. "Only your mother knew how it would all end. She would sit in that tower, staring at the mountains, waiting for the Dark Lord to come for her. She must have realized he would find her; she must have known who would betray her. She had it all planned out, and in the end, I could only save you, and flee."

Tania tried rubbing some feeling back into her face, but it was numb. Her thoughts churned in her aching head. Nothing made sense anymore. "How—how did you come through time?"

"Why, on Shabaz. I thought you would have guessed, child."

There was a noise in the hallway, and Grandfather Birchspring got up. "We'll talk later."

Working in a dazed fog, Tania cleared the dining room table and put fresh porridge in the pot for Lord Enguarand's twin sons, Lysom and Rian. Tania wasn't thinking about them, however. Her hands and feet seemed to move of their own accord. Her head buzzed as if a hive of bees had settled there. Each sound was magnified tenfold, and even the sound of her heart was deafening. She shuffled off to the kitchen, a pile of dirty dishes in her arms, and she thought of a golden-haired woman sitting near a window with a baby in her arms. How she must have hated her baby. The sight of her black hair and dark eyes would have been like a knife in her mother's heart. How had Birchspring managed to save her? When the tower fell, did her mother believe it would kill her too? Had she hoped so?

She set the dishes in the sink and went to the well to fetch water. Unthinkingly, she drew the bucket from the well, sloshing icy water on her feet, but she didn't notice. A snort caught her attention, and she turned her head. Shabaz stood next to her. She hadn't heard him approaching. Another glance told her the canny horse had managed to open the orchard gate again, and the cows were already halfway to the river. For some reason, the silly creatures seemed to think that the grass on the far side of the river was much better than the grass over here. They would try to wade across, often getting stuck or swept downstream as far as the water mill, where they would inevitably make mischief.

Tania set the bucket down and walked to Shabaz. She put her arms around his neck and buried her face in his mane. "She must have hated me," she said, and started to sob. The white horse whickered softly and nuzzled her pockets, searching for tidbits. Tania finished crying and wiped her face on the horse's silky mane. "Why did you have to let the cows out?" she asked. "Now I'll have to go chasing them all over the town, and everyone will laugh at me."

The old horse nodded, as if he understood.

“Grandfather said he wasn’t my grandfather,” she said. “Did you know that?”

Again the horse nodded.

“Did you know my mother?”

The horse’s head bobbed.

“And my father?”

Now Shabaz was still—only his long tail stirred in the cold breeze. Then he snorted softly, nuzzling her hard under the arm.

Tania sighed, tears still pricking her eyelids. “Do you know what I think? I think Grandfather Birchspring has finally lost his mind. He has simply forgotten the truth, and he’s woven some fantastic tale about kings, princesses, and dark lords, just to pass the time. It is impossible for someone to travel through time, just as it’s impossible you can understand a single word I’m saying.” There was a long silence, while Tania leaned on the horse’s withers and pressed her face to his neck. “I just won’t believe it,” she said.

The horse lowered his head and snuffled hopefully in the snow, and Tania dried her tears and went to fetch the cows.

The sun set and Tania finished her chores. She shut the pigs into their sty then rounded up, fed, and milked the cows. Shabaz settled in his stall, and she locked the chickens in their henhouse. As she picked up the bucket of milk, Tania paused and looked across the field to where the sun was setting. On a whim, she set the bucket down and strode through the ruined archway, across the orchard, and ducked under the split-rail fence. Silently she stood contemplating the snow-covered heap of stones before her. Reaching down, she brushed off some snow and sat on a large stone, once part of a pillar, and cupped her chin in her hands. The setting sun sent red shafts of light through the forest. Her feet grew colder, but she sat until the sun dipped suddenly be-

hind the mountains. In the evening, the snow looked blue. The moon would rise soon and turn everything to silver, but until then, Tania sat on the frozen stone and tried to imagine a tower standing before her.

The shadows grew deeper. They slid over the snow and seemed to move in concert, reaching for the pile of rubble. The stones came alive. Shaking snow off their mossy sides, they rose into the air and stacked themselves into a spiral staircase. Wooden beams appeared, freshly cut and sharp-edged. They formed the skeleton of a tower. Slabs of stone levitated and flew into position, covering everything in a gray, shimmering armor. The tower rose like a unicorn's horn into the air, and narrow, diamond-shaped windows appeared in the sides. The top was a pointed magician's hat made of gold tiles that glittered when light struck them. A final window appeared. It was a simple, arched window facing west, and then the shutters opened.

A woman leaned out to fasten them with silver hooks. Her slender arms were bare as if it were summer, and golden hair fell in a shining cascade around her shoulders. She stood for a minute, looking out over the valley, and her gaze slid over Tania. Tania held her breath, but the woman didn't see her. After a moment the woman disappeared, but she reappeared a minute later with an infant in her arms. The child was very pale, with dark hair and eyes that sparkled like gems. The woman tucked the child under her chin and sat at the window. The little girl's arms crept around the woman's neck. Their faces were peaceful, and every now and then the woman would stroke the child's hair. They stayed like that until the moon rose above the trees and the tower turned transparent and vanished.

Tania got up stiffly and brushed the snow off the seat of her pants. The chill had settled in her bones, and her feet were frozen numb. She ran a hand over her face, rubbing her eyes. It had been a dream, nothing but a dream. If she stood there again, perhaps she'd see another

scene—one where a golden-haired woman stared with loathing at her daughter. Which dream was the truth? Tania chewed on her lip. As soon as she could, she was going to have a long talk with Grandfather Birchspring. But not tonight. No, she had to set the table, help with dinner, then clean up and get ready for bed. Her muscles ached already, she was so tired, but she had hours of work still before her.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AMULET

She found no eggs that morning. Two and a half chickens were gone, victims of the fox prowling about. Tania stared at a pile of bloody feathers—all that remained of one victim—and then at the survivors—five frightened hens huddling in a corner. She tossed the carcass onto the garbage heap. The pigs would take care of it later. The fox had absconded with the two fattest hens, and Tania thought that he'd probably be back. So she spent time shoring up the holes in the hen house.

"That should keep that red marauder out of here," she told the chickens. She wiped her hands on her jacket, sucked on the finger she'd whacked with a hammer, and stepped back to admire her work.

"Something has to be done around here, Grandfather," she said later that afternoon, warming her back near the kitchen stove. "The whole castle is going to come crashing down one of these days."

"Thank the heavens we live in the stable," he said, peering into a stewpot and frowning. "Are you sure there was nothing left of the chicken? I could have used a bit of meat for this."

"Grandfather!"

"I'm just teasing." The little man's face creased into a wide smile, and he wiggled his pointed ears. Then he grew serious again. "You

don't believe what I told you yesterday, do you?"

Tania looked into the fire. "I think that it would be best if it weren't true," she said at last. "Can't you make up another story? One where your daughter died, leaving you her small baby, and you came to this castle begging for a job. They needed a good cook, so they hired you, and I grew up running errands and tending the geese and chickens until I was old enough to take over the chores at the stable."

"That is very near the truth," said Birchspring, patting her shoulder. "But not all of it, oh, no, not all."

"I don't want any of it to be true," Tania said in a small voice. "I'm no lady, my father wasn't evil, and I need you to be my grandfather. I don't have anyone else but you." She opened her arms and he hugged her, patting her back kindly. Because he was so tiny and she was tall and rangy, she had to bend right over to hug him.

"I'll always consider you my granddaughter, even if no blood binds us. But you are Lady Amylee's daughter, Lady Tania of Glen Hall in the Golden Forest. One day I will take you there, and you will see where the castle once stood. There is nothing left but ruins, but the mountains are majestic. Perhaps there are still some who live there who will remember stories of Glen Hall. There may even be some elves about, though they are hard to find now."

"A lady! Look at me! I'm about as ladylike as that pig out there," she said, pointing to the sow with her head in the garbage heap. "My clothes are rags, my nose is all crooked . . ."

"Thanks to your penchant for fighting with the twins," scolded Birchspring.

"I didn't know Lysom would punch so hard. Anyway, I broke his arm so we're even. Oh, listen to me! I'm nothing but a farmhand!"

"I see that. I smell that too. You promised to take a bath."

Tania's shoulders slumped. "I loved listening to your stories about

elf lords and princesses when I was little, and I remember everything you ever said about Glen Hall, except to me they were simply stories. You never said it had once been my mother's home," she added sorrowfully.

"I should have said more, but I had to keep the secret. You must keep the secret, also, for if the wrong people find out, your life will be in great danger."

"There you go again, talking nonsense!"

"Hush. It is not nonsense, and I will prove it." He reached under his tunic and drew out an amulet on a thin, silver chain. The amulet was a flat disk of silver, stamped with the tiny image of a rearing horse. He held it out to Tania, and she looked at it closely. It was a unicorn. "Put it on."

She did, slipping it over her head.

"Tuck it in your shirt. It must touch your skin."

The amulet was so cold it burned, and Tania uttered a gasp of surprise. It warmed quickly though, and in a minute she couldn't tell she was wearing it. "What now?" she asked.

"Why don't you go talk to Shabaz some more, tell him your troubles. I'm sure he'll be able to clear up some points for you." Birchspring's eyes twinkled. "Whatever you do, never take the amulet off, and never show it to anyone else."

Tania touched her shirt, feeling the small medallion through the rough cloth. "I think you're completely addled," she said. Her head had started to ache, so she thought she'd go lie down before dinner. The weather had taken a turn for the worse, more snow was falling, and there were gusts of wind rattling the windows.

"There's evil coming," said Grandfather Birchspring, looking with worried eyes at the chimney where smoke was swirling in a heavy, gray coil. "Go talk to Shabaz. The amulet will help you."

Tania sighed, bent down and kissed him on the top of his head,

and then, clutching her cloak tightly around her shoulders, she walked across the courtyard to the stable. Wind whipped stinging snow crystals into her face. Through the gloom, she saw three shadows hurrying under the ruined archway toward the road leading to town. It was the sow and two of her offspring, impervious to the weather, heading off to scrounge around the village. If one of the villagers caught them, they would end up in the family's larder. Tania's shoulders slumped. She had to catch the pigs before someone else caught them first. Pigs were fair game in this part of the country. Swearing, she set off in pursuit. As she reached the road, she stumbled in a pothole and fell flat in the snow. "Those stupid pigs!" she cried.

"Quite a problem, aren't they?" The voice came from above her, and she rolled over, surprised. A well-dressed man on a tall, black horse leaned over and stared down at her. He was young, perhaps in his mid-twenties. Beneath his hood, his face was shadowed and his eyes were very dark. A wicked looking scar ran from his temple to the corner of his mouth, pulling it slightly awry. Despite that, he was a very handsome man, and rich, from the looks of his attire. His thick woolen cloak was lined with lynx fur, and the scabbard lying against his thigh was encrusted with gold. He raised an elegant eyebrow. "Would you be so kind as to tell your master that Sir Renegal has arrived? I sent a letter three months ago, so he should be expecting me." The man pulled his cloak tighter around his broad shoulders. "Hurry, it's getting colder by the minute." He peered more closely at her, his brows drawn together in a scowl, and he said again, in a louder voice, "Did you hear me, boy? Are you simple? Tell your master that Renegal has arrived. Run along, pig keeper!"

The man had called her a boy. It must have been because her hair was tucked into her hood. Tania got up and trotted back toward the castle. Her head was splitting now. She rubbed it and her hand came

away muddy. She was covered in muck, and her face was dirty. She must look a sight. No wonder the stranger had taken her for the pig keeper. Sighing, she pushed open the kitchen door and stomped her feet to knock off the mud and snow. "Grandfather, someone called Sir Renegal has arrived," she announced. "Where is His Lordship?"

"Probably in the study, reading one of his books on nobility," said Grandfather Birchspring. His tone was light, but he frowned. "Sir Renegal, did you say?"

"Aye. Renegal, and he looks like a difficult guest. You'd better heat up some food. I'll go find Lord Enguarand and tell him his visitor has arrived."

"No, you're too dirty. I'll go tell His Lordship. Go back outside and take the man's horse. Put him in the free stall."

In the courtyard, Renegal stood near his horse and gazed at the castle with an unfathomable expression. When Tania reappeared, he waved toward the dilapidated buildings. "Is this Castle Storm?" he asked, sounding incredulous. "Lord Enguarand does live here, does he not?"

Tania nodded shortly. "Here, give me your horse. I'll look after him. You can go into that door and warm yourself in the kitchen. His Lordship will be with you shortly."

The man called Renegal gave her the reins. "Be warned, lad. Fletch has a nasty habit of biting, and when he kicks his aim is sure."

Tania took the horse and led him to the stable. Steam rose from his shoulders and back, and when she lifted off his saddle, she saw he was wringing wet with sweat. "Poor fellow, you've traveled quite some ways," she crooned, as she took handfuls of straw and rubbed him down. "You must be thirsty."

"Parched, actually." The black horse flicked his tail. "And my legs are aching. I'm longing to lie in a deep bed of hay."

Tania froze, her hand still holding the straw to his back. Her jaw dropped. "Did you speak?" she finally managed, her voice a mere squeak.

“Well, it wasn’t Blossom or Daisy over there,” said the horse, tossing his head at the cows. “Or the fellow in that far stall. Of course it was I. Why do you look so amazed? You spoke to me, and I answered.” He pushed his nose against her chest, sniffing deeply. “Beneath all that mud and sweat, I can smell magic.”

Tania blinked and then rubbed her hands over her face, slapping her cheeks. “I must be dreaming. Perhaps I fell and hit my head chasing the pigs. The pigs! They must be halfway to town by now! I have to go get them. If they disappear, it will be my fault and we’ll go hungry this winter!” She peered at the horse, but he said nothing. Relieved, she took a warm blanket and flung it over the horse’s back, fastening it with buckles at the chest.

“Pigs are stupid creatures,” said the horse in a conversational tone of voice. “However, I think chickens are even more ridiculous. The worst are cows. Look at them over there; they haven’t a clue what’s going on.”

“They haven’t?” Tania whispered.

“No, poor things. They’ve been bred into stupidity, like sheep.” The horse snorted. “Now, go fetch me some water and let me sleep.”

Tania drew water from the well, walking carefully in the gathering darkness. Back in the stable, she watched as the horse drank deeply, water moving in knots up his slender neck. She was afraid to say a word, in case the spell would be broken, but her curiosity got the better of her. She tapped the horse’s shoulder to get his attention. “Is your master a great magician? Did he put a spell on you?”

The horse withdrew its dripping muzzle from the bucket of water. “A magician?” He snorted again. “No, he’s but a recruiter, and a poor one, I must say. We haven’t found anyone who even looks like he can hold a sword.” He yawned. “Leave me alone, I want to sleep.” The black horse turned his back on her and closed his eyes.

Tania backed away, her eyes wide. A recruiter? That sounded serious. Who could he possibly be recruiting in this backwater place? She turned and looked at Shabaz. In the darkness she could hardly see him, only a shaft of stray light from the kitchen found its way into the stable and picked out the white of his coat. Shabaz watched her, his ears pricked. Hesitating, she went to his stall and whispered, "Shabaz?"

The horse just fluttered his nostrils and nickered.

Tania shook her head. She was being ridiculous. Horses couldn't talk. Maybe the black horse could, but obviously he was under a spell. The recruiter was certainly a very powerful magician. She reached up and patted Shabaz's neck. "Strange things are going on," she said.

"Not so strange, if you understand them," said the white horse. He nuzzled Tania. "The amulet only works if you touch me. You must be in contact to hear my voice."

Tania jumped back as if she'd been stung. Shabaz only watched her, a wise light in his deep brown eyes. Slowly, she reached over and placed her hand on his neck. "Can you hear me?"

"I hear you always, but you can only hear me if you wear the amulet. I see Wander Birchspring finally gave it to you."

Tania nodded her head, too bemused to speak.

The horse sighed, shifted his feet in the straw, and then said, "Wander didn't give it to you before because it is dangerous to use magic nowadays. There are too many who still hate the magicians for their part in the war. While most chose the wrong side, there were others who fought against the necromancers. The man who made this amulet was a good man. I knew him well." Shabaz dipped his head.

Tania rubbed her forehead again, fingering the sore lump. "Those stupid pigs," she muttered.

"Forget the pigs!" Shabaz spoke sternly. "Strange things are afoot. Who is this recruiter? Who is he looking for? Why is he here?"

A sharp whinny and several snorts came from the black horse's stall.

"What did he say?" Tania asked.

"He says the recruiter is looking for the son of Ironstorm, the great warrior, to lead the new army against the necromancers. He also says we talk too loud, and to let him sleep."

"Lord Ironstorm died hundreds of years ago, and his son has been dead for a century. His great-grandson is in the castle—that's our Lord Enguarand. His two sons are pretty useless, if you ask me. If they lead an army, it will be straight to the nearest tavern," said Tania.

Shabaz chuckled, and then grew serious. "You must find out what is happening."

"How?"

"By listening! When you serve dinner tonight, find a way to stay in the room to hear what's being said."

"Why?"

"Weren't you listening? The black horse said there's a new army! That means the necromancers have risen again!"

A whinny sounded from the shadows.

"What do you mean, not yet?" Shabaz stomped his great foot and listened as the black horse snorted. "Ah, there is a prophecy. Of course."

"Of course? What prophecy?" asked Tania.

"I have no idea. That's what you must find out."

"Does he know?" Tania asked, pointing at the black horse.

Shabaz called to the black horse, and the black horse answered. Then he shook his head. "No, he only knows that his master is supposed to find Lord Ironstorm's son." Shabaz pushed her with his velvet nose. "You'd best be going. Oh, Tania, before you serve dinner, take a bath."

The wind rattling her shutters leaked into her room and made the candle flames sway. Tania hurried through her ablutions; the cold was bitter. She grimaced at her reflection, and then jumped as the dinner bell rang. Grandfather Birchspring would be waiting for her to set the table. She put on her apron and rushed over to the castle, wondering how she was going to spy on the recruiter, talk to Grandfather Birchspring about the amulet, and somehow bring up the subject of the missing pigs with Lord Enguarand.

CHAPTER THREE

SIR RENEGAL'S ERRAND

The missing pigs came back by themselves and proceeded to grunt and squeal outside the dining-room window. Tania was hiding behind a thick curtain, trying not to sneeze. She'd set the table and concealed herself. So far the meal had been anything but enlightening, and she didn't have to worry about Renegal recognizing her as the pig herder. Renegal only had eyes for Melflouise. Tania could have dropped his plate in his lap; she didn't think he'd even glance at her.

No one else saw her. The twins either had their faces buried in their plates or in their cups. Lady Enguarand smiled in the general direction of people's voices, and Lord Enguarand seemed preoccupied with carving the goose exactly right.

Melflouise looked lovely in the candlelight. Her creamy skin and golden hair took on a warm glow. A princess couldn't look prettier. Renegal could not keep his eyes off her. So far the dinner conversation had consisted of Melflouise saying things like, "Where are you from, kind sir?" And Renegal would stammer, "The North, my lady, from Everton. And where are you from?" His skin was fair, and he blushed when he looked at lovely Melflouise. Otherwise he was quite dashing,

wearing a military jacket with a plethora of bright buttons and fringe. His dark hair was carefully brushed, and he would have looked almost effeminate except for the scar that ran from temple to chin. “A sword fight,” he explained to Melflouise.

She was properly awed. Her sister wasn’t as easily impressed. Addlenett just rolled her eyes. “We were born here, kind sir.”

Melflouise glared at her sister, then asked, “How long are you staying, Sir Renegal?”

“For but one night, alas, and then I must be off.”

“Where to, kind sir?”

Tania pricked her ears. Perhaps she would learn something. But at that moment, the pigs came back and started squealing.

“Damn those pigs!” cried Lord Enguarand.

“Funny, that’s just what your pig keeper said as he chased them down the road.” Renegal laughed. “It looks like he found them after all.”

“Pig keeper?” Lord Enguarand looked puzzled. “We have no pig keepers, just Wander and his—”

“Father!” Melflouise tapped her plate with her knife. “You mustn’t talk about the hired help during dinner!”

“Of course not.” Lord Enguarand smiled at his daughter. “Well, I suppose this visit calls for a toast?”

“Hear, hear!” cried the twins, perking up at the mention of more wine. The rest of the meal passed quickly as the boys drank themselves into a stupor, and Renegal and Melflouise stared at each other in mutual admiration.

When they’d finished eating, the women got up, curtsied, and bid the men good night. Melflouise held her mother’s arm, while Addlenett carried a candle to light their way through the castle’s drafty halls.

“Sweet dreams, kind sir,” said Melflouise, giving a little wave.

Renegal leapt to his feet and bowed over her hand. “Meeting you

was like meeting the morning star," he said. "I hope we shall meet again."

Lord Enguarand looked pained and gave a loud harrumph. "Good night, ladies."

They left, and Renegal sank back into his chair with a little sigh. "What a lovely daughter you have, sir."

Lord Enguarand raised an eyebrow. "So I've been told."

"Is she . . . is she betrothed?"

"Betrothed? No, not yet. I've yet to find a worthy husband for her. In this part of the world there aren't very many choices. You understand, with her lineage, I am obliged to find someone her equal."

Renegal looked both relieved and worried. "Her equal? You mean, the son of a lord?"

"At the very least." Lord Enguarand yawned. "The ladies have retired, perhaps you can tell me now what brings you to this country?"

Renegal glanced at the two boys who were slumped over the table and snoring loudly. "I am here on a mission. Did you receive my message?"

"Yes, but that was weeks ago. Refresh my memory."

Tania slid deeper into the shadows behind one of the musty curtains and held her breath to hear what was being said.

"The letter spoke of a prophecy which states, 'When the necromancer rises like the moon, seek the son of Ironstorm, but seek him not too soon. If the blood of Ironstorm exists no more, then the necromancers shall surely win the war.'" Renegal hesitated, and then he said in a low voice, "What I say to you must not leave this room."

Lord Enguarand leaned over the table and nodded. "I remember the letter, but I confess, prophecies aren't really my strong point. We haven't had a magician in the tower since my great-grandfather's day, and anyway, they've grown quite scarce. I didn't have time to puzzle it out. Perhaps you can explain?"

"Do you swear secrecy?"

“I do.”

“You’ve heard that the necromancers are afoot in the North, haven’t you?”

“I’ve heard rumors, nothing definite. But then rumors have been flying since I was a lad. The necromancers were all destroyed, and the last one died right here in this castle, from what I understand.”

“You understand correctly, but unfortunately, his book of spells wasn’t with him. It has been missing for two hundred years, but it seems someone has found it. In the North, three villages near Evertown were razed, and all the people in them vanished.”

“Vanished?” Lord Enguarand wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. “I didn’t hear that.”

“It has been kept a secret so far. We want no panic. The worst thing that could happen would be that the townsfolk and farmers of the North and between here and the mountains all decide to leave. If they go south, who will be here to defend this country? You must make a solemn vow not to abandon your land.”

“I have no army to defend it!”

“That’s why I am here. I am raising an army to fight the necromancers. There are as many prophecies as there are leaves on a tree, and I have been chosen to pursue this one. So I came here, searching for the son of Lord Ironstorm. I am working for Lord Yalinka of Tattinggil.”

Lord Enguarand choked on his wine and sputtered. “The sorcerer!”

“He is a good man.”

“I know that. I’ve seen him. He sits in the Council of Lords, but never says much. To tell you the truth, he looks more like a bag of bones than a warrior. And he wants to raise an army? I suppose it was his sorcery that led him to discover the necromancers. For that we should be grateful,” Lord Enguarand said dubiously. “And you say you’re recruiting for him?”

"I bear his signature ring." The young man held his fist to the candlelight. A gold ring glinted on his third finger.

"So you do." Lord Enguarand scratched his head. "Understand, I'm not challenging you. It's simply best to be careful nowadays. If I understand correctly, you want my sons to join your army. I warn you, they haven't been trained in the art of weaponry."

Renegal looked at the boys, snoring deeply. His face was shadowed, so Tania couldn't tell what he was thinking. He said in a level voice, "We have training camps in the North. The elves of the Golden Forest have taken charge of archery, there are sword masters from Point Town, and the Golden Forest hides a growing number of soldiers and knights willing to fight against the necromancers."

"But," Lord Enguarand scratched his head again. "You said that they haven't actually risen yet. What was the prophecy again? When the necromancers rise like the moon. What does that mean?"

"It probably means that they will rise in silence and in stealth."

"Oh."

"We simply want to be ready. Lord Yalinka has studied the various prophecies for years, and he has decided the best course of action is secrecy. That way, when the evil ones rise again, we will be ready. Now, will you pledge your sons to our cause?"

"Do you need them both?" Lord Enguarand's voice sounded plaintive.

"No. One will do to fulfill the prophecy."

"Ah. I admit, I prefer to have one here to defend the castle, if need be. You can take whichever one you please."

"I understand." Renegal looked at the boys. He shrugged. "I'll take the one with the red hair. We must leave at first light tomorrow. Have him ready and mounted then. There is one more thing." He hesitated a bit. "Yalinka, as you know, is a sorcerer. He deals in

prophecies, and even he admits that much of what he understands is shadowy. He has seen one that troubles him. It concerns the necromancers, in a way. He says they will be seeking someone to consolidate their power. He bid me to search for a young woman. He said that she is important, but could not tell me why. I was simply told to keep my eyes open for a young woman, perhaps sixteen years of age. He also told me to look for a Tower elf.”

“A young woman and a Tower elf?” Lord Enguarand raised his eyebrows. “Our cook, Wander, is an elf. He’s old though, with white hair and a long beard. And there’s the stable . . .”

“I’ve met your cook, he might be the one, but I doubt it. I’ll report him to Yalinka though. I’ve met your stable hand as well.” He grimaced. “There is no way your stable hand can be the young woman Yalinka seeks.”

“Then you’ll have to search elsewhere.” Lord Enguarand yawned.

“I will. Good night, sir.” Sir Renegal bowed and left the room, after another dubious glance at the twins.

“Good night,” said Lord Enguarand, looking not at his guest, but at his two sleeping offspring. He heaved a sigh, and then shook them by the shoulders. “Wake up, wake up!” he cried.

The two boys raised their heads and blinked. Lysom had a bit of salad stuck to his nose, and Rian couldn’t open one eye. “What is it?” Rian croaked.

“Is it morning yet?” Lysom asked, peering out the window. “My, it’s dark! Is there a storm?”

“Better close the shutters,” said Rian, and collapsed again.

“Lysom, would you like to become a soldier?” Lord Enguarand asked. “Like your great-great-grandfather, Lord Ironstorm?”

Lysom blinked. “I must be drunk.” He started to giggle. “I thought you said become a soldier.”

"I did!"

"A soldier?" The idea seemed to sober him. "I suppose that would be nice. Will you hire an arms' master to come and give me lessons?"

"No, I'm sending you to the Golden Forest to learn the art of archery."

"Archery?"

"Yes, I think that would be the safest. Sword fighting means getting too close to the enemy."

"What about aball . . . ballast . . . abalistics?" Lysom stopped and scratched his head. "What is the art of ballistics called?"

"Ballistics. There's a thought. I'll mention it to Sir Renegal tomorrow. So it's decided then. You'll go train to be a soldier. Rian will stay here and defend us, if need be. Perhaps your idea of an arms' master is a good one."

"Aye, but how will you pay him?" Lysom was rubbing his head, making his hair stick up in reddish tufts.

"I have a few things to sell. Why, if there is to be a war, they will need warhorses. I bet that old Shabaz will fetch a good price."

"You should have sold him years ago. But what will I ride to war?"

"Ballistics' experts don't ride. To get where you're going, you can take the cob."

"The cob?" Lysom made a face.

"I need the plough horses, and Shabaz will bring me some gold. Tell Tania on your way out to have the cob saddled and ready tomorrow morning. Where is that wench anyway? I haven't seen her all evening. She's supposed to clear the table."

"She must be in the kitchen," Lysom yawned. "Well, I'll be off then. Good night, Father." He got to his feet and staggered to the door.

Lord Enguarand stretched and yawned as well. "I'd better go tell your mother the news. Knowing her, she'll cry her eyes out."

Tania waited until they had both left before slipping out of her hid-

ing place. Lifting the plates from the table, and being careful not to wake Rian, she thought about what she'd heard.

“He cannot sell Shabaz,” she muttered. “He belongs to Grandfather Birchspring.”

CHAPTER FOUR

YALINKA OF TATTINGIL

The kitchen was deserted. Lysom was nowhere to be seen. Tania knew he was certainly deep under his covers, fast asleep. Her eyes burned, and she wished she could sleep. Instead, she washed the dishes, put the leftover food in the larder, and made sure the fire was banked for the night. Then she hurried through the snow to the stable.

Light glowed from beneath her grandfather's door, and Tania knocked softly. "Are you awake? I have to talk to you!"

"Come in, child." The old man was sitting in his bed, the covers drawn up to his chin. His beard was neatly braided and tied atop his head. He held his pipe in one hand, and read from a leather-bound book propped on his knees. A coil of fragrant blue smoke rose from the pipe. "Would you like some chamomile?" he asked, pointing to a battered copper kettle sitting on the little potbellied stove at the foot of his bed.

"Grandfather, Lord Enguarand wants to sell Shabaz!"

"What nonsense. Have some tea, child. Did you dampen the fire in the kitchen?"

"Of course I did, and it's not nonsense! I heard it with my own ears. Sir Renegal is leaving tomorrow morning with Lysom to prepare

for war, and Shabaz is to be sold to pay for an arms' master."

"Strange, the whispers of war were so faint I thought we'd have years to prepare ourselves." The old man sighed and puffed on his pipe. "I've been looking for some hint in this book. Unfortunately, magicians were never much good at plain writing."

"What book is that?"

"It belonged to the last magician who lived here. He was a nice old fellow, always down by the river fishing or poking about in the mud for roots and such. Poor man. He died when the tower fell. So many lives were lost that day that it's a miracle you survived. There was smoke and fire everywhere. Stones the size of dragons flew through the air and one crushed the wall over there." He gestured with his pipe. "I managed to grab this book from the rubble. The magician begged me to save it. Seems it was his life's work. Unfortunately, it seems to deal more with healing carbuncles than the prophecy."

"What prophecy?" Tania poured herself a cup of chamomile tea and sat cross-legged in front of the stove.

"Why, the one about the next war. Haven't you been paying attention?"

Tania sighed. "Prophecies are as thick as fleas on a cur around here. Just in our village alone there are at least three soothsayers who claim to know the exact date of the end of the world. I suppose you're speaking of the one about the necromancers rising like the moon?"

Grandfather Birchspring tapped his pipe on his knee. "That's the very one. The magician wrote it right here in purple ink. Ahem. 'When the necromancer rises like the moon, seek the son of Ironstorm, but seek him not too soon. If Ironstorm's blood flows no more, then necromancers shall surely win the war.' I've been studying it for years, but it's never made much sense. The rest of the book is mainly a treatise for medicinal plants and the art of cauterizing wounds. I've always

wondered how sulfur was used, and this page is quite plain on that subject. Here, you take the book; it might come in handy some day. There's a whole chapter about spicing meat."

"It still makes no sense! Can you see Lysom or Rian winning the war?"

"No, can't honestly say I do. Neither boy holds much promise, but you never know. Perhaps a few weeks of training will put some muscle on Lysom's wiry frame."

"Scrawny frame, you mean."

Grandfather Birchspring chuckled. "From what I gather, there is no war yet."

"No, this Renegal is recruiting for someone named Yalinka. He said something else—he said Yalinka is searching for a girl, about my age, and a Tower elf. Isn't that strange?"

"Yalinka?" The windows rattled, and the candlelight wavered as a gust of icy air forced its way into the room. Grandfather Birchspring grew very still. "Yalinka of Tattinggil?"

"Aye, the very one. Have you heard of him?"

"Yes, yes, but long ago, and in another land. It can't be the same man, for if it is, he's found a way, as we did, to voyage through time. No, it must be his great-great-grandson." The old man was silent, running his hand thoughtfully along his moustache. "The Yalinka I knew fought against the necromancers in the North and lost all his sons in the battle at Glen Hall. I suppose that afterward he must have remarried and begotten other children, thus preserving his name. Strange things were said about him back then. He was here, at this castle, the day it all ended. 'Tis strange. And you say he's searching for a Tower elf and a young girl?" His voice died off. He frowned, smoothing his tattered bedcovers. "Yalinka of Tattinggil. Your mother knew him well, for their lands touched along the southeastern edge the Golden Forest. All the forest belonged to your grandfather, while Tattinggil

land sloped to the sea. There was marsh, as I recall, and the land was poor, though rich enough in minerals. When we were lads we would dare each other to traverse Tattinggil land at night, for there were fairy lights and marsh ghosts. It seemed only right that Yalinka should be an alchemist and a sorcerer—and a good one he was too. We went on many an errand to his castle to fetch remedies, but never at night, no, never at night.”

Tania shivered. “If my mother knew him, he couldn’t have been a bad person.”

“He wasn’t bad.” Grandfather Birchspring made a face. “Scheming, impatient, and ambitious would better describe him. His three sons were your mother’s playmates when they were growing up, and nice lads they were. Perhaps if things had gone differently she would have married one of the boys and joined the two kingdoms. Tattinggil keep is built on a rocky outcropping overlooking the sea, and as I recall, it was a gloomy dwelling. The boys much preferred the Golden Forest. They would often ride their ponies to the castle and play in the orchard all day. Glen Hall was a merry place, the orchards were overflowing with fruit and there were always bards around to tell tales or sing songs. It was a tragedy when the three Tattinggil boys died. Lord Yalinka became even more strange afterward, but who could blame him?”

“That’s so sad! How did they die?”

“They were all slaughtered during a battle. Glen Hall fell, despite your mother’s sacrifice. The Dark Lord attacked Yalinka, and there was a fierce fight. Yalinka’s boys were killed. Your mother fled into the heart of the forest. There, she hid with the elves until Lord Ironstorm came with his army. The elves joined forces with him, and the Dark Lord was finally defeated here, in this very castle.”

“We never say his name, do we,” whispered Tania.

“Whose name?”

“My father’s name. We mention Zalon, the terrible warlord of the North, and we speak of others. I’ve heard their names. But my father is simply referred to as ‘the necromancer king’ or the Dark Lord.”

“The Dark Lord. Yes, we all know his name. But why call evil? It listens, it hears. If we say it, the name will be borne on the wind until it comes to the wrong ears and evil will stir evil. No, child, say not his name for you will certainly regret it.”

“I have heard say evil listens. I will not call it, but I need to know it.”

Grandfather Birchspring leaned over and whispered softly into her ear. “His name was Daston. Daston of the Falls was what he claimed. None has ever found out where he was born, for no town will allow him now. He is spoken of no more.” He straightened up and fixed her with a fierce stare. “A pleasant sounding name for a very evil man. Let that be a lesson for you—names can mislead as easily as faces. Trust no one but your own heart.” He paused and wrinkled his nose. “Tania, I thought you promised to take a bath. Go to your room, child, and wash. Give a good scrubbing to your hair, for it reeks of peat smoke and cow manure. Take the book and keep it. It’s yours now. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Tania blew him a kiss and eased out the door. Her room was dark and freezing cold; she’d forgotten to light the fire in the little chimney. With a sigh, she tossed a handful of kindling onto the embers in the grate and blew softly until a cheerful fire bloomed. She sat on the rug in front of it and studied the book in her hands. The leather binding was worn, but not too much. The ink still looked bright. It hadn’t gone through centuries—it had made a leap forward, as she had.

Below, in the stable, she heard the cows munching their cud and the soft noise of the horses breathing. Time passed. The fire sputtered and grew low. She should bathe and wash her hair. Instead, she picked up a pair of shears, took her long, black braid and closing her eyes tight-

ly, cut it off as close to her head as she could.

Tania looked at the braid in her hand. Then she ruffled her hair, shivering as she felt the cold breeze on the back of her bare neck, and finally got the courage to glance in the mirror.

A youth stared back at her. A youth with hollow cheeks and fierce black eyebrows drawn in a scowl over eyes the color of night. She blinked, and he blinked back, an expression of comic surprise twisting his features. Tania tilted her head and examined her face. She touched her cheeks. They were too smooth. A handful of ashes from the fireplace rubbed into her cheeks and chin gave her a bit of a shadow, as if she might need a shave. She grinned, suddenly elated. "Lord Enguarand won't sell Shabaz. He won't be able to find him. He and I are going off to war. If Lysom can, then so can I."

CHAPTER FIVE

LEAVE-TAKING

Tania didn't sleep that night. Instead, she packed her bags and plotted her voyage from an old map she had. According to the map, the Golden Forest lay on the western side of the Tower Mountain range, and Yalinka's keep was on a peninsula on the northwestern side of the forest.

From Castle Storm, a trading path led north through Three Turn Valley to a place called The Lower Steppes. Then the path twisted over the Tower Mountains, skirted a small marsh, and traversed the Golden Forest. It would be easy to get to Yalinka's keep from there. Another route led from Castle Storm, but it went south and then west through the lowlands, hugging the entire coast to finally end up at Yalinka's keep. The path over the mountains looked shorter. Tania decided that would be the best route.

Before her nerve failed her, she went to the stable and saddled Shabaz, after begging him to keep quiet.

"Where are we going?" the white horse asked.

"To the Golden Forest, and then to Yalinka's keep. I want to join the army, and you can come with me, if you behave."

Shabaz snorted. "It's dark—don't you want to wait until morning?"

"No! Everyone will try to stop me. We're running away in secret,"

said Tania, tightening his girth and leading him to the courtyard. "Hold still while I mount."

A noise made her glance up. Her grandfather flung his window open, his breath coming in great, white puffs as he called out, "Tania! What are you doing?"

Tania looked up, startled. Her hands tightened on Shabaz's reins. "I'm going to the Golden Forest, to join the war. And you can't stop me," she said, eyes flashing.

Wander leaned further out. "I won't try to stop you, but at least let me say good-bye, and prepare some victuals for you. Wait, wait, I say!"

Tania gave a despairing shrug. "Hurry then!" she said. She glanced at the sky. It was still black, but she fancied she saw a thread of light. "It will soon be dawn."

"Not for another couple hours," said Shabaz. "Look, here comes Wander. Why, he has his old traveling bag with him. I suppose he means to come with us."

"Oh, no, you don't," hissed Tania, leaning down from Shabaz's great height to peer at him. "You are not coming with me!"

"I am. Shabaz, don't you move." He looked up at Tania and frowned. "Did you milk the cows?"

"I'm running away! I'm not a stable lad any longer!"

"So, you were just going to leave the poor beasts with their udders full to bursting? And who would milk them? Did you think I was going to do it?"

Tania felt her cheeks flame. "I suppose I wasn't thinking," she muttered.

"If you leave in haste, you usually regret it; when you leave in secret, secrets follow; and when you leave without properly shutting the door, the door slams shut behind you and locks you out. Get off Shabaz and go do your chores."

"I have to go before Lord Enguarand finds out! He wants to sell Shabaz!"

"Why don't you let me handle Lord Enguarand, and you take care of your chores? I suppose you haven't watered or fed the hens either? And what of the stoat and her brood? Were they going to spend the rest of the day in their pen?"

Tania's shoulders slumped. "I should be halfway to the Golden Forest."

"It's quite a ways further than you think," said Shabaz, turning his great head to peer at her. "Hurry and do your chores—I'll be fine here."

Tania slid off Shabaz's back. She pulled off her cap, and her hair, newly cropped, stood up in tufts.

Wander's eyes widened, and he took an involuntary step backward. "Daston!"

"What is it?" asked Tania. She froze. "Did you say Daston? Is that who I look like now?"

"Aye," he said faintly. "That you do." He took a deep breath. "Go, do your chores. I'll take care of Lord Enguarand."

Tania waited until her grandfather was out of sight. Then she mounted Shabaz again and nudged him with her heels. "Let's go!" she hissed.

The white horse simply turned his head to look at her. "Wander said to wait right here."

"He wants to come with me!"

"So?"

"He's too old!"

"Old?" Shabaz gave a snort. "Elves live hundreds of years. Wander still has a few centuries to go, I wager. And speaking of age—weren't you born two-hundred years ago?"

"I'm going to war!"

"Wander has been to war before you, girl." Shabaz was silent a minute, his ears pinned back. Then he shook his great head and sighed. "I never thought that the necromancers would reappear or that I would

be going off to war again.” His skin shuddered and he nuzzled Tania’s foot. “You won’t be so happy in a few weeks, I fear. War is nothing like the bards’ songs, and the fighting is sporadic. In between, it’s simply huddling in front of a sputtering fire as freezing rain seeps between your armor and your neck, and you’d trade your own mother for a pair of dry socks.”

“I have no mother,” said Tania.

Shabaz nipped her foot. “You’ll see,” he predicted. “In a few months you’ll be longing to return home.”

“I have no home—ouch!” Tania jerked her foot away. “You bit me!”

“You’d best get moving. Renegal will be up soon. I wonder if Lysom will be able to wake up so early? I’ve never seen him before cock-crow,” said Shabaz. “You should have their horses saddled and ready.”

Tania took off her riding gloves and proceeded to do her morning chores. She brushed and saddled Fletch, Renegal’s horse, and then got the brown cob ready for Lysom. The black horse had little to say except irritable mutterings about getting no rest and having stiff hocks. The brown cob, a sturdy gelding called Marron, was excited about setting off. He had spent his life pulling the farm cart to and from the village, so it was a thrill for him to hear he was to carry Lysom all the way to the Golden Forest.

“I’ve heard stories about that place,” said Marron, as Tania cinched up the girth and made sure the saddle was in place.

“Oh? From who?”

“Shabaz, of course. What do you think we talk about in the orchard all day?” Marron swished his tail.

“I never thought about it.” Tania patted his neck. “There you go. You’re all ready.”

Marron pushed his velvety muzzle against her chest. “You have the talisman now. It used to be Wander Birchspring’s. He spoke to us

horses often. I wondered when he'd give it to you," added the stocky horse. "It suits you, you know. Not just anyone can wear it and hear us. You have to have some magic in you. One of your ancestors must have had elf blood."

Tania blinked. "I didn't know that," she said.

"Maybe I'm wrong. I haven't been out much in the world," said Marron in an apologetic tone. "Not like Shabaz. To hear him, you'd think he's been everywhere."

"Maybe he has," said Tania. "Well, now for the cows."

When she was finished, she was famished. Her stomach felt as if it were turned inside out. She sniffed and caught a whiff of smoke and frying bacon. Perhaps a quick meal before she left would be a good thing. She mustn't eat too much though. If she did, her body would betray her. She had to hold her womanly curves at bay. A nerve twitched in her cheek. Not that she had any curves to begin with, but that was because she was so wiry. Her chores and work had made her shoulders broad and her arms strong. Even the boys in the village were circumspect with her. They never teased her or pulled her braids like they did the other girls. No, she was their equal, not afraid to get into a brawl or throw a punch. Her broken nose was proof enough of that. But war was different. She had to stay whipcord thin.

Her gaze fell on the dark ice on the top of the rain barrel. Her moonlit reflection stared back. She tilted her head, pensive. Wander said she looked just like her father. Were his cheeks so hollow, or his eyes so deep-set and blue? Even the ice couldn't hide the magnificent color of her eyes. Perhaps he'd had elf blood, but she would never know, would she? No one spoke of him. The old beliefs still held true: evil listened.

He'd been the bane of the North, and only Lord Ironstorm had been able to stop him. Why had he killed all those people, destroyed

the great Tower City, and made his way south in a swath of destruction? He'd been the most powerful necromancer the world had ever seen. Why had he turned to evil? Tania didn't know, and she was afraid of the answers. But part of her longed to know, and part of her whispered, "He couldn't have been all bad. Your mother married him, and you are his blood." Then again, perhaps she inherited some of his cruelty. Could she turn into a monster? Tania shivered. Maybe she would find something in her travels that would help still that little voice in her head. The one that hissed that she was just like her father, or would be like him. No! Never! She would rather die a thousand deaths than end up like him. She would prove that she was good, not evil.

Her stomach rumbled. Good, evil, or whatever, she was definitely hungry.

In the kitchen, a new fire crackled and pushed the cold into the corners of the room. Wander stood on his stool, stirring a pot of fresh porridge. The scent made Tania's mouth water. Soon the room was warm enough for Tania to take off her cloak. She did, and thrust her chin out defiantly. "Don't say anything," she said, catching sight of her grandfather's thunderstruck face. "I know. I'm a disgrace."

Wander passed a hand over his face and shook his head. "No, it's not that. You look so much like your father it spooked me. Oh, no, don't frown. He was, for all his faults and madness, a handsome man. I often wondered what he would have been like if he hadn't chosen the evil side of magic."

Tania felt bile rise in her throat. Why did he have to keep harping on that? Didn't he understand it was unbearable for her to think that she looked just like a monster? He must have noticed her distress because his eyes softened. "Your mother thought you were the world's most beautiful baby."

"Really?" Tania couldn't trust her voice.

“Truly. You must never doubt your mother’s love for you.” Wander peered at her closely, then stepped off the stool and shook his head. He took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. “Tell me, what are your plans?”

“Plans?”

“Yes, plans. What were you going to do? Were you going to show up at the fort and cry out, ‘Here I am! I’m ready to fight! Enlist me at once!’ You wouldn’t have gotten very far. Perhaps they’d have put you in the infantry and confiscated Shabaz for a captain. Most likely they would have taken Shabaz and told you to go back home to your mother.”

Tania blinked. “I didn’t think of that,” she said. Her eyes filled with tears, and she rubbed them away with her knuckles. “I’m going though, no matter what you say. Shabaz and I will fight the necromancers on our own if we have to.”

“Well, if you’re determined to go, I suppose I can’t stop you,” said Wander. He pulled on his moustache. “You are good at archery, aren’t you? You’re built like an archer—rangy. And you certainly have a way with horses, especially now that you have the amulet. I’d say the mounted archers would be a good place to start. The Golden elves are the best archers, and they have a cavalry. Shabaz was one of their horses—a warhorse from the Golden Forest Elvish Guard. They might take you in if we can persuade them that you’re good enough. You have to have something else to offer—something they will need.”

“What else could they need?”

Wander stirred the porridge some more and frowned. “I’ll think of something, don’t worry. Ah ha! I have an idea. Assistant cook! You did take the book I gave you last night, didn’t you? It will be invaluable. You can study it on the way. Now, we need to find you a bow. An elvish bow would do for your size, not one of the crossbows. They’re too heavy.” Wander tapped his spoon on the edge of the cauldron. “I

wonder if old Som's still in business? He'll have what we need. Shabaz will remember the way to his shop."

"Have you spoken to Lord Enguarand yet?"

"Aye, and everything's arranged. He's going to hire Lucien's daughter Polly to cook and clean, and her eldest son will look after the farm animals."

"What else did he say?"

"Oh, the usual, I suppose. How unfortunate we're leaving, and how much he'll miss us. He hopes my sister will recover quickly, and wishes us a rapid journey."

"You told him your sister was ill? You don't even have a sister."

"I wasn't about to say that you were off to war. He has enough worries. He cares for you, child, and it would only make him fret."

Tania hung her head. "I can't believe I was just going to ride away," she said.

"You were caught up in the grand adventure," said Wander. He patted her shoulder. "It's all right, you can repair your fault today. In the future you must think about where your actions will lead."

"What about Shabaz?"

Wander's eyes twinkled. "Lord Enguarand remembered I owned him when I reminded him how much he owes me for pay. We struck a bargain. He'll close his eyes to our hasty departure, and we'll stop by Lucien's farm and fix things up with Polly."

"Did he pay you what he owes you?"

"Child, he has no gold. What little money he makes goes to the farm or his family. I will not begrudge him that. We've lived warm, clothed, and fed for sixteen years—there're not many who can say the same. Why spoil a good arrangement?" Wander tasted the porridge. "Needs honey. Now we can leave in peace knowing that whenever we return, we will be welcomed."

“Lord Enguarand wants us back?”

Wander chuckled. “He’ll be waiting anxiously for our return. He’ll have to pay Polly, and I suppose they’ll be short a pig before spring. Lucien won’t take less than fair wages for his daughter and grandson.”

“Why don’t Lord Enguarand’s children work? He has four—surely enough to run this farm. If Melflouise had learned milking instead of embroidery, and if Rian hadn’t wasted his time learning courtly dances and mended fences instead, Lord Enguarand wouldn’t be in such a fix.”

“I suppose you’re right. But noblemen seem to have a strange aversion to marrying milkmaids, and Lord Enguarand has high hopes for his children. He wants to see Melflouise married to a rich man, preferably a noble, and Addlenett will share the same fate if Lord Enguarand can find two such rare gems. Rian will stay here and become ‘Lord of the Manor,’ and Lysom, with his soldier training, will certainly earn a high grade in the military and perhaps end up with a troop of his own to captain.”

“That would be nice,” said Tania. She rather doubted it though. The thought of Lysom doing well in anything else but a mead-drinking contest was remarkable.

“Set the table, and then we’ll grab a bite to eat and be on our way. Hurry. I hear footsteps in the guest quarters. Sir Renegal must be awake. We should leave before he comes down, don’t you think?”

Tania nodded, and took the heavy pile of pewter plates. She hadn’t heard anything, but she never questioned Wander’s sharp ears. The dining room was empty and the fire needed building. She thrust a handful of tinder into the ashes and blew. Soon a spark licked the hay and burst into flame. She added a few twigs, then a branch. Sitting back on her heels, she warmed her hands a bit before getting to her feet. She turned, and nearly collided with Sir Renegal. He looked dashing, wearing a red cloak with gold trimming, his dark hair neatly brushed,

and his boots gleaming.

“Oh!” Tania nearly curtsied, remembered she was wearing boys’ clothes, and gave a rather sketchy bow. “Good morning,” she added in a rather gruffer voice. She turned, meaning to flee, but Renegal grabbed her arm.

“I say, boy, would you get my horse ready?”

“He’s all ready to go, sir. You’ll find him in his stall.”

“Well done.” Renegal sat down with a sigh. “Fetch me some breakfast, and some for Lord Enguarand’s son. I took the liberty of waking him. The sun will rise in an hour, and I want to be gone beforehand.”

“Aye, sir,” said Tania.

“What’s your name, lad?”

“Tan, uh, Tan, er, I mean, uh,” she stuttered.

“Tan? Tanner? Well, Tanner, you seem a likely lad. Don’t be shy. Have you ever thought of joining the army?”

“Once or twice.”

The recruiter shrugged. “If you feel the urge, there is room in the infantry at Yalinka’s keep. Tell me,” he said, looking about. “Are there any girls living in the castle other than the Lady Melflouise and her little sister? Young damsels, perhaps Melflouise’s age?”

Tania blinked. “Sir?”

“Just a yes or no will do.”

“No, sir. There are no other ladies about, except Lord Enguarand’s daughters. Excuse me, sir, while I go get your breakfast.” Tania fled, and nearly collided on the stairs with Lysom. She was so surprised she didn’t think about her disguise. Instead she blurted, “Lysom, you’re awake!” His red hair stuck up in tufts, his face was crumpled with sleep, and dark shadows ringed his eyes. His jacket was wrinkled, his pants looked too tight, and his boots were so old the leather looked as thin as paper. She couldn’t help but compare him with Sir Renegal,

waiting in the dining room.

He peered at her and rubbed his eyes, yawning hugely. "Oh, it's you, Tania. Would you believe it? I have to wake up in the middle of the night. I'm going off to war." He yawned again. "I suppose you think I'm ridiculous."

"No, why should I think that?"

"Because I'm so useless." He blinked hard and then frowned. "What happened to your hair?"

"I cut it. Don't be silly, I don't think you're useless at all."

"You're lying. If you want the truth, I think you'd probably do better than I would as a soldier. You used to beat me up when we were children. Of course, I probably deserved it." Lysom shrugged, then yawned again and rubbed his eyes. "I best be going. Sir Renegal is taking me to join some army somewhere to fight someone. I suppose I'll learn more when I get to wherever it is I'm going." He scratched his head. "It seems a bit complicated. I think I'm to learn ballistics, if you can believe that. Well, I must be off now. Your hair looks nice that way."

Tania held her breath, waiting for him to ask about her strange clothes, but all he did was pat her on the shoulder and stagger into the dining room.

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She giggled as she told Wander about her meeting with Renegal and Lysom.

He raised his eyebrows. "Lysom awake? I shall have to see that. I'll bring the porridge in to them. Why don't you go get Shabaz, and take this bag with you. It's full of victuals and tinder for lighting a fire. I don't suppose you thought of bringing tinder, did you?"

"No, and I must fetch the magic book as well."

"What? You were going to leave it here? Fie! Be off with you, girl!"

“I’ll be out in a moment.” Wander took the porridge and trundled off toward the dining room. Tania gave one last look around the kitchen, taking in the vast chimney, the iron pots, and the worn wooden table she’d sat at since she was a baby. Her gaze finally stopped on Wander’s three-legged stool. She left, closing the door softly behind her, and then she dashed to her room. She had no fond glances for the small, dilapidated chamber she’d slept in for so many years. In a hurry to leave, she wrapped the leather-bound book in a scarf and tucked it into her bag. Once more in the snowy, dark courtyard, she mounted Shabaz and waited for her grandfather to come.

“Are we off?” asked the white horse.

“We are,” said Wander, as he climbed nimbly up onto the saddle in front of Tania. “But our first stop is at Lucien’s farm where I must leave a message. Then it’s off to Som’s shop in the fen. I hope you remember how to get there?” he added.

Shabaz snorted. “As if I ever forgot anything.”

“Two hundred years is quite awhile,” said Wander.

“Two hundred years is nothing,” said Shabaz, snorting and tossing his head. He set off through the snow in a steady, mile-eating trot. “I hope you two are comfortable. It’s a long ways away.”

“I brought a map,” said Tania. “I thought we could take the northern road over the Tower Mountains. It’s the shortest route.”

“The shortest, but the most difficult,” said Shabaz. “But if you’re set on going over the mountains, instead of riding along a nice, level road, that’s all right with me.”

Wander said, “I think we ought to take the mountain route. It will bring us to Som’s shop for one, and we’ll avoid meeting too many people.”

“We’ll avoid Castaway Town, which is a good thing,” said Shabaz.

“What’s the matter with Castaway Town?” asked Tania.

“It’s full of pirates and castaways, as its name implies. They say

you can find anything at Castaway, but the price to pay is often death.”

“Can you see in the dark?” asked Tania. She peered at the horizon. “The sun should be starting to show soon, but it’s still an hour before cockcrow.

“Are you worried?” Shabaz asked. “Horses have excellent night vision.”

“I’m not worried about us,” said Wander. “I worry about your poor old legs.”

“Hah!” Shabaz snorted. “Old my whiskers. Look who’s talking, Wander of the Golden Forest! You were already an old man when I was but a frisky colt.”

“Not so! I remember seeing you when I was just a lad.”

Shabaz was silent a minute, only the steady sounds of his clapping hoofs disturbing the night. Then he shook his mane and said, “I think we are about the same age. It seems to me you were always about when we came to Glen Hall. You seemed to like the elf cavalry, and I sometimes wondered if you would join.”

“Perhaps I would have, but I was already a page in Glen Hall, and I liked my work. Lady Amylee was so kind, I couldn’t have left her service for the world. Ah, here is Lucien’s letter box. Can you get any closer? Hold still, will you, while I slip this inside. What were you saying?”

“You were a page, she was a princess, and I was a cavalry horse. And yet we all ended up together, fleeing through the forest. She was so light, even with a baby swelling in her belly she weighed no more than thistledown. I can recall trying to set my feet down as gently as possible, so as not to jar her.”

Wander cleared his throat. “She was special, wasn’t she?”

Tania wondered why her throat felt so tight. She’d heard her grandfather say her mother was special since she was born, but it was the first time Shabaz had spoken of her, or evoked their flight.

“Did you escape together?” Tania asked.

“We did.” Shabaz snorted, and it came out sounding like a sigh. “She was like a spring day,” he said. “Whenever I think of Lady Amylee, I think of soft breezes and delicate flowers. I think of golden sunlight on tender new grass.”

“You would. You’re a horse,” said Wander. He patted Shabaz on the neck. “I didn’t know you were a poet.”

Shabaz chuckled. “You don’t know everything, Wander Birchspring.”

“I know you just took the wrong path,” said Wander. “We should have gone left at the smithy.”

“No, we have to go this way.” Shabaz didn’t slow his steady trot. “Just lean back and enjoy the ride, Wander. I won’t get lost.” He uttered a loud snort. “I was a unicorn, remember, and they never get lost.”

“You were a unicorn?” Tania was surprised. “Where is your horn?”

“I gave it up to get us through time. Powerful magic resides in a unicorn’s horn. I was able to use it once.” He sounded mournful. “I suppose I’ll always be a unicorn, in theory, that is. But my horn is gone forever; they don’t grow back.”

“How sad.” Tania wasn’t sure if she was sad for Shabaz, or sad for herself. She kept thinking how much she looked like her father. Why couldn’t she have looked like her mother? Then perhaps Shabaz and Wander would love her better, and treat her more like a lady instead of a farmhand. As if to drive home her dark thoughts, Shabaz spoke up.

“Tania, could you stop bouncing so much? You’re making my back feel as if it’s churning butter.”

“Sorry,” Tania muttered, leaning back against the saddlebags and letting her legs hang loose. Her thoughts were as dark as the sky, which showed no sign of lightening. Instead, fat snowflakes started swirling gently through the darkness. Thick clouds would make daybreak even more imperceptible. She closed her eyes and decided to get some sleep. One thing she was good at was sleeping—anywhere, anytime she needed.

CHAPTER SIX

THREE TURN VALLEY

The snow fell all through the morning—if you could call it a morning. The clouds were so low and so thick they looked as though they were shredding themselves on the treetops, and the gloomy darkness didn't abate. In the forest, the snow was less deep on the path, and Shabaz trotted without flagging. Snow gathered on the tops of fir trees and piled up on branches, sometimes slipping off with loud thumps. Twice they saw the gray forms of deer slipping through the falling snow, and once an owl hooted, fooled by the dark into thinking it was twilight.

“When can we eat?” asked Tania.

“As soon as we come to a protected glen. Preferably near a stream.”

Shabaz snorted. “You're in luck. I hear running water a ways ahead, and we're nearing Three Turn Valley.”

They topped a small rise, and then Shabaz picked his way down a narrow track that wound through the snow-bound trees and led into a deep valley. The snow made the footing tricky, but they arrived in the valley with no mishap.

“Here we are,” said Shabaz with satisfaction. “Just around that bend there should be a brook, and when we cross that, we'll find the path leading to Som's shop.”

"I don't remember this valley," said Wander, peering into the gloom. "It certainly is dark down here." Shadows leaned across the path, and the ridge high above them hid the sky. They turned the corner and stopped.

"That's strange," said Shabaz, looking askance at the black waters swirling in the river. "That used to be a narrow brook!"

"On the right path, you say? I say you took a wrong turn at the smithy!"

"No, impossible." Shabaz lowered his head and sniffed. "It's the same brook, only bigger. There's the path leading uphill over there. Two hundred years is a long time for a brook. It must have grown into this river and dug itself a deeper bed."

Wander squinted. They could just make out a track across the river. "Fine, but how do we get across?"

Shabaz sighed and pawed at the snow. "Too much rain this season. All the rivers are high. The ford is over there; I'll just have to see how deep it is. Why don't you build a fire and have lunch?" He turned his head and looked at Tania. "I did not take a wrong road, whatever Wander here says. Now, get off my back, and go get some firewood for your grandfather. I'm going to see how deep this river is."

Wander slid off the horse's broad back. He helped Tania unbuckle the bags and put them under the sweep of a pine tree's branches, where there was hardly any snow. Then they watched as Shabaz waded into the swift river. The water swirled around his legs and chest, but to their relief, it barely reached the horse's belly. Shabaz reached the far side and whinnied, tossing his head and shaking his mane. Then he started back, stepping carefully on the slick stones in the riverbed.

"We're in luck," Wander said. "Tania, will you get some wood?" Suddenly he let out a yell and scrambled up the pine tree, all the while calling Tania's name. Tania, running over, saw a wolf cub sitting at the base of the tree, staring upward. The wolf licked its muzzle and whined.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” said Wander, gripping his branch tightly. “I won’t come down and let you eat me.” He waved at Tania. “Be careful. There are wolves about and one is sitting beneath my tree!”

“That’s not a very big wolf,” said Tania, putting the wood down and tilting her head. “He looks about three months old, and hungry.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” said Wander. “Chase him away so I can come down. He might look small to you, but to me he’s huge.”

Instead, Tania crouched in the snow and made a soft whining sound. The wolf puppy replied and bounded clumsily to her side, his tail sweeping the snow. Tania looked up at Wander, her eyes sparkling. “It’s a baby,” she said, running her hands over his sides. “I can feel its ribs and hip bones. If we don’t feed it, it will die.”

Shabaz waded out of the brook and looked up in the tree at Wander, and then down at the wolf puppy, wriggling in delight beneath Tania’s caresses. “He looks dangerous. I think you’d better stay up there until we can drive it off,” the horse said, snorting with laughter.

Wander made his way down the tree. He brushed off the pine needles from his clothes, plucked a branch from his beard, and with a loud sigh he delved into their baggage for some victuals. “I suppose you’ll want to feed the beast,” he said to Tania.

There wasn’t much to eat—just a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, and a few slices of smoked ham. The wolf puppy devoured the cheese and ham while Wander and Tania ate the bread. Shabaz scraped at the ground searching for some grass, but he didn’t find much. Instead, he nibbled a bit of Tania’s bread, and they all watched as the wolf puppy gnawed on a leather strap. The puppy fell asleep on Tania’s lap, and Shabaz finished foraging and lay down near the fire. Wander leaned back on the horse’s side.

“Where are his parents?” asked Tania. “I wonder where he came from?”

“He may be orphaned,” said Wander. “People sometimes adopt

them and raise them as pets. Usually they revert to the wild after they reach adulthood, and they return to the forest.” He looked thoughtful. “The Gray elves raise packs of wolves and hunt with them, but the Gray elves are scarce in these parts now. I’ve only met one in my whole life.”

“Gray elves?” Tania asked, interested. “Who are they?”

“A tribe of elves who used to live in this area. I suppose they’ve all gone back north, where they came from,” said Shabaz. “Be quiet. I want to rest.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GRAY ELVES

Tania pulled her hood over her head and settled more comfortably against the baggage. The wolf puppy kept her hands and lap warm. Snow slid off branches and fell in soft thumps. Wander snored softly, and Shabaz breathed evenly, his eyes closed as he rested. Otherwise, all was silent. If there were any whispers of war, they couldn't be heard here. In the peaceful clearing, Tania had trouble remembering why they'd left and couldn't begin to imagine where they were going. Instead, she was filled with a sort of quietude. The clouds thinned, and light filtered down through the tangled canopy of fir trees and branches into the valley. The light cast no shadows—it was too weak. But when it fell on the river, the water was transformed from obsidian to amber, and the ford could be seen clearly, lined on either side by large boulders. Flat rocks, some at least a meter across, lay in the water. At one time, perhaps centuries ago, those flat rocks had topped the boulders in a rough bridge. But rivers age, and this one had swelled, perhaps from new streams, and water had pushed the bridge over.

Tania snuggled deeper into her cape. As her eyes traced the shadowy forms beneath the swift brook, she heard a little cough. Instantly she spun around, her hands tightening on the wolf puppy's fur.

Standing not a stone's throw away was an elf. She knew he was an elf, although he was taller than any elf she'd ever seen. His pointed ears gave him away, along with an enthralling, wild beauty elves possessed. He had black hair, as smooth as the wing of a crow. His eyes were the color of mulberries, and his skin was a curious swarthy color. A cloak the color of wood-bark covered his shoulders, and he wore a slim tunic of white wool belted at the waist with a silver buckle in the shape of a running wolf. A silver brooch of the same pattern held his cloak closed at his neck. He was smiling at her, and she relaxed, though she darted an anxious glance at Grandfather Birchspring who was still sound asleep and snoring.

"I mean no harm," said the elf, in a voice as quiet as a breeze in the treetops.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" Tania spoke in a whisper.

"My name is Fairnight Graylag. I live here." He waved a hand at the forest behind him. "I guard this ford, and that puppy," he paused and his grin widened, "is mine."

"You should feed him more," said Tania. She hadn't meant to reproach him, and as soon as the words left her mouth she wished she could call them back.

The elf didn't seem offended. "Perhaps. He's at an age where he has to learn to fend for himself." He broke off and looked to her right. "Oh! I'm sorry sir, did I wake you?"

Grandfather Birchspring rubbed his eyes and blinked. "By my whiskers, a Gray elf!" he exclaimed.

"Fairnight Graylag, at your service," said the elf, giving a slight bow. He shifted his feet, making his cloak ripple. Tania noticed that it blended with the snow and the trees behind him, making the outline of his silhouette hard to spot even when he was so close. "Where are you heading? It's a rare traveler who stops in this woods," he added.

“We’re going to Som’s shop,” said Grandfather Birchspring.

“You won’t make it there before dark.”

“Is the woodcutter’s cabin still in the clearing?”

The elf gave a start. “Many years have gone by since that burned down. Where have you been, my friend?”

“You call me friend, though you know me not. Thou art as confident as the eagle,” said Grandfather Birchspring, falling into a dialect Tania faintly remembered. She frowned, trying to dredge up memories just out of reach. Before she could bring them into focus, the elf gave a silvery laugh.

“The Towers!” he said, bowing deeper than before. “To the eagle all are friends, but to the hare all are enemies. Thy words belie you—thou art from the White Towers. Though I had believed all had died, and the years gone by gave little hope for survivors. Where have you hidden? Why show yourself now?”

“For all I know, I am the last of the Tower elves.” Grandfather Birchspring was silent a minute. “Do the Gray elves still guard the passage to the Steppes?” he asked.

Fairnight Graylag nodded. “We do.”

“What news have you of the North?”

Fairnight seemed uneasy. “As much as I trust you, friend, I must ask who travels with you, and why?”

“This is my grandda—er, grandson Tanner. He is on his way to offer his services to the elves of the Golden Forest.”

With a piercing look at Tania, the elf replied, “The news is as it always has been, all quiet in the North.” He hesitated a moment, and then said, “There are more of my kin about. If you’re planning on camping here tonight, perhaps you would like to join us.”

“We join you with pleasure.” Grandfather Birchspring dug his elbow into Shabaz’s side. “Wake up, you lazy nag. We’re leaving.

Tanner, hurry, lad! The sun is setting and we don't want to keep Sir Graylag waiting."

Shabaz snorted and heaved himself to his feet, and the wolf puppy woke up and jumped out of Tania's lap. He yawned, stretched, and then peed, crouching in the snow with a sheepish expression. The elf laughed again, but quietly, and Tania realized that although she could hear him clearly, the sounds he made were as unobtrusive as the sounds of the forest. To someone not fifty feet away, he would go unnoticed, as much by the shifting colors of his cloak as the subtle sound of his voice.

As Tania hurried to fasten the baggage to Shabaz's back, she could hear Shabaz muttering about pushy elves, in particular, pushy Tower elves, and especially a certain Wander Birchspring who was getting too big for his britches. He stopped muttering and nuzzled Tania. "I was awake," he said quietly, "and listening. You did wisely to hold your tongue and take note. Fairnight might seem friendly, but he's still a stranger. He might be an eagle, but we are just hares—never forget that."

Tania patted his neck. She was troubled. Grandfather Birchspring hadn't introduced Fairnight to Shabaz. He must have his reasons for secrecy.

The elf led them through the woods along twisting paths. The way seemed clear enough, but when Tania glanced back to see where they'd been she couldn't see a sign of a trail. She was walking holding to Shabaz's tail, so his words came to her clearly. Now he was talking to Grandfather Birchspring, although the latter never answered him directly.

"Once my old master and I stayed with the Gray elves. The pass they guard leads to the High Steppes. The necromancer lord came from the North, but couldn't get through the pass. The elves guard it too well. Instead, he came through the mountains through the White Towers. I always wondered what would have happened if he'd tried to wrest the pass away from the Gray elves. Perhaps the war would have ended there."

Grandfather Birchspring made no comment, and the horse resumed his train of thought. "The Gray elves are loyal to no one but themselves. They guard the pass because it is their land and because the wolves come from the Steppes. They allied themselves to the wolves in the dawn of time, and have remained allies ever since." The white horse flicked an ear in Tania's direction. "I hope you're listening, child. When we get to the camp, stay near me until we see if Fairnight Graylag means well."

Tania gave a little tug on his tail to let him know she'd heard. In front of them, Fairnight turned. He pointed toward a massive yew tree. "This way," he said, holding one of the sweeping branches aside.

They passed in front of him and found themselves in a circular clearing. In the middle, a fire burned merrily. Red sparks leapt from crackling pine branches, and sitting around the fire were ten other elves. They all rose and bowed as Fairnight arrived.

"Welcome," said one of the elves. They all wore bark-colored cloaks fastened with silver brooches in the shape of a running wolf. They could have all been brothers; twins even, for each one was tall and slender, with amethyst eyes, black hair, and dusky skin. All were seemingly made from the same mold. Only one looked to be very old. His hair had streaks of silver in it, and his face, though unlined, seemed stern. He stood in the center of the group and was taller than the other elves by a head.

"Wander Birchspring, at your service. This is my grandson, Tanner." Grandfather Birchspring bowed, and Tania copied him, keeping her eyes fixed on the tall elf. He hadn't moved. He stared at them, and seemed transfixed, as if he'd come face to face with a ghost.

"Wander Birchspring," said the tall elf finally. His voice was a mere sigh, and he shook his head hard. "My eyes and ears are old, forgive me. Is it really you, Wander, or has my age caught up with me at

last and pushed me into the world of spirits?”

“Nay, your eyes deceive you not. However, my memory fails me. Have we met before? I’m sorry, I don’t recall your name.”

“My name is Lupin Graylag. These are my sons. I’m sorry, I forget my manners.” He shook his head and sat down again. “Come, sit by the fire and warm yourselves. I will tell you how I know you.”

Wander and Tania approached warily, Tania keeping her hand on the horse’s withers. “You have me at a disadvantage,” admitted Wander, perching on a log. He nodded toward the fire. “I thank you for your hospitality though. A warm fire will be welcome tonight.”

“We elves live for centuries, and our memories are long. Two hundred years ago we fought a fearsome battle in this very woods, and many Gray elves died. A man called Ironstorm came with his army when he heard of our plight. He rode a unicorn and his sword could undo the Dark Lord’s spells. He had a lieutenant. A young elf from the White Towers, who carried a silver shield, rode at his side. But by the time they arrived, my people were already defeated and had fled. Only a handful and I remained. The Dark Lord’s army slaughtered that handful, and I was wounded. You found me, Wander, and brought me to Ironstorm’s camp. There, a maiden tended me. She was wondrous fair, with hair like sunlight and eyes that brought to mind springtime. I stayed but a few days, but her face is graven in my mind. All those who were around her stand out in my memory. For that reason I recognized you, Wander Birchspring. It’s natural you don’t remember me. I was simply a wounded soldier among so many.”

“Nay, I recall.” Wander nodded, his eyes hooded. “I only met one Gray elf in my life, and it was thee.”

“Leave high speech aside. Among us, we are friends.”

Wander nodded, but his face was still troubled. Tania noticed, but couldn’t divine the source. Her hand tightened on Shabaz’s with-

ers. The horse rubbed her shoulder with his velvety nose and said, “I remember that battle. I was the unicorn Ironstorm rode. Lady Amylee was with us then, and you were but a—”

“I would ask one thing,” said Wander suddenly. He stood up so quickly he smacked Shabaz’s nose with his head. “Ouch!” he cried. “Move over, you flea-bitten nag!”

“Flea-bitten?” Shabaz snorted. “You’re just clumsy, and your head is as solid as a rock. No wonder it’s so hard to knock sense into it.”

The Gray elves chuckled, and Tania drew her breath in with a hiss. “They hear you,” she whispered.

“Of course we hear,” said Fairnight. “We Gray elves speak to the wolves—why not unicorns as well?”

“Why not, indeed?” Grandfather Birchspring drew himself up to his full height, coming nearly to Lupin’s waist. “You should have made it known, sir,” he said stiffly.

“ ’Tis your own fault. We don’t understand horses—only our wolves and the magic beasts. I did not realize your steed was a unicorn. He seems to have misplaced his mark of distinction. You didn’t introduce us to your companion,” he added, his voice chiding.

“I am Shabaz,” said the warhorse, tossing his head.

“Welcome, Shabaz.” The Gray elves all bowed, and two wolves that had been lying quietly by the fire got up and came over, their tails wagging gently as they touched noses with the white horse. The puppy Tania had found was sitting by Fairnight’s feet. He gave a little bark, and Fairnight looked down and said, “No, he’s not going to step on you. You can go say hello.” The puppy bounded over and sniffed at Shabaz’s hoofs.

“You can understand the wolves’ speech?” Tania asked, trying to keep her voice low like a young man’s.

“Of course. We need no amulets.” Fairnight laughed at Tania’s

discomfort. “Don’t look so surprised.” He shook his head. “You mustn’t try to hide magic from a Gray elf; we can feel it from afar. Your amulet is a powerful one. Whoever made it put a strong spell upon it. Not only can you speak to unicorns, but you can hear horses and donkeys as well, I wager.”

Wander sat back down with a sigh. “Excuse me, I have been discourteous. We are grateful for your hospitality, and I have repaid it by . . .”

“By being a hare,” said Fairnight, with a laugh. “You fear us, but for what reason I know not. Can you tell us your story, Wander Birchspring? When my father knew you, you were a warrior, an eagle among eagles. What changed you into a frightened hare?”

“Fairnight!” His father’s voice was sharp.

“No.” Wander held his hand up. “He speaks the truth. I am frightened. I thought that the last war would be the final one, but it seems that the Dark Lord has not had his last word. Rumor has it that his book of spells vanished, and another necromancer has made his presence known. You must understand what I am speaking of, for why else would the Gray elves come so far south? Are you preparing your defenses, or have you simply come to see the place of your last, terrible defeat?”

Lupin nodded, his expression grim. “It is well we met, Wander Birchspring. You are perceptive. We have come to scout places to post our sentinels. This time, we will be ready.”

“Have the rumors reached the Steppes, then?”

“They are stronger there than anywhere else, and they are not rumors, alas. There have been reports of mountain villages standing empty. Their inhabitants have vanished.”

“Have you heard who is behind this?”

“No. As hard as we look, it is like searching for a wisp of smoke in a fog. We cannot even say from which direction the evil comes. Out of the north, as before? Or the south, where so many took refuge.

Perhaps one with a magic book clutched to his chest. Whatever the case, somebody found it, and has been invested with its foul power.” Lupin frowned. “Do many people speak of this? Has the rumor of war reached men’s ears?”

“Aye, that it has. Recently a recruiter came to search for likely soldiers. It seems you are not alone in your foreboding. Yalinka of Tattinggil has started raising an army. He won’t be caught unprepared.”

“Yalinka of Tattinggil.” A murmur ran around the edges of the group. Lupin was pensive, staring into the fire. “There is a name we know. His was the messenger telling the Gray elves to beware. He has made his plans known to us—seeking the best of our trackers and wolf handlers to form a corps in his army. Aye, Yalinka is readying for war.”

“Have you sent many of your elves?”

“Many have gone west to join Yalinka. Memories of the last war have made us wary. This time, as you said, we won’t be caught unprepared.” He sighed and then looked at Wander with a grim smile. “Your grandson looks a likely lad. Will he be joining Yalinka’s forces then? Is that why you are making this journey?”

“I’m taking him to the Golden Forest. We will join the mounted archers there. Tanner is good with a bow, and Shabaz is an experienced warhorse.”

Lupin gazed at Shabaz. “I suppose he is,” he said, his voice thoughtful. “Two hundred years ago he was a battle unicorn in the prime of his life. Magical beasts age slower than most, but you seem to have kept your youth, though you’ve lost your horn.” He finished on a questioning note.

“I gave it away,” said Shabaz simply. He gave Tania a push with his nose. “Would you be so kind, lad, as to unsaddle me and take your baggage off my back? You might want to set up your tent as well, and hang your blankets near the fire to warm.”

Tania hurried to comply, and then she offered to go get more firewood, as the fire showed signs of dying down. As she bent to her task,

she noticed some of Lupin's sons setting up tents, while others set about skinning the rabbits and plucking the pheasants they'd fetched from a game satchel. The tents were soon erected, and the scent of roasting meat made her mouth water. She'd had nothing to eat since the bread at midday, and her stomach growled loudly.

Fairnight, standing close to her, laughed. "Are you hiding another wolf puppy beneath your cloak?"

"No," she said, turning away from his keen gaze. She was troubled by her disguise, not yet trusting that she would pass as a boy. Her worries vanished as the evening wore on and no one made any sign of doubting she was a boy. Lupin's sons clapped her on the back, tossed a leg of rabbit to her instead of handing it to her, and generally treated her like one of them. Tania stayed near her grandfather, and sat with her face in the shadows. She spoke only when spoken to and didn't relax until dinner was over.

The night was clear. Stars shone between the branches. The elves settled themselves closer to the dying fire, and Lupin lit his pipe. He blew one or two smoke rings, and then leaned back on a log and rested his eyes on Tania. "So," he said in a mild voice. "This is your grandson."

"My adopted grandson," said Wander.

"Ah." Lupin puffed on his pipe, and then said, "I wondered about that. He doesn't have an elvish air. He looks human, except for his eyes. There could be some elf blood in him."

"I wouldn't know," said Wander. "I took him in when his mother died. I never knew his father." He spoke rather sharply, and Lupin held up his hand.

"Peace! I didn't mean to pry," he said. "It's just that we Gray elves love conversation."

"I prefer a bit of music after my meal," said Wander.

The fire crackled, sending sparks into the air. One of Fairnight's

brothers took out a flute and started to play a quiet tune. Tania settled into her cloak. The music was haunting, and so gentle it seemed like the wind was singing as it wove its way through the trees. Shabaz moved closer to the fire to listen, and the wolves crept nearer and curled at their masters' feet. Wander seemed lost in thought—gazing into the firelight while he chewed pensively on the end of his beard. The moon rose and the clearing was lit with its silver light. An owl hooted, a breeze rattled the branches, and Tania found herself hoping suddenly that there would be no war and no fighting to disturb her tranquil world.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CLOAK

Clear blue sky showed above the trees, and the sun peeked over the horizon and into Tania's tent. Instantly awake, she sat up. Sleep never clouded her eyes or mind. She burrowed under her blankets for her clothes and put them on while still under the covers. She then slipped outside and surveyed the clearing.

The Gray elves were gone. They had vanished in the night, or in the uncertain light of dawn. They disliked full sun, kept to the shadows, and moved more readily during the half-light of dawn and dusk. They'd left no sign of their presence behind. Then a movement caught her eye. A cloak hung over a branch near her tent. A silver brooch in the shape of a wolf held a note pinned to it. Tania took it and turned it about.

Her reading was limited to the writings of men, although she could pick out some letters in the elves' runes. She went to see Shabaz, who was standing with his ears pricked near the remains of the fire.

"Did you see them leave?" she asked.

"Yes, but don't ever tell them that. They are proud of their wood-lore." Shabaz blew white clouds out of his nostrils. "It grows colder. Perhaps you should build up the fire for Wander. He'll appreciate that, I'm

sure. His old bones aren't used to camping outdoors anymore."

"Can you read this?" Tania held the note in front of Shabaz.

The horse chuckled. "You think that since I can talk I can read?"

"You can read. Yesterday I saw you and Grandfather Birchspring looking at that old magic book I brought along, and you read the part in elvish rune."

The horse pawed the ground. "Your eyes are too sharp for a mortal. I'm beginning to think you have fairy blood."

"There are no such creatures," said Tania.

"Is that what you think? You shouldn't be so sure. Ahem! It says, 'For Tanner—thank you for finding my wolf puppy. Take this cloak in remembrance of Fairnight Graylag.' " The horse looked at the cloak and snorted. "That is a princely gift. The Gray elves rarely part with their cloaks, and I've never heard of one giving away his brooch."

The cloak was a marvel—dark gray on one side, and pale gray on the other. The colors shifted subtly so that it was hard to see the wearer in light or shadow. It had a deep hood, and fastened at the throat with the brooch. Tania put the cloak on and ran her hands over it. "It's very soft," she said.

"It's made from the wild goats that live on the High Steppes. Each year the elves use their wolves to round up great herds. The Gray elves cull the softest wool from the goats' underbellies. They add silk for the sheen," Shabaz added, sniffing at the cloak. "Very nice, but it smells like goat, don't you think?"

"It must be a new one," said Tania.

She soon had a fire burning, and while waiting for Grandfather Birchspring to wake up, she decided to catch a few fish for breakfast. The river wasn't far, and by the time her grandfather awoke, she had three trout sizzling in a pan.

Grandfather Birchspring emerged from his tent sniffing deeply.

“Ah, I smell breakfast! If you can’t become an archer, I’m sure they’ll take you as assistant cook.” He stretched, and then widened his eyes.

“Why, that’s a new cloak you’re wearing. And the brooch—was it a gift?”

Tania showed him the note. “Fairnight left it for me.”

“Do you know what that means?”

Tania shrugged. “He’s grateful I found his lost puppy.”

“It means you’re an honorable member of their clan. Fairnight’s family is the Running Wolf clan. Wherever you go in their territory, you have but to show this and they will let you pass. The other Gray elves will do whatever they can in their power to help you if ever you are in difficulty. It’s as if you were one of them.”

Tania wrinkled her forehead. “That makes me feel rather strange,” she said. “I hardly know them.”

Grandfather Birchspring laughed. “The gesture was a noble one. I wonder if it was Lupin’s idea. At any rate, now that you have a new cloak you can give me yours. Mine is quite threadbare.”

Tania spent the rest of the morning hemming her old cloak to fit Wander. She was handy with a needle and thread, and so absorbed in her work that she didn’t notice the snow falling until it started to cover her neat stitches. Then she glanced up, a frown puckering her face. Shabaz was standing by the fire and, in the snowfall, was nearly invisible. The fire had died down; snowflakes sizzled and hissed on gray embers. Grandfather Birchspring was busy tucking away the tents into their saddlebags. Then Shabaz knelt on the ground, groaning a bit as he descended, so that Wander could sling everything on his broad back and fasten it down.

“There,” he said, stepping back and wiping his brow. “Tania, is my cloak ready? We’re about to set off.”

“It is.” Tania nipped the thread and tied a knot. She then held it up for Wander to see. “Try it on,” she said.

He took off his old, tattered cloak and put on the green one, pausing to tie the hood snugly under his chin. "It feels perfect," he said. "What do you think, Shabaz?"

The horse's eyes twinkled and he gave a snorting guffaw.

"What's so funny?"

Tania bit her lip. "The hood is pointy," she said, trying not to laugh. "You look like a little fir tree. Come here, let me fix that."

Wander reached up and patted the point down. "No time for that. We have to reach Som's shop before nightfall, and it's a good five or six hours away. Come on, let's get moving."

They set off, Shabaz walking through the snow and ducking under branches. When they reached the ford, he waded through while Tania held her feet up out of the water. On the other side she dismounted, as the hill leading out of the ravine was steep and Shabaz had enough to carry. Tania scrambled up the twisting path, sometimes grabbing Shabaz's tail for balance. She admired the unicorn's agility. Not once did he slip or set his hoofs wrong, and he leapt lightly over fallen branches. Once he cleared a fallen tree that had to be chest high.

Panting, Tania hauled herself over the log, careful not to rip her new cloak on sharp branches. At the top of the ravine, she climbed onto Shabaz's back. "Tell me something," she gasped, when she could get her breath back. "Why did you unfasten the gate all those years when you could have simply jumped over the fence and spared me the chore of fetching the runaway cows to bring back to the farm?"

Shabaz chuckled. "You needed something to do, and the cows were bored. They wanted to explore and I helped them, that's all."

The hours passed to the rhythm of Shabaz's hoof beats. Mile after mile, the white horse trotted across the empty fen dotted with thin strands of birch or ash trees. Not once did Tania see a living thing, other than a herd of deer so far away as to be just a smudge of dark gray

moving on the horizon. Snow still fell in whirling flurries, and the sky was the color of lead.

“It’s very flat,” Tania said after a while. “Is this what’s called the Lower Steppes?”

Shabaz spoke without turning his head. “Yes. This is just the tip of the Great Northern Steppes. Here, it is squeezed between the forests, and then it dips down into the marshland. We climbed up to it through Three Turn Valley. It’s very steep, but it’s the fastest way to this place.”

“Does anyone live here? It looks so empty! Yet there was a cornfield a ways back, and over there is a turnip field. Where are the farmers?”

“There are hidden valleys about. Som’s shop is in one such place.”

“It’s rather bleak and windy,” said Tania.

“The wind is gentle today. Sometimes it can scream across the fen with the force of a tornado. No trees grow tall here; the first storm knocks them flat.”

No trees grew, but there were bushes of all sorts; briar rose, blackberry, stunted yew, yellow genet, and white thorn grew rampant. There was also tall grass that stood higher than Shabaz’s head. The grass was hard-edged and cut, as Tania found out when she tried to grab a piece of it.

“That wasn’t very smart,” said Wander, binding a strip of gauze around the slice on her palm. “There, it will sting, but grass cuts won’t get infected.”

“It’s as sharp as a sword,” said Tania, pulling her leg out of reach of another swath of grass.

“That’s why I stay on the path,” said Shabaz. The bushes thinned, then grew thick again. Sometimes Tania could see the horizon on all sides, and sometimes hedges made of thick bramble hemmed them in. The fen was not altogether flat, she noticed, but the dips and rises were so gentle as to be imperceptible.

Tania cleared her throat. "Grandfather Birchspring?"

"Yes?"

"When you were in the army, a lieutenant, as Graylag said, were you . . ." she hesitated, plucking at her bandaged hand.

"Was I what, child?"

"Were you young?"

"I was. I rode next to Ironstorm and held a silver shield."

"I don't understand. For you, that was only sixteen years ago. I thought elves didn't age quickly."

Wander Birchspring was silent for a moment, and then he said with a sigh, "Shabaz gave up his horn to travel through time. I gave up my youth."

"Your youth! How terrible! Why?"

"The sorcerer needed something precious from each of us."

"What about me? What did I give up? I was just a baby," said Tania.

"You gave nothing. Your mother made the last sacrifice. She gave her life for you."

Tania's mouth went dry. Tears pricked her eyes. "You did all that just to save me? All because of me? I'm so sorry," she said.

Shabaz slowed, and then stopped. In the silence Tania could hear her own breathing. Then Wander slid off Shabaz's back and reached a hand to Tania. "We should stretch our legs." His voice was kind.

Shabaz fluttered his nostrils. "We need to tell her, Wander," he said.

"You tell her then. I'm tired," said Wander, as he sat down on a flat rock. When he drew his feet beneath his cloak, he looked even more like a little fir tree.

Tania sat next to him. "No, you tell me."

The elf frowned. "I suppose it's for your own good, although we never planned to tell you the whole story. We didn't want to frighten you. The fact is, child, the Dark Lord knew of your existence. We tried to hide you, but I suppose your mother knew he'd find you. She had our

escape planned; Shabaz and I only found out about it when the Dark Lord attacked. She made us promise to help her, and once we pledged our promise, she told us what we must do, and what we must sacrifice.

“We agreed, Tania. We agreed because it was your mother’s wish, and because we loved you. We all loved you, especially your mother, and we wanted to save you. I only wish she’d confided in me sooner, or that she’d told me who had betrayed her.”

“There are many things to wish for,” said Shabaz, nuzzling Tania’s cheek. “We must be careful. The necromancers know there is a child somewhere, and they seek a young woman. They are looking for you, Tania, but they will search for the daughter of a lady. Wander and I thought that as a servant maid you would go unnoticed. At present you pose as a young man. You must keep to your disguise.”

“The best thing would be Yalinka’s plan to crush the necromancers before they even have time to gather an army,” said Wander. “That is why we agreed to take you to the Golden Forest. You will be safe with an army of forest elves.”

Shabaz tickled Tania’s cheek with his whiskers. “Stop crying and get on my back. We’ve still a ways to go. And, Wander, if I were you, I’d leave the hood as it is. It will make a perfect disguise. We can hide you in a forest of pine trees.”

Tania wiped away her tears. “I’m sorry,” she said to Wander and Shabaz. “I’m sorry for what you had to give up. I promise, I won’t ask any more stupid questions, and I won’t cry anymore.”

“That’s my girl, I mean, my lad.” Wander patted her shoulder. “We’d better leave. Give me a leg up, there you go.” They set off at a canter, and for the next few hours, no one said a word.

Just before evening, the path took a sharp turn and plunged into a deep ravine. Light was dim in the valley and the wind quieted. The path was now paved, and Shabaz’s iron-shod hoofs struck sparks against

the rocks.

Streams splashed down the steep sides of the ravine. They shone silver in the gloom and braided together to join in a fast-flowing brook at the bottom of the valley. The travelers crossed the brook on a creaking wooden bridge. Shabaz paused before passing beneath a massive stone archway.

“What is it?” asked Wander, leaning forward and peering through the gloom.

“Didn’t there used to be a gate here?”

“A door, I think. An old oak affair with iron studs.” Wander tilted his head. “It must have fallen off. Som was never very good about repairing his own things.

“It’s very still,” said Shabaz, his ears twitching back and forth.

“Som’s shop isn’t very busy, even in the best of times.” Wander shrugged. “I never could figure out how he made a living out here. The only people who ever come are looking for elvish weapons. There isn’t exactly a huge calling for them.”

“Perhaps he’s gone,” said Tania.

“I don’t think so. I would have heard.”

Shabaz gave a snort, and then trotted briskly beneath the archway. The travelers found themselves in a courtyard next to a dark pond. In front of the pond stood a house. Or rather, it leaned to one side. Its steep, sagging roof jutted out past the crooked porch to touch a massive boulder. It made it look as if the building rested on its elbow. Above the porch a broken sign hung crookedly from a rusted chain. Printed in red letters were the words “Som’s Shop—Be Welc.”

There were several outbuildings, each vying with one another to be the first to fall down. A potting shed propped up with poles leaned out above an overgrown garden. A small pigeon tower stood crumbling to one side. No pigeons fluttered about its tiled roof. A rusted shovel

lay on the ground, along with several other tools—too rusted and broken to be identified. The path down the ravine had been paved with cobblestones, and the semi-circle courtyard in which they found themselves was paved as well, though weeds grew through all the stones and nearly hid them.

“It’s derelict, it must be abandoned,” said Tania, her shoulders slumping. “I’ll never get a weapon. How can I show up in the Golden Forest without a bow?”

“Abandoned?” Shabaz sounded surprised. “It looks pretty much the same as it did two hundred years ago—except for the missing door.”

“Where is that bell rope?” Wander slid off Shabaz’s back and climbed onto the porch. “There used to be a bell rope here.”

“Knock,” said Shabaz, helpfully.

Wander knocked, and they waited. The darkness grew deeper, along with the cold. Finally a sound came from the rickety building. The door opened and a shadowy figure peeked out.

“What is it? What do you want?”

“We’re looking for an elvish bow.”

“The shop’s not open at night. Go away! Come back tomorrow!”

“Som! It’s me, Wander Birchspring. Let us in!”

“Wander? Wander Birchspring? I haven’t seen him in two hundred years. He must be dead. Go away! Leave me alone!”

“Look closely, it is I. Here is Shabaz, too.”

The figure leaned out and peered at Shabaz. “That’s no unicorn. That’s a big white horse. Now, begone!”

Shabaz spoke up, his strong, whinnying voice echoing in the small courtyard. “Som! You wouldn’t recognize your own mother in strong sunlight. It is I, Shabaz, and if you don’t let Wander inside, and find me a stall full of hay, you’ll live to regret it!”

“Well, by my hands and whiskers, if it isn’t old Shabaz! And

Wander—can it really be you?” Som reached out and drew Wander into the doorway. “Well, you have the Tower elf eyes, and the Tower elf height, or should I say . . .”

“Say nothing, just let us in, and go put Shabaz in a nice stall.”

“With fresh water,” said Shabaz.

“You can drink from the pond. By my hands and whiskers! A unicorn without his horn. There must be a good story in that, perhaps one I could hear?”

“If you invite us in!” Wander spoke with exasperation.

“You must be Wander—only Wander used to be so rushed. Always in a hurry, he was. Here, let me show you where to sleep, Shabaz. My heavens, who is this?”

“My name’s Tanner,” said Tania. She stared at Som. In the dark it was hard to tell, but it seemed as if he might be a dwarf. She’d seen dwarfs before, of course, but it had been a long time ago. One day a group had come to trade in the market near Castle Storm. The village children had all run over to stare, and Tania remembered being impressed by their deep, gruff voices. They were shorter than humans, shorter than elves, and incredibly stocky and strong. Their features were usually hidden behind beards, and their eyes were sharp and bright. Som looked no different, with a long black beard, and eyes that glittered like black pebbles beneath running water.

“Tanner is my grandson,” said Wander.

Som raised bushy black eyebrows and favored Tania with a keen gaze. “Well, don’t just stand there gaping, Tanner. Unsaddle Shabaz and carry your baggage into the house. The fire’s lit, I’ll be inside in a tick.”

“Yes, sir,” said Tania, unbuckling the harness and sliding everything off Shabaz’s broad back. She staggered under the weight of it, but managed to carry it into the house and set it on the floor. She straightened and looked around. “It looks like a cave in here,” she said. The

ceiling was low; Tania's head could almost touch it. Beneath her feet the gray flagstone floor was worn to a satin smoothness. There was a black, potbellied stove in one corner. A fire glowed in the grate, radiating heat. There was a wooden table and four chairs, all very sturdy and well made. Light came from an oil lamp sitting on the table, and from candles placed in two wall sconces. In front of the stove was a deep armchair, well cushioned and covered with an incongruous rose floral fabric. The walls were made of stone, but they were nearly hidden by all sorts of weapons—bows, quivers of arrows, swords, knives, and even spears—hanging upon them. Tania had never seen such an assortment of weapons.

“Well, well, I see you've made yourselves at home.” Som came into the room and clapped his hands. “Sit down, sit down! Wander, you take the armchair. Tanner, draw up two chairs and we'll sit by the stove.” He motioned to her with his pipe, and she hastened to pull chairs toward the cozy stove.

“We can't stay long,” said Wander. “Just the time to choose a weapon for the lad, and we're off.”

“To join Yalinka's army, no doubt.” Som's eyes twinkled. “I've been busy this month—more folk have come to my shop than custom, and the Gray elves love to talk, you know.”

“They've been here?”

“This morning I had a visit from the Graylag clan. This is their land.”

“The Steppes belong to the Gray elves,” said Wander.

“They gave me this valley long ago when I saved one of their sons from drowning. There are a few others who've been allowed to settle here, but for the most part it is a lonely place. I cherish my solitude, but I appreciate good company. How long will you be staying?”

“We'll be glad to stay the night, but tomorrow morning we have to be off.”

“That sounds fine. Why, what's that? I hear more hoof beats. Are

there others with you?" Som asked.

"No." Wander frowned. "Who could that be?" He pulled the curtain back and peered out the window. "It's Sir Renegal and Lysom!"

"More customers?" Som rubbed his hands together. "This *has* been a busy day!"

Tania felt the blood leave her face. If Lysom saw her, all would be lost unless she could convince him to hold his tongue. She got up. "I'll go see to Shabaz."

"Good idea." Wander looked distracted. "I was sure they would take the coastal route."

Once outside, Tania slid into the darkness and waited until Lysom was alone in the stable. She didn't have to wait long.

Sir Renegal strode out of the stable and called over his shoulder, "Make sure you water Fletch." Then he pounded on Som's door.

As soon as Tania saw Som open the door and usher Renegal in, she rushed into the stable. In the dark, she saw Lysom about to go into Fletch's stall. Taking a deep breath, she sprang upon him and knocked him to the floor.

"Oof!" he gasped, and tried to fight back, but Tania was stronger and held him flat on his stomach with his arms crossed behind his back. "What do you want? I have no money!" he gasped, struggling, his face in the straw.

"Be quiet. It's me, Tania, and I have to speak with you."

He stopped moving and coughed. "What? Who? Tania? What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to fight, and if you try to stop me, I'll thrash you."

"Let me up, I won't try to stop you. You're daft though, girls can't join the army." He wriggled out of Tania's grasp and sat up, spitting bits of straw out of his mouth. Then he caught sight of Tania and his eyes widened. "What have you done to yourself?"

"I'm going to pretend to be a boy, and don't you dare laugh," said Tania, making her voice as fierce as she could. "My name is Tanner, and my grandfather and I are on our way to the Golden Forest to join the mounted archers."

"With which horse?"

"Shabaz."

"You can't take Shabaz, he's our horse!" Lysom scowled. "You'll be hanged for theft when I get through with you."

"Your father gave him to Wander for services rendered. Do you want to pay his back wages or fight about it?" Tania made a fist, and Lysom backed away.

"No, no. You can keep him. He's too old to be of any good anyway." Lysom batted her fist away. "You're scaring me Tania."

"It's Tanner, Lysom, don't forget."

"I won't. I suppose you're here to buy some sort of weapon."

"A bow and arrows. What are you getting?"

"Nothing. I'm not keen on fighting. Sir Renegal needed a new sword, so we stopped here." He looked about. "It doesn't look very inviting."

"Are you really going to study ballistics?" Tania got to her feet and stuck out her hand, then hauled Lysom to his feet and brushed the straw off his back. "I'm sorry about your britches," she said, noticing a rip in his knee.

"Oh, that was already there. I haven't had a new pair of pants in ages. I hope the army outfits me with something."

"I'm sure they will," said Tania.

"As for ballistics—father said it would keep me out of trouble. I'll be behind the lines with the catapults and ballistas."

"Aren't you excited?" Tania couldn't keep the enthusiasm out of her voice.

Lysom stared at her, a scowl on his thin face. "About what? Sleeping

in the rain? Riding until your rear end is rubbed raw? Eating cold food and having to kill people?” His voice rose. “I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“Oh, Lysom.” Tania patted his shoulder. “I don’t think we’ll have to fight anyone. Yalinka is raising an army to *prevent* the war—weren’t you listening?”

“I just want to go home. I miss my mother, and I miss Rian. I’ve never been away from him. I’m tired from riding all day, and hungry, and I say, you wouldn’t happen to have anything strong to drink?”

A loud snort from Shabaz made Tania jump. “We’d better go inside, they’ll be wondering what we’re up to,” she said. “Maybe we should go in separately.”

“It won’t make any difference—you’re supposed to be a boy.” Lysom gave a ghost of a grin. “I’m looking forward to seeing how long you can pull this off.”

“If you don’t say anything, no one will ever guess.”

“I swear on my twin’s head. I won’t say a thing, Tania.”

“No! It’s . . .”

“Tanner. Bother! Sorry. I’ll call you Tanner, don’t worry.”

“Thank you,” said Tania with relief.

“Like I said, it’s going to be entertaining. And I think we’re going to have need of entertainment before long.”

He was sounding maudlin again, so Tania took his arm and pulled him out the door. “Som’s house is very cozy, you’ll see. And maybe you can buy yourself a sword or something useful.”

“Useful? I’ll probably cut my own arm off.” The smell of grilling meat wafted through the open door and cut his voice short. He swallowed audibly. “Sir Renegal might be a great lord, but he’s a lousy cook. We haven’t had but stale bread and hard cheese since we left Castle Storm. Oh, by the way, while you’re here, why don’t you help me with the horses?”

“What? You haven’t unsaddled them yet?”

Lysom reddened. “No, I haven’t. Why don’t you take care of Sir Renegal’s horse? He’s bitten me twice already.”

“All right.” Tania took the black horse’s bridle and led him to an empty stall. Then she pitched hay into it from a pile near the doorway and found two buckets. “Here,” she said, giving them to Lysom. “Go fetch water from the pond. I’ll put hay in Marron’s stall.”

“Thanks.” Lysom left, and Tania put her hand on Marron’s back.

“How was the trip?” she asked, taking handfuls of hay and rubbing his back and neck to dry him.

The sturdy cob snorted. “Dreadful. I had a stone in my foot for miles, and Lysom rides like a sack of potatoes slung over my back. I’m aching all over.”

“I’ll rub your legs with some liniment. I’m sure Som must have something in his shop.” She patted him and went to see Sir Renegal’s horse.

“How are you?” she asked, unsaddling him.

“It feels good to have that off my back,” said the black horse, shaking like a big dog. “I’m so sore. What a dreadful road. Why didn’t we take the coastal route? We were told to go to each city to recruit, and here we are in the middle of nowhere.”

“Why do you suppose you came this way?” she asked, rubbing the horse’s back with handfuls of dry straw.

“Ahh, that feels good. Sir Renegal mentioned something about receiving an urgent message.”

“From whom?”

“I have no idea. He has a glass ball he studies now and then. I think it talks to him sometimes, but as I’m only a horse, I have no understanding of those devices.”

“That sounds more like magic,” said Tania.

“It can’t be, magic is forbidden.”

"I have an amulet," Tania reminded him.

"You'd be wise to keep it hidden. Soldiers are leery of magic."

"Why did you bite Lysom?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"Every time he puts the saddle on, he pinches me with the girth. Did no one ever tell him to smooth the blanket, and make sure the horse's skin is not caught under the girth before pulling it tight? We've got tender skin right behind our forelegs."

"I'll tell Lysom," said Tania.

"Tell me what?" It was Lysom, setting a bucket on the ground so hard half of the water sloshed out.

"I'm going to show you how to saddle a horse tomorrow morning, and you'd do well to pay attention. Otherwise, I'll bite you myself. Look. See those sores? The girth rubbed Fletch there, and it's all your fault."

Lysom groaned. "Don't start in, please. I've had all I can take from Sir Renegal. He's boxed my ears twice, he's called me a fool so many times I'm beginning to think it's my first name, and he finds fault in everything I do. I've tried to tell him it's the first time I've ever done anything—he won't believe me. You tell him, Tania, er, Tanner. All right?"

"Don't you feel bad being so useless?" said Tania.

"I'm trying to remedy that." For the first time there was a spark of anger in Lysom's voice.

Tania grinned. "Then you're not so useless after all. Come on, let's go eat."

CHAPTER NINE

LYSOM GETS A SWORD

The two youngsters stepped into the dining room. Som and Wander were nowhere to be seen. Yellow firelight flickered on the walls, and Sir Renegal stood next to the chimney, warming his hands. He'd tossed his cloak over the armchair. "I hope the horses have been cared for. Did you water them?" he asked, his voice sharp.

Lysom cleared his throat. "Yes, of course. Sir Renegal, look who I found. Our stable lad, Tanner, has decided to join the army."

Sir Renegal whirled around. "When did you get here? Were you following us?" he asked.

"We got here before you," she said. "Have you seen my grandfather?"

"Your grandfather accompanied you?"

"He's going to cook for the army," said Tania, keeping her voice as gruff as she could. She caught Lysom grinning and threw him a withering glance. "Where is Mr. Som?"

"The shopkeeper is searching for an appropriate sword for me." Renegal flicked something unseen from his shoulder. "I need to replace my old one; it's getting shabby."

"Why don't you give your old one to Lysom?" Tania said, pointing to the boy.

“Why, where is your sword?” asked Sir Renegal, his eyebrows raised.

“I haven’t got one.”

“Didn’t your father give you Lord Ironstorm’s famous sword? It belonged to your family!”

“It’s rusted beyond recognition,” admitted Lysom. “It hangs in the study over the fireplace. At least, that’s where it usually is. Someone tried to pry open the study window with it one day, and it bent.”

Sir Renegal looked as if he’d swallowed something sour. “Lord Ironstorm’s sword, rusted?”

“We haven’t really had much use for it,” said Lysom.

“Except to open windows,” added Tania. She sat on a stool near the stove and warmed her frozen hands.

“To open windows!” sputtered Sir Renegal. He threw his hands up, and then sat down in the armchair, stretching his long legs in front of him. “I suppose I could give you my old one. It’s a good sword. It has a few nicks and scratches, but that’s to be expected. I fought in the war against the seafarers. Wrap the sword in a piece of cloth to carry it. You’ll have to write to your father to send you money for a scabbard.” He drew it from its scabbard and examined it. Then, with a snort, he tossed it at Lysom.

The boy dived at it, grabbed it by the blade, and shrieked. He’d cut his hand deeply.

Tania, used to cuts and scrapes from the farm, bound Lysom’s hand with a clean cloth. “That was a stupid thing to do,” she whispered to the boy.

He glared at Sir Renegal, “He shouldn’t have thrown it.”

“I mean, grabbing it by the blade!” She shook her head. “Look at you, blood all over your jerkin.”

Lysom glanced down and blanched. “I look like a beggar,” he said. “I come from ten generations of lords, and I look like a beggar. I have

a sword and no scabbard—and what can I wrap it in? I only have one cape. What I wouldn't give to be rich, like him over there." He pointed his chin at Renegal, at the far side of the room.

"He's insufferable. If he'd have cut his hand, I'd have let him bleed," whispered Tania, tying the last knot and sitting back on her heels. "Tell me if it starts to throb. We'll have to clean it again tomorrow. Perhaps Som has ointment here."

"I thank you," said Lysom stiffly. Something sparkled on his cheek and he rubbed his fist on it.

"Don't be sad," said Tania. She grinned. "Remember when you were seven and I was eight, and I pushed you out of the apple tree?"

He sniffed. "You broke my arm."

"You got up, and broken arm or not, you punched me and broke my nose."

Lysom nodded. His face was still pale, but his eyes crinkled with laughter. "Then I got my splint off, and you dared me to ride the sow." He frowned. "I can't remember how I broke it the third time. Maybe it was just twice."

"No, I hit you with the broom. I had no idea your arm would break again. I'm sorry, it must have hurt."

"Yes, that was the worst. Maybe that's why I didn't remember." He shrugged. "I'm glad you decided to come along. I was getting lonely, but I hope we won't fight any more. My arm is still crooked."

Tania looked over at Sir Renegal, who was staring into the fire. His face wore a scowl. "He doesn't look like very good company," she said in a low voice.

"All he does is criticize me." Lysom said.

"When we get to the Golden Forest, it will be better," said Tania.

"We're going to Lord Tattinggil's castle," said Lysom.

"Oh." Tania shivered. "It sounds gloomy."

“I think it sounds grand. Lord Tattinggil’s castle. He asked for me especially.”

“He did?”

“Well, he asked for one of Lord Ironstorm’s descendants. I just happen to have his blood in my veins.”

“I am looking forward to going to the Golden Forest. It sounds lovely.”

“It sounds damp, cold, and uncivilized,” was Lysom’s comment.

Then Som came back with a sword. Firelight ran up and down its blade as he turned it this way and that, showing it to Sir Renegal. “’Twas made by dwarfs from sky iron. Leafed ever so finely it is—you can see the layers in the blade,” said Som, pointing.

“Very nice.” Renegal took it and hefted it, then swung it in a circle. Red and yellow firelight reflected down its length, setting it aflame. “Very nice,” he said again. For once, his voice had lost its arrogance. He slid it into his gold scabbard. “I’ll take it,” he said.

“Would you like to know the price?” Som asked.

“Whatever it is, I’ll pay.” Sir Renegal’s tone was once again condescending.

Som shrugged. “Perhaps I can offer you travelers dinner and lodgings? I’m sorry, but I have room for only two. The others can sleep in the stable—it’s comfortable, I assure you.”

Sir Renegal sat in the armchair and yawned. “That sounds fine. You, Lysom, can prepare your pallet in the stable. Tanner is used to sleeping in stalls, I imagine, him being a stable lad.”

Tania opened her mouth, but Wander cleared his throat. “Tanner, go help Som with the dinner. I’ll sit here and warm my old bones, if I may.” He gave her a sharp look, and she nodded.

Som led her to the back kitchen where a goose roasted on a spit in a vast fireplace. In a twinkling, Som tossed carrots on the table and sliced them, his deft hands flashing as he cut. Then he chopped up a

cabbage, some parsnips, an onion, and an apple. Heating goose fat in a skillet, he added the vegetables to cook, and bade Tania to turn the goose. While she did that, he filled a small caldron with water and hung it over the fire to boil. "When the vegetables soften, put them in the water. Then pour the goose drippings and a handful of flour into the skillet, and when it's brown add water bit-by-bit, stirring all the while. Then set the table; the plates and cups are in the armoire. I'm going to prepare Sir Renegal's bed."

"Put some nails in it," muttered Tania.

Som shook his head. "Nay, he's not as bad as he seems. Arrogance is not evil. Save your animosity for your enemy. Sir Renegal is on your side."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean my remark to be heard," said Tania, chastened.

"Keen ears," Som tapped his head. "Watch the goose."

"Sir Som," began Tania.

"Som, call me Som."

"I would like to offer a scabbard for Lysom's new sword. Would you have something I could afford?" Tania reddened. "I have no coin, but I have a bracelet in my pouch. It belonged to my mother, but I'll never wear it."

Som scratched his chin. "Show me," he said.

Tania opened her pouch, which she always wore tied to her waist. In it she kept a comb, a toothbrush, a jar of toothpaste, a bar of ash soap, and the trinkets she owned: two rings, what looked like a large opalescent marble, a bracelet, and a necklace. She pulled out the bracelet. It had been her mother's, she supposed. She'd never really thought about it. The trinkets had been in her possession since she could remember. "Here. It's not gold, but perhaps it's good enough to trade for a scabbard—a cheap one, one that's been used? Lysom won't mind. But I want him to have one. He'll just cut himself again if he carries the sword around with a bare blade, and if I know Sir Rene—"

“Hush, lad.” Som was turning the bracelet this way and that. It winked in the light. “‘Tis a pretty thing. Where did you say you got it?”

“I think it was my mother’s. I’ve had it since I was a baby.”

Som peered at her from beneath his eyebrows, but said nothing. Then, abruptly, he nodded and left the kitchen.

Alone, Tania tended the goose, turning the spit, and stirred the vegetables in the skillet. When they were ready, she scraped them into the caldron. Heating the skillet once more, she poured some goose drippings into it, and stirred in the flour. When that browned, she whisked water from the vegetables into the skillet, making a brown sauce.

The goose fat sizzled and spat on the fire, and the smell was making her mouth water so hard it hurt. Her stomach growled, but she kept turning the goose, and didn’t try to pry off a piece of the brown, crackly skin. When Som came back, bearing a battered leather scabbard, Tania had put the goose on a platter and arranged the vegetables around it, pouring the sauce into a bowl.

“Well done, lad.” Som took the goose and handed her the scabbard.

Tania shook her head. “No, I’d rather you give it to him. Tell him it’s an old one you found lying about, and you thought he’d better take it.”

Som shrugged. “If you like. Leave it here then. I’ll give it to him later. Take the sauce, and watch your head. The doorway is low.”

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Later, lying in fragrant straw with her head on Shabaz’s warm neck, Tania rubbed the bump on her forehead and said in a whisper, “Traveling is great fun. Why didn’t we do this before? Nothing kept us chained to that ruined old castle. We should have left long ago.”

Shabaz nuzzled her shoulder. “We’ve only been gone two days, and we’ve had the good fortune to find the Gray elves and share their camp,

and now we're dry and cozy in Som's barn. It may look as if it's falling to pieces, but a gale could howl and we'd hardly know it. He has a subtle way of keeping things in order. Perhaps it's his dwarf lore. He can make a stable as warm as a castle."

"Warmer," murmured Tania, her eyelids drooping. She cuddled into the straw and fell asleep, secure with the knowledge that Shabaz was near, and watching over her.

CHAPTER TEN

TANIA'S BOW

“Wake up!” Tania poked at Lysom, but he just burrowed deeper into his nest of straw and snored. Wrapped in his arms was his new sword and scabbard. Lysom had protested when Som handed him the old scabbard, but when he’d understood it was a gift he’d buckled it around his waist, his face pink with emotion. The buckle pressed against his cheek, and would leave a funny mark.

“Oh, bother!” Tania muttered. Dawn was still a good hour away, but Shabaz had awakened her and she’d already dressed and fetched buckets of water for the horses. Out of habit, she’d fed and watered Som’s cow, and then milked her, carrying the bucket to the back door and setting it on the steps. The dark never bothered her, and since she masqueraded as a boy, she would have to wake earlier than anyone else to wash and dress.

She tried to wake Lysom again, but he just grumbled and hugged his sword more tightly, so she gave up and went to the kitchen. Smoke was coming out of the chimney—someone must be awake.

Tania peered into the window and saw her grandfather and Som sitting in the kitchen, a map on the table between them. Som pointed, and said, “There is the pass, and there is the tunnel. The tunnel has been

open for years. But if I were you, I'd take the pass. It's free, for one, and guarded by the Gray elves, now that the Tower elves are no more."

"Except for me."

"Yes, except for you." Som looked at Wander, his brows drawn together. "There is something strange afoot."

"Strange?" Wander's voice was light. Tania pressed her ear closer to the window, but kept well in the shadows. If her grandfather caught her spying, he'd be angry, and with reason.

"Yes, strange. A unicorn doesn't just lose his horn—and Shabaz was a unicorn, I remember that well enough. You, Wander Birchspring, were once with Lord Ironstorm. He fought with you at his left. There were few Tower elves as handy with a sword as you were. But look at you! Going off to join the elves of the Golden Forest, and carry a sword by your side! And then there is your grandson. A likely lad, to be sure, but not a lad. Did you think you could fool old Som?"

Tania squeezed her eyes shut. Here it was then—the end to her dreams of adventure. She listened, waiting for the dreaded words that would stuff her back into a skirt and send her to Castle Storm to be a milkmaid once more.

"You can help me there, Som. All right, she couldn't deceive you. But she can fool humans, and she'll fool the Golden elves as she fooled Lupin Graylag and his clan."

"The elves see what they want to see, and humans see what you want them to see. You can't fool dwarfs though, and that's another reason to avoid the tunnel through the mountains. Yes, of course I'll help you, old friend. But you must return the favor and tell me your tale. It will be a secret between us, I swear by my hands." Som held his hands to the firelight. "A dwarf's hands are the most precious of his belongings."

“Aye, I know that. Thank you, Som. The story is a simple one. Tania was given to my care, and I’ve sworn to protect her. Right now, her life is in danger. Dark forces are seeking a young woman. We—Shabaz and I—have decided to hide her in plain sight as a lad in the mounted archers. She has the horse, and soon, thanks to you, she’ll have a bow and a quiver full of arrows. Shabaz gave up his horn to protect her. It was not on a whim, Som, you must believe me. This girl has to be kept safe and in hiding until the Dark Lord’s book of spells is found, and until the one who is now using his evil force is destroyed.”

Som pulled on his beard, his eyes lost in thought. “The girl gave me a bracelet,” he said. “ ‘Twas dwarven work, and very old. She claims it was her mother’s.”

“Gave you?”

“Traded for a scabbard. Seems the young lord has a sword but no way to carry it. The girl took pity on him. Not surprising, he’s fair pitiful.” Som grinned.

“Aye, that he is. But Lord Ironstorm’s blood flows in his veins, and we’ve hopes he’ll make a fighter.”

“Well, he’ll appreciate the scabbard. ‘Tis a good one, though battered. It has gone through more than a century, and it has a hint of magic woven into it. The blade it holds will be healed of nicks and scratches, cleaned, and kept whole.”

“Magic is forbidden.” Wander spoke sternly.

“Not forbidden, frowned upon. It’s not the same thing. The humans have control of most of the world; we have to keep our place in the scheme of things. We let them in, we let them fight at our side, but little did we guess that they would prove stronger than us in the end.” Som chuckled. “Now they drag us into their wars.”

“No. We go willingly. A necromancer isn’t human; he’s an abomi-

nation.”

Som nodded. “But he was a man, at least he was born one, though necromancers cease to be human when they practice their death magic. Well, Sir Birchspring, I suppose the best I can do is swear to help you. And find your granddaughter—I mean grandson—a decent bow.”

Tania sagged with relief against the window jam. Then she picked up the bucket of milk and knocked on the kitchen door.

“Come in!” Som motioned to a stool. “Have a seat. I’ll just put the milk on to heat, and we’ll have some porridge.”

Tania was afraid to look at him. Now that he knew she was pretending, she felt awkward. Wander patted her hand. “Did you sleep well, Tania?”

“Better stick to Tanner,” said the dwarf, not turning around. “Walls have ears.”

Tania blushed and nodded. “I slept well, thank you.”

The dwarf put porridge before them in huge wooden bowls, then excused himself, taking a torch and lighting it in the fireplace before bustling out of the kitchen.

Wander sighed. “We’ll be leaving at first light.” He looked out the window. “We’re taking the mountain pass. Likely Renegal will take the tunnel. It’s direct, but the toll is expensive and dwarfs guard it. He’ll arrive in Lord Yalinka’s castle in five days, if he hurries.”

A few moments later, Som reappeared, holding a bow and arrows. “Here you are, the very thing. An elf bow!”

Tania took the bow and admired it. It was made of pale wood polished to a satin finish. The ends were wrapped with silver wire, and a red tassel hung from the bottom. She bent it, and slipped the string on, then slowly let the bow pull it taut. It was light, but she could feel its strength in the quiver of the wood. Her finger found the string and she plucked it. “It’s lovely.”

“Here are the arrows. The quiver will hold twice as many, if need be,” Som said.

“It’s beautiful,” said Tania. “Can you tell me about it? Where did it come from? Who made it?”

“It’s elvish—made by the Gray elves. They are clever archers, and they hunt elusive game. Their bows are light and easy to use, and their arrows fly true, even in a high wind. The wood is from the Steppes; they call it bee lash, and it is strong and supple. Wet won’t bother it, or cold. It fears heat and dryness most of all. Rub it with a damp cloth to clean it, but don’t leave it wet, and don’t leave the string taut. Loosen it often. You can carry it for days cocked if need be, but it will need to rest afterward.”

“Are the arrows made of the same wood?”

“Yes, and fletched with wild goose quills. The vane is white; the others are gray. The crest is made of silver wire. Take care not to lose your arrows!”

Tania smoothed her fingers over the bow, then unstrung it, and tried the quiver on, adjusting the strap so that it rode comfortably on her shoulder. She reached behind her, to see if the arrows were within easy grasp. “It’s perfect,” she said. “Thank you, Grandfather.”

Wander sighed. “I only hope you won’t have to use them, child. I pray we will be able to avert this war. Let us go. Lord Yalinka is raising an army and the sooner he does, the sooner we will be finished with this accursed new necromancer.”

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Renegal was awake by the time they left. Tania managed to dig Lysom out of his cozy nest of hay and help him get Fletch and Marron fed and watered before Renegal started scolding. She even saddled Fletch, but

told Lysom he had to saddle his own horse.

“Watch. I put the blanket high, and then slide it down over the withers into place. Then I put the saddle on. Do you see?” She showed him how to smooth the skin on the horse’s belly. “That way, you won’t pinch when you tighten the girth,” she explained. “You do it for Marron, and I’ll watch.” Satisfied, she clapped him on the back. “Well done! You learn quickly. Why, I bet that in a month you’ll be better at this than I am.”

Lysom blinked. “I doubt that, but thank you.” His hand, never far from his new sword, patted his scabbard. “I can’t believe I have a real sword. Father would hardly trust me with a knife.”

“You’ll have to get fencing lessons.” Tania’s face broke into a grin. “I know! My grandfather can teach you! I’ve heard it’s but few hours ride from Yalinka’s keep to the Golden Forest. You can come and visit.”

“Your grandfather?” Lysom snorted. “I’ve seen him wield a ladle, but sword fighting? No, I must write to my father for some money and find a real fencing master.”

Tania shook her head. “When will you stop taking everyone at face value? My grandfather is an excellent swordsman. If you don’t believe me, ask Som. They’ve known each other for ages. Please? Then you can tell me about your life in the grand castle.”

“I’d better ask your grandfather first,” said Lysom.

“You’re turning into someone sensible,” said Tania. “Your own mother won’t recognize you. Here, show me your hand. It seems to be healing fine,” she said, peeling the bandage back and examining the cut. “Wash it with hot water, put some marigold salve on it, and then bind it with a clean cloth. Do that every day until it’s better.”

Lysom flexed his fingers, and looked at her. “Thank you, Tania. I don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t come along.” He hesitated, and then said, “I’m looking forward to seeing you in the Golden Forest.

And I'll be sure to tell you all about Lord Yalinka and his castle."

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When Tania left, she turned and waved. Som and Lysom waved back. Renegal just turned and went back inside.

"He is terribly rude," Tania said.

Shabaz snorted. "He is just being himself. He doesn't think he's being rude, he simply has other things on his mind than seeing us off. He hardly knows us, and we're going a different route."

"He did offer to pay our toll," said Wander. "I refused. I thanked him, but told him we preferred the scenic route."

"Did Lysom ask for fencing lessons?" Tania asked.

"Yes, he did." Wander chuckled. "He even offered to pay. Poor lad, if he had as much money as pride, he'd be a rich man. I refused the payment. I told him I would do it as a favor, and that I was going to train you, too, so it wasn't as if I would be going out of my way."

"That was kind," said Shabaz.

"What sword will I use?"

"Sword?" Wander guffawed. "Beginners use staffs. I won't have you using a real sword for a while. Even with a staff, you'll be nursing cracked knuckles and bruised ribs."

"I am looking forward to watching the lessons," said Shabaz.

"Stop laughing," scolded Tania. "You make me bounce."

"I can't help it. The thought of you cracking Lysom over the head with a staff is hilarious. Especially as you've already done it at least twice. Now he'll get his revenge. You're supposed to be a boy, so he can hit as hard as he likes."

"He wouldn't do that!" Tania said.

"Why not?"

“He’s a gentleman.”

Wander spoke up. “I think you’re right, Tania. He is a gentleman. The more time I spend with the lad, the more I like him. I think this voyage was just the thing for him. I shall look forward to giving him lessons.”

“So, how far away are we?” Tania asked.

“We have a three-day journey to the pass, and then another three or four days down the mountainside to the forest,” replied Shabaz.

“How wonderful!” cried Tania.

“That,” said Shabaz, “will depend on the weather.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TOWER CITY

Wet snow stuck to Tania's eyelashes, trickled into her collar and soaked her socks and trousers. She was thankful for the new cloak. It shed the snow and sleet and didn't get heavy with water, but all her clothes were damp and the cold seeped into her body, making her shiver.

"Get down and walk," said Shabaz, pausing. "You'll warm up, and we'll stop soon for the night."

"Where?" Tania asked, her teeth chattering. "There is nothing but rocks about."

"I have some tinder and kindling in the baggage," said Wander. He frowned at Tania. "Your lips are blue."

"My toes are frozen," she said. "I hope we'll find shelter soon. Last night was miserable, sleeping in that little cave."

"I've slept in worse places. A cave isn't bad. It keeps the rain and snow off you."

"Yes, but here there are no caves, are there? All I see are boulders and snow."

"There's a place further on. The hunters used it on occasion, and as it was made of stone, I think it will still be standing," said Wander.

Tania slid off Shabaz's back. Her feet were numb, and she

stumbled along for what seemed an hour before Shabaz gave a snort.

"I see it. The roof is still intact. What luck."

"The mountain folk wouldn't let a shelter fall to ruin," said Wander.

"There is a trickle of smoke coming from the chimney," said Shabaz, stopping so suddenly that Tania ran into his rear-end.

"Sorry," she said, rubbing her hands together. "Shall I go see who is there?"

"No, let me go." Wander looked at Tania. "Get back on Shabaz. If you hear me shout, gallop as fast as you can."

"No!" cried Tania.

"Yes," said Shabaz. He nipped her shoulder. "Do as your grandfather says and get on my back. Hang on tight." His voice softened. "Don't worry, it's just a precaution. We're at war, and it's best to act as if everyone is an enemy."

Tania sat on Shabaz's broad back, her hands wrapped in his silky mane. She watched her grandfather pick his way over the rocky path toward the little lean-to built into the sheer side of the cliff. As he went further away, his outline faded. With his green cape, he could have been a little pine tree. Tania couldn't hold back a giggle.

"I know why you're laughing," said Shabaz. He sounded amused.

"Fir trees aren't supposed to walk," said Tania. "Look, he's just sitting outside of the cabin. What do you suppose he's doing?"

"Growing roots?" Shabaz chuckled. "No. He's listening to see who's inside. Ah, now he's knocking at the door. He must believe there's no danger. I hope the stable is still intact," he added.

"He's motioning for us to come," said Tania.

"Let's go."

Shabaz went straight to the stable tacked onto the side of the shelter. It was built of stone, and the walls were as thick as the length of Tania's arm. There were bales of straw and mountain hay, and Tania made

sure Shabaz had a deep, clean bed. She found a bucket and packed it with snow, then set it in the stall to melt for water before making her way into the hunter's cabin. Inside, a roaring fire warmed her. She stomped the snow off her boots, darted a glance at her grandfather, and, at his silent nod, she entered and sat next to Wander, perched on a long wooden bench built into the wall. The cabin consisted of nothing but one large room with a fireplace, a caldron of boiling water, and three benches on each wall. There was only one window, and the door was narrow and made of sturdy oak. A staircase led up to a mezzanine, where bunk beds could be seen. In the cabin, besides her grandfather, were two Gray elves and their wolves.

"Raul and Aleric of the Gray Wolf clan," said Wander by way of introduction. "This is my grandson, Tanner."

They nodded to her, and one said, "Greetings, young Tanner. I see you wear the badge of the Running Wolf clan. They are our cousins. How fare they?"

"They are well—at least they were when we last saw them just five days ago," said Tania.

"You are a human, I see that, but dressed in that cape for a minute I mistook you for one of us," said the other elf. Looking at Wander he said, "Have you come to see the ruins of the Tower City?"

"We will be going that way, yes." Wander yawned. "I am weary. If you don't mind, I will eat a morsel of cake and be off to bed. Tanner lad, make sure the horse has enough water and don't tarry. We've a long journey tomorrow."

"We, too, are going in that direction. I propose we travel together, if that is all right with you," said the first elf, the one called Raul. "We are going to join Yalinka's army. I'm sure you've heard about that," he added.

"Aye, I've heard. We would be glad of your company," said Wander. He took a cake from his pack and ate it, and Tania did likewise, sur-

prised to find she was famished. She'd thought she was too cold and tired to eat. To drink, they dipped hot water from the caldron into their cups. Her grandfather explained, "Each traveler is supposed to fill the caldron and make sure there is tinder and wood for the fire. Before we leave tomorrow, we will replace what we've used and leave the cabin ready for anyone who needs shelter."

Tania nodded, too exhausted to talk. She checked on Shabaz before she went back into the shelter. The horse dozed, his chin resting on a wooden beam. His bucket was empty, so Tania put more snow in it, and then went to find her bed. Wrapped in her cloak, dry from the fire and finally warm, Tania fell asleep.

The next day, sun sparkled on the snow. Tania saddled and led Shabaz from the stable at daybreak, while her grandfather and the two elves readied the cabin, making sure the fire was doused. The day was bright, and Tania felt her spirits lift. As they walked, they ate the biscuits Som had given them. When they were thirsty, they melted snow.

"One thing about the mountain trail," said Raul, walking next to Tania. "There's always enough water. In the winter there is snow and ice, and in the summer there are streams trickling in every crevice. It's very nice here in the summer."

"Are you from around here?" Tania asked.

"Yes. My brother and I grew up on the far side of that mountain. The Gray Wolf clan guards these mountains, now that the Tower elves are no more." He hesitated. "Your grandfather is the first Tower elf I've ever seen."

"He says he's the last of his kind," said Tania.

"Where are you from?" Raul asked, "And where are you bound?"

"I grew up in Castle Storm, and I'm going to the Golden Forest to join the archers."

"Castle Storm?" the elf raised his eyebrows. "How interesting.

The legends say much about that fabled place.”

“They don’t mention how drafty it’s become, or that half of it’s in ruins,” said Tania. “To tell the truth, I was just the stable lad. And pig herder,” she added.

“Pig herder. A noble occupation,” said the elf, a teasing note in his voice.

Tania grinned, despite herself. “I didn’t think so. I’m glad to be joining the army,” she said. “I want to go to war and have an adventure.”

Raul laughed, but it was without mirth. “Adventure? Perhaps you think so. I am joining to protect our lands from the necromancer. The last war was a bitter one. I pray we’ll avert this one.”

“Did you fight?”

“No, I was too young. But I wasn’t too young to watch my elder brothers go off and be slaughtered, or to understand my mother’s grief at losing her sons. Your mother must be hoping you never have to fight.”

“My mother is dead,” said Tania. She looked at her companion. “I never knew her.”

“I’m sorry,” said Raul. “Is your father still alive?”

“No,” said Tania. “I never knew him either.”

“Where does your elf blood come from, I wonder?” he said, peering closely at her.

She averted her face. “I have no idea.”

“It’s there, I’m sure of it. A Gray elf – you have our eyes and your hair is black, like ours often is.” He touched his hair. “I’m considered fair by my tribe; my hair is dark brown. But yours is as black as the wing of a crow.”

“You may be right, but I’ll never know,” said Tania.

“It depends. What was your father’s name? Perhaps I know of him.”

“I, I never knew my father’s name,” Tania stammered.

Raul frowned. “I am sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. That is one of the Gray elves’ faults; we love conversation, but we mean no harm.”

“That’s all right.” Tania’s hand crept to her new bow, and she stroked the satiny wood. “I spent my life in the castle courtyard and the village—I never went past the smithy’s shop. I’m not very good at conversation.”

“Well, conversation is how we pass the time while on guard,” said Raul. “We tell jokes, we reminisce, and we love to talk about family affairs, for the Gray elves are linked by blood and marriage, and our cousins, aunts, and uncles are all dear to us. But there are few of us, our territory is vast, and we take our duties seriously. Months can go by before we see our family. Every seven years, at summer solstice, we all meet at the top of Mount Rymoth and celebrate with a bonfire. That is when we catch up on all the news. This is the seventh year since the last celebration. Perhaps you can come this year, and we can find out something about your family.”

Tania shook her head. “No, I think not. I prefer to think that Wander is really my grandfather.”

Raul laughed. “That is a fair answer. But you can come to our celebration anyway. You have the badge, so you are of the Running Wolf tribe now. We shan’t pry into your past, and you can bring your grandfather. You should have your own wolf cub. No Gray elf is ever without his own wolf.”

Tania took a closer look at the large wolf trotting at his master’s side. “What is your companion’s name?”

“He is called Flash,” said Raul. “His brother is Dare. You are right to call them companions, and not pets. They stay with us out of loyalty, but they are wild animals. We never bind them with leashes or collars. They are free to stay with us, or revert to the wild. We share our food with them, but we don’t go out of our way to feed them. They are expected to fend for themselves, although they will help us hunt if need be.”

“Will he fight at your side?” Tania asked.

“If he chooses. I will not ask it of him.” Raul reached over and

scratched Flash's rough head. "He will decide for himself."

Tania nodded, strangely touched. Later, when the sun was setting and they had made camp in a sheltered place between huge boulders, Tania went to groom Shabaz. While she brushed him, she asked, "Why do you come to battle with me? After all, this war is between men, not beasts. You should be free. If you wish, you can go."

Shabaz was silent so long Tania thought he wouldn't answer. Then he said in a quiet voice, "My race is nearly extinct. Have you ever seen a unicorn?"

Tania thought, and shook her head. "No, only on the carvings at Castle Storm."

"We were never prolific, and there were never herds of unicorns like there are horses. We lived in solitude, much like the griffins. They were our mortal enemies, and whenever a griffin and a unicorn met, they would fight to the death. There was no reason behind it—it was just in our blood. As a foal, I was told that griffins ate young unicorns, and I was taught to hate them. I lived in fear of them for years. Then one day news came that the last griffin had been killed. I had never seen one, never, and now I never would. They were no more.

"Not long afterward, I was captured by an elf of the Golden Forest. They speak our language, as do all elves, so captured is perhaps not the right word—but I cannot think of another. The elf put a halter on me, and I agreed to follow him. Living in the forest, alone, is a dull way to pass the centuries. I suppose fighting griffins had given meaning to unicorns' lives, but there were no more and we lived, as I said before, alone. My first master was an elf. He was one of the archers in the troop, and I was trained as a warhorse. We unicorns are bellicose by nature. We fought the griffins and took to fighting with the elves as a matter of course. There were many of us in the troops. I think that most of the wild unicorns joined forces with the elves."

“But, who were you fighting?” Tania asked.

Shabaz pawed the snow. Above them, stars glittered in the sky. In the mountains, the air was so clear and the stars so bright, Tania sometimes felt as if she could pluck one from the sky and wear it as a jewel around her neck.

When Shabaz spoke again, his quiet voice seemed to blend with the starlight. “The world of men and elves was new, and there were violent upheavals as they confronted the demons of the southern swamps for their lands. When there were no more demons, there were the plains, forests, and mountains to be conquered. Men and elves fought side by side. Men for land and riches; the elves for the glory, I suppose, and to defeat ancient enemies. When this earth was made, elves occupied a very small part of it. They were weaker than demons, and the goblins and trolls held most of the lower mountains and deep forest. Hordes of orcs, huge rocs, and magicians held the high mountains—hardly anyone could cross the passes.”

Tania shivered. “I’ve never seen a goblin, and I thought trolls were just stories to frighten children.”

“They existed. They still exist, in places hidden, out of the way of men and elves. But the elves, once they conquered their land, stopped fighting. They settled in their kingdoms. The Gray elves in the Steppes, the Golden elves— now rid of their enemies—in their forest, and in the mountains, the Tower elves built Tower City and made it the most beautiful place on earth. I can still remember the first time I saw it. The sky was so blue it hurt your eyes to look at it. Sunlight glittered off the silver roofs and delicate white buildings. Narrow, arched bridges spanned the many frothing streams and chasms. The whole city was perched on the sides of three mountains, and bridges joined the three sides together. The bridges were works of marvel and magic. The central bridge was five hundred feet high and one thousand feet

long. It arched over the deep chasm, and seemed to disappear into the clouds. The Tower elves were merry folk—small with blue eyes and fair hair—handy with swords and yet wonderful builders. They were often hired by men to build their cities for them.”

“So you fought with the Golden elves,” Tania said. “Were you in many battles? Was it exciting?”

The white horse snorted. “I was young, and my blood was hot. We fought the goblins in Cais Pasa, the great swamp to the south, and then we swept upward toward the hills where the greater goblins lived, and we wiped them out. The fighting was terribly fierce, and we lost many warriors. My first master and I fought in nine battles before he was killed—shot off my back by an orc.” The great horse stopped speaking and looked over Tania’s head toward the horizon.

“Go on,” she said, her throat tight.

“My next master and I fought in the war against the orcs and the magicians. Thousands of warriors died, and when it was over, men and elf alike distrusted magic. The magicians had done too much damage. They were chased away, to the sea, and it was many years before they were allowed back to the mainland. Afterward, there were fifty years of peace. The longest I’ve ever known.

And then, from the north, came whispers of an abomination. A necromancer—a Dark Lord, one of the magicians, it was whispered—who’d escaped the war, had risen and was sweeping through the mountains, slaughtering whole villages, men, women, and children alike. He raised an army before we could ascertain the rumors, and it was so strong, he managed to conquer all the lands from the High Steppes all the way to the coast. Only your mother stopped him,” the horse said. His breath was warm on Tania’s neck. She shivered though; Shabaz’s story had chilled her.

“Then there were two centuries of peace,” she said.

“Yes. But the Tower elves are gone, the Gray elves nearly exterminated, and the Golden Forest almost empty of life. Orcs and goblins tried to take the lands back, but men kept them away. Men grew stronger, while elves faded. Elves are less prolific than men. Men have children every year, while elves have children only once every twenty years—and even that is rare. Men came to fear magic, and they forbade it in their cities and councils. Though some magicians lived and practiced in villages, they were mostly for healing. Men and elves divided their lands, but men took most of the power. There is but one elf king, and he rules the council of elves. ‘Tis Fairnight’s father, Lupin Graylag, though he mentioned it not. Power, to an elf, is unnecessary. Of men, there are many rulers. Lord Yalinka rules his domain, and there is the King of the Southern Isles. Lord Fallersea rules the southern coast and the great marshes all the way inland to the central plains. His land is vast, and he is very powerful. Our castle, Castle Storm, pays homage to Lord Fallersea, being on the very edge of the plains.”

“I knew that,” said Tania. “Every year Lord Enguarand gets dressed in his very finest and rides away for two weeks to sit at the council. I never really knew what that meant.”

“It meant he swears fealty to his liege lord, that he pledges a certain amount of his crops for taxes, and that he discusses matters of trade, weather, and road repairs with other lords such as himself, each responsible for their bits of land and tenants. Lord Fallersea is, so I’ve heard, a good ruler—fair yet firm. Lord Yalinka is part of the council; he holds much land and many prosperous towns are under his rule. There is also Sir Renegal’s father, Lord Rene. He holds the land along the coast between the southern marshes and Lord Yalinka’s land. Castaway Town is part of his domain. The Golden Forest and the Steppes belong to the elves, and the dwarfs have taken over the mountains.”

“Will we see any dwarfs here?” Tania asked.

“No, they stay in their underground city, and in their tunnels. They are few—like the elves—and shy. Nay, you won’t see a dwarf unless you take the tunnel pass, and we’re not likely to do that.”

“Are there many other lords in the land?”

“I suppose. Men are always seeking dominion over others and calling themselves Lord of something or other. It seems to please them. The world is vast. I haven’t traveled everywhere. The Steppes stretch north to the land of marsh and lakes—the orc lands, and beyond that, I believe, is a great tundra, mostly uninhabited. To the south are the swamps, and I’ve heard of a desert that no one has ever crossed and lived to tell about. The sea is to the west, and there are thousands of islands. To the east are more mountains and deep forest. Someday I would like to travel in that direction, for I have heard tales of cities and lands where magic still rules. It makes men uneasy, and they do not ply their trade in that direction. Plus, there are high ridges still infested with great orcs and goblins. They fled into the east and have settled in hidden enclaves. I would only go with a guide. There are some to be found—rangers—who travel between the lands of men and the eastern territories. Perhaps some day . . .” His voice trailed off, and he gave a soft whicker. “Let us concentrate on what lies before us though, shall we? Go to sleep, Tania. Tomorrow we have a steep hike to the outskirts of Tower City. What you will see there will undoubtedly change your ideas about warfare and adventure.”

The next morning it started to snow again. Snowflakes sifted through the gray air. The steep trail wound between huge boulders, giving them glimpses now and then of the gorge. But clouds and snow obscured the view. It seemed to Tania that she was walking in a world limited to her vision. Nothing existed except the grayness all around her and the boulders that loomed out of the snowfall as they approached. Her legs were aching by the time they stopped for lunch,

but after a quick meal they started off again. They had to reach shelter before nightfall, and that meant the ruins of Tower City. Silently, for sound traveled far in the thin air and they didn't want to advertise their presence, the travelers started out again. Words were few; just keeping upright was a constant struggle. The snow made the ground treacherous, and only Shabaz never lost his footing. Twice Tania slid backward, her hands and feet scrabbling for purchase. Once Dare caught her arm with his huge jaws, stopping her descent. The next time she slammed into a boulder and sat, stunned, until Raul helped her to her feet. "The city isn't far," he said with a tired smile.

It sprang into view just as Tania was about to give up and sink to the ground in weariness. She rounded a corner and before her, shrouded in mist and snow, was what remained of Tower City.

The central bridge was still intact. Built with high magic, it had withstood the war and looting. Some towers still stood—high and pointed, their roofs gone, though—stripped of their silver tiles. The rest of the city was shattered. Streets were full of debris; rocks and splintered beams were overgrown with moss and now covered with snow. The snow whirled in eddies over the deep ravines, and most bridges were broken. The travelers picked their way through the rubble. Now and then the wind would moan, and to Tania's mind it sounded like the voices of those long dead.

"Do ghosts exist?" she whispered to her grandfather, standing close to him as he stopped and scanned the city, an unfathomable expression on his face.

He turned to her, and she saw his eyes were full of tears. "If they do exist, then there must be hundreds here." He wiped his eyes with his beard and sighed. "We'll cross the bridge tonight. There should be a place where we can stay, although to tell you the truth, I don't fancy sleeping here. It used to be so beautiful, and now you can hardly tell

it ever existed.”

“There is a building still standing,” said Aleric. Raul and he stood shoulder to shoulder, looking with bleak expressions at the ruins. “We come here often, but each time it is a shock.” He whistled, and Dare trotted to his side, his tail held high. “Go check the shelter. Come back and tell us if it’s safe,” he told the wolf. Dare gave a little whine and left, streaking across the bridge. A few minutes later the wolf was back. He barked twice, and both Aleric and Raul looked concerned.

“There are orcs in the shelter,” said Aleric. “Dare says there are only two, and one is wounded.”

Wander spoke up. “The war against the orcs is centuries over. They will not be aggressive unless we provoke them.”

“The elves have no love for orcs and vice versa,” said Aleric. “The Gray elves have long lived on the border of their land, and we tolerate each other as long as we stay in our own territory.”

“Do you speak their language?” asked Tania.

“No, but Wander does,” Shabaz replied.

The two Gray elves turned to the horse in surprise. It was the first time Shabaz had spoken in their presence. “What spell is upon you, that you speak the language of men and elves?” asked Raul.

“No spell,” said Shabaz. He pawed the ground, his hoof striking sparks from a stone. “My kind and yours have long been allies. I am a unicorn, though my horn is gone.”

“If what you say is true, it must make for a good tale. But we should make a decision before night falls. There are things in the city that you won’t want to meet in the dark,” said Aleric.

“I’ll go see what the orcs are doing so far from their territory,” said Wander. He took off his backpack and slid from Shabaz’s back. “Wait for me here,” he said. “Yes, even you, Dare.”

Tania opened her mouth to protest, but Shabaz nuzzled her shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Wander won’t put himself or us in any danger.”

The sun had disappeared behind the mountains and deep shadows crept up from the gorge and from behind the broken walls. Tania shuddered. She’d heard stories about orcs, but she’d never seen one. A shout made her jump. It was Wander, calling to them.

“Come,” said Raul with great seriousness. “We are about to meet our ancient enemies face to face.”

“Have you met an orc before?” asked Tania.

“Once,” said Raul. “A chief orc came to parley with my father for safe passage for his tribe across our lands. We agreed, and they crossed over one night. Not one of our sentries saw them, even though they’d been told to watch carefully. But the orcs left signs of their passage.”

“They move like shadows in the night,” said Shabaz.

Tania crossed the great span of the central bridge. The sun had set, but the sky was still light enough to show her the depth of the chasm beneath her feet. Far below, so far as to appear just a sparkling thread, was the mighty river Elme. It was too far away to hear even the roar of its rapids. Mist settled into the gorge, and darkness crept up the sheer sides of the cliffs. The bridge rose in a gentle arch. At the top, Tania stopped and looked behind her. The city had vanished. All that existed was a single, narrow strip of stone. Behind her was darkness, and in front of her was a wall of mist. She drew a sharp breath, then turned and followed Shabaz.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE ORC'S TALE

Flash and Dare sat in front of a small, nearly intact building made of intricately carved white stone. Even the tiled roof was still whole, keeping the rain and snow out. Raul and Aleric strode through the arched doorway, but the wolves stayed on guard. Tania hesitated, but when Shabaz ducked through, she trotted after him. Their footsteps echoed loudly on the polished stone floor. Ahead, yellow light spilled from a doorway. Tania heard a murmur of voices, and then a soft moan. Shabaz and the elves preceded her into the room. When she stepped inside, the warmth and light made her blink. Then Shabaz moved to one side of the room, and Tania got her first glimpse of an orc.

It was lying on a pallet in front of the fire. A long arrow stuck out of its shoulder, moving with each breath it took. Another, smaller orc, huddled nearby. Wander was at the wounded orc's side, busy digging through his pouch for some medicine. Without looking up, he said, "Tanner, get your book of healing from Shabaz's saddlebag and bring it here. Raul, if you would be so kind as to fetch water, we could start cooking some soup."

Tania unbuckled the saddlebag and took the heavy book to Wander. Raul and Aleric, after a moment's hesitation, went to fetch water and

food. Tania unsaddled Shabaz and rubbed him down. The horse looked at the two orcs for a moment, then he said to Wander, “They have come from the north, from the marshes. I recognize their badges. They are of the tribe of Nostor.”

Wander nodded. “These two escaped the marshes with their lives, but while crossing the gorge last night, one was shot by a guard.”

“The Gray elf guards are still posted along the north ridge,” said Shabaz. “Too bad they have keen eyes. It must have been quite a feat to have seen this orc in the dark.”

“And to have shot him.” Wander sighed. “It’s not a mortal wound, but the arrow is barbed, so we’ll have to push it through. Pulling it out will do too much damage to his shoulder. I hope the numbing potion works as well on orcs as it does on elves.”

“I don’t see why not.” It was Raul, coming in with two buckets full of water. One he put in front of Shabaz. “Drink, unicorn. You must be parched.” The other he poured into a caldron and set it over the fire to heat. He sat next to the wounded orc and said a few words to him in a language Tania had never heard. It was a strange, whining sound with guttural clicks and high notes.

The orcs were slender and not as imposing as a man, though bigger than an elf. Their skin was gray, and their eyes were yellow and very bright. Heavy lidded, they had the same disconcerting stare as a lizard. They had flat noses, and thin lips. When the larger orc grimaced, Tania was startled to see pointed teeth.

“They sharpen them,” said Raul, stirring a handful of herbs into the water. “It is their tradition, although they eat their meat cooked. They even eat fruits and vegetables when the season permits.”

Tania looked at the orcs. They wore knee-length robes made of quilted wool, and had no ornaments except their badges. Their leggings fastened with leather strips, and on their feet were boots made of

thick leather.

“Why should medicine for men and elves work for orcs?” asked Tania, her eyes on the long, black arrow.

“Elves share the same ancestors as the orcs,” said Raul. He must have noticed Tania’s shocked expression, for he gave a wry grin. “Some claim that orcs are elves turned to evil, but it is not so. They are their own race. But long ago, before the advent of tribes, and even before magic it is said, there was one people living in the forest. They split into groups, left for different lands, and their lives changed as did their aspects. Orcs evolved into one branch, elves into another. Men came from across the ocean, and goblins, ogres, trolls, and magicians had their own ancestors. ‘Tis only orcs and elves who are far-away cousins.”

“And bitter enemies,” said Wander, a frown on his face. He gave the orc a drink and then sat back on his heels. “In a few minutes we will try to work the arrow out. Tanner, lad, I will need your help.”

“Mine?”

“Aye. If you’ll be going to war, you’ll need to know how to treat arrow wounds. Heat this cauterizing iron in the fire. When it is white hot, tell me. Now, watch as I use this awl to push the arrow through the muscle.” Wander stopped and spoke to the orc, who, with an effort, sat up and braced himself against a stone bench.

Tania was instructed to hold the orc’s arm still while Wander cut the arrow, then he used a long, awl-shaped instrument to push the arrowhead through the orc’s shoulder until it came out the other side. The orc didn’t utter a sound, but his eyes lost their bright yellow color, dulled with pain, and his skin took on a sheen of moisture.

The orc smelled different than humans or elves. Elves had hardly any scent; they smelled like the forest or like fresh-cut grass. Wander, for instance, always smelled like spring rain. Tania had never really thought about it before. People, she knew, could have the acrid smell

of sweat, and smoke from the campfires clung to their hair and clothes. Everyone had their own odor, some better than others. But orcs smelled like deep loam or marshy water. They had a musky, musty scent. Their blood was darker than men's blood, nearly purple, and had a sharp, acrid smell to it. Tania couldn't tell if she was repulsed or attracted. At any rate, it was strange.

When the arrow was out, Wander seared the wound with the cauterizing iron. The orc uttered a strangled cry, and the bleeding stopped. Muttering a healing spell, Wander bound up the wound and handed the orc a cup of tea. The orc's hands shook too much to hold it, so Tania helped, holding it to his mouth so he could drink. She was amazed her own hands were so steady. Her nerves were frayed. The orc frightened her more than she cared to admit, and she hated the sight of blood.

Raul and Aleric were both in the room, cleaning their boots. Shabaz was lying near the doorway, and Dare and Flash lounged in front of the fire, their golden eyes blinking lazily.

"Should we leave a guard by the door?" Tania asked, remembering to keep her voice low and rough.

"Nay, lad. This building is spelled with magic, nothing with evil intent can enter," said Aleric.

Wander looked up from the soup he was busy stirring. "That is why the orcs had no fear of us," he said. "Dinner is ready. Perhaps we should eat before we hear the orc's tale. He says it's a long one."

Dinner was a thick soup made with smoked bacon, onions, and broth. Wander was an excellent cook, and the smaller orc took three bowls full before finally sighing and settling on his cloak in the guise of a pallet. His yellow eyes blinked in contentment. Tania sat with her back against Shabaz, her bowl cupped in her hands, and her knees drawn up to her chest. The room was very warm, and she felt sleep weighing heavily on her eyelids.

A high screeching sound came from nearby and Tania's eyes flew open, all trace of sleep leaving her. "What was that?" she cried.

"Nobody knows," said Raul. "No one who has ever gone to see has ever returned."

"It sounded like a banstee," said Wander, cocking his head.

"A banshee, you mean," said Tania.

Aleric said, "Banshee—banstee. The creature has many names. Some call her the Weeper. Others say it's the spirit of fear come to life. In any place where great tragedy has befallen, the banstee makes her home. She cannot come inside, so fear not. However, pray you never meet her in the darkness in her territory."

"Mayhap the orc will tell his tale," said Raul, scratching Flash behind his ears.

Wander said a few words to the orc who put his empty bowl down and nodded. Then the orc cleared his throat, and to Tania's amazement, spoke in high speech, the speech of elves and men.

"My name is Kios. As you've ascertained, my woman and I have come from the North. My badge proclaims me Nostor—that was my clan. My woman is from the Blue Mountains, near the marshes of the North. My full name is Kios D'Nor Nostor Re." He paused. Evidently this meant something. Tania looked at her grandfather.

Wander nodded. "D'Nor Nostor Re. Crown prince of the Nostor clan. May your arrows always fly true and your footprints never betray you."

"You are familiar with the proper greetings," said the Orc. He closed his eyes and rested before going on. "Yes, I am crown prince. Was crown prince, that is. For as of three weeks ago, the Nostor clan is no more."

Wander frowned. "No more? Did your ancient enemies come, or were you disbanded by internal politics?"

“Politics?” The orc smiled faintly. “Nay. As for ancient enemies, these were new ones, some we’ve never seen.”

“Tell your tale, but first, tell us how it happens you speak our language,” said Raul.

“Our tribe has long traded with the men living on the coast. Our land borders the swamps of Yalinka’s keep on the north; only a high, sharp ridge of shale separates our territories. Our clan has traveled far, and our people learned the high speech, as you call it. Orcs, too, have several dialects, and one is not far removed from yours. I heard you tell of our common ancestors. ‘Tis true. We were once of one blood, but time and events have changed us, so that we look upon each other with loathing and dread. Perhaps that will change, for I fear we will be fighting the same enemy before long—one who changes the living into the dead, and then changes the dead into something that ices the blood. ‘Twas the . . .”

“Hush!” Wander said, holding his hand up. “Speak not aloud. Evil calls evil.”

“Aye”, said Raul, and he shivered, his hands tightening on Flash’s deep fur. The wolf whined.

Tania looked closely at the smaller orc. It was a female, but she could tell no difference between them, except for size. Next to her, Wander gave a small cough, and she realized she was staring. Ashamed, she turned back to the orc, who began to tell his tale.

“I will not speak the names of the creatures that came to our country. Twas a fortnight ago, or mayhap more. They struck at midday, when all were asleep or in their homes. Orcs love the darkness,” he added, nodding toward Tania. “We were unprepared. No rumors had spoken of these creatures, and there was no news from the guards at the frontier. But that can be explained.” He looked suddenly weary. “Our guards led them to us, or rather, what was left of the guards.” He

shuddered very hard, and his voice dropped to a mere whisper. “The undead are so unnatural that one’s first instinct is to flee, gibbering in fear. Their eyes are empty, and they have no memories of who they were before. I called to my brother, who had been posted guard, but he knew me not. And then the arrows rained upon us. And you can disbelieve me if you will, but in that ghastly army, orc and Gray elf fought side by side, though not by their own will, being caught in the spells of the undead.

“My woman and I fled through a tunnel, which collapsed soon after we passed through. It had been mined by the undead, and they overran our village. We left behind everything we held dear. For days we wandered, stunned, through the marshes. Then it came to us to seek aid with the mountain orcs, but they have disappeared. Now we understand where the undead army came from. It troubles us that they were overthrown in such secrecy that no one has heard.”

“Whispers,” said Raul. “There have been whispers of war, of whole villages disappearing. We didn’t realize they were orc villages. And you say elves were there too? What clan will be mourning their loved ones, I wonder?” The two Gray elves looked at each other, and in their eyes was worry.

“Orc, human, elf—what difference does it make?” Wander said, shaking his head. “The fact is, there is a Dark Lord risen, and he commands an army.”

“Not a very big one,” said the orc, his face grim. “The army chased us into the marshes, but I knew of a place where the ground was unsafe. We lured them there, and there many hundreds of undead were mired and perished for good.”

“They have to burn,” said Aleric.

“They burned.” The smaller orc spoke in the high speech as well. “There is black pitch in that ground, and the reeds were winter-dry. We lit the fire all around them, and the very ground burst into flames

beneath their feet.”

“What about the leader?” asked Wander, leaning forward.

“He rides a black steed and his sword glows with a green light. His face is masked. I looked, but could not recognize any features. Was he orc? Elf? Human? I can’t be sure. His steed is undead, but knit together with a spell so powerful that arrows couldn’t pierce its hide.”

“He is in contact with the animal; he can make it as strong as his magic permits,” said Wander, his voice worried. He tugged at his beard. “Shabaz, old friend, what sayest you to this story?”

The unicorn fluttered his nostrils, speaking in high speech for the orc’s benefit. “He lost an important part of his army, so he will be searching for more troops. I say we separate and go in different directions. Raul, you and Aleric must go north and west, and warn the orcs and tribes of men living in these regions. Send Flash and Dare to Lupin and the Gray elves in the Lower Steppes; they will give the message. Against the undead, it’s better to be prepared, and in a castle.” Shabaz gave a small whinny. “Send everyone to Castle Storm. Lord Enguarand will have to shore up the walls and dig out the moat again, but it is the closest fortress in the region.”

Aleric cleared his throat. “We will go warn the villages to the north, as you said. But perhaps the orcs will not listen to us.”

“We will travel with you,” said the orc. He closed his eyes. “If we rest until tomorrow evening, I will be able to run.”

“All right. It is decided.” Aleric looked troubled. “We would have joined Lord Yalinka’s army, but this is more important. I will send the wolves at first light with messages for the clans. Then we will go into orc territory.” He gave a faint grin. “I certainly never expected to go there with such a guide.”

“Nay, you could not have imagined it,” said the orc. Then he gave a deep sigh. “My shoulder is healing, but my heart grieves. My only

hope is to reach my woman's clan before the Dark Lord."

"Fear not," said Aleric, reaching over and lightly touching the orc's hand. "We will run like the night breeze, silent and fast over the land. Your woman's people will be safe. Then we'll take everyone to Castle Storm."

Tania folded her arms over her knees and looked into the fire. Part of her wanted to giggle, thinking of Lord Enguarand's face when the orcs and Gray elves came demanding shelter. Another part of her shivered in fear for her home—and for the people in the village as well. She closed her eyes, praying that Raul and Aleric would be successful. And that they would have time to repair Castle Storm's fallen ramparts, overgrown moat, and broken drawbridge in time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GOLDEN FOREST

Going downhill was easier than climbing, and after only three days Tania, Shabaz, and Wander reached the outskirts of the Golden Forest. Guards met them as they prepared to cross a stone bridge arching over a swift stream.

“Halt! Who goes there!” came a silvery voice from somewhere in front of them. There was no sign of anyone, and as hard as Tania peered into the trees, the owner of the voice remained invisible.

“I see him,” whispered Shabaz, his ears pricked toward a particularly tall ash tree.

“I see him, too,” chuckled Wander. “He’s good though. Without your keen ears I doubt you would have pin-pointed him, Shabaz.”

“I don’t see anyone,” said Tania, squinting her eyes. She was anxious to get her first glimpse of a Golden elf.

“I said, who goeth there?” The voice came again, in high speech this time, and sounding exasperated.

“Wander Birchspring, at your service,” cried Wander. “Accompanied by Tanner, my grandson, and by Shabaz, a war unicorn.”

There was a pause, and then, “I see no unicorn.”

“Well, I see an elf,” said Shabaz loudly, with a snort. “Hiding behind

yonder ash. Step out, that we may better see thee!”

“By Mithral!” cried the elf, and it appeared to Tania as if he materialized out of nothing, popping into view so suddenly she jumped.

“You didn’t see me,” he said to her, a smug grin on his face. He came closer and peered at them. “Welcome to the Golden Forest. I am Kellori, son of Kell.”

Tania stared. Whereas the Gray elves were swarthy with dark hair and eyes like mulberries, the Golden elves had skin like warm amber and eyes that seemed to hold all the colors of the forest within them. Possessing the inherent, captivating beauty of the elves, with high cheekbones, a mobile mouth, and slender bones, he also seemed more compact than the Gray elves. He saw her and bowed. “I hope I pass your inspection, Sir Tanner,” he said.

“You are very young to be standing guard,” said Wander, his voice stern.

Kellori laughed, and it sounded like a bubbling brook. “That I am, kind sir. But look, another elf stands behind me. Allow me to introduce you to Kell, guardian of the northern border, guardian of this river bank and the three hills behind us.” He stepped aside, and another elf was there, as if he’d always been there, although not one of the three had seen him before.

“Hello! Thy wood-lore is fine-honed,” said Shabaz, giving a snort of surprise. “To sneak up on a unicorn is fine work indeed.”

“You were distracted by my son. Otherwise, I’m sure you would have spotted me.” He looked pleased though, not modest. He resembled his son in every way: amber skin, green eyes, and hair the color of fall leaves. Both elves were dressed in dark gray clothes. As it was winter, they blended with the tree bark. “Kell, at your service.”

“Wander Birchspring . . .”

“Wander Birchspring—Wander . . . Why, I have heard of thee!” He clapped his hands. „I have heard your name, and I am honored to

meet you. What brings you here, Master Birchspring?"

"Need you ask?" Wander replied.

"Nay, nay! But some things are best said in daylight, before we reach the cover of trees. Shadow calls shadow."

"We come to join the mounted archers. My grandson, Tanner, is a fair archer, and Shabaz has agreed to accompany him. I am a cook, and my healing powers are not to be laughed at. I can wield a sword. Once I was sword master, and I intend to give lessons to my grandson and anyone else who wants."

Kellori cocked his head. "I've heard say big surprises come in small packages. Here is living proof!"

Tania choked back a laugh, but Shabaz had no such reservations. He let out a loud guffaw. "Kell, your son, is he an elf or a court jester?" "Kell looked daggers at his son. "I think you should have stayed at home with your mother and sisters. You are too young to accompany me."

"Peace!" Wander held up his hand, taking pity on Kellori's downcast expression. "No harm done. 'Tis true I am small, even for a Tower elf. You, young Kellori, must not take people at face value."

Kell spoke sternly to his son. "And you must learn to curb your tongue. How many times have I told you to think before you speak? But Master Birchspring has given me an idea. Mayhap I will take you to the next summer court and present you to the elf king. A jester might be just the job for you." He smiled then, for elves are not ones for scolding. "Come, it grows late and you must be tired. Kellori, your job is to escort these folk to the forest. Take them to Captain Sebring."

"Yes, sir," Kellori said, standing very straight. He motioned to the travelers. "Follow me."

They walked for several hours through the forest. There was little snow, just a dusting of white on the hard ground and frost sparkling on branches. They passed through meadows decked in white, where

streams, locked in ice, waited for spring to thaw them. In silence, they walked through groves of white birch, tall ash, lyme, and beech, and then came to the heart of the forest where huge oak trees grew, interspersed with fir, yew, and maple. Night was falling, and Tania's breath came in white plumes. Her feet were frozen, and she felt her heart leap in gladness when she caught sight of a flickering light through the trees. They halted in a large clearing, empty, but for a lone birch tree gleaming in the moonlight.

"Have we arrived?" she whispered.

Kellori turned and nodded. "Stay here, I will go get Captain Sebring. I won't be long," he added, seeing Tania's shiver.

"Why must we wait?" Tania asked, watching as Kellori vanished in the trees.

"It is more prudent. They are on guard, and we could be enemies. If we had walked in together, nothing would have told them we didn't hold Kellori prisoner. His leaving us here is a mark of trust."

"I see you've been at war," said a voice from nearby. A man stepped out from the shadows, followed by Kellori. Close up, Tania could see that although he had the stature of a man, he looked almost like an elf. His hair, in the moonlight, glinted like fire, and his eyes were a very clear green. His skin was paler than that of the Golden elves, and he wore a silver torque around his neck—something elves never wore.

"Captain Elorén Sebring at your service," he said, bowing. "I have heard of thee, Wander Birchspring. Welcome to the Golden Forest. Greetings, Shabaz and Master Tanner. Please accompany me to our camp and make yourselves comfortable."

"Thank you," said Wander. "Your name seems familiar to me. Where are you from, Captain Sebring?"

A shutter seemed to fall over the green eyes. "I come from the Southern Isles," he said.

Wander nodded. "My memory rarely fails me. Your great-grandfather was King Sebring. Elo' Réen, if I recall his full title correctly. Your father, would he be the king? Are you not Prince Elo' Réen then?"

"I was Prince Elorén," said the captain. "And I am not a prince any more; I am simply Captain Sebring."

Wander raised his eyebrows, but did not comment. Instead, he said, "I met your great-grandfather. When I was a lad, I was valet in Glen Hall. With the lord and lady, I sailed to Isle Galadrihil."

"Glen Hall?" The captain's voice sharpened with interest. "Then you must know this forest well. The ruins of the castle are not far."

"I remember where they are," said Wander. He sighed. "I would go see them, but in the sunlight."

"Here is our camp," he said, lifting the heavy branch of a yew tree aside. Within a large circle of fir trees, white linen tents were set up in neat rows. Lamps within them made the tents glow like lanterns, and the effect, against a glittering powder of snow, was enchanting. There was a central bonfire and men and elves stood, or sat on fallen logs around it. A bit to the side was another fire with a huge caldron of bubbling water hanging from a tripod above it. A second, smaller pot simmered over red coals, and the odor of lentils tickled Tania's nose and made her mouth water.

"We will be eating soon," said the captain. "Tomorrow there will be time to speak of enlistment and such. This is the regiment of the mounted archers. The stable is behind the trees on that side," he said, pointing. "Shabaz can stay there. Tanner, take him to the stable, and then meet your grandfather back here. The tent closest to the stable will be yours; you can share it with your grandfather."

"All right," Tania said gruffly.

"I am your captain, you must call me Captain Sebring, nothing else. You will say, Yes, Captain Sebring' when I ask you to do something, and

you speak when you're spoken to, and not before. Is that clear?"

Tania nodded. "Yes, Captain Sebring."

"Very good."

Tania led Shabaz to the stable, found an empty stall and filled it with straw. Then she got some hay and grain for him from the storage tent and made sure he had fresh water. "Will you be all right here?" she asked.

"I lived in a stable for sixteen years in Castle Storm. Why shouldn't I be all right?"

"It just seems strange to shut you in."

"I can open any door," said Shabaz loftily.

"Well, good night," said Tania, stroking his neck.

A horse whickered plaintively from a neighboring stall, and Shabaz said, "He says he has no more water."

Tania filled a bucket from the spring and carried it to the stall. She opened the door, but the horse pinned its ears back and bared its teeth.

"Tell him I'm just going to give him some water," said Tania, backing away.

Shabaz whinnied. Tania edged toward the horse and put the bucket down. She waited until he stretched his muzzle out, then gently she touched his neck. The horse whirled, and his teeth snapped together with the sound of stone breaking. Tania had been expecting that though, and she had already pulled her arm back. "Shabaz," she said, "Tell him I don't want to hurt him. I just want to talk to him."

Shabaz whinnied loudly, and the horse froze. He pinned his ears back again, but Shabaz gave a firm snort. Tania reached her hand out and touched his shoulder. She could feel him quivering. "Hello, my name's Tania. What's your name?"

"Hex," said the horse. He held himself perfectly still.

"I want you to relax, Hex."

“How can you understand me?”

Tania slid her hand over his shoulder, gently rubbing. “I have a magic amulet. Doesn’t that feel good?” she asked. The horse didn’t reply, but his shivering stopped. Slowly, so as not to startle him, she picked up a handful of straw and started to rub him down. “Your coat needs grooming,” she said. “And your feet need to be cleaned and trimmed. I see burs in your tail. Shall I get them out for you? It must not be very comfortable.”

“All right.” The horse sounded surprised. “I won’t kick you.”

Tania found a brush and a comb in the stable and groomed the horse. She was shocked to find recent scars on his flanks and on his belly. “Who did this to you?” she asked.

“It’s of no importance. He’s gone.” The horse sighed. “I had forgotten how good it felt to be properly groomed.” He lowered his head to his bucket, comfortable now with Tania.

As the horse drank, she noticed it favored one foot. She felt its hock and found it was hot. “Does this hurt?” she asked the horse, pressing with her thumb.

“A little,” he said, lifting his dripping muzzle. “I sprained it today jumping a branch.”

“You should have a plaster on it,” said Tania. “I’ll make you one.”

“It’s handy having speaking magic,” said the horse, while she wrapped his hock with a liniment plaster. “That feels better.”

“It will be as good as new tomorrow,” Tania said. She patted the horse and, for the first time, realized how tall and finely made he was. His mane and tail were flaxen, and his coat was ebony, an unusual color for a horse. He arched his neck, fluttering his nostrils.

“Aren’t you a beauty!” she said.

“I come from the Southern Isles; they are famous for their horses.” Tania patted him. “If you need anything, just tell me, or tell Shabaz.

I'd like to be your friend," she added.

"Thank you, I won't forget what you did for me."

She wandered back to the camp, found her grandfather, and sat on a log. The archers were a mixed group of men and Golden elves. The elves had open faces, she decided. They spoke easily to one another, breaking often into poem or song. Dinner was cheerful, the archers introduced themselves, and Tania's head swam after a minute, trying to remember all their names. Queral, Galad, Gryp, Llyr, and Farj were the elves nearest her. They were a merry group, perched on their log with their bowls in their laps, and they soon had her laughing at their tales and jokes. Golden elves shared the alluring, wild beauty all elves possessed. Their eyes were light, unlike the Gray elves, and their skin was fairer. They were sturdier than their serious cousins of the Steppes. They had dark gray capes and wore riding boots. Their badges, pinned to their capes, were a horseshoe and an arrow.

"So, Tanner, have you come to join the archers?" Galad asked, between bites of his lentil stew.

"Yes," she said, keeping her voice gruff.

"We are glad to have another recruit; there are not many of us. As you can see, we're a mixed bunch. The men from the Southern Isles are the captain's men. The elves are all that's left of the once mighty Golden elf clan." Queral made a face. "Though it amazes me to see you, Master Birchspring. I've never met a Tower elf. Are there any more of you?"

Wander shook his head. "No, I am the last. And as for the Golden elves, it pains me to see a once mighty clan reduced to a few dozen."

There was a solemn silence as the rest of the lentils were ladled out. Tania tasted her stew and made a face.

"Horrible, isn't it," said Llyr cheerfully. "I hope your grandfather is a good cook, we are in desperate need of one. We've been taking turns."

“Where is your cook?” asked Wander.

“He left. Everyone has gone to Yalinka’s keep. It’s more glamorous there, I suppose. The soldiers have real barracks, and there is a trading village on the coast a few miles away. Most soldiers appreciate things like that. We’re the only troop posted in the forest.”

“That’s odd,” said Wander. “I would think Yalinka would want troops posted all along the frontier. Come to think of it, the only guards we saw were at the entrance to the forest. There should have been guards all the way along the road to the Tower Mountains.”

“You sound like Captain Sebring,” said Llyr. “He complains about the lack of troops, but what can you do? Nothing has really happened; there is no army to fight against and no one quite knows what will happen next. Our orders are to stand ready, so,” he shrugged, “we practice our archery. Tomorrow, young Tanner, you can show us how you shoot!”

“But there is an army,” said Tania. “We heard about it! In Tower City we met two orcs. They said that their whole village was destroyed.”

“Orcs!” Gryp spat his lentils out. “Orcs! Bah—if the enemy is attacking orcs, perhaps he’s not our enemy after all.” Tania drew back. She’d never seen an angry elf; his face was contorted as he snarled. “Orcs are our enemies, and have been for centuries. Why should we care what happens to them?”

“Two of them have joined the Gray elves to warn the northern lands about the Dark Lord.” Wander said, pointing a stern finger at Gryp. “You will do well to forget your old grievances and consider yourself lucky the orcs should want to join us. There are too few elves now, and someone has to protect the northern frontier.”

“Lucky?” Gryp’s face was twisted in fury, and the elves started muttering angrily among themselves. Some elves sided with Gryp—others argued that there was only one enemy, and that ancient grievances were best forgotten. To Tania’s relief, most, however, seemed to think

that the orcs were no longer their foes. The Dark Lord was the one they all feared.

“What’s this I hear about the Dark Lord?” Captain Sebring strode over and stood before them, a frown on his face.

Wander said, “We came through Tower City, and learned that the Dark Lord had taken an army into orc territory. They managed to destroy the orcs, but his army suffered grievous losses. He’s weakened. Perhaps if Yalinka strikes right now, there is a good chance he can defeat him.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Nobody does. But according to the survivors, he was in the northern marshes a little over a fortnight ago.”

Captain Sebring looked thoughtful. “Tomorrow we’ll go see Lord Yalinka, and you can give him that information in person.”

“Very well, sir. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to turn in.”

“Of course.” The captain nodded. “Good night, Master Birchspring. We’ll speak again in the morning.” He was facing the fire, so Tania got a chance to study him. Before she could look away, he caught her eyes. For a minute he held her gaze squarely, and prickles ran up and down her spine. She had the strange impression he could see right through her. But then he shook his head, breaking the spell. “You’d best turn in. You’re going to have a long day tomorrow.”

Tania ducked her head and muttered a hasty good night. Wander was in the bathhouse, washing up. Tania went to their tent, sorted out their affairs, and hung a blanket from the ceiling front to back, making two little rooms. Then she took her toothbrush and some soap and went to wash. The archers had built a little bathhouse near the spring. It had a potbellied stove, a wooden floor, and several buckets to wash in. There was even a mirror hung up on one wall—that must be for the men, Tania guessed. Elves didn’t need to shave, and she’d never seen

her grandfather even glance in a mirror. She looked in it. Her face was dirty, as usual. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her hair was matted and greasy. No wonder Captain Sebring had stared at her. She looked just like a scruffy farm hand. Humming, she brushed her teeth and splashed some water under her arms, and on her face and neck. She'd bathe when the weather got better; she wasn't about to take off a stitch of her clothing. She peered at her reflection, a line of worry between her brows. But the linen bands she'd wrapped around her chest since she'd left Castle Storm were still in place, and although they were tighter than was comfortable, they kept her chest flat. Pads sewn in her sleeves made her shoulders wider. She had a high collar to hide her smooth throat, and she practiced glowering in the mirror to see which expression best suited an uncouth pig herder best.

Finally, she yawned and left the bathhouse. In the tent, Wander had lit their lantern and was sitting in his bed, studying the book of spells. His beard was braided and neatly tied, and as usual, he had a cup of steaming chamomile tea.

"I see you've arranged the tent," said Wander. "The blanket was a good idea. It's almost luxurious, don't you think?"

"Yes, after sleeping outdoors for weeks. I even like the bath house."

"Does that mean you'll be bathing sometime soon?" asked Wander, a hopeful note in his voice.

"Perhaps," said Tania cheerily. She undressed, unwound the linen from her chest, took a deep breath and wriggled her shoulders. "Ahh, that feels better."

"You won't be able to keep this up indefinitely," said Wander.

"I only want to keep it up until we've defeated the Dark Lord," said Tania. "I've a certain responsibility to see my father's book of spells destroyed, don't you think?"

Wander was silent for a moment. "I didn't realize you felt that

way,” he said finally.

“Ever since you told me about him, I’ve been determined to set things right.”

“You may look like your father, but you have your mother’s character. She couldn’t bear injustice. She had a menagerie of animals hunters had wounded, and who couldn’t go back to the wild. She kept them, trying to make up for the hunters’ mistakes. We would tell her it wasn’t her responsibility, but she wouldn’t listen. To save Glen Hall and the Golden Forest, she married the Dark Lord, thinking she could somehow make things right.”

“I understand how she felt,” said Tania. “I won’t give up until the new Dark Lord is dead, and that accursed book of spells destroyed.”

“A spell book isn’t destroyed easily,” said Wander. “Often they are protected, and only a key—a Master Word—can break through that.”

Tania shrugged. “Perhaps Lupin or Som will know what to do.”

“And then, perhaps, you’ll be able to claim your birthright. You can rebuild Glen Hall and settle in the Golden Forest.”

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful!” said Tania. “I love it here already. The forest seems, well, familiar somehow. I lie here, and my bones are at peace, as if I know I’ve come home.”

“You have come home,” said Wander. He finished his tea, closed the book, and turned the wick down so that the light was just a faint, orange glow. “Tomorrow I will accompany Captain Sebring to Yalin-ka’s keep. I want you to stay here where you’ll be safe. Besides, I have a feeling you’ll have to show them you’re capable of joining the archers.”

“Wish me luck,” murmured Tania, sleepily.

“I wish you the best of luck,” said Wander, and he sighed. “Welcome Home, Lady Tania of the Golden Forest.”

“It’s Lord Tanner, for now” said Tania.

Wander chuckled. “I’ll not forget.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE MOUNTED ARCHERS

“All right, let’s see how you shoot.”

Tania took an arrow from her quiver and nocked it. She drew the string smoothly, both arms working in unison, her eyes sighting along her arm past the bow toward the bull’s-eye, tied to the trunk of an oak tree. Her hand brushed along the side of her jaw, reaching her ear, then she paused, taking aim. She released the arrow and watched with satisfaction as it flew true, smacking into the bull’s-eye just off the center.

“Another, and faster this time!” barked the man in charge of her induction. His name was Sir Farener, and he came from the Southern Isles.

She flicked another arrow out of her quiver, nocked it, pulled it back, and let it fly, her aim a little less sure, but the arrow hit the target, lodging next to her first arrow.

“Faster!” ordered Sir Farener.

In her haste she grabbed two arrows and fumbled them.

“Llyr!”

“Yes, sir?” An elf appeared, his bow over his shoulder.

“Show Tanner how we must shoot.”

“Here, we’ll shoot together,” said Llyr, a grin on his face. In the daylight, Tania saw that the Golden elves’ eyes were truly amazing.

Looking into them was like staring into a forest. Sometimes they were the pale green of spring, or the deep emerald of summer. The autumn's golds, or even the silver of winter flashed in their eyes. Elves were so captivating she had a hard time not staring. She blinked and turned back to the target. Llyr said, "I'll count to three. Ready? One, two three!"

Tania reached for an arrow and gaped as Llyr's arrow hit the target. "I didn't even have time to start!" she cried.

"You'll have to learn to be faster. For the time being, forget the target, forget trying to hit the bull's-eye. Practice drawing your arrows and nocking them as fast as possible. We'll teach you how to nock two, even three arrows at a time. Watch." Llyr drew two arrows and shot them, lodging both in the bull's-eye. He did it so fast his hands were a blur.

Tania bit her lip, and then straightened her shoulders. She'd yet to fail at an undertaking. Well, except for the time she'd decided to climb the eastern tower. Luckily she'd failed while still close to the ground. "I'll practice," she said.

"Good." Sir Farener clapped her on the back. "You're not bad for a beginner. You've got the basics, and that's something. Now, let's see how you ride."

"I'll go get my steed," said Tania.

"No need, we've got one saddled for you already."

Tania didn't like the look of Sir Farener's smile. It was more of a smirk, she decided. It looked like the smirk on her own face when she was about to pull a prank on one of the twins. The horse was led over, and she looked at it. There seemed nothing amiss.

"Here," said the man holding the reins. "Hop on, I'll hold him for you." He had the same grin as Sir Farener.

Tania swallowed, but remembered her amulet. "That's all right, I prefer to get on by myself."

"Suit yourself," said the man.

She took the horse and patted his neck. “How are you,” she asked, in a soft voice.

The horse tossed his head in surprise. “Well, by my ears and whiskers, a talking human! He nuzzled her chest, then gave a horse’s laugh. “Magic, of course. I smell magic. You’ve got it well hidden beneath layers of cloth and a good coat of grime.”

“What trick are you playing on me?” asked Tania, conspicuously adjusting the girth and the stirrups.

“Trick?” The horse gave a snort. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“All right,” said Tania. “Hold still a minute, please, while I mount.”

She put her foot in the stirrup and started to climb on, when the horse let out a whinny of pain. “Hey, there is something in my saddle blanket!”

Tania jumped back down. “I thought they were up to no good,” she muttered. Aloud, she said, “I never get on before checking the blanket and saddle. It comes from years of working as a stable hand, I guess.” She took the saddle off and smoothed the blanket. Feeling a prick, she searched and soon extracted a long thorn. The oldest trick in the book, she thought, tossing it on the ground. Couldn’t they be more resourceful? She put the saddle back on and got on the horse. “All right,” she said, “Let’s go.” There were a few jeers and disappointed groans from the men and elves watching her.

She glared at the archer who’d brought her the horse, and he grinned back, unabashed. “I must have missed that,” he said cheerfully.

“What should I do now?” the horse looked at her. “I’ve never carried a rider—usually I pull a cart.”

Tania rolled her eyes. Not the oldest trick, but several tricks. Well, she’d show them. Already, the men and elves, gathered to see her official welcoming, were looking on with interest. “I want you to canter in a big circle. Arch your neck and look like you’re having a good time.”

“I am having fun,” said the horse, striding out in a bouncy canter.

Pulling carts is dull, I have to stay on the road.”

“What would you like to do?” Tania asked.

“Jump. I’ve always loved jumping. When I was a foal I would leap over anything in my way.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Over there’s a nice big log, with a table behind it. Do you think you can clear both?”

“There are elves sitting on the log, and dishes on the table.”

“They’ll get out of the way. Shall we go?”

“All right!” The horse gave a snort and bounded toward the table. As he approached, the elves looked first amused, then startled, and then they all gave a shout and dived, just as the horse gave a mighty leap and sprang over the table. One of his hind feet caught the edge, and the whole thing came crashing down.

“I thought you said you could clear it,” Tania scolded.

“I didn’t think it was so wide. What a jump though! I’m having so much fun. Can I try that, too?”

Tania looked in the direction the horse’s ears were pointing. It was the laundry, strung between two trees. “It’s not too high?”

“Of course not!” the horse was already gathering his muscles. With a grunt, he launched himself in the air and sailed over the line, heavy with flapping shirts and tunics. His tail, however, caught the rope and dragged it to the ground. “Whoa!” cried the horse, what’s that pulling my tail!”

“The laundry, whoops, the rope broke. Is that better?”

“Yes! Hey, I bet I could jump that tent, the log, and then the tent on the other side of the stream.”

“What are you waiting for?” Tania cried, choking with laughter. Behind her, men and elves shrieked and waved their arms.

The horse pounded to the first tent, jumped it beautifully, hopped over the log, then lengthened his stride and leapt over the frozen stream.

“Hurray” cried Tania. “Now for the last tent!”

“Let’s go!” cried the horse. He whinnied, and thundered toward the tent. At the last minute, his foot slid and he careened into the tent. “Whoa!” he shouted. He gave a desperate heave and tried to clear the tent anyway, but he landed right in the middle of it. Tania heard the sound of splintering wood as the tent pole snapped.

“Are you all right?” she asked the horse.

“Fine, thanks. I think I could have jumped it if I hadn’t hit that patch of ice.” The horse gave a snort. “I believe I stepped on something fragile.”

Tania looked down, and her heart sank. “You smashed someone’s chair.”

“Oh.” The horse lifted his hind leg and shook it, sending pieces of the chair flying. Then he stepped out of the ruined tent. “Perhaps I better stick to pulling carts,” he said. “I don’t think jumping really suits me.”

Tania glanced around, expecting to see a crowd of men and elves. Instead, there was a deep silence in the encampment. “Now what?” she muttered, sliding off the horse.

She turned, and collided with somebody. Stepping back, she looked up and into the eyes of Captain Sebring.

He stared at her, his face as dark and furious as a thundercloud. Lightning flashed in his eyes. “What do you think you are doing?” he hissed.

Tania quailed, but managed to stammer, “Riding, Captain Sebring.”

“Do you know whose tent this is?”

A sinking feeling was growing in the pit of her stomach. “No,” she said.

“It’s mine. It was mine, that is.”

“I’ll fix it, sir, I mean, Captain Sebring, sir. I’ll clean up the mess. No need to worry, I’ll get right to it.”

“You’ll get right to it, all right. And when you’re finished, you’ll

wash the laundry you dragged through the camp. Afterward, you'll clean the stable. That will be your job from now on. The bathhouse will be your responsibility, too; you will clean it every day. The latrines need to be emptied and the pit dug afresh every other day. That will be your responsibility. And in your spare time, you'll mend and clean tack and help your grandfather in the kitchen." He drew a deep breath, as if he wanted to say more; instead, he spun on his heels and strode away.

Tania grinned ruefully at Llyr, who'd come to sympathize. "It sounds like I'll be too busy to learn how to shoot."

"We're sorry," he said. "We never thought that the horse would run away with you. It was just a joke. Don't worry about the archery lessons. I'll give them to you whenever you're free."

"We'll help clean up the tent," said Gryp.

Galad, Queral, and Farj had come over as well. Galad said, "We're not as handy as dwarfs at repairing furniture, but we'll do our best." He picked up a piece of splintered wood and looked at it. "We might have to chip in and buy the Captain a new chair, though."

"It's not your fault," said Tania to the elves. "I let him go where he wanted." She patted the horse's steaming neck. "He had a good time, anyway."

"I did," said the horse. He nuzzled her. "And I got you in a fine mess. If I can make it up to you, I will."

"Don't worry about it," said Tania. To the elves she said, "I'll be right back. Let me go put this fellow back in his stall."

"Take your time," said Llyr. He gave a silvery laugh. "We'll get to work here."

Tania went to the stable and put the horse in his stall. "What is your name?" she asked him, as she rubbed him down and made sure he had fresh water and clean straw.

"I'm just a cart horse. I don't have a name."

"Well, I can't just call you horse, can I? Is there any name you'd like?"

“Well, I’ve always liked the name Karen.”

Tania choked. “That’s a girl’s name.”

“Well, what’s so funny about that? You’re a girl and you’ve got a boy’s name.”

“How did you know?”

“You can’t fool a horse. It’s a question of scent. Why are you hiding as a boy?”

“I’m in disguise,” said Tania. “I’ve come to enlist in the archers to help fight the Dark Lord.”

“You won’t get to do much fighting if you’re cleaning the latrines,” said the horse. “I happen to like the name Karen.”

“Fine, that will be your name then.”

“Can you say it?”

“See you later, Karen.”

The horse gave a joyful whinny. “I love it. Thank you!”

Tania patted him, and then she went to see Shabaz. “Did you hear what happened?” she asked him.

“I saw most of it.” He chuckled, and then grew serious. “You’ve made a bad impression on your first day. Captain Sebring won’t be easy on you now. You’re going to have to work hard to get back into his good graces.” He nuzzled her hair. “Don’t look so dejected. I’m sure you’ll find a way to earn his praise.”

Tania ducked under the door and went into the next stall. “Hello there,” she said to the magnificent horse.

“Hello, little magician,” said the horse.

“I’m not a magician, I just have an amulet,” Tania said. She knelt in the straw and unwrapped the plaster from his foot. “I would have come this morning, but I had some things to do.”

“I saw that,” said the horse, with a laugh. “But I think you’re wrong. I have seen a magician once, and he looked a bit like you.”

“Oh.” Tania pondered on that a minute. “Where was this magician?”

“In the Southern Isles.”

“How does this feel?” Tania asked, pressing on his hock.

“Much better, thank you.”

“What do you think you’re doing? Get out of there this instant! Do you want to get killed?” The voice, very quiet—almost a whisper—came from the stall door.

Tania stood up slowly and peered over the horse’s back. It was Captain Sebring, his expression even more furious than when she’d destroyed his tent. “Are you going to kill me?” she asked.

He shook his head, but the movement was very slow. He didn’t raise his voice. “No, but that horse will. Get out of there!” His face had gone very white, she noticed.

She whispered to the horse, “Do you want to kill me?”

“No,” the horse shook his massive head. “It’s true I damaged the last man who groomed me, but he was an evil person, and did everything he could to make my life miserable.”

“He won’t hurt me,” said Tania, stroking the horse’s neck. “Look, he’s really quite gentle.” She grabbed a handful of mane and swung on the horse’s back.

Captain Sebring’s mouth dropped open. “By the ocean’s children,” he whispered.

“You have a terrible reputation,” Tania whispered to the horse.

He snorted. “I was mistreated as a colt, mishandled as a yearling, and beaten by my last groom. Wouldn’t you be savage? Only my master has my respect.”

“Whose horse is this?” Tania asked.

“Mine,” said Captain Sebring. Haltingly, he reached over the door and stroked the horse’s muzzle. “But I’ve never dared do this. He’s always snapped and pinned his ears back before.” He looked at Tania

with wonder.

“His last groom beat him,” said Tania.

Captain Sebring looked startled. “How did you know that?”

“ ‘Twas easy enough to guess.” Tania swung off the horse and pointed to his sleek hide. “There are old scars here, if you look closely. Some are under his belly, where the marks won’t be noticed.”

“How did you notice?” The captain was still looking at Tania as if she’d just sprouted wings.

She lifted Hex’s forefoot. “He injured his hock yesterday. I went in to check him, and I saw the scars. I put a plaster on his hock, but you’ll have to go easy with him. See? It’s still a bit swollen.”

“I suppose I’ll have to put you in charge of taking care of him. His last groom is in the infirmary, and as soon as he’s well, he’ll be sent home.” The captain sighed and ran his hand through his hair, making Tania think of her grandfather.

“Oh!” she cried. “Have you been to see Lord Yalinka? What did he say?”

Captain Sebring frowned. “Young man, you’re too curious. But for your information, Lord Yalinka is away on business. Your grandfather is in the kitchen, with somebody who came to visit.”

“Lysom! Is it Lysom?”

“It’s Sir Lysom, to you. He says you used to be his stable lad, and I can see you were a good one. Well, you’ve got a job with us, at any rate. Now, get out of my horse’s stall, and go do your chores!”

“Yes, Captain Sebring. Oh, please, may I go see Ly . . . Sir Lysom first?”

“Hurry. The laundry won’t wait, and neither will your other chores. I suppose you’ve already forgotten about my tent?”

“No, captain.” Tania hurried past him. Before she could escape, he caught her arm, squeezing hard enough to make her wince.

“One more thing, Tanner.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, who?”

“Yes, Captain Sebring?”

“Take a bath tonight. That is an order!” he shouted the last word at her. In a hurry to get by him, she tripped and tumbled through the doorway. She landed on the frosty ground and rolled. Inside the stable, she could hear Shabaz snorting with laughter.

Getting to her feet, she rubbed her bruised posterior and glared at the stable. “I’m sorry about your tent, Captain Sebring,” she snarled under her breath. “Next time I’ll make sure I don’t half destroy it; next time I’ll demolish the whole thing.” Still muttering, she made her way to the kitchen. Her grandfather waved his spoon at her in greeting, and then went back to stirring the caldron where a fragrant soup was bubbling. And next to him, sitting at the long mess table, was Lysom.

Tania was about to fling herself on him, when she remembered where she was and who she was supposed to be. Besides, when he caught sight of her, she was glad she hadn’t hugged him. He looked at her, his eyebrows shot up and his mouth turned down.

“My heavens, Tanner,” he said, emphasizing the Tanner. “You certainly look the part.”

She glanced down and saw her clothes were filthy and her breeches torn. Lysom, on the other hand, had on a new outfit. His jacket was made of quilted wool and had silver buttons. He wore warm velvet pants, the color of blackberries, and his cape, carefully folded on his lap, was a splendid forest green wool lined with what looked like sheared lamb, dyed to match. On his head perched a felt hat, a jaunty feather from a cock pheasant stuck in the crown.

“Don’t you look wonderful!” cried Tania.

Lysom preened. “Thank you. The clothes are from Lord Yalinka. He covers me with gifts.”

“Literally,” said Wander, blowing on the spoon. “Try some, Tanner?”

“It’s delicious,” she said, tasting the soup. “I’m so glad to see you, Lysom. Are you learning ballistics?”

“As a matter of fact, I am. But I have lots of free time. Your grandfather has kindly offered to gift me fencing lessons.”

“After I finish the soup.” Wander added some herbs and stirred.

“Oh, what about me?” wailed Tania.

“From what I hear, you’ll be too busy,” said Lysom, frowning. “Besides, it won’t be seemly if I take lessons with my own stable hand.”

“Nonsense,” said Wander. “You’ll need a sparring partner; someone who won’t be afraid to get some bruises. Tanner will be just fine.”

“If you say so.” Lysom sniffed.

“I’ll finish my chores in a hurry. Wait for me, please?” Tania begged.

“We’ll start in exactly one hour. The archers will be sitting down for lunch, and we’ll have some privacy and time for ourselves. When you hear the dinner bell, come to the clearing behind the stable.”

Tania bolted out the door and rushed to the washing shed. There, she saw Queral and Farj scrubbing the clothes. “Oh, that’s my job!” she said.

“A simple thank you would have been fine,” joked Queral.

“I’m sorry, thank you, of course, thank you!” Tania helped finish, and they hung up the laundry. In a rush, she sprinted to the ruins of Captain Sebring’s tent. There, Llyr and Galad had managed to change the tent pole, find a new chair, and were busy folding clothes. Tania remembered to say thank you first, then she shooed them away. “I’ll finish the rest,” she said. “It won’t do for Captain Sebring to see you here.”

“We feel bad about this,” said Llyr, a grin on his face.

“It was a mean trick to play,” agreed Galad.

She pointed to the tent. “Well, you’ve made up for it. I like working in the stable, so it isn’t a punishment for me.”

"I haven't forgotten about the archery lessons," said Llyr. "Tomorrow morning, at sunrise, meet me at the archery field."

"Thank you." Tania finished folding the clothes and put them in the captain's dresser. He had a bigger tent than the enlisted men. It had a polished wooden floor and a throw rug, instead of the rough pine planks she had. He had a real bed instead of a cot, and a lovely mahogany desk with what used to be a matching chair. Tania, accustomed to housework, soon had the tent straightened up and everything gleaming. The desk had fallen in the disaster, but luckily, it hadn't been damaged. Its contents had spilled, and there were still some papers lying about. She put them on the desk—the captain would know where to put them. One was way under the bed, and Tania fished it out. It wasn't a paper.

It was an image. She knew of these things. The magicians would sometimes make them. It wasn't magic as much as it was alchemy. In Castle Storm there were several of these images, framed and hanging on the library wall. This one wasn't as faded as the ones in Castle Storm though. Its colors were vibrant, and the people seemed to be alive. She looked closely.

A family stood on dazzling white marble steps. Behind them was a lush garden, and beyond that was a glint of turquoise sea. On the far right was a tall man, with black hair and pale skin. In the image, his eyes seemed to be a steely blue though it was hard to tell, as they were deep-set. Next to him stood a lady. She was a Golden elf; Tania could tell from the amber skin, long, flame-colored hair, and extraordinary eyes. Her beauty was astounding. Two children were with them, both boys. One boy favored his mother, with elvish features and copper hair that glinted in the strong light. The other boy was dark haired, like his father, but with his mother's amber skin. They were handsome lads, staring seriously out from the image. Everyone in the image was seri-

ous, but the boy with the copper hair had a spark of humor in his green eyes. Even his mouth seemed to be twitching in mirth. Tania knew she was looking at Captain Sebring as a child. But where had that merry glint in his eyes gone? She pictured his face. It still had a wild, elvish beauty—his mother’s legacy—but the mirth had gone. His face and eyes were grim. That was it. He was grim now.

“What are you doing?”

She spun around, the image still clutched in her hand.

“Put that down.”

“Yes, Captain Sebring,” she said. She placed it on the desk with the other papers, and then edged past him. “Your tent is clean,” she said.

“Except for your stench,” he hissed. “Get out.”

“Yes, Captain Sebring.” She darted out the door, misjudged the step, and fell head over heels into the snow. Luckily, she was agile. She landed on her knees, got her breath back, and then she heard the dinner bell.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FENCING LESSONS

“One, two, three, and turn—quick now, turn, yes! That’s right! One, two, three, and whoops! No, no! Hold your sword like this, it’s not a stick.” Wander’s voice was sharp.

“It looks like a stick to me,” Lysom grumbled.

“It is a staff,” said Wander, “and it’s all you’re going to get for now. Where were we? Are your knuckles still bleeding, Tania?”

Tania sucked her knuckles and glowered at Lysom. “They’re fine. Why can’t I lead for once?”

“You’ll take turns. Lysom, I want you to turn your wrist like this when you strike. When you have a real sword, the guard will protect your hand. With a staff, you have to watch your knuckles, but it will make your hands quicker, believe me.”

The two youngsters circled each other, holding their staffs chest high like swords, bodies turned sideways to each other.

“Remember, give your opponent the smallest possible target. Stay turned sideways; keep your weight on both feet. No, Lysom! Don’t lean forward on your right leg like that. If your opponent swipes at your foot, you’ll lose your balance. Try again. One, two, three—very

good! Wrist straight, elbows down, don't flap like a goose, Tanner!"

"A goose! That's a good one . . . ouch!" Lysom dropped his stick and glared at Tania. "That was my knuckle."

"Now you know how it feels."

Lysom picked up his stick and brandished it wildly. "Just wait until I . . ."

"That's another thing." Wander stepped between them. "You must never, ever lose your temper while fighting. It will cloud your judgment and make you rash. If you lose your head, you will not feel the blows you receive until it is too late. Rage can blind you and will take away the ability to plan ahead. Fencing is all about speed, skill, and ruse; it is not about strength. One last time. En garde, one, two, three, four, up, down, very good—left—right, nice move, Lysom. One, two, move your feet, I want to see fast feet! Well done. That's all for today."

Tania tossed her stick on the ground.

"No, pick it up." Wander shook his finger at her. "It may look like a staff, but to you it's a sword and you'll treat it with respect. I shall teach you every other day at exactly lunchtime. You can eat in the kitchen afterward. Lysom, if you can't make it, send a messenger. I'm sure Lord Yalinka will have one at your service."

"I'm called Sir Lysom there," the boy said haughtily.

"I will be happy to call you whatever you'd like, but remember, I am your sword master. That means you owe me respect and total obedience. I'm not teaching you chess or dancing. I'm teaching you to kill. If you disobey me, if you are disrespectful and ignore the rules of fencing, I will not give you lessons, and I will see to it that your sword is confiscated."

"I understand," said Lysom. "I promise to obey. I only hope Lord Yalinka won't mind that I've torn the shirt he gave me."

Tania looked at the gaping rent, then at Lysom, staring with a mourn-

ful expression at his new shirt. He'd changed; he was gaining a measure of self-respect. For once, he could be proud of his clothes and of his name. On one hand, it was annoying to see him acting so conceited. On the other hand, she was glad that he was happy.

"I'll mend it for you, if you'd like," said Tania. "That way, he won't even see it."

"Will you? Thank you!" Lysom trotted after her to her tent. "I think I'm going to be quite good at fencing. It seems to come naturally to me. Did you see how well I moved my feet? Don't feel bad, Tanner. You're not noble, so you don't have the same aptitude. But I hear you're doing wonders in the stable."

"I love horses," Tania admitted, searching through her affairs until she found her sewing kit. "Here, give me your shirt. Tell me," she said, sitting on the cot to sew. "How is Lord Yalinka? I mean, besides being generous and welcoming. What does he look like?"

"He looks a fright," Lysom said cheerfully. "The first time I saw him I nearly turned and ran. Luckily, it was night. I was exhausted and Sir Renegal held my arm in a tight grip. After a few minutes, though, I grew used to his appearance, and I could see that once he'd been a handsome man."

"My, what a splendid portrait you've painted of your benefactor," said Tania. She bit off the thread and held the shirt to Lysom. "It's done."

"Why, here you are." The tent flap pulled back and Captain Sebring poked his head in. "I've been searching for you, Tanner. What are you doing?"

"He's mending my shirt," said Lysom, holding it out to the captain.

"A stable hand and a valet. I see you've many talents, Tanner. Well, your next task is cleaning the stalls. Go see Galad, he's the stable master. Tell him I've put you in charge of Hex."

"Yes, Captain Sebring." Tania waited until he'd gone, then she let

her breath out. For some reason, whenever he was near she couldn't seem to think clearly. Her mind froze; he set her nerves on edge.

"Well, I'd best be going." She shook Lysom's hand, and held the tent flap open for him. Once outside, she turned toward the stable.

"Aren't you going to eat something?" Lysom asked.

"No, I'll wait until tonight. Have a safe ride back, and I'll see you in two days."

Lysom nodded, and then hurried toward the mess tent, where a delightful aroma made Tania's mouth water painfully. She went to the stable, saw Galad about Hex, and mucked out the stalls. That done, she went to the bathhouse and scrubbed it from top to bottom.

The sun was setting when she finished, so she went back to the stable and fed the horses, familiarizing herself with them. The amulet was helpful. The horses trusted her and let her handle them without any problems. Her chores finally done, she sat awhile in Shabaz's stall and leaned against a bale of hay. Soon, her eyelids drooped and she snuggled closer into the warm hay. All her muscles ached; she'd had a long day. Her stomach growled with hunger; she'd been drinking water to still the pains. But aside from a hasty porridge gulped down at breakfast, and a spoonful of soup, she hadn't eaten. It made her head spin, and so she stayed in the stall, curled up in the hay, and slept.

Shabaz woke her before dawn. "Tania, get up. It's time to feed the horses."

"Oh, all right." Tania sat up and plucked a piece of straw from her hair. Shabaz had lain next her that night, keeping her warm. She hugged him, and yawned and stood. Then she leaned against Shabaz's withers. "I feel dizzy," she moaned.

"Pitch the hay ration into the stalls, then go eat your breakfast. Oats should be given an hour after hay anyway. Then you can bathe while we eat, and be back here in time to turn us out and clean our stalls."

“The sun will be up by then, and I’ll get my archery lesson.” Tania perked up. “I can’t wait. Llyr is an amazing archer—did you see how he shoots?”

“No, but I’ll come and watch this morning.”

Tania hurried to feed the horses, and then she went into the kitchen, where Wander was already awake and making porridge.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Fine. I’m used to sleeping in stables,” said Tania. Her stomach growled and she made a face. “I’d love a bowl of porridge, please.”

“Here.” Wander scooped out a ladle-full, then spooned honey on the top. He cracked two eggs into the skillet and scrambled them with a dollop of cream. Then he tipped them on a plate for her, with a slice of buttered toast. While Tania devoured her breakfast, Wander looked on, a worried line between his brows. “You look pale,” he said.

“I’m tired, but yesterday was rough. It will get easier, I’m sure.”

“What are you doing here?” The voice made her jump. It was Captain Sebring, looming over her.

She glanced up and quailed. As usual, he looked as if he wanted to crush her to dust. Why had she demolished his tent? “I’m eating, Captain Sebring.”

“I see that. I mean why haven’t you taken your bath? I thought I’d given you an order?”

“You did, sir. I was just on my way.”

“Well, hurry!” he said.

She got up in haste and turned to go. In her hurry, she tripped over Captain Sebring’s feet. He grabbed her arm before she fell, then sent her on her way with a firm shove. Sailing through the doorway, she was mortified to hear her grandfather chuckle and say, “Tanner’s a good lad, but baths are not his strong point.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll soon teach him the virtues of cleanliness,” said

Captain Sebring with a hearty laugh.

Tears blurred her vision as she stormed into the bathhouse. Thankfully, it was empty. She set water on the stove to heat, and started to fill the zinc tub. While the water heated, she rationed the oats, and then turned the horses into the pasture. She quickly mucked out their stalls and then she went back to the bathhouse. Someone had left a brand new uniform for her inside. On it was a note, "For stable hand Tanner."

Not Archer Tanner. There was no pin in the form of a horseshoe and arrow. She blinked, and more tears rolled down her cheeks. She'd run away from her home for this? The phrase "Out of the frying pan, into the fire," popped into her head. Sniffing, she poured hot water into the tub. Making sure the door was locked, she took off her clothes and crouched in the tub, scrubbing with handfuls of gritty soap.

When she was done she felt better. She could even shrug about Captain Sebring and her grandfather laughing at her when she tripped. She supposed that it must have looked funny. She was, after all, supposed to be a boy, and boys were always getting into scrapes.

She dried herself and tried on her new clothes. They were made for an elf, and they fit her well. The leggings were warm; the shirt was heavy linen with a tight weave that wouldn't tear. There was a leather vest and a wide leather belt. She pulled on a pair of new, stiff riding boots. She would have to break them in. Everything was new, and everything felt warm. She'd never had such nice clothes. She fingered the cloth. The cape wasn't as fine as the one the Gray elves had given her, but she would wear it with pride. She had no pin, but if she worked hard, perhaps she'd get one soon and be a real member of the Archers. Until then, well, stable lad wasn't such a bad thing.

There came a pounding on the door. Tania gathered her things and tipped the bath water into the hole in the floor. The bathhouse had been built right over the stream. It made fetching bath water handy.

“Hold on a second,” Tania cried, as the pounding continued. She looked into the mirror. Her hair was growing; she’d have to cut it again. She still had dark circles under her eyes, and her bones seemed to press against her skin, but the disguise still held. A boy still stared back at her, his navy blue eyes wide, nose crooked, mouth pinched with worry. She nodded, and then opened the door.

“Ah! I see you finally got around to following orders.” Captain Sebring strode in. He looked around, hands on hips. “Yes, you do a good job cleaning. The bathhouse looks spotless. My tent was repaired, the stable is clean, and the horses all fed. I suppose you can have an hour to yourself. Get on with you, young man. But be in the washing shed before noon. You have sheets to wash today.”

“Yes, Captain Sebring.” Tania clutched her old clothes to her chest and made to leave. As she passed him, she stumbled and he caught her arm, gently this time. She drew a quick breath. Her arm, where he’d touched it, tingled.

The Captain raised his eyebrows. “You better look where you put your feet,” he said. “If you fall down, you’ll get your new breeches all dirty.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir,” stammered Tania, and she turned and bolted for her tent. His amused laughter followed her, and she had the absurd urge to turn and see him smile. She would have liked to see his face lose its hard edges.

In her tent she grabbed her bow and quiver and then dashed to the archery field, where Llyr was setting up some targets.

“I’m sorry, am I late?” she gasped, rushing up.

“Heavens, who are you?” The elf laughed delightedly. “Why, I can’t smell you coming any more!”

“Was it that bad?” asked Tania, abashed.

“Worse,” said the elf. “We all wanted to toss you into the stream—you’re lucky it was frozen. But you clean up well. Let me see you.

Why, I believe you have elf blood.” He looked surprised. “Look at me.” He tilted his head, examining her. “You do, I’m sure of it. Possibly Gray elf ancestry, though I could be mistaken. There are elves from the south that have eyes like yours. They are like the night sky with stars in them.”

Tania was uncomfortable. Elves loved beauty and waxed poetically about nearly everything, but she had a disguise to keep up. She made a face. “Shall we get to work?” she said.

“Work? Who said anything about work? Archery isn’t work; it’s an art. I want you to sit here, and I want you to watch me. Today, all you will do is observe me. I want you to study each of my movements. I will start very slowly.” Llyr reached into his quiver with exaggerated slowness, took an arrow, nocked it, cocked it, and let it fly. Every movement was divided into separate parts, so that it looked as if he paused after every position. Soon, Tania began to see a pattern.

“You must stand like this, and turn your shoulders just so,” Llyr said. He shot all his arrows, and Tania went to pluck them from the target. All had pierced the bull’s-eye.

The lesson lasted for an hour, then Tania thanked him and hurried to the washing shed. There, she scrubbed sheets until lunchtime. She also washed her old clothes, hanging them to dry just behind her tent. She couldn’t wear her uniform everyday. But when she went into her tent, she saw that another uniform was on her cot. Two new sets of clothing! Astounded, she smoothed her hand over the shirt. Now she knew what Lysom must feel like. She couldn’t bear the thought of getting them dirty, or tearing them. She supposed she’d get used to them soon enough though.

She was right. After two weeks the new clothes were comfortably worn in, including her boots. She had her own schedule: feed the horses before dawn, at sunrise the archery lessons, then clean the bathhouse

or do laundry. At lunchtime she had fencing lessons. Lysom came nearly every day. In the evenings there were different things to do; sometimes the troop went for a ride through the forest, and sometimes they would practice archery. Often Tania fell asleep during dinner, her head in her arms, and Wander would wake her up and tell her to go to the tent. The men and elves would stay around the campfire, telling stories, singing softly, or just smoking their pipes, watching the sparks from the fire fly upward. Tania would lie in bed and try to stay awake, to listen to the warm murmur of voices, Captain Sebring's warm voice rising above the rest. But she was always too exhausted. Sleep claimed her as soon as her head touched the pillow.

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One afternoon, Grandfather Birchspring took her to see the ruins of Glen Hall. Wander rode Shabaz, and Tania rode Hex. The ruins were in a small valley. The forest had long swallowed up the orchards, but they found an ancient apple tree covered in winter frost. The stones that had once been a fine manor were scattered widely. With tall trees growing all around them, it was nearly impossible to see what the place looked like before.

Wander sat for a long time on a fallen log, just looking. Shabaz, a strange look in his eyes, stood behind him. After a while, Wander said to Tania, "You've got the sight, girl. I know you do. If you want, you can see Glen Hall as it was. Get on Shabaz and close your eyes."

She did, without asking what the sight was, or how he knew she sometimes saw things that weren't there. She thought of the ruined tower in the orchard and supposed she did, in fact, have some gift to see, or at least imagine, past scenes. Once settled, she closed her eyes.

"Wrap your hands in my mane," said Shabaz. "Clear your mind and

think of nothing. Now, picture the apple tree, the one in front of us.”

Tania concentrated. In her mind she saw the tree, standing in a little clearing, its branches white with frost.

“The snow is melting and leaves are growing. All around the tree, grass is shooting up, pale green and waving in the sunlight. The tree is in a meadow—can you see it?”

Tania nodded. As the unicorn spoke, she saw the meadow widen. A stone wall sprang up around it, and other apple trees joined the first, so that she was facing a tidy orchard.

“I will turn around. Keep your eyes closed. Just follow the vision and don’t speak.” Shabaz turned, and as he did, the scene shifted.

Tania saw a road leading to the distance. The orchard was on her left. The road was on the right. The road disappeared between two hills, and in the distance, visible between the hills, was the sea. Shabaz turned more, and a garden bordering the road came into view. As the scene continued to evolve, a manor appeared. It was built of dun colored stone, and the roof was gray slate. It was a huge place, nearly a castle, with many chimneys and multi-paned windows. There was a stable in the back, and in the pastures along the road were many fat cows and sleek horses. The forest came right down to the orchard, huge trees leaned over the stone walls. For as far as the eye could see on one side was forest, and on the other side were ploughed fields, pastures, and orchards. Near the manor the garden was a riot of colors, with roses and honeysuckle climbing the walls, beckoning the visitor to come sit on the stone benches set beneath the trees.

Tania suddenly realized Shabaz was gone. She was alone. She hesitated, then walked into the garden. She passed under a rose arbor and found herself in a grove of white birch, white roses, and blue iris. Another arbor led to another clearing, and so on. The garden was vast, and each corner was more enchanting than the one before. Fi-

nally, she sat on a bench beneath a climbing yellow rose bush. As she sat there, she saw a woman appear, walking through the garden toward her. She was very young, perhaps only fifteen or sixteen, but she had a grave expression that made her look older than her years. Her clothes were quaint, the sort of things Tania had seen in antique engravings. Her dark green skirt was long and swept the ground; the sleeves of her white blouse were ample and edged with lace; and she wore a lace scarf around her shoulders. She walked up to Tania and smiled.

Tania's breath caught in her throat. The woman had hair the color of ripe wheat. Her eyes were the palest golden-green of spring. When she smiled, her face lit up like a candle and it seemed that Tania could feel warmth radiate from her straight to her own heart. She was beguiling in a way that was overwhelming. Tania felt herself smiling too; joy flooded her, although not a word had been spoken.

The woman took Tania's hand and led her to the heart of the garden where a willow tree overlooked a clear lake. Beneath the tree sat a man. Tania shivered. The sky seemed to darken, but then the woman waved her hand, and the sun brightened once more. The man didn't move, and as Tania approached, she saw that he was chained to the tree. He, too, was dressed in old-fashioned clothes. He had tall boots and tight fitting leggings, and wore an out-dated, long blue tunic with a dark blue vest over it. He looked at her, and her heart stopped. Dark blue eyes the color of night, hair like crow's wings—he was handsome yet somehow repulsive. He had her face, her eyes, and her hair, but everything was sharper, harder edged.

"I won't hurt you," he said. His voice was wry. "As you can see, I'm harmless now."

Tania wanted to stay back, but the woman drew her nearer. She knelt by the man, pulling Tania to the ground with her. Face to face, the three people stared at each other. The woman's eyes were filled

with tears, and her sorrow was so keen that Tania felt it like a stab. The man seemed affected too. His face paled. "Why are you here?" he asked her, his voice harsh.

Tania shook her head. She wasn't sure. She looked at the woman, but she wouldn't speak. Her eyes were filled with a strange mixture of sadness and joy. She squeezed Tania's hand and pointed again to the man.

The man stared at one, then the other. "I know why you're here," he said, and he started to laugh. It was a hollow sound, devoid of mirth. "You're here to free me," he said, and he lunged toward her, but his shackles held him tight. He thrashed from side to side, fighting the chains, but they held fast. He stopped struggling and looked at her, a frown on his handsome face. "You are not a lad. Despite your outfit. I can see past your disguise. How is that so? Tell me, how can I know such a thing? Yet I do. You're a girl. Why do you dress so? Is there a war? It's an outlandish uniform though; I've never seen the likes of it."

Tania didn't reply. She was afraid to break the spell, so she sat still, watching the couple beneath the willow tree.

"Speak to me!" he roared. "I'm sure you've come to set me free, just as I know that you're a girl, just as I know . . ." he stopped, his breath coming hard. He slumped against the tree, and Tania saw deep marks on his arms where he'd strained against the chains. The iron seemed to burn his flesh. Pity stirred in her heart. She looked at the woman. Surely she could help him. But the young woman just stared at her gravely, and Tania realized that although she thought of her as a woman, the girl was younger than she was. Only her eyes were ancient. She turned back to the man. He was staring at them, an expression of anger twisting his face. "Well, have you decided what to do with me yet?"

Tania shook her head. A bird flapped overhead, and she looked up and saw a farm pigeon swoop past. She heard a giggle, and noticed that the young woman had gotten even younger. Her face was round,

her hair was in braids, and she held a wooden hoop and a stick. She laughed, and it was the delighted laugh of a child.

“What’s this?” said the man. He frowned. “I think she’s getting younger.”

As Tania watched, the little girl shrank even more, stood on unsteady legs, and toddled toward her. Tania caught her in her arms, and the child shrank into a baby. The baby nestled close. Her soft cheeks were rosy, and her hair was delicate gold curls. The baby gave a soft sigh. Then, as Tania held her, she shrank to nothing. Instead of a baby, Tania held an iron key in her hand. The key was so cold it made her hand ache. Tania looked around, her heart beating frantically.

The man pressed himself against the tree. “Sorcery,” he whispered. “Black magic.”

Tania blinked. The woman had vanished, and so had the sun. Dark clouds scudded across the sky, and the wind whipped the willow tree’s branches about.

“You have to let me go,” cried the man. “Don’t leave me alone here. Look, just undo my chains, please?” He leaned forward. There was a lock on the chain. The key must fit the lock.

But Tania was undecided. She stood up, and deaf to the man’s pleas and curses, she left the garden, walking back the way she’d come, out to the orchard. She passed the gate, wandered through the trees, until she was facing the little apple tree she’d seen in the forest. As she stared at it, the sky turned nearly black, lightning cracked overhead, and the wind whipped the grass around her feet. The leaves flew off the tree, and the bare branches turned gray, then white. Tania blinked, and the tree was again frost-covered. She was still on Shabaz’s back, and the sun was just touching the horizon. She looked past the apple tree, through the forest toward the two hills. Faintly, in the distance, she caught a glimpse of the sea.

“Did you see it?” she whispered, when she finally got her voice back.

“I showed you Glen Hall as it was before.”

“I saw my parents. Did you see them, too?”

“No.” Shabaz sounded surprised. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure,” said Tania. She rubbed her hand over her face. “I’d rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.”

Wander looked worried. “Perhaps you should tell us,” he said.

“Perhaps.” Tania gave a dry laugh. She wondered where she’d heard that laugh before, and then remembered the man under the willow tree. Her father had laughed like that. “I’ll tell you, but not right now. Not while the sun is setting and the shadows are lengthening. I’d rather tell you in full sunlight, if you don’t mind.”

“Shadows call shadows,” said Wander.

“Exactly,” said Tania, and she felt as if she’d suddenly aged a thousand years.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A LETTER AND A DISCOVERY

Lysom and Tania made rapid progress with their fencing lessons. Wander was an excellent teacher. Tania also became a proficient archer; Llyr was so proud of his student he organized a shooting contest. Tania didn't win, but she was among the four finalists. The semi-finals pitted her against Galad, and she lost. Galad lost in the final against Captain Sebring. Llyr, the best archer in the camp, didn't participate, but gave the prizes. There were four arrows for the winner, three for the second place winner, and two apiece for Tania and an elf called Tyntigal. The arrows were carved from mistletoe, the best wood for arrows, and they were tipped with mithral, the elves' favorite metal. Their feathers were from the Goshawk, except for the vane, which came from a snow goose. Tania was thrilled—she'd never had such a valuable gift, and she was looking forward to showing Lysom.

Almost everything was going well. Tania's reputation with the horses soon became the talk of the camp, and men and elves brought her horses for her expert advice. She didn't let that go to her head, though. She knew it was only her amulet that allowed her to speak to the creatures and helped her understand their problems. Most were

easy to solve. Shabaz wandered freely about the camp. He could speak to the elves, being a unicorn, and with his knowledgeable instructions, the mounted archers became a force to be reckoned with.

Although only forty strong, the archers of the Golden Forest knew theirs was a particularly deadly and effective fighting force, and most chafed at being kept apart from the other troops stationed at Yalinka's keep. To occupy the men, Captain Sebring had them practicing skirmishes in the woods. Tania took part in the mock fights. She and Shabaz made an unbeatable pair. With her shooting abilities honed by Llyr's lessons, and Shabaz's experience, they often came out with the most points at the end of the day. The fact that she still hadn't earned her pin only bothered her a little, and she was careful to stay out of Captain Sebring's way.

Now that she kept herself clean, and wore her uniform, he treated her more like one of his archers and less like a stable lad. He could still find chores for her if he saw her sitting with nothing to do—she was rarely idle—but she still preferred to avoid him. His grim face and habit of snapping at her for no reason made her nervous. When she got nervous, she inevitably did or said something foolish.

She was sitting by herself near the frozen stream early one morning, when he came upon her and said, "Haven't you got anything better to do, Tanner?"

She had been in the middle of trying to unravel the strange vision she'd had at Glen Hall. Captain Sebring's interruption had snapped the fragile thread of thought she'd woven, and exasperated, she riposted, "Don't you have anything better to do than sneaking around scaring people? I bet your mother had her hands full with you and your brother, although I'm sure you were the one planning all the mischief." Suddenly realizing to whom she was talking, she jumped to her feet and squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the clout that was sure to come.

Instead, he sat on the log she'd vacated and stared at the stream.

"I hadn't seen that image for years," he admitted after a moment. "It must have been stuck in the back of one of the desk drawers and jarred loose." His eyebrows lifted, and his face lost its hard edges. "My mother was beautiful, wasn't she?"

Tania was taken aback. "She was breathtaking," she admitted. "You said 'was.' Is she dead, sir?"

"Yes," he said, his expression bleak.

When he didn't continue, she dared say, "I'm so sorry. My mother is dead too."

"Oh?" He looked at her. "What happened?"

"I don't know," said Tania. "I was just a baby. I never knew her."

"Did your father raise you?"

She felt her cheeks flush. "I never knew my father."

"I'm sorry." He gave an embarrassed cough. "It must have been difficult."

"My grandfather raised me, and he did his best."

Now Captain Sebring frowned. "You say he's your grandfather, yet he is clearly an elf, and a Tower elf at that. Yet, you don't look half elf. Perhaps there is elf blood in you, you have their eyes . . ." He blinked and turned away. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"That's all right. You're half elf, so you must like conversation," said Tania.

"My mother was always either talking, laughing, or singing. She was like a bubbling brook. When she was around, there were no shadows."

"How did she die?" Tania wished she hadn't asked that as soon as the question left her lips. His face once again became bleak. "I'm sorry. You don't have to answer that."

"It was an accident, no one wanted to harm her. But she saw my brother, and rushed into the fray. She just didn't think." There was

a deep silence. Tania held her breath, afraid to look at him. After a while, he cleared his throat. “The Southern Isles have never concerned themselves with what happens on the mainland since the last war. I thought that we should help fight the necromancer, and my father, after much discussion, was persuaded by my brother to raise an army. It was a lark for us at first. War was something we’d heard of, but never thought we’d really see. During one of the exercises, things got out of hand. A group of mercenaries started to fight in earnest. It seemed some of the archers owed them money. At any rate, the mock fight turned ugly, and my brother went to mediate. A blow caught him on the head and killed him instantly. My mother happened to be nearby, and she saw my brother fall. She rushed into the field and a stray arrow felled her.”

Tania dared a glance at him. He frowned at the stream, his eyes cloudy.

“My father asked me to leave. He told me it pained him too much to look upon me, and he asked me to take my group of archers and go.” He sighed. “He disbanded the army, and took away my title. The Southern Isles won’t come to fight this battle, no matter how badly it goes for men and elves.”

Tania drew her breath in. “I don’t believe that,” she said. Shyly, she reached over and touched his arm. “He’ll come around. He just needs a little time.”

“It’s been six months.”

“Was that when it happened?”

“It seems an eternity to me. If only I could turn back time. I’d go save my brother, and my mother would still be alive.”

“I’m so sorry.” Tania shook her head. If only he could become the boy in the picture again, the boy with the mischievous eyes. Without thought, she knelt next to him, opened her arms, and drew him to her, patting his shoulder softly. Of course, as soon as she put her arms

around him she realized her mistake. He'd responded by tucking his head in the crook of her neck, for a split second. Then they both pulled apart so fast Captain Sebring fell off the log and sat staring at her.

Terrified, Tania tried to think of something to say. She opened her mouth and managed to croak, "I have to go to the stable, sir," and she bolted. A glance behind her showed the captain, still on the ground, looking after her with a stunned expression.

She hurried to the stable, but at that moment the dinner bell rang. It was a relief to get her staff and spar with Lysom. Her feelings were a jumble of confused emotions. Mortification at having hugged the captain, sorrow from his story, and especially, bewilderment at her reaction to him. She'd completely forgotten to act the part of a young man. Part of her even wished she could have sat a little bit longer with her arms around him. Panic iced her blood as she discovered she wanted nothing more than to rush back to tell him that she was a young woman, not a boy and . . .

"Ouch!" she dropped her staff and hopped about, blowing on her knuckles.

"Pay attention!" snapped Wander. "You were slow side-stepping. If you get in that position, attack next time. It will confuse your adversary. Watch." He took her staff and executed a few strokes with Lysom. Then he purposely waited too long, and when Lysom struck, instead of parrying, he lunged closer, avoiding the staff and coming right up next to Lysom's chest. "See?" Wander asked. "He can't hurt me now. His blow will have no power. What you must do in this case is unbalance your adversary. Don't stop, as I have. Either knock his feet out from under him, or give him a strong shove and then get out of range."

Tania and Lysom fenced a bit more, then Lysom said, "I have to get back early; Lord Yalinka is giving a dinner."

"He's back?" Wander pricked his ears.

“He got back yesterday, but he was tired and stayed in his quarters. He sent me a message this morning.”

“We should stop then. Lysom, I need you to give a message to Lord Yalinka. Tell him that Wander . . . oh, bother. I’ll go myself. Where is Captain Sebring? Tania, have you seen him?”

Tania gulped and said, “I think I saw him down by the stream.”

Wander raised his bushy eyebrows. “Really?”

“I’d best do my chores,” said Tania, turning away from his keen gaze. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Lysom.”

She went to her tent, but Lysom followed. “Can I ask a favor?”

“Of course!” Tania put her staff away under her cot and sat down. “What is it?”

“I want to write a letter to my family.”

“That’s a good idea. Tell them I send my greetings. Oh, wait, best not. Wander and I are supposed to be with his sick sister.”

Lysom’s ears were bright red. “I never learned how to write,” he blurted.

“What?” Tania started to laugh, but Lysom’s expression made her stop. “I’m sorry. Lots of people don’t know how to write. I can teach you, if you’d like.”

“I know some, I mean, I know my letters and I can write a few lines. But my father expects a long letter, I’m sure. I hated my tutor, so I used to skip as many classes as I could. Rian is the educated one; he didn’t mind learning.”

“So that’s why you were always in the orchard,” laughed Tania. “And I thought you’d come to play with me.”

“It was a lot more fun with you than with the tutor.”

“My grandfather made me learn the high speech,” said Tania, biting her lip. “Will that be all right?”

Lysom grinned. “Father will think I’ve done my lessons.”

Tania took a quill and found a clean piece of paper and a bottle of ink from Wander's leather bag. It had been ages since she'd written anything. Her grandfather had taught her her letters and had tried to teach her a good hand, but she'd always hated studies—in that she sympathized with Lysom. "I'm afraid my spelling will not be any good," she said.

"Not to worry." Lysom waved his hand. "Father knows I'm no scholar." He cleared his throat and dictated the letter.

Tongue between her teeth, she began to write laboriously.

Dear Mother and Father,

Greetings. I haf arrived in Lord Yalinka's keep, after a two week voyage. The trip was frawt with difficulty. I had no idea the world was so vast. We traverssed the mountans and took a dwarffen tunnel so long there was a way-stashion in the middle where we spent the night. 'Twas lit all with glo-worms, tamed by the dwarffs, but the horses did not like it. Lord Renegal made me cook and bild the fire each nite, and I had to take care of the horses. Now I am very profishant. However, he gave me his old sword. Soon I will be taking fensing lessons and I intend to fite bravely. Don't worry mother, Lord Yalinka is going to train me in balistics, so I shall be far from the battle. I am looking forwerd to lerning how to work the catapult. It is a massive affair—and Lord Yalinka has fiveteen. They reekwire twenty men to arm it. Lord Yalinka is very kind. He hath told me that I am like a son to him, and he menshons you with great affekshon, father. I am loged in the gest rooms in the castle. Sir Renegal was vexed about that. I think he wanted to see me crammed in one of the soldiers barracks with the commeners. Luckily, Lord Yalinka woodn't hear of it and I haf my own room with a bed with pillos stuffed with fethers. It is lukshurious — a maid brings me brekfast. Lord Yalinka hath given me lots of new cloze. Well, actually, they are not new; they are of a rather odd style and he

sayeth they used to be his son's cloze. I inkwired after his son and he told me that he hath died. I felt akward, but Lord Yalinka was understanding and told me that it gave him grate plezure to see his son's cloze put to good use. I don't want to hurt his feelings, so I ware them and they fit well. I shall rite agen soon,

Your loving son,

Lysom.

Lysom took the letter and squinted at it, lips moving as he read it silently. "Is that how you spell luxurious?" he asked. "And the word 'inquired' looks odd."

"Why don't you write it yourself," Tania snapped, snatching it out of his hands.

"Don't tear it! Give it here!"

"No, you can do it yourself!"

"Give it back, it's mine!"

"I say, what's going on?" Captain Sebring poked his head into the tent.

Tania felt her cheeks grow hot. Ducking her head, she pretended to fix one of the laces on her boots.

"I was just writing a letter for my parents in high speech," said Lysom loftily. "My father is a lord, you know," he added.

"Ah, yes, the young Master Lysom. I recognize you. How go things at Yalinka's keep?"

"We're fine, thank you," said Lysom, preening.

"Show me?" said Captain Sebring, holding out his hand.

"It's private, actually," said Lysom, frowning.

"Nothing is private in war. I need to check all outgoing mail. Our position and actions must remain a secret."

"Very well," said Lysom. He handed over the letter.

Captain Sebring read it, pausing now and then to savor a word. "It

says here that you're lodged in the jest rooms," he said, his eyebrows raised.

"Jest rooms?" Lysom sputtered.

"Guest rooms!" said Tania, pained.

"Oh, so you were the one writing this?"

"Tanner was our stable hand, so his writing leaves a lot to be desired."

Lysom smirked at Tania, who wished she were alone with him so she could wipe the smile off his face with her boot.

"Why did you let him, then? I suppose you've hurt your hand, that would explain it," said Captain Sebring.

"Uh, why yes. I bruised it in sword practice this morning."

"Sword practice?"

Too late, Lysom seemed to realize what he'd said. Tania drew her breath in with a hiss; Captain Sebring had never given them permission to learn sword fighting. But Captain Sebring only looked interested. "I would like to see some of your practice," he said. "Pray, who is your teacher?"

"Tanner's grandfather," said Lysom, getting to his feet. "If you like, I'd be glad to fence with you."

"No, no. Who is your usual partner?"

Lysom frowned. "Tanner, sir."

"Well, why don't you show me some of your moves?" He drew his sword out of his scabbard and held it out. "Do you use swords?"

"Of course!" said Lysom. "But I have my own sword." His cheeks were pink with pleasure as he said that, and he drew the blade from the battered scabbard. As usual, thanks to the magic scabbard, the blade gleamed as if it were newly forged.

"A decent blade," said Captain Sebring. "I see you care for it well."

Tania snorted. Lysom could have shoved it rusted and full of nicks into the scabbard, and it would have come out clean. But no one knew that, and she held her tongue.

"Come, lad, take my blade. Show me what your grandfather has

taught you two.” He held it out toward her, a smile on his face.

She hesitated, remembering her hug. It made her jumpy. She felt her cheeks redden again.

“Take it. I’m sorry I told you my troubles; I was just feeling sorry for myself,” he added wryly. “Come on, lad.” He pulled her out of the tent. Lysom was already waiting, his sword winking in the light.

Tania started to say that they only fenced with wooden staffs, but Lysom elbowed her sharply in the side. “Let’s start!” he cried. “*En garde*, Tanner.»

He took his stance, and Tania followed, more slowly. She hefted the sword in her hand. It was beautifully balanced, and there were delicate etchings on the blade. The pommel was simple and fit in her hand. The guard arched like a cresting wave over her hand, protecting it. She swung it through the air, listening to the blade sing. For a minute, she forgot Lysom standing impatiently in front of her. She forgot her grandfather’s stern words, and she forgot her baffling emotions in the presence of the handsome captain.

«Let’s go!» cried Lysom, and he lunged at her.

Surprised, she danced backward, parrying his thrust easily. Her grandfather’s lessons came to her then, and she bit her lip in concentration as she counterattacked. Their blades met with a loud clang, then a slithery hiss as they slid apart. The sound was entrancing, and she leaned into the next blow, trying to make the swords ring like a bell. Lysom had a wolfish grin as he parried and thrust. They were evenly matched in height and weight, and although they held swords for the first time, it seemed to Tania as if she’d always fenced thus—turning in a half circle, her feet dancing sideways as she sought an opening in—

«Tania!» The outraged cry came from behind her, and it unbalanced her. The next moment she faltered, and Lysom lacked the experience to stop his swing. His sword caught her squarely on the

shoulder, and she felt it bite through her jerkin, slice through her shirt, and cut to the bone.

She stood in shock. She felt no pain, only a dull ache and a sudden tingling in her side that reached the top of her head and down to her toes. She didn't dare look. Instead, her eyes held Lysom's. He stood in front of her, his mouth open, frozen. He opened his hand and his sword dropped to the ground. Still Tania didn't move. Her own arm dangled at her side; she felt warmth running down her hand. She swallowed hard, and then heard the clang of metal as the sword slipped from her nerveless fingers. Glancing down, she saw both blades were scarlet.

«Tania!» Her grandfather rushed to her, pushing Lysom out of the way. «Foolish child! I told you, I told you no real weapons!» He turned to Lysom. «What have you done to Tania?»

«It's Tanner,» said Tania, automatically. The sound came out of her mouth, but she didn't feel her lips move.

Captain Sebring was at her side. The trees tipped and leaned sideways, and abruptly she found herself staring at the sky. The captain carried her, running with her from the feel of it, calling to the surgeons. Tania blinked. The sky was still there, and there was his face, above hers. He was looking down and there was the strangest expression on his face. Anger—yes, she could see that—she'd come to recognize his furious look. There was also some exasperation, so she knew the wound wasn't too serious, but it was grave enough to warrant the worry in his eyes. There was something else though, another expression. Relief—it was relief. Strange. How had she gotten so proficient at reading expressions? Or was it simply the captain's face she'd learned to read? She'd stared at it hard enough. Now he was barking orders at someone, and the world dipped again as he ducked into the infirmary tent. She felt the smooth surface of a table beneath her as he set her down. She frowned. Her vision darkened, and an icy chill crept up her side.

«So cold,» she whispered.

«No!» he cried. He bent over her. «Tanner, or Tania, whoever you are, you are not going to die. Do you know why?»

She shook her head, her breath coming short.

“Because I am personally going to kill you,” he hissed.

Die? She hadn't thought of that before. She couldn't die! She had to tell him she wasn't a boy. And then she had to defeat the Dark Lord, and somehow set things right. She began to shake. Captain Sebring leaned closer, and she opened her lips, meaning to tell him everything.

But then hands pulled him away, and a stranger loomed over her. “I'm the surgeon. You'll be fine, just relax.”

She felt someone taking her jerkin off, and then her shirt. A bandage was pressed against her arm, and she started to feel pain. She clenched her teeth, her eyes still fixed on Captain Sebring, but his back was to her. With a muttered curse, he left the tent. Only then did Tania close her eyes. There came a hissing sound, as the cauterizing iron was pressed to her skin, and the shock of freezing cold on her arm. A second later, it was followed by excruciating pain and she uttered a scream. Then, thankfully, she fainted.

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She woke up in a bed. It was a real bed, with a red velvet bedspread and green brocade curtains hanging from the canopy. She frowned, trying to think, but her head felt as if it were stuffed with wool. The curtains were parted, so she could see that the bed was in a luxurious room where a fire burned in a corner chimney, casting a glowing light over a polished wooden floor. The light flickered off a table set with a pitcher and a glass. There was also a bookcase full of books, more than she'd ever seen in one place.

It all came back to her then—the swords, the cry, and the pain—and Captain Sebring’s last words. She uttered a loud moan.

A knock sounded on the door, and it opened. In strode Captain Sebring, his mouth drawn in a thin line. Right behind him was her grandfather, looking paler and more wrinkled than she’d ever seen him.

“Tania, you’re awake! How are you feeling?” Grandfather Birchspring cried, coming to her side and peering at her, his face puckered worriedly.

She cleared her throat and tried to sit.

“Here, let me help.” Captain Sebring lifted her, his hands gentle.

Sharp pain stabbed her arm, but Tania refused to wince. She had to get well and get back to training. There wasn’t time to waste being ill. Nervously she glanced around her. “I’m fine, really. Where am I?”

“Yalinka’s keep.” Captain Sebring perched on the side of her bed and looked at her, his expression grave. “Your grandfather told me everything. We decided to bring you here. You’ll be secure here; Yalinka has promised to protect you.”

Tania looked at her grandfather, the blood draining from her face. “Grandfather, no! I can’t stay here. I have to fight the Dark Lord, you *know* that.”

“ ‘Twas folly, Tania.” His eyebrows drooped mournfully, and he tugged at his beard. “You nearly lost your arm.”

Captain Sebring frowned. “I had no idea you’d never used real swords. You should have told me, Lady Tania.”

Tania gaped. Why was he speaking to her in such a formal manner? *Lady* Tania? What had Grandfather Birchspring told him? “I want to go back to the Golden Forest. I don’t want to stay here.” Her voice wobbled and to her dismay she felt tears prick her eyes.

“The Dark Lord is looking for you. You will be safe here.” Her grandfather spoke firmly.

Tania shook her head. “Please, Captain Sebring. Your troop can

protect me. Don't leave me here, I beg you!"

Captain Sebring shook his head. "The rumors of war are rumors no longer, Tania. Whole tribes of elves and orcs have vanished. News comes almost every day, and Yalinka is readying his army. Soon we'll all gather here and then leave for war."

"I want to fight with you." Tania clutched the covers in her hands. Frustration welled in her.

"War is no place for a lady." He paused. "Lady Tania, it still sounds strange when I say it. From stable hand to lady is quite a change." His smile almost took away her pain. "For my peace of mind, and for your grandfather, I want you to promise to stay here."

Throat tight, she nodded. He leaned over and brushed a light kiss on her forehead. "Farewell, Lady Tania. Think of me sometimes."

She watched as he left, and then she couldn't stop the tears from spilling down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Tania." Her grandfather took her hand.

"I suppose you're leaving too." She scrubbed at her eyes with her good hand, dashing away her tears, angry with herself for showing weakness.

"Aye. Lord Yalinka insisted I stay with Captain Sebring's troop." He didn't look happy. In fact, he looked so mournful that Tania swallowed her own disappointment and squeezed his hand tightly. "It's almost over. Lord Yalinka's army will crush the necromancer, and we'll go back to Castle Storm triumphant."

Tania gave him a wistful smile. "You were right about everything. War and adventures aren't what I thought they'd be."

"Stay here, Tania. I'll be back as soon as I can. You'll be safe in the keep. At least I can be sure of that." He nodded, took a deep breath, and said, "Captain Sebring is a good man Tania."

When he left, shutting the door quietly behind him, Tania thought

her heart would break in two. She'd never been parted from Wander Birchspring, and now someone else had a place in her heart: a tall, flame-haired captain who'd asked her to think of him sometimes.

"How can I not think of you?" she whispered to the empty room.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

YALINKA'S KEEP

Every morning a chambermaid left a new dress at the foot of Tania's bed and lit her fire. A manservant carried a tub of hot water for bathing to her room, and after she bathed and dressed, she went to the dining room for breakfast.

Everyone called her Lady Tania, and either bowed or curtsied when they saw her. It wasn't fair. She'd wanted to stay anonymous. To her immense chagrin, they'd taken her uniform and bow and arrows away, and had given her dresses to wear.

It felt strange wearing long dresses. She'd never had anything remotely fashionable. Her hair was growing, and the chambermaid insisted on brushing it and dressing it, braiding it with ribbons and pinning it into a graceful chignon. When she caught sight of herself in the mirrors as she wandered around the castle, she was always startled. The likeness had nothing to do with her; it was that of a tall, slender, young woman. Worst of all was the way Lysom had acted. He'd been sympathetic at first, coming into her room and perching on the foot of her bed while she recuperated. But as soon as she was up and around, dressed in her new clothes and treated like royalty, he'd started acting

strangely.

“What is it, Lady Tania?” asked one of her ladies-in-waiting. Now that it was known she was heir to the Golden Forest and the ruins of Glen Hall, she had two women whose sole purposes in life were to follow her around, arrange her hair, prepare her bath, and make sure her dresses were clean and pressed. They were nice women—one was elderly, comfortably round, and had gray hair; the other was younger and thinner. Both were trying to teach her how to do needlepoint and become a real lady. The older woman was called Lady Gladys, and the younger woman’s name was Dora.

“I miss my grandfather,” said Tania.

“He’s been sent back to the Golden Forest.” Dora’s voice was as thin and reedy as she was.

“I know, but I miss him all the same. May we ride out there today and see him?” asked Tania. She tried to smile, but there was a painful ache in her stomach. She knew the answer would be “no.” She was not allowed outside—it was too dangerous. Now that her identity was common knowledge, she was only safe within the thick walls of Yalinka’s keep. She blinked to keep back her tears, and put her needlepoint down.

Her embroidery got better. It no longer looked as if she’d tied knots in all her threads. She hated it though—the sitting still, the tiny stitches, and the monotony bored her. She stood and stretched. “I’m tired, I think I’ll go lie down for a while.”

Lady Gladys accompanied her to her room. “I hope you feel better by dinner time,” said Gladys with a curtsy.

Tania nodded without smiling. She knew she would not feel better. Nothing could ever make her feel better. She looked at her hand and flexed it. She could move her hand and fingers, but her left arm was still weak and had lost most of its range of movement.

Sitting on her bed, she stared out the window. It faced the ocean.

Waves crashed upon the jagged black rocks that made up the shoreline. She couldn't escape that way. The keep was enormous. It was built into an outcropping and backed right into a huge cliff. The living quarters were all situated on the ocean's side, facing west. The castle faced the mighty ocean on one side, and on the other there was the marshland. Now it was mostly drained. Generations of Yalinka's family had worked to empty the marshes, and the land was flat and covered with tall grasses that waved and shivered in the constant wind. The wind never let up here; it wailed or it whispered, but it was always present. Tania could not get used to it. At night, the sound of the surf kept her awake, and the endless wind caused the skin on her neck to prickle. She was used to the quiet of Castle Storm, used to having tall trees surrounding her, not this wide, empty, open space.

And creepiest of all, the most frightening thing about Yalinka's keep was Yalinka himself. Just thinking about him made Tania shiver. That also made Lysom angry. Not only did the girl he'd always treated as a servant suddenly have the same rank he did—if not better—but he admired everything about Yalinka, and he couldn't understand why Tania went to such lengths to avoid him.

"He's our benefactor," said Lysom, his face red. Lady Gladys had just reprimanded him for addressing Tania in a "manner not in keeping with her rank, nor his, for that matter." Lysom was not used to being scolded for disrespect to Tania, and he was having a hard time keeping his temper. Seeing his discomfort, Tania took his arm and led him from the sitting room into the hallway.

"I don't like this situation any more than you do." She sighed. A strange lassitude filled her at all times. Some days it was almost too much effort to go to the dining room for meals.

"Lord Yalinka is a wonderful person," said Lysom. "I can't understand why you take such pains to avoid him."

“He frightens me.” Tania parted a heavy, velvet curtain and looked at the ocean. “Where is he? I haven’t seen him lately.”

“He has gone on an important mission. He bade me to watch over you.” Lysom puffed his chest out importantly. “Did you notice? He lets me carry my sword. It’s in case anyone tries to harm you,” he added.

“Why would anyone bother?” Tania asked. She felt her head start to spin again, and she sank down upon a window seat. The curtains nearly hid her from view.

Lysom sat with her, and they looked out at the heaving waves. “I wish I’d never found out about your father,” he said finally. “I think about it every time I see you, and I suppose there are some who lost everything in the last war, and still hold a grudge. They would not know you as I do, and will think you are evil. I shall protect you against them.”

“I’m not evil.” Tania sighed.

“Some people never forget their hurt.”

“It was too long ago. Everyone who ever lived back then is dead.”

“Except you and Wander Birchspring.” Lysom shuddered. “See? When I think that you are actually two hundred years old, it . . .”

“I’m not,” Tania cried. “I’m not, don’t say that. I don’t know why Yalinka told everyone, or why my grandfather let him. He should have taken me away from here. Because of Yalinka I’m a prisoner here, and everyone thinks I’m some sort of monster.”

“Lord Yalinka is wise. He knew that you’re the one the Dark Lord is searching for, and he’s pledged his castle to protect you.”

“How goes the war?” Tania asked. “Have you heard any news?”

“When Yalinka returns, he will surely have something to tell us.”

“I’m afraid for Castle Storm. I hope that the Gray elves and the orcs got there in time to protect it.”

“I’m sure they did, or else we’d have heard,” said Lysom.

“I want to see my grandfather,” said Tania.

"You are still very weak. You almost lost your life."

"You nearly killed me, you mean," said Tania. She regretted her words as soon as she saw Lysom blanch. "No, I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry, I don't blame you. We were both foolish, and Grandfather scolded us both enough to last us a century. I wonder . . ."

"What?"

She blushed. "I wonder why Captain Sebring hasn't come to see me."

Lysom peered at her, a frown on his face. "Why, he's busy, of course. There is a war going on, in case you haven't heard. He's received orders from Yalinka. The Golden elves are to leave for Castle Storm in a week."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"What's the matter? Why do you look so pale? Tania! Is it your arm?"

"No, I'm sorry, it's the shock." Tania took a deep breath. "So, my grandfather and Shabaz will be going home."

"Not Shabaz, he's here in the keep," said Lysom.

Tania blinked. "Are you sure?"

"I think so, I saw a white horse in the royal stable. It must be Shabaz. Why? Is it important?"

"I miss him. Can you take me to see him?"

"He's just a horse, Tania," said Lysom. He patted her shoulder. "Don't look so sad. Why don't we take a walk to the gallery of mirrors? It's a splendid room, don't you think?"

"All right." Tania let Lysom take her arm and help her up. Then he gently led her down the endless hallways to the glittering gallery where thirty gilt mirrors reflected the colors of the sky and the ocean in an endless perspective.

"It still seems so strange to see you dressed up and a lady now," said Lysom.

They stood side by side in front of one of the tall mirrors. Lysom

looked handsome in his finely woven tunic, a sword in his belt at his side. He wore a short, green velvet cape, and although outdated, the clothes were rich and suited him. Tania still didn't recognize the maiden at his side. She was as pale as the moon, with huge, navy blue eyes in a high-cheekboned face. Her hair was as dark as black velvet, and Dora had put a white, pearl-studded net around her braids and fastened them with a pearl clip. Her long neck looked too fragile with her hair pulled back. The dress she wore was dark blue velvet and hugged her slender figure, then flared out to a long skirt that swept the floor as she walked.

"It's not me," said Tania.

"Of course it is. You're much better now, I mean, you look nicer, like a real girl. Oh bother, I don't know what to say. It's true—it's not the same anymore is it? I don't suppose we'll ever be able to tease each other like we used to. Lady Gladys will be there to hit me over the head with her needlepoint if I do." He grinned, but it looked strained.

Tania stared at their reflection, a frown on her face. "Who is Lord Yalinka, anyway? When I saw him," she continued, her voice dropping to a whisper, "I thought he was some sort of ghoul. He frightens me."

"He's very old, but he's had a hard life. He lost his sons, and he's all alone."

"But, he can't be the Lord Yalinka Grandfather Birchspring told me about. That would truly make him ancient."

"What story is that?" Lysom asked.

"My mother knew a certain Lord Yalinka. He had three sons, all of whom were killed fighting against my father," she said, her eyes bleak.

"Perhaps he has used his magic to stay alive for all these long years. He's a very powerful sorcerer," said Lysom.

"It would be an abomination," said Tania.

"Not any more than you are," Lysom told her. He bit his lip. "I'm sorry. I spoke thoughtlessly. Forgive me."

Tania looked at him. "Of course I forgive you. You're like the brother I never had. You can speak your mind with me. I won't care."

"It matters to me," said Lysom, looking down at the floor. He drew a deep breath. "I'm still trying to get used to you. I feel different around you." He gave a shaky laugh. "It's very strange."

"I feel the same," said Tania. "Everything is strange to me. I miss Castle Storm so much."

"Well, I don't miss that crumbling heap of stones at all. Come, it's nearly time for lunch. Shall we go?"

"Please." Tania still felt weak, and leaned gratefully against his arm. The hallways were so long here and had no windows because the building plunged into the very heart of the cliff. The keep came out on the other side, with towers facing the flat marshland. The marsh rose slowly toward the farms on the plateau, and if you stood on the very top of the battlements, you could catch a glimpse of the Golden Forest. At least that's what Lysom said.

Tania hadn't been allowed to go past the living quarters in Yalinka's keep. Everyone had orders to keep her in sight and protect her from harm. The guards were all very respectful and kind, but they were firm. No, Lady Tania could not go past them.

With Lysom she could go further, to the hall of mirrors, for example, or to the ballroom where they had wandered about one day, staring at the faded opulence. Lysom had bowed and, jokingly, asked her to dance. Tania had tried, but she'd never learned the art of dancing, and she kept tripping when Lysom swung her left or right. Finally they had collapsed in helpless giggles on one of the velvet couches lining the walls. A cloud of dust had risen when they sat down. Tania had smoothed the gold velvet with her hand and tried to imagine the room full of gaily-dressed revelers, but the dust motes in the air and the faded tapestries on the wall bespoke of long years of disuse. Then Lysom had

had a sneezing fit because of the dust, and they'd left the ballroom to its ancient memories.

After dinner, back in her bedroom, Tania tried to think of ways to escape and go see her grandfather. Shabaz! Lysom had said Shabaz was in the stable here. All she had to do was find him, and he could take her to see her grandfather. She started toward the door, and then stopped. She couldn't get by the guards. Tears of frustration slid down her cheeks as she considered her situation.

She was a prisoner. If she had her boys' clothes, she could sneak by the guards. But no, her hair would give her away, and everyone knew her face. She thought of creeping through the long, dark hallways at night and shivered. Perhaps she could get out when the keep was soundly sleeping. She plucked at her midnight blue dress. It would hide her in the dark. She could wear her black silk shawl over her head to hide her shoulders and face, and if someone came, she could try to shrink into one of the numerous crannies in the walls. If she was caught, perhaps she could pretend to be sleepwalking, or simply lost.

When she heard the changing of the guard at midnight, she got out of bed and blew on the embers in her fireplace to coax a little flame. That done, she dressed in her blue robe and took her shawl from the cedarwood chest at the foot of her bed. In the light of the flickering fire, she pulled on her boots. Then, thinking of the noise her footsteps would make, she took them off again. She waited awhile. Until the second guard had settled, and the faint sound of footsteps in the hallways quieted. Then she opened her door and slipped out. That was perhaps the worst moment, for there was a guard stationed at the end of her hallway. But he stood in an alcove, and his view was limited to those coming up the stairs, not those already in the hallway leading to the bedrooms.

Tania crept down the hall, going toward the back stairs, which

were usually unguarded. They were old but sturdy wooden stairs that spiraled down into the kitchens. The servants used them. Once in front of the kitchen door, Tania turned right and took a narrow hall that went to the servants' quarters. Halfway down the hall, she took a doorway leading directly into the great dining room. The room was empty, and the fire had been carefully dampened. A faint smell of smoke lingered, but the room was cold. The marble floor was like ice underfoot. Everything was still, and all the curtains were drawn. The darkness was not complete, though. Yalinka had cunning lights set into the wall sconces. The lights cast a faint, green glow. It looked as if there were fireflies captive in frosted glass globes.

She hurried to the door and eased it open, looking out onto the long, wide hallway that cut the keep in two. It led to the front of the keep, and she imagined it must be guarded. Gliding down the hallway, keeping close to the walls and making no sound with her bare feet, Tania arrived at a staircase that descended to another hallway. She listened, holding her breath. The only sound she heard was a soft, buzzing noise. She peered into the darkness. Glow globes made little light, and all she could see was a faint glint of gold on the banister carvings, and the faint shine of gray marble floors.

Her feet were so cold that she had ceased to feel them. The pain had disappeared, and it was like walking on blocks of numb ice. She drew a deep breath and walked slowly down the stairs. At the bottom, she saw what was causing the buzzing sound. A guard stood, propped up by his alcove, his eyes closed, snoring. He was not completely asleep. Every once in a while he swallowed, blinked, and stared vacantly at the hallway.

Tania waited until he'd closed his eyes again, and she darted past him, holding her breath until she was out of his line of sight. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she huddled close to the wall. After a mo-

ment, she resumed her nocturnal prowl. She'd come halfway through the heart of the castle. Now she must be in the part of the keep that was built into the mountain itself. It was a tunnel, really, with no windows. But the hallway was wide enough that ten men could ride abreast, and there were alcoves here and there, thankfully empty. Just one guard at the foot of the stairs. It was all Yalinka thought necessary.

The hallway wasn't straight. It curved, first to the left, then to the right. Tania hugged the walls, touching the carvings in the cold marble as she walked, because in some places it was so dark it was as if she were blind. Then there would be another glow globe, and a pale green light would show her the hallway, still wide, still empty. She passed the light and was plunged into darkness once more. Her hand sought the wall, and her fingers brushed against the intricate carvings. One of the figures moved.

Startled, she pushed the marble, moved it even more, and a portion of the wall slid inward. She hesitated. She knew that old castles were riddled with such passageways. Castle Storm had at least ten that she knew of. But they usually led to rooms, and she wanted to go outside and try to escape. Escape.

She bit her lip and uttered a muffled sob. She was shivering with cold, her feet were bare, and she was lost. At the end of this hallway was sure to be another guard, and she would not have the same luck twice. The passage was dark, but a faint glow came from the depths, and she could see a spiral staircase leading downward.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE PRISONER

Tania entered and pulled the doorway shut behind her. It closed with a soft click. From inside, a simple latch held it closed. The carving acted as a doorknob. Reassured that she could go back, she started down the stairs. They were made of stone, worn smooth by time. It was not as cold in here. The drafty hall had been icy, but now she felt herself thawing out a bit and her feet prickled with pins and needles. She sat on the stairs and wrapped them in her skirt to warm them up. When she felt better, she got to her feet and continued her descent. At the foot of the stairs was a wooden door. Tania lifted the latch and pushed it open, and found herself in a long, narrow hallway. There was a strange, sweetish smell. She wrinkled her nose, not liking it.

The glow globes here were reddish, and their light looked almost like firelight. They gave no warmth though; her breath still made white clouds in the air. In the dim light, Tania saw that there were several doors set along the hallway. She opened the first one and saw that she must be in the part of the castle that had once served as the prison. The doors were heavy and huge clasps showed where once locks had hung. Inside, there were small, square rooms with no windows. Long

empty, they had flagstone floors and iron rings set into the stone wall. Tania stared at them, imagining the prisoners held by chains to those heavy rings.

With a shiver, she closed the door and continued. She opened all the doors and looked in at the empty cells, and then she came to the end of the hallway. There was one last cell door on her right, and in front of her, a smaller door that must lead out of the dungeons. She hesitated, and then opened the door on her right. There was a glow globe on the opposite wall, so she could see inside. Here, the room was not empty. There was a chain, and attached to the chain was a skeleton.

Tania felt her head grow light as she stared at it. The bones lay in a heap in the corner. Scraps of cloth still clung to the bones, and the skull was propped up by the ribcage, making it look as if the prisoner had dozed off. But there were oddities about the bones. Tania crept closer. The femurs were both shattered, and one of the arms was completely missing. She looked more closely, and saw that even the skull was not intact. There was a gaping hole in the back. When this prisoner had been chained to the wall, he had already been dead.

How strange. Tania crouched in front of the bones. An iron chain was wrapped around and around the body. The chain was fastened to a torque on the prisoner's neck and attached to the wall. Why had a dead man been put in chains? It was a puzzle. Tania was not squeamish. Bones were simply bones, and could not hurt her. Puzzles, on the other hand, were meant to be solved.

She knelt close to the skeleton and picked up the skull. It was light; the bones were old then. The hole in the back looked as though it had been made by a blow. Tania set it down and lifted the iron torque off the vertebrae. The iron was bitter cold and stung her hands. She fought off the urge to fling it away and placed it carefully on the floor. Wiping her hands on her skirt, she next lifted the scraps of cloth off

the ribcage. It had once been a fine chemise, she saw, with ruffles on the front and buttons carved from seashell. The material crumbled to dust in her hands, and all that was left were the shining buttons. She gathered them and slipped them into her pocket. The skeleton's hips and femurs had been crushed. Only splinters of bone remained. Tania pulled at a strip of leather, and a belt appeared, sliding out from under the chain with a soft, clinking sound. It was a scabbard belt; it once held a sword. There were still initials carved in the leather.

She held her breath. It was elvish writing. A "D," and then an "F."

DF

Daston of the Falls. In elvish, it would be Daston Falls.

She traced the name in the dust. Her finger faltered. She looked at the skeleton wrapped in iron chains.

"I know why there was so much iron. You must be an elf, or part elf. Elves hate iron, don't they? It must hurt you yet. Even now, two hundred years later, your bones must scream with pain. Did Yalinka do this to you? Did he think to avenge his sons?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Has your suffering equaled his yet?" She shook her head. "I think not. I think that the Yalinka you knew, and the one who holds me prisoner are the same. I think he's lived in his sorrow for centuries. I saw him. His anguish has eaten him like a worm so that all that is left is a shell. Why? Why has he kept you like this?"

She closed her eyes. "I would go back to my dream to speak with you," she said. "Take me back to the dream. You came to me once. You can bring me to you once more." In the quiet, she could hear her heart beating and the blood rushing in her veins. She reached out, her eyes still closed, and found a small bone. Holding it, she let her mind go blank.

At first, all she could feel was the chill seeping into her bones. For a while, she thought that it wouldn't work. Perhaps, she thought, I

need Shabaz to cast me into the dream. But even as she thought about that, she pictured the small apple tree in the woods, and as before, it bloomed and all around her spring came.

She found herself standing in front of the garden near Glen Hall. But the manor was no longer standing. Instead, it was in ruins. The garden was destroyed. Rose bushes and flowerbeds had been trampled and uprooted. Great gouges were torn out of the earth, and in some places, it looked as if there were still pools of sticky blood.

Tania looked through the trees. There was nothing. No sign of life. She set off anyway, walking down the path that led to the lake. Finally, she reached the edge of the water. The willow tree was still there, and beneath it, the man still sat in his chains. He was watching her approach, but he said nothing. She swept a curtain of branches aside and ducked into the alcove formed by the tree.

“So you’re back,” said the man.

Tania was afraid to speak. It might break the spell. She pointed to the man, then at herself.

“Are you mute?” the man asked. He frowned. “Speak to me!”

Tania sat in front of him. She plucked a twig from the tree, cleared a space on the ground, and in the earth she wrote, “Dost thou knowest me?”

The man raised his eyebrows. “Are we going to play guessing games? And in high speech no less.” He looked at her closely. “You look familiar. There is something about you that tells me I should know you, but no name comes to mind when I see you.”

“Who art thou?” she wrote.

The man lifted his hands, the chains weighing down his arms. “I am the man in chains. That’s all I can remember. I have no idea how long I’ve been here, or where I was before this. All I know is the pain of this iron touching me, day and night, night and day. I’ve seen things happen. They happen over and over again. If you come back another

time, you'll see ice on this lake. And perhaps, if you come again, the manor yonder will be intact. It falls and is rebuilt."

"Who razed it?" Tania wrote.

"I don't know." The man looked at her, his face drawn. He raised his hands, barely concealing the trembling. "The pain is like a thousand wasps stinging, and it clouds my mind. I feel as if I should know that. It happened, didn't it? I didn't imagine it."

"No. It hath been destroyed. Knowest thou Lady Amylee?"

The man flinched violently. "Aye, that name is familiar. But why it should stab me like a hundred knives when you say it, I know not." He paused. "'Tis strange. I hear your words in my head. You needn't trace them in the dirt."

"Lady Amylee was my mother." Tania pointed to the ruins. "That was her home. Daston of the Falls came and destroyed it. He murdered her family, he murdered her neighbors, and then he killed her."

"He killed her?" The man's face was ashen.

"She died, but she managed to kill him too."

The sun had disappeared. Spring was gone. While Tania had been speaking, seasons had passed. Leaves turned brown and a hard wind blew them away. Through the bare branches, Tania saw Glen Hall, intact.

"Watch," said the man. "All you've spoken of shall come to pass."

An army came. It crushed the pitiful defenses spread about the manor, and the sound of screams made Tania blanch. A woman ran from one of the buildings. She was pregnant, her movements awkward. She dashed to a copse, where a tall unicorn and an elf waited. The elf helped her mount. Even from afar, Tania could see the panic in their movements. The elf and the woman rode the unicorn into the woods. When they were out of sight, a man riding a tall black horse separated from the fray and galloped to the copse. He leapt from his horse and looked at the ground, his hand tracing the hoof prints, his face tense.

As Tania watched, he raised his head and looked at her.

“That’s you,” she told him, pointing.

“I see.” His face was contorted in pain. Sweat rolled down his neck. “Who . . . who was he?”

“Daston of the Falls. He was a necromancer.”

“Why did he make war on those people?”

“Only you can tell me the answer to that.” Tania frowned. Another man came toward him. He was tall, and something about him was terribly familiar. “Yalinka of Tattinggil,” she whispered. “Why is he here?”

The two men converged. Yalinka was younger, but Tania knew him. Yalinka spoke first. “Your promise means nothing now. She is gone.”

Daston said, “I will get her back, but I will never give her to you.”

“You reneged on our bargain. I was to have had the Golden Forest and Glen Hall. What use are ruins and the dead to me? You forget who gave you your power. I gave it to you. I can take it away.” Yalinka stared at the man, and his eyes flickered eerily.

The man flinched, but stood his ground. “Tell me, sorcerer, do your allies have any idea who hides behind the Dark Lord’s mask?”

“Who will tell them? You?” Yalinka gave a harsh laugh. “You’ll rue the day you married Lady Amylee. She was mine. I told you she was to be my bride.”

The black-haired man looked toward the woods, where the woman had fled. “I had six months with her. Six months of peace. In my whole life, that is all the joy I ever knew.” He turned and faced Yalinka. “You’ve destroyed my home and murdered my people. But I was caught unawares. Now, look, sorcerer, and listen well. For what you thought to turn to your advantage shall betray you. I have the Master Word. The word which made the dead walk, and when I say the word, they will fight for me and they will annihilate your force.” He raised

his voice to the wind and shouted a dark word, and the air seemed to twist and coil around them.

Yalinka uttered a startled curse, turned, and smote the young man on the head, felling him. He pointed, and smoke curled out of his fingers and pinned the man to the ground. He spoke words of darkness, and the man suddenly vanished, as if sucked into the ground. When he disappeared, there was a thunderclap.

Yalinka saw that now his army was fighting against his own forces. He began to run, shouting at three young men, his sons, leading the charge to retreat, retreat! But it was too late. Arrows flew from all sides, and the boys were killed.

Afterward, Yalinka gathered the bodies of his sons together, and he dug their graves by himself, letting no one approach. The battle over, the townspeople came from the village and from the surrounding forest where they'd hidden. They saw Yalinka, and his mad sorrow, and they watched as he buried his sons beneath the ground. "The Dark Lord did this!" screamed Yalinka, and the people heard him and believed it was true.

Time shifted. The seasons changed. They moved backward, and snow whirled across the scene, blurring the edges. Fall came with its whirling leaves, then the heat of summer lay over still grass. Then it was spring again, and a very young woman danced over the grass and whirled in a circle, her arms held out, her head back, her golden hair glittering in the sunlight.

"Daston! Daston!" she called.

The black-haired man stepped out from behind a tree. "You called, my lady?"

"There you are! Where have you been? The council is looking for you. The mighty magician, Daston of the Falls," she said, her voice vibrating with laughter.

"I'm not a mighty magician. I'm just an apprentice."

“An apprentice to whom?”

“I cannot tell, it’s against our rules. But he’s a mighty sorcerer, and he’s agreed to teach me in exchange for a book . . .” His voice broke off. “I’m nothing. I have no land, no title or fortune.”

“Who cares about that?” The girl laughed again and stepped forward, lightly as a fawn, and took him in her arms. They held each other, not speaking.

“Your father will not let me marry you.”

“I’m too young to marry. Come again in three years. I’ll be twenty then. In three years you shall come to claim me, and I will wait. You will have gained a fortune and a kingdom—of that I’m sure, my handsome Daston. My charming magician. I’m so glad you decided to take the mountain route on your way to the seacoast.”

“Life is full of such fickle twists of fate. Now, kiss me once more. I must be off.”

“Where are you going?”

“I set sail for the Southern Isles, and then I start my apprenticeship. I will see you in three years, my lovely lady, my beautiful Amylee.”

“I’ll be waiting for you.”

d

The sun set, and the moon cast a faint silver light over everything. “That was my mother and you,” said Tania. “Do you remember that day?” She turned to the man and saw his face was wet with tears.

He looked at her, and his mouth twisted in pain. “You have come to torture me worse than these chains, worse than the iron wrapped around my neck.”

“Answer me. Do you recall that day?” she asked sternly.

“Yes. I do. And everything else.” He shuddered. “I went to the

Southern Isles, but it was a short journey. For I was expected back in the fall to continue my studies. My master was very powerful, and his last lessons were to be in the art of Still Magic. Know you what that is?"

"No." She frowned. "Should I?"

He drew a deep breath, fighting against the pain of the iron chains, his body quivering with the effort. "The magic of life and the magic of death are like the two sides of the same coin," he said, his voice grating. "They are different, but part of the same whole. I became a necromancer that winter, deep in the heart of the mountain; I practiced my art until I was sure I could hold men's bodies together for a time. Time enough to do what I wanted. I needed a kingdom, and I was going to raise an army and get it."

"A kingdom to marry my mother." Tania shook her head. "What dark deeds were set in motion with her innocent words? If she knew what you were planning to do, she would have killed you then and there, in the garden."

"I was blinded by ambition, and by the greed of another man," he whispered, his eyes bleak.

"Yalinka." Tania was starting to understand what had happened. Her skin prickled. "'Twas Yalinka, the sorcerer."

"Aye. I hadn't realized he'd been watching Lady Amylee. He wanted Glen Hall for his own. His wife long dead, alone with three sons, he thought to join his land with that of your mother's. But not by proposing one of his sons, which would have suited your grandfather. No, he wanted Amylee for himself, and he knew that her father would never agree. So, he trained me and he used me. He used my youth and my power." Hoarsely, he shouted the last words, straining against the chains. Then he slumped back, his head against the tree, his face tortured. "Amylee," he said, his voice cracking.

"He used you?" Tania spoke slowly, feeling as if she blundered

along a dark tunnel. But a glimmer of light shone. She tried to calm her beating heart. “How?”

“I was sent to gather troops. I was young, I believed in his cause, and I could be convincing,” he said wryly. He shrugged. “Mostly, he used my father’s book of spells. The one Yalinka convinced me to steal before I left the Southern Isles. I didn’t know that Yalinka had coveted that for years. He and my father communicated with each other in the way of all sorcerers, through spy globes made of rock crystal.”

“Yalinka was your master?” The light was growing stronger.

He closed his eyes, his head tipped back. “He was. He trained me in the arts of battle and in the arts of necromancy. Then he sent me north, to plunder the poorly defended lands that bordered the Steppes, and my army swept down to the Golden Forest. So many elves died in those battles, but Yalinka had told me they were our enemies and that the lands I won would be mine to rule. I brought my army to Glen Hall, and showed your mother my army and kingdom.” His face contorted.

“She must have been horrified,” said Tania in a whisper.

The man opened his eyes and faced her. He was pale, and deep lines of pain still marked his visage, but his voice was clearer. “She was, at first.”

“What you did was unforgivable.”

“I know. I know!” He struggled against his chains for a minute, and then subsided. “I was evil. Perhaps I am still foul. But Yalinka was always in control. I thought I could escape him; I thought I could defeat him. I didn’t realize how strong he was, even in the end.”

“Do you regret doing what you did?” Tania asked coldly.

“Yes.” His voice cracked. “Yes, I regret. I regret choosing the wrong side of the coin. I regret studying with Yalinka, and becoming a part of his treacherous schemes. I wish I’d never killed anyone, but when it started, it was impossible to stop. It was like a wave that rises

and has to fall. I thought it was finished when I captured Glen Hall, though. I thought that the wave had crashed, and that the tide of evil had ebbed. After we married, we spent six months in Glen Hall. Six months of peace, where I learned what I'd missed all my life. Your grandfather and grandmother were terrified of me, and avoided me at all cost. But I loved the Lady Amylee, and she loved me."

"Never." Tania's hands were clenched into tight fists. "She never loved you. She was trying to save her family and her home. She was pretending."

The man looked stunned. "No. I won't believe that. Who told you?"

"Her valet. Wander Birchspring."

He looked at the sky. Moonlight made the traces of his tears shine. "Perhaps you're right. If so, then my whole life was one lie after the next. It wouldn't surprise me."

"Why did you destroy Glen Hall?" Tania pressed.

He fists opened and clenched. "It wasn't my doing. My army was made of mercenaries and those whom I'd convinced to join what I thought was my cause. When I realized what I was fighting for, I disbanded them. But another man took them and made them part of his army of undead, and of other creatures who love the darkness and the taste of blood. 'Twas Yalinka. He was furious I'd married Lady Amylee, although I knew it not at the time. He waited until I was unprepared, and he attacked the manor. I rode out to stop him. When I did, the troops fighting with him joined forces with me once more."

"All of them? Even the undead?" Tania shuddered when she said the word, bile rising in her throat.

The man chuckled dryly. "By then they were all undead. But I had the Master Word, you see. I'd stolen my father's book, but I was not the fool Yalinka thought I was. I took out a certain page before I gave the book to Yalinka. It contained the only word that would undo

all the magic in the book. I said the word, and the army turned upon Yalinka. Lady Amylee saw that, and she thought I'd reneged, and she ran away. Yalinka called his sons to battle, and my troops slaughtered them. I'm sorry they did. I was crazed with grief at the loss of your mother."

"Don't you dare put any blame on her," hissed Tania. "She left you out of terror, and you never inspired anything but disgust. She met another man, a good man, and she loved him."

"Ah. Lord Ironstorm." He drew a shaky circle in the dust with his hand, then smoothed it.

"My real father."

He looked at her, and for the first time he smiled, though his eyes were still sorrowful. "Nay, Daughter. I know thee. Thy face is my own; your hair, your eyes—all bespeak your heritage.

"Do you want to find out who I am, and who you are? My mother was a Gray elf. Her name was Reyanna. She was daughter of the White Wolf clan. She was captured by orc raiders, who took her to the coast and sold her as a slave to a man from the Southern Isles. He was a magician, a hard man, and cruel. For a while he taught me magic, and then, when he saw I had talent, he thought to sell me to another magician. I escaped, thanks to my mother's ruse. She hid me in a salt barrel being shipped off the island. I sailed to the mainland where I apprenticed myself at the guild of sorcerers, for I am half elf, half magician. My blood calls magic, and the sorcerers were glad to take me into their guild.

"Then Yalinka found out who my father was, and he sent me back to the Southern Isles to steal his book of spells. I did, because he promised to help me gain the cause of Lady Amylee. I stole the book." He put his face in his hands. "My father tried to stop me, but the spell he cast rebounded and hit him and he died." He rubbed his forehead and looked at Tania. "I'd already learned how to protect myself. The book under my arm helped too; it was steeped with magic. I freed all

his slaves and I went to find my mother, but she was dead. He'd killed her for helping me escape. I took the cursed book and fled the island.

"I gave the book to Yalinka, but not before taking the Master Word and hiding it from him. Yalinka imprisoned me beneath his keep. He claimed it was for my own good, that the sorcerers' guild wanted retribution for my father's murder. I found out too late that was untrue. My father's slaves burned his body in his workshop, and called his death an accident."

"Now I understand why no one knew where you'd come from," said Tania.

"I came from darkness, and I lived in darkness. Only Lady Amylee ever smiled at me and held me in her arms. Only the Lady Amylee . . ." his voice trailed away.

"She hated you in the end," said Tania.

At that he gave a soft laugh. "No. She hated no one."

"And then you killed her."

The man gazed bleakly at the sky, where a faint line of pink showed where the dawn was breaking. "I have sat here for centuries. For centuries I have been chained to this tree, condemned to watch a monstrous story unfold; and never once, until you came, did I grasp it was my story. These chains have burned me until it feels like iron pressing on my bare bones. But never, never once, has anyone come to speak to me until you. And all the hurt I've suffered for all that long time is nothing compared to the pain I feel now, knowing that I was responsible for the death of the only woman I ever loved." His voice broke on the last word, and he began to sob. "My life has been a lie."

Tania flinched before his sorrow. "Tell me what happened when the smoke came upon you, and when you disappeared."

He quieted, his mouth still twisted in misery, but his eyes grew bitter. "Yalinka caused me to be buried in the earth. You saw that. What

he did later was dig me out and imprison me in his foul dungeon. He'd injured me grievously, and for many months I lay in the dungeon, recuperating and gathering my strength. Perhaps Yalinka thought I was as good as dead. But I escaped, and learned that Yalinka had taken my identity. He had disguised himself as me, and razed the Tower City. The name Daston of the Falls became a frightened whisper."

"Why did he do this?"

He grimaced. "I believe he did it to protect himself. No one connected Yalinka with the Dark Lord. 'Twas my name he used. I was free, but I had to stay hidden. Finally, I struck out toward the south. I'd heard Lady Amylee hid in Castle Storm and I was frantic, for Yalinka was searching for your mother and he found out where she'd gone.

"But why would Yalinka seek her?"

"Yalinka was broken in sorrow, but bent on vengeance. He wanted to kill me, oh yes, but he also held your mother responsible for his sons' deaths. And then he found out that she'd taken refuge in Castle Storm."

"All this time it was Yalinka, and nobody ever found out," Tania said. "Were you still a necromancer?"

The man took a deep breath. "I was finished. I had renounced necromancy. All I wanted was to save your mother and flee. I wish you would believe me."

"I believe you," Tania said, feeling as if her whole being was suddenly bathed in light.

The man looked at her, startled. "How can you decide so quickly?"

"Because I can tell you still love my mother." Tania reached out and, for the first time, touched his hand.

He flinched, jerking his hand away. "Don't touch me. I'm an abomination."

Tania took his hand again, holding it tightly. She could sense the cold iron and the stinging pain he must feel three-hundredfold. Her

heart broke, and then healed for all time. Her father hadn't been evil.

"I know little about Still Magic, as you call it, or magic in general. It's something we dare not use anymore. But I've heard say, and who hasn't, that a necromancer loses his soul when he practices his magic. If you'd lost your soul, you would not be here today." Tania spoke slowly. She trembled with cold. Perhaps it was the frost of the dungeon, seeping through her clothes, or the story, making her bones ache. "Yalinka betrayed my mother, but how could he have fooled everyone for so long?"

"No one looked beneath his disguise. The Dark Lord was too terrifying. He took my appearance, and disguised as me, he terrorized the countryside and then attacked Castle Storm."

"Stones the size of dragons flew," murmured Tania.

"You were there in your mother's arms, and she begged Wander to take you to safety. I saw him take you to the stable and mount Shabaz. He left before I could stop him . . . before I could see you. I'd never seen you before." There was deep pain in his voice. He leaned back against the tree trunk. "If only I had arrived a few minutes sooner."

"Where were you?"

"I was up on the ridge behind the castle. I had ridden as fast as I could when I heard his plans. I thought to save your mother. But I was too late. From the ridge, I saw the tower fall. I saw the babe and the unicorn vanish, and I saw your mother, lying in the ruins. I ran to her and took her in my arms." His voice broke again, and he pulled as hard as he could against the chains, his muscles and tendons standing out.

"Stop, you'll hurt yourself!"

He cried out in anguish. "Pain? What is pain to me? He killed the love of my life and made her believe it was my doing. While I lay there, his great warhorse trampled me. Yalinka cut my arm off with his sword as I strove to protect your mother's body. Then he hit me on the

back of the head, and I knew no more. I woke up here. And I've been here ever since."

"Did my mother say anything to you before she died?" Tania asked.

He shook his head. "She was already dead. She said not a word." Tears poured down his face. His shoulders shook, and he could hardly breathe for sobbing.

Tania's eyes burned. "Don't cry," she whispered. She inched forward and took him in her arms. The iron around him burned her skin, but she held on. She held him while he cried. When his body stopped shaking, she leaned back and took his face in her hands, examining it. "You and I are almost the same age. You haven't aged, in all the centuries you've been chained here. How old were you when you married my mother?"

"Twenty."

"I am eighteen."

He pulled away from her gently. "This is no place for you, Daughter. You must go back. Leave me now."

"No." Tania had been clutching a small bone she'd found in the dungeon. Now she opened her hand. In it was a key. Somehow, she'd known it would be there. "I will set you free." She did, and as she turned the key in the lock, the chains fell to the ground and turned to dust. The man looked at his hands, his arms and legs. Then he looked at Tania, amazement on his face. "There is no more pain," he said. He smiled, and his face lit up. "No more pain."

"What will happen now?" Tania asked.

"I don't know." As he spoke those words, the dawn broke, and the birds began to sing. They sat, side by side, and watched the sun rise over the misty lake.

In the morning sunshine, another song was heard. And then rich laughter, and a voice like gold bells ringing. "Daston! My Daston! Where are you?" Lady Amylee came into sight, and she stopped as she

caught sight of them beneath the willow tree. "Hello!" she said, parting the branches. "Hello, Tania."

Tania held her breath. Her whole world seemed to tremble on the edge of a knife blade. "Do you know me?" she asked.

"I do." Amylee smiled as she took her hand and led her into the sunshine. "Come, my Daughter, and come, Daston, for shadow calls shadow, and soon Tania must leave."

They sat in the sunshine, and Amylee held their hands. The three of them could hardly speak for crying and laughing. But then Amylee grew serious. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Daston, and sorry I ran away."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "You had no idea why I put you in the dungeon that day. I had no time to explain, and I wanted to keep you safe. When you ran away from me, you believed I'd reverted to evil, but it's a good thing you ran. Yalinka nearly killed me. I would have been unable to save you. He would have taken you and made you into his slave before killing Tania at his leisure. When you fled, you saved Tania. For that, I will always be grateful that you doubted me."

Amylee nodded gravely. "The past is done. It may not be changed. We will dwell here, you and I, in this place, until the spell is broken." She smiled sadly. "The spell is almost broken. But there is one more thing to be done, and only you can do it, Daston. You must save your daughter, and save her world."

"The Master Word," he said.

Amylee nodded. "I'm afraid you must say it aloud, so that Tania can hear it, and say it when the time is right."

Daston turned to Tania, his expression somber. When he spoke, his voice was very quiet, and he held her gaze, his dark blue eyes unwavering. "It is a word written in our blood. Only you can give it power. No one else can say it for you. Listen, you must say it just so." He leaned over and whispered in Tania's ear. "The word is 'everdark.'"

“Remember, and when need be, say it but once, but loud enough so that Yalinka and his surrounding army can hear it.”

Amylee kissed Tania. “I love you, my Daughter. When you go back, tell Wander and Shabaz that I love them, and always will. It’s up to you to clear your father’s name. Never let anyone tell you he was evil. He was not, and I love him, as I love you.”

Tania nodded. Her eyes blurred with tears, or the light faded. Whatever it was, the scene in front of her slowly disappeared. The couple in front of her stood, hand in hand, waving, and then vanished.

Tania blinked. She found herself sitting in front of a pile of chains. The bones within them had turned to dust. She opened her hand. A small finger bone lay there. A ring still adorned it. It was too small and fine to be a man’s. It must have been her mother’s ring. She took it off, and the bone turned to dust. Tania looked at the ring. It was set with a green stone, and seemed of elvish work. The writing on the inside showed simply two initials entwined. A “D” and an “A.” Daston and Amylee. She slipped it on her finger.

A breath of air stirred the hairs on the back of her neck. In the quiet, she heard a soft click. Someone had entered the dungeons.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TANIA'S CHOICE

Tania tried to get to her feet, but her body was stiff with cold. Shivering, she pushed her hands on the ground and got to her knees. She staggered and managed to stand, leaning hard against the rough stone wall. In the penumbra, her breath made small white clouds.

Footsteps approached, and she shrank into a corner. The sound of steps came down the hall, and with it was a sickly, sweet smell. Tania closed her eyes as the door creaked open wide, and the voice she dreaded most of all said, "Well! You've found your illustrious sire, I see." There was a pause, and the voice went on, freezing now. "How did you set him free? No matter. Perhaps 'twas time that happened. He'd served his purpose, and now I have you."

Tania faced Yalinka through the doorway. Her heart pounded, but her voice sounded steady enough. "What do you want from me?"

The sorcerer's eyebrows lifted and he smiled, making his already deathly face even more ghastly to behold. "Time. You are the daughter of time, and you can bring my sons back to me. I have you, and I have the blood of Lord Ironstorm."

"Lysom?" Tania felt the blood start to flow in her legs and arms,

and they began to sting.

“Aye. Young Lysom. Shall we go? It’s almost sunrise. We wouldn’t want to worry your ladies-in-waiting, would we? No. You must go back to your room, and sleep. You look tired, my dear.”

As he spoke, he waved his gnarled hands and a terrible lassitude came over her. She staggered, and would have fallen. But he caught her, and with a strength that was superhuman, carried her easily back up the stairs and along the endless hallways, through the darkened, silent castle, until he came to her room. As he passed, guards bowed their heads and slept, and Tania saw that he was wrapped in a cloak of magic that hid him from view. Her spirits plummeted when she realized she couldn’t make the slightest effort to move. Her arms and legs felt leaden.

Lord Yalinka placed her on her bed and put his hand over her forehead. “Sleep, Lady Tania. Sleep. And when you wake, all of this will have been a dream.”

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Tania opened her eyes and blinked. Her head ached, and the memory of a strange dream made her frown. What had it been? Something important, she was sure, but it slipped from her mind as soon as she tried to pin it down. She heard a knock, and the chambermaids came with her clothes and hot water. They curtsied, and one said, “Lord Yalinka is waiting in his study for you this morning.”

Tania nodded. She felt strangely worn out. Yalinka? Wasn’t she frightened of him? Odd, she could dredge up no feelings about him at all. She felt tired, that was all. She dressed, smoothing the unfamiliar velvet with her hand. Then she caught sight of a strange ring on her finger. She tugged at it, wanting to take it off, but it stuck. How odd. Where had it come from? Perhaps she’d gotten it yesterday. She couldn’t

seem to remember a thing about where she'd been or what she'd done.

"You look lovely, Lady Tania," her maid said.

Tania forgot about the ring and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. Today's robe was dark emerald with gold thread stitched in delicate patterns around the sleeves and neckline. Her maid brushed her hair and caught it up in a fine, golden net spangled with green stones. Then the girl curtsied and bid her good day.

"Thank you, and a good day to you too," answered Tania. She rubbed her hand over her face. The lethargy wouldn't leave her. Her head felt as if it were full of cotton wool. Then a guard came to take her to Lord Yalinka.

"I'll be right there," she said, after he tapped on her door. She put on her slippers, then saw her belt with her pouch lying on the floor. The pouch bulged oddly. She opened it and looked in it. Some unfamiliar buttons glinted from the bottom. Frowning, she fastened it around her waist and followed the guard who'd come to fetch her. Her feet in their light slippers were cold, and her hands too. She rubbed her arms as she walked through the echoing hallways, wishing she'd thought to take a shawl.

The guard noticed, and gallantly held out his warm cape. "Take this, Lady Tania."

Surprised, she took it. "Thank you." She wrapped herself in its warmth. "I don't know why I'm so chilled today."

"It's very early, and you've not broken your fast. I will get some scalded milk for you and bring it to the lord's study."

Tania smiled gratefully. "Thank you," she said, at the doorway. She curtsied and took the cloak off.

The guard shook his head. "Keep my cloak, I'll be back with the milk in a short while."

He left, and Tania rapped on the door.

“Come in,” creaked an ancient voice. Tania pushed the heavy door open and slipped inside. The study was small. It held a large bookshelf and one window, which looked out over the frothing sea. Yalinka sat near the fireplace. Firelight made his skin red. On another chair perched Lysom. He stood when she entered and bowed.

“Good morning, Lady Tania,” he said.

“Hello, Lysom.” She curtsied, feeling like part of some elaborate play.

“Sit here, child.” Yalinka smiled at her, and she sank into the chair, pulling the cloak tighter around her shoulders. “Are you cold?”

“A bit. It’s nothing. A chill I caught.”

“You must wonder why I called you here this morning.”

Tania blinked. The bright firelight hurt her eyes. She turned toward the bookcase. “Yes, I did wonder.”

“I wanted to give you news of your grandfather.”

“Oh!” A spark of interest, the first she’d felt all morning, pricked her. She sat up straighter. “How is he?”

“The troops are moving out of the forest. News has come. The Dark Lord is heading toward the Steppes.”

Lysom looked startled. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I didn’t want to worry you, dear boy. But now that both of you are here, I wanted to break the news to you. It looks like the Dark Lord has managed to raise a powerful army. He’s heading across the Steppes, behind the Tower Mountains. My spies have seen his army moving.”

“What will you do, Lord Yalinka?” Lysom asked.

“I have sent the Golden elves to battle, and the troops stationed in this castle will be moving out tomorrow.”

“There are only a handful of Golden elves left,” murmured Tania. She should feel frightened, but all she felt was numb. She shook her head sharply, trying to clear it.

“They will join up with the Gray elves on the Steppes.”

“How exciting!” cried Lysom. “Should I ready myself to travel? If your troops are leaving tomorrow, I want to be with them.”

“You are a brave boy.” Yalinka sighed. “But all is for naught, I fear.”

Icy dread trickled down Tania’s back. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“The Dark Lord’s army is far greater than mine. I misjudged his strength and cunning. I believe that all is lost.”

Lysom stood up. “I won’t let him. I’ll fight him by myself if I have to. Give me leave, so that I may ride to battle.”

Yalinka made to reply, but a knock on the door forestalled him. “Come in,” he cried, his voice sharp.

The guard entered, carrying a tray with a mug of steaming milk. “Here, my lady,” he stammered, setting it in front of her.

“Thank you, sir. Shall I give you back your cloak?”

“No, you can keep it. I’ll get it later.” He bowed to Lord Yalinka and left, shutting the door behind him.

Tania sipped her milk, thankful for its warmth. But nothing could soothe her nerves. Lord Yalinka’s words had shaken her. “Is there really no hope?” she asked in a small voice.

“None.” Yalinka sighed deeply.

Lysom jumped to his feet, his face flushed. “I don’t believe it,” he cried, his voice raw with emotion. “We can’t just stay here and wait until he comes to kill us all. We must do something.”

Yalinka shook his head. “I’m sorry, Lysom. But wait. I have a thought.” He turned his gaunt face to Tania. “There is another way . . .” his voice trailed off. “Lysom. Look behind you on the shelf near your shoulder. Upon it is a red book. Yes, that one. Bring it to me, will you?”

Lysom complied. Yalinka took it and laid it on the table. The book looked heavy, and the leather binding was worn thin. The vellum pages were yellowed and faded, but Tania fancied she saw a shadow float out of the book like smoke when it opened. She rubbed her hand

over her eyes.

“Come, Lysom. Look here.”

The boy did, gazing over Yalinka’s shoulder.

“Can you read that?” the sorcerer asked.

Lysom reddened. “I . . . I cannot, sir,” he said. He glanced at Tania. “But Tania can. She knows her letters better than I do.”

Yalinka nodded and pushed the book toward her. “There is a passage I wish you to read aloud.”

Tania put her milk on the tray and stood. The cloak slid off her shoulder and landed on the floor, but she walked to the table and looked down at the red book. The words were written in dark ink. She read, “‘When the Dark Lord rises, at the crescent moon, seek the blood of Ironstorm, but seek him not too soon.’” She faltered and looked at Yalinka. “This is very like the prophecy in our village. But there is a second verse. It says, ‘When the voyager spills the blood of Ironstorm, choose three times one year. Choose three times a day. Choose three times an hour, then three times say’ . . .” her voice faltered. “I know not what words are written afterward. It is in another tongue. Can it be a spell?”

“Yes.” Yalinka nodded. “It is a very, very powerful spell. It is made to turn back time. If the spell is done just right, I can choose a year, a day and an hour. Then time will revert to that moment, and all will be as before.”

Lysom frowned. “I dislike the premise. Spill the blood of Ironstorm? It sounds as if one of my blood must die.”

Yalinka looked at him, and his eyes were hooded. “Yes, it does sound like that.” He moved his fingers in a subtle pattern, and Lysom sank to his knees, then fell to the floor. He struggled feebly, but soon subsided, his eyes wide open and terrified. The ancient sorcerer turned his withered face toward Tania. “You are the voyager. Look at me.”

His voice seemed to control her mind. She did look at him, though she had tried to turn away.

He gave a ghastly smile, but then, shockingly, tears ran down his gaunt cheeks. Tania ceased her struggle, and the viselike grip on her mind eased slightly.

The sorcerer nodded and settled deeper into the chair, turning away from the fire so that his face was in shadow. "Will you listen to what I have to say, Tania?"

"Yes," she whispered, strangely moved by his tears.

"I am but a poor, broken man. My life ended when the Dark Lord murdered my sons. Long may he rot in hell. But I did not die—no—rather I lived in abject misery until the day you came to me. For, you see, I've been waiting centuries for this moment. I kept myself alive at great personal cost. Look at me! I am suffering, can't you see? But you can help. I have a boon to ask of you, one that will save me, and save Castle Storm. If you agree, then everything will have been but a bad dream. I can make that happen. Tower City can spring from the ashes, and the Golden elves can become the mighty tribe they once were. I can make the Gray elves as numerous as they were before the Dark Lord decimated them, and I can bring your mother back to life."

"What?" Tania jerked backwards. "What did you say?" She blinked. The fire flickered and illuminated the old sorcerer's face. He was not looking at her, rather, he stared out the window where huge waves crashed upon black cliffs.

He continued to speak in his soft, rasping voice. "Your mother and my sons will live once more. Your grandparents will even be alive. I can push back time to a certain year, a certain day, and a certain hour."

Tania swallowed with an effort. "What day is that?"

He turned to her. "The day my sons died. I would change that day, and everything that happened after will have been erased."

“What happened on that day?” Tania’s face felt cold, and when she spoke, she could hardly feel her lips.

The old man leaned forward and pressed his hands to the wooden table. “Imagine your land, and imagine Glen Hall as it was—a lovely, prosperous place full of pleasant folk and laughter. When the Dark Lord came, he changed all that. He imprisoned your grandparents and your mother, after forcing her into a sham of a marriage and raping her.”

“Stop!” Tania’s hands flew to her face.

“No, you must hear me out. On that day, that ill-fated day, I came to defend Glen Hall. I led a small army, and my sons gallantly rode with me. I had no idea of the force the Dark Lord commanded. I only knew I had to free Lady Amylee from the monster who held her in . . .”

“Please,” said Tania, “I can’t bear it.”

“Your father was a monster,” whispered Yalinka. “His blood flows in your veins. What do you think I must feel whenever I see you? My sons, my flesh and blood, were killed that wretched day. The Dark Lord struck them down, and laughed as they lay dying.” His voice broke.

Pity stirred Tania’s heart. She reached out and touched his skeletal hand. It was ice-cold, yet hard as gnarled wood. “Please,” she begged, “Say no more. I’m sorry, sorrier than you can imagine. When my grandfather told me who my father really was, I wanted to . . .”

“Yes?” His eyes were unblinking, yellow as a raptor’s eyes.

“I wanted to die,” she ended in a whisper.

He drew back out of her reach, and his voice dripped with venom. “You should want to die. Who could live mindful that their blood is so tainted? You sicken me, yet I took you in and protected you. At present another Dark Lord has risen, using the same book your father used for his foul purposes. You must die, and in dying, release me from my suffering and bring my innocent sons, and your mother, back to life. Think about it. You should never have been born, and now you will

have the chance to redeem yourself. Redemption! I offer you a chance to set all things right!"

"Redemption." Tania felt the cold wind in her bones. Outside, the waves boomed like thunder. "How?" she asked.

"First you must choose."

"What is my choice?" Tania shivered with terror. Everything was frightening. The words he spoke, the feeling as if she knew what was about to happen, that it had happened, somehow, before.

"You can refuse. I will not force you. It must be of your own free will. If you refuse, I will take my meager forces and try to save Castle Storm." Yalinka sighed and shook his head. "The Golden elves will surely all die, along with your handsome Captain Sebring. Your grandfather, and Lord Enguarand's family, will be destroyed. The Dark Lord will surely win, and he will crush all he can before someone finally stops him. But it will be too late for the ones you love.

"Or you can choose to agree and complete the spell. Then my sons will be alive, and all that I've told you will come to be. This time, I will defeat the Dark Lord, because I know who he is and where he is hiding." He moved his hands and muttered a spell, and Tania saw Glen Hall as it was before, bright and shining, with the orchards full of apple trees. In the orchard four children played—Lady Amylee with her golden hair, and three young lads, with dark hair and laughing eyes. Sons of the sorcerer, but good boys, and loving. Then the vision shifted, and she was in the study once more, with the fire blazing at her back and Yalinka leaning over the table, his eyes intent.

Tania stared at the ancient sorcerer. His eyes were full of tears, his hands trembling. His sons. He loved his sons. All he wanted was his sons back. If she agreed, she had the power to bring her mother back to life. Her mother had died for her. She could save her, and give Wander back his youth. Shabaz would have his horn, and Captain Sebring would be born

again, years later, and his brother would never have to die. There would be no need to raise any army. "I have chosen," she said in a whisper. "I will do as you say, and time will go backward."

"Thank you. Thank you, Tania. You don't know what this means to me." He paused and wiped his eyes. "You must cut the boy's throat. He is asleep and will not suffer. Stand in his blood. Then, say the year, the month and the day three times. After, I will tell you the words to speak. And when it's done, time will leap backward. The sun will shine on Glen Hall, and once again your mother's laughter will ring in the gardens. Tower City will be the queen of the mountains, and the Tower elves will work their magic. Just think, your grandfather's people will never have died!"

"Right this minute?" Tania looked around. The room wavered, then she blinked and tears slid down her cheeks. Everything sprang into focus, and yet everything seemed distorted somehow. Unreal.

"Here and now." Yalinka reached into his voluminous robes and pulled out a knife. It was old, made of iron, and the handle had rusted, although the blade was black and shining. When Tania touched it, its coldness burned her fingers. There was an answering sting on her chest, and she realized her amulet had grown hot. She hesitated, suddenly unsure. Her amulet seemed to be burning into her skin.

Yalinka stood, his guise severe. He bent over and took Lysom by the hair, holding his head up, baring his white throat. "Do it," he said, and his voice compelled her to act. She was helpless to resist.

Her hand moved despite herself, but there came another twinge and Tania winced as something hurt her finger. She looked, and saw the unfamiliar ring adorning her hand. The green stone flashed, and suddenly a blinding pain shot through her head. In a second, her dream and all her memories surged back. Daston, and Amylee, and the fact that Yalinka was the Dark Lord and his will was evil.

But he was powerful, too powerful. He could force her to act against her will. She took a deep breath and tried to clear her head. There was only one thing to do. She drew her arm back, and then stabbed with all her force . . . right into Yalinka's chest.

He uttered a mad scream and shoved past her, flying out the doorway with his cloak swirling around him. His screams echoed down the hallway, and there was the sound of a heavy door slamming. Then silence. The knife dropped from Tania's hand with a loud clatter.

Lysom fell backward and hit the wall. "Tania!" he cried, his eyes wide with fright. He shrank from her, and she saw her hand was covered with black blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ESCAPE FROM YALINKA'S KEEP

Tania cleaned her hand the best she could on the rug and on her skirt, nearly gagging with horror. The blood stung, and even after it was wiped off, her hand prickled. The knife smoked; the sorcerer's blood sizzled on the blade. Horror-stricken, she kicked it into the fire, where it burst into flame.

Lysom got to his feet and gasped, "I saw everything. I could hear and see everything, but I couldn't move." He shuddered violently, then leaned over and was ill.

Tania held his shoulders, but he pushed her away from him. "I thought you were going to kill me," he said, and then he burst into tears. It was just nerves; in a minute he was calm again, but his face was pale and crumpled with fright, and anger blazed in his eyes. "Was he telling the truth? Could he have turned back time?"

"I don't know." Tania shivered. "Perhaps it was just a way of punishing me for my father's sins, for it's true that the Dark Lord's army slew Lord Yalinka's sons. What he won't admit is, at that time, the Dark Lord was Yalinka."

"What?" Lysom's voice rose to the ceiling.

“We have to leave this place. I fear Yalinka is not grievously wounded. He will be back, and if he catches us, he will kill us both.”

“What are you talking about?” Lysom was nearly screaming. He took her shoulders and shook her until her head rang.

Tania managed to push him away. “The Dark Lord is Yalinka! We have to reach the Golden elves. It’s all a trap.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“He tried to kill you. What other proof do you need?” Tania hissed.

Lysom grew even paler, then nodded. “Maybe we should leave.”

“I know where to go.” She picked up the guard’s cloak from the floor, and then, making sure that Lysom was following her, she dashed down the hallway, stopping only when she reached the secret door. “Watch,” she said, panting from running so far. She turned the figure, and the door swung inward. “Down here is proof Yalinka is the Dark Lord.”

“So? It’s a secret passage. The castle must be riddled with them.”

“Just be quiet and follow me.” Tania crept down the stairs, holding her breath, straining for any sounds. When she reached the dungeons, she showed Lysom the chains. But he was unimpressed.

“A pile of dust, some rusted chains. What proof is this?”

“There lies the remains of my father,” said Tania, and all at once she couldn’t control her tears. “He wasn’t bad,” she sobbed. “He was Yalinka’s prisoner and puppet nearly all his life. He never knew any kindness except for what my mother showed him.”

“He was a monster,” snarled Lysom.

“No, he wasn’t.” Tania sniffed and dried her tears. She stared at the dust, and then knelt. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I wish everything had been different. I almost turned back time to give you another chance, but I realized it’s impossible.”

She stood, and pulled the last door open. It led to another hallway. “We have to get out of the castle. Perhaps this leads somewhere.”

“Of course it does,” snapped Lysom. “But where? It could go straight to the edge of a cliff. I’m going back.”

Tania whirled around. “He wanted me to kill you!” she cried, pushing him against the wall. “Can’t you get that through your thick skull? If you go back, he will kill you himself. The Dark Lord is Yalinka! He won’t let you live to tell anyone.”

Lysom paled. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not, and you know it. Follow me,” she said. “Please?”

Lysom’s shoulders sagged, then he straightened and his eyes flashed. “You’re right. I’m being foolish. I’m sorry, Tania.”

He seemed to grow in stature. To Tania, it was almost as if he changed from a boy into a man as she watched. His back straightened, and his face hardened into an expression of determination. He looked at her and took a deep breath. “I’m ready. But we better take a glow globe. It looks dark down there.” He lifted one off the wall sconce, and held it before him. “Go on, I’m right on your heels.”

They took the narrow passage, and it did get dark. After a few turns, there was no light at all except the red glimmering cast by Lysom’s glow globe. Slowly, they edged forward. The ground beneath their feet grew damp, and the walls glistened with moisture.

“We’re either beneath the sea or beneath the swamp,” said Lysom.

“Do you smell something peculiar?” Tania asked, wrinkling her nose.

Lysom sniffed. “It does stink. What is it?”

They rounded another corner, and the stench became stronger. Each step seemed to bring them nearer to something horrific—for now they’d identified the odor—that of something dead and rotting.

“Wait!” Lysom grabbed Tania’s arm so hard she yelped. She stopped, and in the pitch darkness, she felt a stir in the air.

“What is it?” she whispered.

Lysom sniffed. “The smell is stronger, and I felt a draft.”

“So did I.” Tania peered into the murk, but the glow globe only lit the dank stone wall next to them. The wall glistened with moisture, but one part seemed dryer than the rest. “Look,” she said, pointing.

“I see it. The wall juts out a little here.” Lysom held the glow globe high. “Let’s go see what’s behind it.”

Shoulder to shoulder, they crept along the wall. Part of the wall protruded, but it was nothing that they would have noticed if they hadn’t felt the breeze. Then the wall doubled back sharply, and became a passageway. If they had kept going straight, they never would have seen it, for the wall angled out to hide the cunning opening. The passage was narrow and slanted downward. Tania pulled at Lysom’s shirt.

“We don’t have much time,” she said urgently.

“Maybe this is the way out. We should make sure.”

“It smells bad,” said Tania, choking as a waft of foul air struck her. “What could that be?”

“I’ve no idea.” Lysom sounded less sure of himself, and his footsteps faltered.

They edged forward a few paces more, then Lysom, holding the glow globe over his head, illuminated a cavern hewn out of the rock. The cavern was small, but it was big enough to contain a horse, and that is what lay there, dead. It was a massive creature, with a long mane and tail, still wearing its trappings of war. For it was a warhorse.

For a second, in the dull light, Tania’s heart had stopped. For a terrible instant, she’d thought it was Shabaz, and when the glow globe revealed its shining black coat, her heart started beating again. She slumped against Lysom. “I was so afraid,” she whispered. Her heart hammered madly. To make things worse, her hand throbbed, and she felt an icy chill in her fingers where Yalinka’s blood had touched her.

“Look,” Lysom pointed to something else, something lying near the horse’s side. It was a full set of armor, and a mask. The terrifying

mask resembled a human skull painted black. An iron helmet covered the top of the skull, and the armor was made of black iron, too. It shimmered in the feeble glow, pulsing as if it were alive. "This is the Dark Lord's armor. He leaves it hidden in this secret passage, along with his steed." Lysom turned to Tania, his eyes shiny with panic. "You were right."

Tania tugged his arm. The idea that Yalinka could come and revive the dead horse, don the armor, and become the Dark Lord nearly paralyzed her with fear. "Now that you've seen the truth, you must understand that we have to flee. We have to find the Golden elves and warn Castle Storm."

"He means to attack my home, doesn't he?"

"He means to have Ironstorm's blood. If he gets hold of you or your brother . . ."

"Or my father!" he gasped. "He must mean to head toward Castle Storm. The Steppes was just a diversion."

"Then we must warn the Golden elves. We have to go to Castle Storm."

They turned around and hurried back up the tunnel, but at the end of the passageway there was a fork. Lysom lowered the glow globe. "Which way do we go?"

"Hold on." Tania peered closely at the damp ground. "Look! Here are some hoof prints." She shuddered, thinking of the undead warhorse carrying his evil burden through the dark cavern. "The hoof prints go to the left. He likely uses this path to sneak out of the castle."

"Then we should take the other way. I don't want to fall into a trap. He must keep part of his army somewhere nearby. This path may lead to them."

"All right, that sounds sensible." Tania started down the right-hand passage, but Lysom paused.

“Should we steal his mask? It might make it harder for him to act.”

“No, now that he knows he’s been found out, it won’t matter anymore. I think he’s insane. I think he’s been plotting and planning on getting revenge on my father for what he did to him, and he wants to hurt me as much as possible.” Tania drew a shaky breath. “I’m so glad he didn’t make me kill you, Lysom.”

Lysom gave a hollow laugh. “I’m glad too. I’m glad you’re stronger than you look. Now, let’s hurry.” He grabbed her arm and dragged her along at a run.

Lysom wouldn’t let go of her, and she was grateful, for twice she tripped and he hauled her back to her feet. He slowed when they caught sight of a faint, gray light. “Can that be a way out of here?” Tania wondered aloud.

“Shh. You stay here. Keep the glow globe. I’ll go check.”

“Be careful.” Tania plucked at Lysom’s sleeve.

“I’ll certainly do my best.” He turned to her and sketched a quick grin, then became serious again. “If I cry out, turn around and go back. Take the other passage, and keep safe.”

“Keep safe,” echoed Tania. She watched as he crept down the narrow hallway, staying close to the stone wall. In a minute, he was out of sight. She hugged the glow globe to her stomach and tried to stop her shaking. The minutes passed. Still there was no sound. She put the glow globe down and edged toward the light. It was so faint, it was almost like she was imagining it. She stopped and pressed closer to the wall, trying to make herself invisible. There was still no sound. What had happened to Lysom?

He came upon her in a rush. “Tania!” His voice made her jump. “What are you doing? I told you . . .”

“Don’t be angry,” she begged. Her knees gave out and she sat in a heap. Relief made her lightheaded.

"I think we're near the stable," Lysom said.

"Hold me." Tania shook so hard she could barely speak. She looked up at Lysom, her face wet with tears. "I was so frightened," she whispered. "And my hand aches so, and I can hardly move my fingers."

He knelt by her and took her in his arms. He patted her back and crooned into her ear. "Remember all the times you did this to me?" he asked in a soft voice. "When I was scared, when I fought with Rian, when my father whipped me, and when I fell off my horse, you were always around to comfort me."

Tania sniffed and buried her head in his shoulder. "You're like my little brother. My bratty little brother," she added.

He nodded. "That sounds about right. Are you feeling better? Because I think we'd better go." He stood and helped Tania to her feet. "Let me see your hand." He took it and examined it. "It's freezing. You must be cold, that's all. Come on." He held her by the waist. "Can you walk?"

"I think so." Tania gave a little sob. "I'm sorry. I won't fall apart again. I'll be fine. Just point me to the stable, and I'll get us two horses."

Lysom seemed reluctant.

"What is it?" she asked, looking at him.

"Sir Renegal is there. I saw him. He must have drawn guard duty at the stable, and he looks his usual, bad-tempered self. He'll never believe our story."

"Is anyone else around?"

"I didn't see anyone. Just Renegal. And he'll call the castle guards and have us stopped. The orders are not to let you out of here."

Tania thought a minute, then said, "You'll have to knock him out."

"What?" Lysom blanched. "Think of something else, please."

"No. Remember what Grandfather Birchspring taught us, about the spots on the head?" She pointed to her head. "Here and here. If

you knock him hard enough, you'll put him to sleep."

Lysom found a likely rock at the foot of the tunnel, and, with a last, wide-eyed glance at Tania, he stepped outside. Tania strained her ears. She heard a faint "hullo," a thud, an "ouch!" and then a louder thud. Lysom hissed, "Come Tania!"

Tania crept out from the tunnel, pushing aside the branches that hid the entrance. Looking back she couldn't see the narrow crevice that was the opening. Cleverly hidden, the tunnel led straight to the stable.

"Tania!" It was Lysom. He pointed to the ground, where Sir Renegal lay in an ungraceful heap. "I think I hit him too hard," he said.

"Is he breathing?"

"Yes, but he's bleeding too."

"Oh." Tania frowned. "You'll have to bind that up. Did you have to hit him twice?" she asked, looking at the twin bruises, one with a deep cut which was bleeding freely.

"He has a hard skull," Lysom griped. He tore a piece of his shirt off and bandaged Renegal's head. "Now what?"

"We saddle our horses and ride away. Can you get Marron? Where is he?"

Suddenly she heard a familiar whinny. In the box nearest her was Shabaz. Tania gave a glad cry. The white horse pricked his ears and whickered. His stall had a lock on it, but Tania took Sir Renegal's sword from his scabbard and pried open the door. Unfortunately, the sword cracked in two as the lock gave, and she tossed the pieces on the ground. "Hurry!" she said to the white horse. "We have to go to the Golden Forest as fast as we can."

"I'm glad to see you, Tania!" said Shabaz, nuzzling her shoulder. "What has happened? Why are you here?"

"Yalinka is the Dark Lord," Tania replied, tossing the saddle over his back and fastening the girth.

Shabaz gave a snort of surprise. "I wondered why I was locked in this stall."

"He locked you in?" Tania was aghast.

"Why are you talking to a horse?" Lysom asked.

"I have a magic amulet," said Tania. "I have to tell him what's happening so he can help us."

"Magic is forbidden," Lysom said sternly. He caught sight of Renegal's sword and grimaced. "He's going to be furious when he sees that," he said, pointing.

"Let's hope we're long gone before he wakes up." Faintly, from the castle, there came the sound of a horn. "What's that?" Tania gasped.

"That's the guard's trumpet. Yalinka must be calling all the guards to the keep. They must be lining up for inspection. If Yalinka means to leave as the Dark Lord, he won't do so now, unless he means to show himself to the guards." Lysom sounded worried. "Or perhaps he will use his power to turn them all into the undead. Can he do that, do you suppose?"

"I have no idea how his magic works!" Tania shivered with dread, imagining Yalinka casting his dark spells upon the hapless guards, then going to saddle his undead steed. A fit of trembling nearly overcame her, and she had to press hard against Shabaz's warm side.

"Easy, little one," he nickered softly, nudging her shoulder.

"Hurry!" Lysom cried.

"We can't leave Sir Renegal! He'll be turned into one of them," said Tania. "Hitch a wagon." She caught sight of a familiar horse. "Karen!" she cried, and she opened the stall. The horse nickered and arched his neck.

"Hello!" he cried. "Why, you're not in disguise anymore. How are you?"

"In a hurry," said Tania. "I am going to give you a very important

mission. You will have to pull a cart with this man in it and follow us. Do not worry if we get ahead of you, just keep on our trail. We're heading to the camp in the Golden Forest. Meet us there."

"All right," said Karen.

Tania found Fletch, and explained that his master would be in the cart. "And stay with Karen; when your master awakens, he'll need you. But whatever you do, don't let him go near Yalinka."

"I promise," said Fletch. He didn't seem curious as to why Renegal was out cold. Perhaps he was used to seeing his master hit over the head.

Lysom wasted no time saddling Marron, and then Tania helped him lift Sir Renegal into the cart. When that was done, Tania swung onto Shabaz's back.

"Go on, Tania!" Lysom cried. "I'll look after Sir Renegal. We'll meet at the camp."

Tania hesitated but an instant, then grabbing huge handfuls of Shabaz's mane, she leaned down and said, "Let's go!"

Shabaz took off at a gallop, thundering over the drawbridge, his muscles bunching as he stretched out and ran. Along the straight, dirt road he galloped, and Tania's eyes teared as the wind whipped her face and hair. She had never dreamed Shabaz could gallop so fast. He was a unicorn, she remembered belatedly. He could outrun the wind, and so she held on as tightly as she could and let the great horse run. With each hoof beat, her hand throbbed, but she clenched her teeth against the pain. Sooner than she thought possible, the plains gave way to forest, and Shabaz thundered along the frozen road that once led to Glen Hall. The snowy fields flashed by, and the orchards were decked in frost. Shabaz swept past the ruins in the valley. The road dipped and rose, but Shabaz never faltered or slowed. He hardly seemed to touch the ground. Tania's hands and feet were frozen, her face was numb with cold, but she managed to hang on. Finally, Shabaz entered the Golden

Forest and started up the narrow path that led to the encampment.

No one was there, but hoof prints marked the way the troop had gone. "They're heading to Tower City," she cried against the wind, and Shabaz wheeled about and galloped along the path toward the mountains. Tania was too tired to hang on, so she used Shabaz's long mane to tie herself to his back, winding it around her arms so she couldn't fall off.

For three hours he galloped, and Tania was faint with cold and exhaustion when finally a thin plume of smoke came into sight. Shabaz didn't slacken his speed. He leapt over the head of a guard posted on the outskirts of the troop, and cantered into the midst of the elves, his breath billowing like white clouds from his nostrils, his great hoofs making thunder upon the frozen ground.

"Tania!" Wander Birchspring, leapt to take Shabaz's bridle. "What happened? Why are you here?"

Tania slumped over, dizzy with fatigue. "It's Yalinka," she gasped. "He's the Dark Lord, and we must flee."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CAPTAIN SEBRING'S PROMISE

Someone lifted her off Shabaz. Tania buried her face into his shoulder and shivered.

“Lady Tania,” said a voice she knew. She raised her head and saw she was in Captain Sebring’s arms. He ducked and entered his tent, setting her on his bed, pulling warm covers over her, but she couldn’t stop shaking.

“What you said about Lord Tattinggil is a grave accusation, indeed,” Captain Sebring said with a frown.

“It’s nothing but the truth.” Tania couldn’t stop her teeth from chattering.

“You shouldn’t be outside in that dress. Where is your cloak?” scolded Wander, but his eyes were worried.

“I lost my cloak. Shabaz gallops so fast,” said Tania. “It must have fallen off on the road. Lysom will be here in a while. And so will Sir Renegal.”

“Sir Renegal is aware of this?” Wander asked.

“Not exactly,” Tania said with a grimace. “He’s unconscious. Lysom is bringing him in a wagon. We have to wait until they get here.”

Captain Sebring rubbed his hand over his face. “Tell us everything

from the beginning, if you can.”

Tania looked up at Wander. “I wanted to see you. I wanted to come back here; I missed you so much. But no one would let me out of the keep. I was a prisoner.” Her voice wavered.

“It was for your own good, child,” said Wander. “Is that why you’re here? Because you missed me? Did you run away?”

Tania still shivered violently, and her head ached from the cold. Her hand was numb, and trickles of ice seeped up toward her elbow. She could hardly gather her thoughts, but she knew she had to convince Captain Sebring and the elves to go to Castle Storm. “Yalinka wants time to go backward. He has the red spell book.” She shook her head, trying to clear it. “Yalinka wants to go back to the day his sons died, and save them. For this he needs Ironstorm’s blood.” Tania looked at Captain Sebring. “It’s the truth. I saw the book of spells, and I held the knife.”

Wander came with a cup of tea. “Here, take this,” he said.

Tania reached her hand out, and then swayed with a sudden onslaught of pain. She fell back onto the pillow, her vision darkening.

“What is it?” Wander cried, bending over her.

“I stabbed him,” she said, her eyes tightly closed. “The knife was cold, and when I stabbed him his blood touched me. It was black, and foul, I think, and it poisoned me. I can’t feel my hand anymore,” she whispered. “It aches so, as if it is turning to ice.”

Wander touched it, and gave a shocked cry. “Tania!”

She opened her eyes and gazed at Captain Sebring and Wander, willing them to believe her. “Lysom and I found his steed, the one he rides as the Dark Lord. He means to go to Castle Storm. He needs one of Ironstorm’s blood to turn back time. He’s going to go to Castle Storm now that he doesn’t have Lysom anymore.” She was babbling, and each breath she drew pained her.

“Hush, drink this.” Wander held the hot tea to her lips.

"I'm not done yet," she said. She drew a shaky breath. "Yalinka lied to you. There is no army on the Steppes. The shortest route to Castle Storm is through Tower City, though. Once he sees I've gone, he'll realize we're taking that route. He may try to stop us."

Captain Sebring came near her bed, his face strained. "Lady Tania, you've leveled grave accusations against the one who has claimed to protect us against the Dark Lord. 'Twas by his idea that the Golden elves regrouped."

A babble of voices came from outside, and Farj opened the tent flap crying, "Captain Sebring!" Then he stumbled into the tent and burst into tears.

"What is it?" The captain took Farj by the shoulders.

"Kell, it's Kell. And Kellori," said Farj in a dreadful voice.

"What happened to them? Are they all right?" Captain Sebring asked.

Farj shook his head mutely, as they all stared at him, silent.

Tania held her breath. It seemed her heart had stopped beating, and inside the tent the stillness was sinister.

"No?" Captain Sebring let go of Farj and stepped backward. "What happened?"

"It's a mystery. When the guards went to relieve them of their duty, they were gone. They've vanished." Farj choked and looked up at his captain. "I fear the worst, sir."

Captain Sebring let his breath out in a long hiss. "Tell the others to make ready. We're moving out.

"I'm sorry, Farj. Kell was your brother. We will mourn him when this is over. Go on. We have much to do. Now, I fear, we must make haste."

"'Twas Yalinka's idea that the Golden elves regroup?" said Wander, his voice shaking with fury. "What better way to have all the elves together, so that he could capture them all at once? We've been duped, all of us. And to think that Yalinka has stayed his hand for two hundred

years.” He shook his head. “Was it simply to avenge his sons? How is it possible?” he broke off and frowned.

“He said he needed me for some reason, but I think it was just to torture me,” said Tania.

Wander stared at her pensively. “No. I think you’re wrong, Tania. He does need you for the spell. He needs you, and one of Ironstorm’s blood. Otherwise, he would have worked his foul magic ages ago. He’s been waiting for you. There is something in your blood that he needs.”

“He tried to control me with his mind,” said Tania, the memory making her ill. “I was holding the knife and about to cut Lysom’s throat.” She choked and drew a deep breath. “It was awful. I couldn’t resist, and then something burned my hand. I looked, and saw this ring. The second I laid eyes on it, it flashed, and it broke Yalinka’s spell.”

“Show me,” Wander ordered.

She held her hand out, and Wander touched the green stone in awe. “Lady Amylee never took this off. Where did you get this, child?”

Tears streamed down Tania’s face. “I found my father’s bones in Yalinka’s dungeon. This was with them. He must have grasped my mother’s hand as he lay dying, and it stayed with him all these long years.”

Wander shook his head. “Your father was the first Dark Lord. Why would Yalinka keep his bones?”

“My father was never the Dark Lord,” said Tania. “It was always Yalinka. My father was his prisoner. Only my mother knew the truth, and she could say nothing for fear Yalinka would kill him. She loved him.” Her strength was fading. Even speaking was an effort.

“That’s folly!” Wander cried, scandalized.

“Can’t you see she’s in pain?” Captain Sebring cried. “Please, can’t you help her?”

Wander gave a start. “You’re right. Stay with her while I go get the book of healing.” He left, after giving Tania a last, worried look.

Captain Sebring knelt at her side. “My Lady, if what you say is true, then we must hide you somewhere the Dark Lord cannot find you, and go to protect Castle Storm. For even if his plan to turn back time has failed, I fear he will seek revenge on the Gray and Golden elves, and of all the people in this region. He will reign in terror until his necromancy gets the best of him and kills him. But he may live for centuries yet, before that happens.”

“I’m sorry I deceived you and pretended to be a boy, Captain Sebring,” she said.

He looked at her, a wry smile tugging the corners of his mouth. “I’m not your captain anymore. You can call me Elorén, that is my name.” He reached out and gently smoothed the tears off her cheeks with his fingers.

“Are you still angry?” Her voice was a mere whisper. It hurt to breathe.

“No, of course not.” He took her good hand in his and pressed it to his lips. “How could I be angry at the woman I love?” he said. His smile deepened. “Now you know my deepest secret.”

“You love me?” She thought her ears had deceived her.

“I was more relieved than angry when I found out that Tanner the stable hand was in truth Tania. I think I fell in love with you when I came to see you at the keep. You looked so frail, lying in that huge bed with a bandage on your arm. Yet you insisted you wanted to fight the Dark Lord.” He chuckled, and then grew serious. “I can’t stop thinking about you, Lady Tania.”

“You asked me to think of you sometimes. Well, I thought of you every minute. I kept waiting for you to come visit me at the keep.”

“I wanted to see you, but I always had too much to do. Will you forgive me?”

“Of course. I think I fell in love with you the moment I saw you.”

A sigh escaped her lips. “I wanted to tell you I wasn’t a boy, but I was too afraid you’d send me home.”

His hand tightened on hers. “Just rest, Tania, and get well. For my sake, please?”

She sketched a weak smile. “For you, then,” she said, and the world tilted and went dark. Faintly, she heard someone calling her name, but the sound disappeared into a well of silence.

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Sound came back first. It was a low, indistinct rumble that pulled Tania out of her sleep. The rumbling grew stronger, and was accompanied by a curious bumping movement. Eyes closed, Tania tried to make sense of it. After a minute, she recognized the din. It was the sound of someone yelling. The noise got louder and clearer, and in a moment Tania identified Sir Renegal’s voice.

She opened her eyes and blinked. She was in a wagon. That would explain the movement. And the racket coming from next to her was Sir Renegal sitting up in the wagon, shouting.

Tania lay still a minute and tried to collect her thoughts. She felt a little better. She was not so exhausted, and she felt warm. Looking down, she saw that she was wrapped in several warm blankets. Her hand still hurt, though. If anything, it hurt worse than before, and that was another reason she’d awakened.

She reached up and rubbed her eyes. She’d fallen asleep in the middle of a conversation. Her cheeks burned as she remembered to whom she’d been speaking, and what she’d blurted just before passing out. Captain Sebring—Elorén—must think she was a fool. First, she dressed like a boy to be a soldier, and disguised as a boy she hugs him. That alone was enough to make her want to writhe in embarrass-

ment. But no, then she gets a sword cut and he finds out she's a young woman, and not just any woman. She is the heiress to Glen Hall and the daughter of a man everyone thought was a demon. And the next time he sees her, she's half frozen, blithering about Yalinka, and tells him she loves him.

Tania buried her head beneath the covers. How could she ever look him in the face again? Then she smiled, despite herself. He'd said he loved her. An absurd joy filled her, but it faded as she thought of their predicament. And what was Renegal carrying on about? She peered out of the covers. Sitting not too far from her, on another pallet, was Sir Renegal. His face looked greenish and a huge bandage swathed his head.

"I insist on speaking to Captain Sebring!" trumpeted Renegal, then he stopped yelling and clutched his head. "Ohh!" he moaned, "Just wait until I get my hands on that blasted boy!"

Tania was about to say something when he noticed her looking at him. "You're awake!" he said. He peered at her closely. "Did they kidnap you as well?"

Tania's eyes widened. "Is that what . . ."

"Captain Sebring!" Renegal broke off talking to her and waved.

Tania tried to sit up, but she still felt too weak. She debated whether to duck under the covers once more, but decided it would be childish. Instead, she plucked nervously at her blanket until the handsome captain came up. He rode Hex, and he held a quiver and bow slung over his shoulder. His sword hung from his belt, and his cloak was wrapped twice around his body for warmth. When he spoke, white clouds hung in the air in front of his mouth. Frost glittered on his eyelashes and on Hex's mane.

Tania's heart pounded painfully when she saw the captain, and she was suddenly tongue-tied.

Renegal had no such reservations. "Ah. At last. Captain Sebring,

I insist on an explanation, and not some idiotic babbling from one of your soldiers. What am I doing here? I demand you let me go.”

Captain Sebring brought Hex level with the wagon and looked down at them. “Are you feeling better, Tania?” he asked, ignoring Renegal’s outburst.

“Yes, thank you.” She blushed again, and he smiled at her, his eyes twinkling the way she always imagined they would if he lost his stern countenance. They turned stony again, though, when he turned them upon Renegal.

“You are being kept here for your own protection. I cannot let you go back to Yalinka’s keep, for who knows what has become of it? I fear your fate is linked with our own. Pray we arrive at Castle Storm in time.”

“What are you talking about?” Renegal screeched. “Why isn’t that whelp of an Ironstorm wrapped in chains? He tried to murder me! And where is the driver for this wagon? Why does that horse have no bridle?”

“The horse has been instructed to follow the troops. Don’t worry. If you fall behind, someone will come looking for you. And as for Lysom, if he’d wanted to kill you, he would have simply left you to Yalinka’s dark spells. It is due to his quick thinking that you are here with us and not one of the walking undead.” Captain Sebring grinned. “You have much to thank him for. You’d do well to try to make the rest of us as grateful as well. Now, stop your shouting and get some rest, for soon we will arrive in the mountain passes, and the wagon will be left behind.” He looked at Tania and his eyes grew worried. “You’ll have to ride again, my lady.”

“I will be all right on Shabaz,” said Tania, and her mouth curved into an enormous smile. She couldn’t help it. She smiled, and tears of joy slid down her cheeks. She was safe. She was back with her grandfather and Shabaz, and Elorén was here, looking at her with his heart in his eyes.

He leaned over and brushed her tears off with his glove. "I promise, I won't let anyone hurt you. Don't cry, Lady Tania." His voice was soft.

"I'm not sad," she said. Her smile grew wider, if it was possible. "When can I see my grandfather?"

"He's scouting with Shabaz. You'll be able to see Wander this evening when we make camp. I will send him to you as soon as possible." He left his hand on her cheek a minute longer, then nodded and reined Hex to the side, cantering toward the head of the troop.

Renegal stared at her as if she were a viper he'd suddenly discovered curled next to him. "You can't believe this madness, can you?"

Tania looked at him. "I'm afraid I started it all," she said.

Renegal looked at her more closely and uttered a startled cry. "By the gods of the seven . . . you're Tanner! You're not a boy! You must be the one Yalinka was looking for!"

Tania sighed. "I'm afraid so. My grandfather tried to hide me, and he thought I'd be safe with Yalinka."

"But . . ." His face was drawn in pain and he rubbed his head again, groaning. "I feel as if my head is cracked in two! Damn that boy Lyson! If I ever get my hands on him . . ."

"I'm afraid that was my fault too," said Tania, biting her lip. "You see, we didn't want to leave you for Yalinka to kill, and I had a feeling you wouldn't listen to reason."

"But, Yalinka! But...but...." Renegal threw his hands in the air. "Lord Yalinka? Kill me? It's preposterous!"

Tania only looked at him, her eyes sad. "I knew you wouldn't listen," she said. She turned her gaze to the copper brazier. It glowed red, warming the little wagon. She struggled to a sitting position, leaning against the wooden side, pulling her covers up with her good hand. Her other hand was bandaged, but the pain felt as sharp as ever. If anything, it seemed to get worse as time passed. Her shoulder, not

quite healed from the sword cut, ached too. Her whole left side was in agony. She twisted, trying to turn it toward the brazier, but the pain was too great, and she cried out, blackness threatening to swallow her once again.

“You’re hurt!” Renegal leaned over and caught her before she slid sideways. “What happened?”

“Yalinka tried to make me kill Lysom, but I stabbed him instead. His blood—I don’t know—poisoned me, I think.” She broke off with a little gasp of pain. “It hurts,” she whimpered.

His glare turned to a concerned frown. “Here, let me put this cushion behind you. I don’t need it. Is that better?” He drew back, expressions chasing themselves across his face, finally settling on bafflement. “What is going on?”

Tania waited until she got her breath back. Sitting up was harder, but it felt good to be closer to the brazier. The cushion held her arm higher, and rested it. Taking a deep breath, she said, “Do you recognize me?”

He frowned, looking down at his hands. “I heard tell the Lady of Glen Hall had returned. In the barracks, there was talk of a sorceress, and Yalinka came to tell us that the Dark Lord’s daughter was sheltered in his keep. He said that you were not evil, like your father, but rather you were in danger and that we had to make sure you never left the safety of the castle. I assume you are that girl. Are you?”

“Yes, but I’m not a sorceress and my father wasn’t evil.” The wagon lurched over a stone and Tania winced as the jolt hurt her shoulder. “Did Yalinka say why I was in danger?”

“He said that the Dark Lord needs you to make the prophecy come true.” Renegal swallowed. “‘Twas talk of magic, and most of the soldiers didn’t like to hear it.” He paused. “Are you really from another time? What magic brought you here?”

“Magic!” Tania cried. She clapped her good hand to her mouth

and stared at Renegal. "I just remembered. The spy crystal! Have you still got the spy crystal?"

He paled. "How did you find out? Answer me."

She pulled the amulet from beneath her cloak. "This has a spell upon it that lets me speak to horses. Fletch told me that you sometimes spoke to Yalinka with a small 'device.'" She laughed without mirth. "Have you spoken to Yalinka since you've been with us?"

He flushed. "Of course I haven't. I've been in this wagon since I woke up, and no one lets me out of sight for more than three minutes at a time."

Tania closed her eyes, then opened them, and stared at him. "I hope you're telling the truth. You have to believe me about Yalinka. If you don't, we will all die. Yalinka is a necromancer, he is the Dark Lord, and has been for centuries. He seeks to avenge his sons and turn time backward, but failing that, he will simply extend his dominion over all the lands he can, for he needs death like we need air to breathe."

"Why I should trust you?" Renegal peered over the wagon side toward the high mountains. "Where is Lord Yalinka now?"

"I have no idea." Tania shook her head. She snuggled further into her blankets to escape the chill. "I don't care if you trust me or not, but you have to believe me." She stared past him to the mountains. The setting sun was turning the snow at the peaks red, and navy blue shadows reached down their flanks. Ahead, came the sound of hoof beats. They grew louder, and then Shabaz loomed over the wagon. Wander, perched on his broad back and wearing the green cloak, looked more than ever like a little fir tree on a snowdrift. Tania grinned and told him so.

"I'm glad to see you looking better," said Wander. He heaved a sigh of relief. "We're setting up camp. In a little while you'll be comfortable in a bed, in a warm tent. Shabaz wants to know how your hand is."

"It's worse, I think," said Tania. She turned frightened eyes to her

grandfather. "I can't move my fingers anymore, and the cold is up to my elbow now. It aches constantly, and if I move it, the pain grows sharper."

Wander's expression clouded. "We're sending a scout ahead to the Gray elf clans. Perhaps someone will have a healing spell, for the book I have is too vague to be of any help at all."

Renegal looked interested for the first time. "I've been told I've a skill in healing," he said. He touched his head gingerly. "When we settle down for the night I would like some dried comfrey and red-mint oil, if you have any. If you boil them together, the scent can take away my headache."

"I'll see what we have in the stores," said Wander. "Here we are. I'll send someone to get you, Tania. Sir Renegal, if you're feeling fit, you can come with me and I will escort you to your tent."

"He has a spy crystal," said Tania, looking closely at Renegal. "You might not want to leave it with him."

Scarlet patches appeared on Renegal's cheeks. "Are you accusing me of planning to contact Lord Yalinka?" he asked.

"I think that the temptation might be too much," said Wander. "Why don't you give it to me? I'll make sure no harm comes to it, and when this is finished, one way or another, I will return it to you."

"I should hope so," said Renegal bitterly. "Here. Take it. But you understand," he said, looking at Tania now. "Trust has to go both ways."

"I know, and I'm sorry," said Tania. "But I'm too frightened of Yalinka to act otherwise. He killed my parents, and he plans to kill me too."

"He plans to kill all of us, child," said Wander. He took the clear globe that Renegal handed him and tucked it away in his pouch. "But you have more cause to fear him than anyone, except perhaps Lysom."

"Did I hear my name?" Lysom's ruddy face appeared. His cheeks were pink with cold, his nose and ears bright red. He reined in Mar-

ron and then caught sight of Renegal. His smile slipped, and he looked suddenly as if he wanted to disappear.

“You’ve come to apologize, I assume,” said Renegal in an acid tone.

“Uh,” Lysom gave a pasty grin and said, “As it happens, yes, I’ve come to say I’m sorry. And I hope that someday you will find it in your heart to forgive me. I feel dreadful about hitting you. I am so sorry. I truly didn’t mean to injure you.” He was warming up to his apology now. “I humbly beg your . . .”

“All right. Stop. That’s enough.” Renegal sighed loudly and, reaching over the back of the wagon, unhitched the tailgate. He swung his legs out from under his covers and made a face. “Instead of blithering, come over here and help me walk. I feel as if my legs are made of cotton wool.” He stopped and looked around the wagon, his face registering first disquiet, then shock, and then anger. “Where is my new sword?” he howled, pointing to his empty scabbard.

Tania winced. “I’m afraid that’s my fault too,” she said, trying for a bright smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FORCES OF NIGHT, FORCES OF DAY

Snow stung Tania's face. Freezing wind buffeted her and whipped Shabaz's mane and tail. In front of them loomed a wide chasm. Sheer, ice-covered cliffs plunged from the chasm into a deep gorge. The shortest path to the Gray elves lay beyond it. She hung on to Shabaz with one hand; her left arm was in a sling, bound tightly to her chest. The unicorn bent his head into the wind and said, "Are you ready?" "Yes!" Tania cried. She closed her eyes.

Shabaz gave a mighty leap, clearing the chasm. Tania hardly felt his muscles bunch before they'd landed on the far side. Behind them, the army lined up on the opposite side. Tania turned and waved.

"Are you going to be all right, Tania?" Wander called, his voice nearly lost in the wind.

"Shabaz will take care of me!"

"We'll see you soon!" cried Elorén. He rode Hex, his silhouette taller than any other. He waved, and in the dim light, Tania saw he was holding the spy ball that Wander had taken from Renegal. She had one too. Wander had found it in her pouch; the small sphere she'd taken for a bauble had been her mother's spy crystal. For years she'd had it, and had never known. Now hers was attuned to Elorén's, and they could

communicate.

She clutched Shabaz's mane. "Good-bye," she whispered. Shabaz gave a small whinny and they set off again, heading toward the tallest peak before cutting across the pass and going to the heart of the Gray elves' territory.

No one could heal her arm in the archer's troop. Finally, in despair, it was decided that Tania must go to the Gray elves in hope that they might save her.

The pouch tied to her waist contained food and a canteen of water. She had new boots and the warm cloak that had been a gift from the Gray elves. Grandfather Birchspring had given her a dose of strong medicine to try to dull the ache in her arm. Otherwise, she was tied to the saddle, being too weak to hang on by herself. Shabaz would go without stopping, for every minute counted. Tania's hand had started to turn black, and the pain was nearly blinding.

The evening turned into blackest night, but Shabaz went on. The path they'd chosen was visibly marked. The Gray elves kept it clear and soon, they hoped, they would meet one of the scouts. Shabaz was sure-footed and could see in the dark, but Tania was glad when the moon rose. She clasped her arm around his massive neck, leaned her face against his mane, and looked up at the silvery mountaintops.

"It's so peaceful," she said. "With the snow on the mountains, and the ice glittering where the water falls. I would love to come here in the summer."

"How is your hand?" Shabaz asked, his voice deep with worry. "If only I still had my horn. A touch from my horn and I could have healed you." He sighed. "A unicorn's horn holds a wish. And a unicorn's tear will heal any wound. Even the kiss of death is chased away by the crystal drop of a unicorn's tear. But a unicorn never cries until he is dead, and then only one tear falls from his eye."

Tania dug her fingers into his thick mane. "I would rather lose my arm than lose you, my friend," she said.

He snorted softly. "I was just thinking aloud, that's all."

"Can you tell me a story, Shabaz?" Tania asked.

"About what?"

The quick, steady clop, clop, clop of his hoofs on the stony ground was hypnotizing, but the pain in Tania's hand kept her from sleep. She snuggled deeper into his soft mane. "Tell me about anything. I don't care. Did your mother ever tell you a story?"

"When I was born, my mother taught me all about what to eat and how to fight and escape my enemies. Then she told me that our greatest enemies were the griffins, and she spoke about all the atrocities they had committed against the unicorns. When I was almost grown, she left one day and never returned. I believed a griffin had killed her, and mad with grief and rage, I searched for her everywhere. I never found her, and then, a while later, I heard the last of the griffins was dead. I never set eyes on one of those fabled creatures. Time passed, and I learned many things. I will tell you a secret, Tania. I think my deepest wish has always been to see a griffin."

"What would you do if you ever met one?" Her voice was a mere whisper; it was all she could manage.

Shabaz sighed. "I don't know. I would like to behold one—my mother told me how beautiful they were. Like lions with eagle heads and wings. They had eyes like molten gold, she said, and sharp feathers as bright as polished bronze. They could fly, and in the air they glowed as brightly as the noonday sun. I never learned if they were intelligent, like us, or just beasts, like horses."

"Horses talk," said Tania.

"Only with magic. Otherwise, they are beasts of burden, and reason only with today and yesterday. They can't think of tomorrow,

and that sets them apart from us.” Shabaz sounded sad.

“What’s the matter?”

“In all my wanderings, I have yet to meet another unicorn. There were so many lost during the wars we fought alongside the elves, sometimes I wonder if I’m not the last of my kind as well.”

“And you without your horn.” Tania gave a ghost of a laugh. “Will we arrive soon?”

“It’s not far. Why, child?”

“I can’t see anymore. Has the moon set?”

“No. It’s still there, and the stars are bright as diamonds. Can’t you see them?” Shabaz quickened his pace.

“No. I see nothing.” Tania felt Shabaz shiver beneath her.

“We’re almost there,” he said, and he set off at a gallop, rushing across the mountain pass. He ran so fast that the wind froze Tania’s cheeks, but she kept her face in Shabaz’s flowing mane and didn’t lift her head, even after what seemed like hours, and suddenly, out of the night, came a shrill voice.

“Tania!” cried Shabaz. “They are waiting for us! Hold on, it’s not far now! Tania? Tania!”

She heard, but couldn’t answer. Her head lolled sideways, and she would have fallen but for the cords tying her to the saddle.

Shadows came out of the dusk and warm hands untied her. They lifted her off Shabaz and carried her to a warm place and laid her in soft furs. A strange, sharp scent assailed her nostrils, and Tania’s eyes fluttered open. She expected to see elves bending over her, but what she saw was the expressionless face of an orc, its wide eyes staring into hers.

“Can you understand me?” it asked in the high speech.

“Aye,” Tania murmured.

“We received a message from the Gray elves. They were afraid they would not be able to reach you in time. So we came ourselves. Have no

fear, Child of the Prophecy. Close your eyes and sleep. We will tend to your hurt.”

Tania did as he bade. The words “Child of the Prophecy” resounded in her mind like a drum, however, and her dreams were dark and full of fearful visions. In one, Lord Yalinka stood over Lysom and slit the boy’s throat with an iron dagger. As his life’s blood left him, Lysom struggled and kicked, but in vain. He died, and Lord Yalinka suddenly vanished, with a sound like the heavens splitting in two. Tania tried to wake, for she knew she was dreaming. But she was transported to another scene, where two armies met and clashed in a great melee of smoke, flashing metal, and horrendous cries. Behind them was Castle Storm, and on the ramparts orc and elf fought side by side, as hordes of undead unleashed their arrows and charged toward the castle. Shields held high, the undead met arrows without flinching. Already dead, they could not be wounded, and many arrows had to pierce them before they would collapse. To stop their charge, they had to be hacked to pieces, and it was an arduous, ghastly job. The soldiers of Castle Storm fought valiantly, but their numbers were limited, while it seemed the undead were boundless. As soon as a soldier died, the spells Yalinka chanted made him a zombie, and he would stand, pick up the nearest weapon, and turn against his former companions.

“Stop!” Tania shrieked, but her words were lost in the tumult. She tried to think of the Master Word that would unlock Yalinka’s spell, but she couldn’t. Her mind was blank. And while she stood there, powerless to help, Shabaz and her grandfather rode into the fray. The great white horse struck out with deadly hoofs and cleared a space around him, while Wander Birchspring wielded his sword with deadly effect. But arrows flew too thick, and there were too many enemies. Helplessly, Tania watched as the white horse fell, and her grandfather was buried beneath a multitude of undead warriors.

She sat up with a start. Sweat poured off her body, and she shivered uncontrollably. For a minute she just sat there, gasping for breath. Then she realized that her head was clear, and her hand had ceased to ache. She blinked, and her surroundings came into focus. The fire had died to embers, and all around her was silence. Had she screamed? She didn't think so. It was so quiet. Nobody stirred.

Embers cast a ruby glow on the interior of the tent. It was unlike any tent she'd seen. It was round, and a large hoop was suspended from a central pole, giving the tent its size and shape. The fire was in a low, copper brazier, which also glowed red and gave off a delicious heat. Herbs smoked in the brazier, and the tent was scented with their spicy aromas. A rug covered the floor, and she was lying on a warm pallet made of furs. She looked at her hand. It didn't pain her so much, and a huge bandage swathed it. She still couldn't move it, though, and flexing her wrist sent stabbing pains up her arm.

She grimaced and lay down again, but sleep eluded her. The strange smells and sights kept her awake. Everything looked familiar, but was unusual. The tent was different from what she was used to, and the central pole was intricately carved with animals and demons. The brazier was very low and stood on four squat legs. Even the copper teapot sitting near the brazier was odd. It had two spouts, one on each side, and the handle was curved sideways so it could be poured one way or the other, without changing grip.

Tania lay in bed and stared at the objects in the tent. Even the rug was distinct from anything she'd ever seen. It made sense, she'd never been in an orc's dwelling, and had never expected it. Orcs had always been something feared, stories to frighten naughty children, and so scarce in her world that she'd paid scant attention to tales about them.

Dawn broke at last. She could see the sky getting lighter from a hole near the top of the tent pole. Smoke from the brazier wisped out

of the hole, keeping the air fresh. When she saw the tent walls start to lighten, she sat up again. She reached into her bag and took out the spy crystal. All she had to do was think of Elorén and it flashed once, turning first green, then blue. Gray clouds formed in it, and then Elorén's face appeared. He looked tired, and worried. His eyes found hers, and a smile illuminated his face.

"Tania," he said. His words sounded quietly in her head.

She smiled at him, and raised her bandaged hand. "It's getting better," she whispered.

"We're leaving within the hour. We're almost at the summit. By tomorrow, we'll be near Som's shop. In less than four days we should be at Castle Storm, bar any disaster." He shrugged.

"I miss you," said Tania. She held the crystal tightly. "I'll see you at Castle Storm."

"I miss you too." He paused, then gave a small sigh. "We haven't found any sign of Kell or Kellori. I dare not think too far ahead. Contact me tomorrow," said Sebring. The crystal went dark.

Tania tucked the crystal away and straightened. Her keen ears caught the sounds of stirring outside. Orcs, like elves, preferred the early morning and late evening light for moving. She hadn't heard that they broke their fast with scalded milk flavored with chicory. She sipped a bowl of the sweetened, spicy drink, blowing to cool it. The orc who'd given it to her was busy packing up the tent. Efficiently, with no wasted movement, he rolled up the bedcovers, made parcels of the furs, and put everything in deep leather bags. Next he helped Tania to her feet. "Did you like your milk? Do you feel better?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you." She motioned to her hand. "What did you do to it?"

"We soaked it in a remedy that our healer made for you. He will come and speak to you later. Right now, we must get ready to move. Come, I will show you where you can wash. Here are some clothes. We

took the liberty of cleaning yours, but they are not dry yet.” He hesitated. “You have a cloak from the Running Wolf clan. They live far in the Northern Steppes. Are they kin?”

Tania remembered what her father had said in the strange dream she’d shared with him in the dungeon. “No. My grandmother was a member of the White Wolf clan.”

The orc looked at her closely. “I’ve heard of them. They live near the sea.”

“I never knew my grandmother,” said Tania. She hesitated. “She was captured by orc raiders and sold into slavery.”

The orc’s eyes widened. “Our laws forbid that, and have for the last century. Can you name the one who did that deed? For he will be punished, I assure you. We deal no longer in slavery, thanks be to G’naiyon.”

“It happened two hundred years ago,” said Tania, suddenly feeling the weight of time upon her shoulders.

“By G’naiyon’s sacred sword!” hissed the orc. “Then it is true. You are the Child of the Prophecy!”

“That’s the second time I’ve heard that said. What is the Child of the Prophecy?” Tania asked.

The orc blinked. “The Child of Prophecy will join elf and orc, so that the family is once again made whole. The wars will stop, and nevermore will the two people meet with fear and hatred in their hearts.”

“I thought that your wars were over.”

“Alas, no. Whenever elf sees orc, it is generally sighted along his arrow. And the same is true for us. We have no love for our cousins, for we have been at war for ages, despite the fact that we are two sides of the same coin. Now, we must put aside our ancestral loathing and follow you, the Child of the Prophecy, to the place where it will all end, one way or another.”

Tania frowned. “Were you not going to Castle Storm anyway?”

“Messengers have been arriving like flocks of birds. Elves, orcs, and even fairies have been told to go to Castle Storm.” The orc paused. “What we didn’t realize was that the time has come. You are here, and so it will all come to a head. Win or lose, everything that shall come to pass for the next two hundred years will be decided at Castle Storm.”

“Fairies?” Tania couldn’t take it all in. “Fairies don’t exist,” she said.

The orc’s eyes twinkled. “Come with me. I will show you our baths. Then you shall see for yourself what exists and what does not.”

When she stepped out of the tent, she saw that she was in an encampment. Orcs were busily taking down tents and preparing to leave. Sweat popped out on her forehead and her hands grew damp. The sight of so many orcs was alarming. Most of them paused when they saw her, but kept on with their chores. A few made signs in front of their foreheads with their hands.

“It is a form of greeting,” said her companion.

Tania jumped, then flushed. “I beg your pardon. I’ve been remiss with my manners. What is your name? Mine is Tania, and you may use it freely.”

“Mine is Zoeth. You may use it freely. You make the motion like this.” He flipped his hand in an arc in front of his head. “Let me undo your bandage for washing. I will put another on when you are done. The bathhouse is free. I will wait for you here.”

Tania stepped into the small, wooden hut. It was divided into three sections. There was a sauna, where rocks steamed on hot coals. There were ditch-dug toilets just like in the army. And there was a bath with hot water waiting for her. As in the tent, things were familiar but subtly different. The bathtub was taller and narrower than what she was used to. The sauna had a square bucket and dipper, and the herbs that scented the soap were unlike anything she’d smelled before. Only the toilets looked the same. And everything, as in the army, was made

to be taken apart and packed up at any time.

In the bathhouse, Tania stripped off her clothes and stood in the sauna near the rocks until her body was shiny with sweat. She examined her hand. It looked scalded; her skin was red and blistered, and broken veins left deep bruises on her hand and wrist. It hurt to move it, but she rinsed it carefully with warm water. Then she used a handful of soft soap to scrub her body. The soap was green and mildly abrasive. She rinsed in the bath, and then, feeling almost like new, she dressed in the clothes the orc had given her. The leggings were made of supple leather and laced up to her thigh. Over that went pants made of tightly-woven cloth, a long-sleeved chemise, and a tunic made of warm wool.

It was awkward using one hand to dress, but she did her best to hurry. She fastened her own cloak around her shoulders and pulled on her boots. There was no mirror to see how she looked, but the clothes were warm, comfortable, and of reasonable fit. Smoothing her elvish cloak over her orc tunic, she stepped outdoors into the pale sunlight.

The orc, Zoeth, was waiting patiently. It was hard to read his expressions, so Tania wasn't sure if he was surprised by her appearance or not. It seemed impossible that two beings as dissimilar as elves and orcs were related. Elves were expressive and extravagant, while orcs seemed to be unreadable and practical. The orcs' clothing and baggage were sensible and plain, and their faces betrayed little of what they were thinking. As Tania got to know Zoeth, she began to appreciate his dry humor and his mountain lore. But the orcs didn't sing as they trekked, and they didn't engage in conversation, which the elves adored. Zoeth walked next to her in silence, and never spoke until Tania asked him a question.

"Have orcs and elves ever lived together peaceably?" Tania asked.

Zoeth considered. "Perhaps. Not in any lifetime I've ever heard of, but things must change. There are too many powerful factions rising.

If elves and orcs are to survive, they must survive together.”

“Like unicorn and griffin,” said Shabaz, speaking up. “But it is too late, for us.”

“Perhaps it is the way of the world,” said Zoeth. “At any rate, the time for doubts is past. Now is the time for joining sides and action. The forces of the living against those of the dead. Light against dark. We orcs and elves, the children of twilight, must unite with men, the forces of day.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TWILIGHT'S CHILDREN

The trek to Castle Storm was a strange one for Tania. She rode Shabaz, while the orcs, who didn't use horses, walked. They walked as fast as a trotting horse, however, and had incredible stamina. Though they had no horses, they used wooly, gray, dog-like creatures to pull travois strapped with their belongings. Everything, including the tent, went on one travois.

"What kind of creatures are they?" asked Tania, patting one on its broad, fuzzy head. "They are bigger than wolves and dogs, but they don't seem fierce." She tilted her head. "They look like a cross between a wolf and a sheep, actually."

"We call them cerbers. They come from the mountains far in the west. Legend has it that they followed the first orcs across the mountains, and from then on served them as beasts of burden. They are not as intelligent as wolves or dogs, but they are very strong, and they guard the encampment against most enemies. They yelp to alert us of danger and will bite if someone attacks, though their teeth are not sharp like a wolf's teeth. They seem particularly protective of our children. They are carrion eaters, and take care of all our garbage."

"I noticed your children all stay in a group," said Tania. Several

orc children had come over to Tania. Curious but shy, they huddled together, staring at her. Then, with little giggles, they darted away.

“During the day, they stay with their teachers. We have three in our clan. One teaches herb lore, another teaches hunting and tool making, and the third one is in charge of the children’s cultural education,” Zoeth explained. He walked next to Shabaz, easily keeping up with the horse’s long strides.

“Is that usual?” Tania asked.

“It is traditional to have three teachers, yes. But some clans have more, and we are hoping to get a language teacher to teach our children high speech.” He sighed. “But the clans have been scattered and decimated, and who can tell when that will be possible.”

Tania had begun to perceive the orc’s subtle expressions. Their faces were not as mobile and animated as the elves, or as human faces, but their eyes changed color slightly, and their mouths turned downward or upward in sadness or mirth. At the moment, Zoeth looked sad, so she changed the subject. “Do the cerbers have names?” she asked.

“No, we call them all Cha’hoat. It means ‘good beast’ in our language.” He shrugged. “We are not a very imaginative people. We prefer the practical over the beautiful, and have always striven for simplicity in everything—habitation, clothes, and even beasts of burden.” His mouth twitched. “You must think we are terribly backward.”

Tania was startled. “No, not at all. I was just thinking how tempting your lifestyle is.” She searched for words to express her feelings. “You are not attached to anything. You are nomads, wanderers, without a multitude of belongings to tie you down. You seem lighter than air to me.”

Zoeth looked pleased. “The elves call us the twilight people,” said Zoeth. “We move like shadows and make no marks upon the land. Our clans live mostly on the Steppes and in the mountains, but there

are orcs in the great swamps to the south.” He grew serious once more. “If we lose Castle Storm, we will take refuge there.”

“We won’t lose Castle Storm,” said Tania fiercely.

The orc glanced up at her, his expression unreadable. “I pray that you are right,” he said. They arrived then at a narrow passage, and in single file, and silence, they continued down the steep mountainside.

After three days they arrived in the lower reaches of the forest, and Tania recognized Three Turn Valley. In vain she searched for some sign of Fairnight Graylag and his family, but the wind whispered through the bare trees, and the orc hunters came back empty-handed. Game was scarce, and there was little to eat but dry cakes made of summer grain.

That night the orcs set up the encampment with a heavy watch. The cerbers, growling and whining, stayed close to the guards, whose yellow eyes kept searching the darkness. Tania tried to contact Elorén, but he didn’t pick up his crystal, or the contact had somehow failed. Perhaps they were simply too deep in the valley. At any rate, it was useless to fret. She wrapped her furs around her, and lay on the pile of fragrant pine branches Zoeth had given her as a pallet.

Shabaz was uneasy, and stood near Tania. No tents had been erected. Everyone slept fully clothed with their weapons by their sides. The moon rose—a slim crescent that cast little light. The orcs’ wide eyes reflected the moonlight, and Tania could see when Zoeth glanced upward. His eyes were pools of gold in his face.

In the darkness Tania rubbed her hand, trying not to worry that it was still numb. She could not feel her fingers, and sometimes the numbness would become an ache that set her teeth on edge. She lay still, trying to sleep, but at the same time terrified of sleep.

The closer they got to Castle Storm, the closer they drew to the Dark Lord. For some reason, she could practically sense his presence. Was it because his blood marked her? Whatever the cause, Tania knew

Yalinka lurked somewhere nearby. How close? It was hard to tell. One day? Two days away? Maybe even creeping through the forest this very minute, sneaking toward the slumbering orcs, seeking more bodies for his ghastly army.

Dawn had barely colored the horizon gray when Shabaz nickered softly into Tania's ear. "Get up, child. We leave. Make no sound."

Tania sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes as she glanced uneasily around. The guards had built no fires and the cold mist that permeated her clothes made her shiver. She shed her fur blankets and rolled them tightly, fastening them to Shabaz's saddle. Then she mounted, burying her hands in his thick mane to warm them. Even with her elvish cloak, she was chilly.

There were no sounds that morning. No birds sang. The children clustered, silent, in the middle of the encampment as the orcs quickly gathered their meager belongings and fastened the cerbers to their travois. Underfoot, the ground was frozen and still dusted with winter snow, although by rights it should have been spring by now. Tania shuddered. What was happening in her world that even the seasons and the weather seemed to have been ensorcelled by the Dark Lord's spell? Winter gripped the land in its pitiless clutch, and frozen fog swathed the trees in a white shroud.

They moved out without noise. The orcs were, indeed, masters of shadow. Sometimes Tania fancied that she was all alone. The orcs made no sound, and neither did the cerbers, padding on silent feet. Even the poles holding the travois moved across the snowy ground without noise. Guards brought up the rear and erased all signs of their passage. It was as if they had never moved through Three Turn Valley, thought Tania, turning at the top of the hill and peering down. And even when Zoeth was walking next to her, she would suddenly lose sight of him as he passed a deep patch of shadow or glided through a thicket. She doubted

even the Golden elves had such wood-lore. She thought of Kell and Kellori, and her eyes filled with tears. On an impulse, she took out her spy crystal and stared into it, willing Elorén to answer her.

But, the sphere remained transparent, and she tucked it back into her pocket with a sigh. If he tried to reach her, she would feel a sort of tingle emanating from her pocket. The crystal called to her when it was attuned. Elorén must be busy, that's all. She stared at the bleak countryside and hunched her shoulders against the cold.

When they reached Castle Storm's lands, Tania felt her heart leap. The orcs had chosen not to go through the village, but rather came to the castle from the west, cutting through the woods behind the fields and fording the river. Swift and icy, the river must have chilled the orcs, but they didn't show any discomfort. They seemed impervious to cold. The cerbers swam with the travois floating behind them. As Shabaz waded across, the water curled in a froth around his chest. They crossed the river in the same secretive silence they'd used as they traversed the mountains and forest, and then they stopped, while Zoeth and Tania went ahead to announce their arrival.

In the fog, it was impossible to see far ahead and trees would suddenly appear, their branches dripping with icy beads of water. Suddenly, the castle loomed out of the mist and Tania saw that the moat had been re-dug and filled with water, and new walls surrounded the entrance. The main gatehouse had been rebuilt, and she could see the shadowy figures of guards standing on the turrets and posted around the castle.

They noticed her as soon as she saw them and motioned for her and Zoeth to stop. Prudently, she waited, Shabaz shifting beneath her as they approached.

"Who goes there?" called one man, when he came within shouting distance. He held his bow cocked, an arrow trained on her.

Looking down a sighted arrow did nothing for her nerves, but she managed to stutter, "I'm Tania . . . er, Birchspring, and this is Zoeth Dar N'ath, of the Dar Orc clan. We have come to see Lord Enguarand."

The guard lowered his bow and arrow and nodded. "Approach. We have been waiting for you. Your grandfather arrived yesterday." He looked behind her and paled a bit when he caught sight of Zoeth, who had dressed in full orc military regalia. "Welcome, Zoeth Dar N'ath. There are others of your kind about. Are you alone?"

"No. I left the clan at the ford. I will fetch them now, if you will permit."

The man frowned. "Did you not see the guards at the ford? Two should be posted there."

Zoeth shook his head and said to Tania in an urgent voice, "We saw no guards. This does not bode well. Go to the castle, Lady Tania. I will fetch the others."

The guard hesitated, then waved at his companion who'd stayed back a ways. "Come with me. We'll escort the Dar clan to the castle." Together the two men and the orc set off down the meadow. Soon the fog swallowed them.

Shabaz gave a nervous whicker. "We should go to the shelter of Castle Storm," he said.

"What game could he be playing?" Tania murmured.

"Who?" Shabaz asked, though they both knew the answer.

Tania held the reins in her good hand and stared at the whiteness. No sound came from the river, although muffled by the thick fog, she doubted she could have heard anything. Standing with just the faint outline of the castle before her, she felt almost as if she were between two worlds. "Is this what it's like to be a living dead?" she asked. "Lost in silence, unable to see behind you, with simply the orders of the one who controls you echoing in your mind?"

Shabaz shivered beneath her. “Why do you ask, Tania?”

“Because I feel him now. I can feel his presence. He’s near, he knows I can sense him, and he knows that I have the Master Word.” She paused, a frown wrinkling her brow. “He knows he has to keep his army a safe distance away from me.”

Shabaz tugged on the reins and started toward the castle. “It’s just your fancy, girl.”

“No.” Tania felt fear well in her chest, and she fought to quench it. “He’s reaching for me. He knows where I am.” She shuddered, but allowed Shabaz to bear her toward Castle Storm. “I have got to see Elorén,” she said. “He has to lure the Dark Lord near enough so that my words can reach his army. We play a cat and mouse game. He dares not get too close, but he will attack with impunity as long as he stays away.” She put her hand to her face. “We must find a way to draw him closer.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HOMECOMING

No pigs snuffled about, and Tania saw no signs of chickens. Only elf, orc, and human soldiers mingled in the crowded courtyard. The first person Tania saw as she rode through the arched gate was Lord Enguarand. She had no idea what her welcome would be. In a way, the war was all her fault. If she hadn't existed, maybe none of this would have happened to his castle or family. However, when he saw her, his face lit up.

"Tania!" He took her hand to help her down. "I'm glad to see you, dear," he said.

A knot untied itself somewhere in her chest, and she managed a smile. "I'm glad to be back," she said, looking around. The unfamiliar commotion made her dizzy.

"Your grandfather told me all about your adventures, and so did Lysom. According to him, you saved his life."

"I didn't really," she said, embarrassed.

Behind her, Shabaz gave a loud snort.

"And fancy finding out that you are a lady, and Shabaz is a unicorn! Come dear, you shouldn't stay outside in the cold." Lord Enguarand called for a groom to care for Shabaz. Then he took her arm and walked

her toward the front door.

Tania looked around desperately. Where was her grandfather? She wanted to go to the kitchen and see Wander, but Lord Enguarand led her straight to the sitting room. As she entered, Lysom, Rian, Melflouise, and Addlenett all sprang to their feet.

“Tania!” cried Melflouise. “We were so worried about you!”

“How lovely to see you,” Addlenett said with a deep curtsy.

Tania eyed the two girls uneasily. What happened to the disdainful sniffs in her direction? She smoothed her robe nervously. The orcs’ clothes couldn’t explain their change of attitude. Addlenett cleared up the mystery.

“So you’re really Lady Tania. How strange your grandfather kept it all secret.”

“He couldn’t tell a soul, didn’t you pay attention to his tale?” Melflouise snapped.

“Be quiet Melf,” said Lysom, taking Tania’s hand and bowing over it, like he’d done in Lord Yalinka’s keep. “Welcome, Lady Tania.”

Tania winced, and started to wish she’d stayed with the orcs.

“Lady Tania, how lovely to see you.” Lady Enguarand stared at a spot to the left of Tania. “Come have some tea.”

“Er, thank you,” said Tania, less at ease by the minute. She’d never been invited to the sitting room, and she hated the way Melflouise and Addlenett stared at her as if she’d suddenly grown wings.

Tania perched on the edge of a chair, feeling terribly out of place. She longed to flee to the kitchen, where she imagined her grandfather perched on his three-legged stool in front of a cheerful fire.

Rian spoke with his mouth full of cake. “It’s good to see you Tania.”

“Lady Tania,” Addlenett insisted, making Tania cringe.

Rian nodded and said, “Lady Tania, sorry. I was spellbound by Lysom’s description of his months away from home and made him tell the

tale of the escape from Yalinka's keep at least ten times a day."

Lysom laughed. "Tell Lady Tania about the time Aleric and Raul of the Gray elves arrived with two orcs, demanding to see Father."

"If that wasn't enough of a shock," said Rian, "on their heels arrived a troop of Gray elves and thirty more orcs, all claiming you sent them." He nodded toward Tania. "Father just about fell off the battlement that day. Afterward, you should have seen how everyone worked. We dug the moat and fixed up the walls in no time. It was amazing."

Tania thought that Rian looked well. He'd lost weight and gotten some muscle from working on the castle. He and Lysom both seemed more assured.

Lady Enguarand said proudly, "It seems the twins have a real knack for organizing things. Why, the orcs have their quarters, the Golden elves have room to pitch their tents, and the Gray elves and their wolves are decently lodged. Lysom and Rian have been very helpful."

"Um, excuse me, I'd like to see my grandfather," said Tania, getting to her feet. She managed to leave the room in a dignified manner, but once in the hallway she broke into a run. She bounded down the stairs and rushed into the kitchen—and slammed into a hard, broad chest.

Her breath knocked out of her, she looked up into forest green eyes. Elorén!

"Do you always make such an entrance, Lady Tania?"

Strange. When he called her that she didn't feel like an imposter. "Only when you're around," she said, feeling her cheeks start to burn. She turned and saw her grandfather, standing on his stool, his face wreathed in a grin.

"Grandfather!" She flung her arms around him, "The orcs healed my hand."

"I see that." He hugged her back. "I'm glad to see you, child."

Elorén led her to the bench and they sat side by side. Now Tania

felt as if she were home at last. Her grandfather stirred the pot of soup, and the fire burned cheerfully in the little stove. Outside though, the bustle reminded her that everything had changed.

“Where are we sleeping?” she asked her grandfather.

“Our old rooms are barracks. I’m staying with the archers. Lord Enguarand says you have the best guest room. The castle is crowded, but Polly fixed that room up for you, and we found some decent clothes for you.”

Tania blinked. For an instant, she’d imagined she’d put her uniform on, take her bow and arrows, and fight by Elorén’s side. Suddenly she realized that fantasy had ended. She was a lady. The idea didn’t disturb her any longer.

She took a deep breath. She had to tell Wander and Elorén about the Master Word. She did, and the two men listened intently.

Afterward, Elorén cleared his throat. “More than ever, we can’t risk losing you. I’m going to assign two archers to protect you. And I don’t want to see you on the battlements or anywhere a stray arrow can find you.”

Tania looked at him. She heard the pain in his voice and knew he thought of his mother. Taking his hand, she said, “I have a plan to defeat Yalinka. But I need you, and your troop. And most important of all is Shabaz.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE LAST BATTLE

“Blindfold the archers.”

The order came as the elves, and what remained of the orcs, took their places next to the men on the battlements. A bitter wind blew ashes in their faces. Yalinka’s army had torched the village that night. Orange and red firelight flickered in the valley as the thatched roofed houses burned, and in the ruddy light Tania had seen the forms of Yalinka’s army, forms that iced her blood.

She swayed as she clutched the rough stone.

“Tania!” her grandfather called.

She turned, her face tragic. “I was just remembering what I saw last night. Is there nothing that will save them? Can anything give them back their lives?”

“No, child. Once the spells of the necromancer take them, they are lost for all time.”

“I saw his horse.” Tania faltered. “It smelled like carrion. Do all the undead stink like that?” She trembled at the memory.

Wander shook his head. “It depends how long they’ve been dead. I’m afraid that their bodies rot even as they walk.”

Bile rose in her throat. “How dreadful.”

“The only good thing is, they are truly dead. Their minds are gone and they feel no pain. Their master controls them; they have no souls or spirit to suffer.”

“I’ll remember that. Thank you for telling me. It lessens the horror somewhat,” said Tania.

He took her arm and they stood, side by side, looking into the distance where the Dark Lord’s army was slowly massing under the cover of the forest.

“He means to charge the castle and take me by force,” she whispered. “I was foolish, so foolish. I thought I would save everyone. Instead I’ve put you all in danger. You should let me flee, or at least go to him. Maybe I could trap him.”

“He’ll not let you get close. He’ll kill you first. He needs two things, Tania, not just you. He needs one of Ironstorm’s blood, and now that he is here he won’t stop.”

“If he kills me I won’t be of any use to him.”

“He is a necromancer. He can bring your body back to a sort of half-life, and commit you to the deed. Your hand will be the one holding the knife—your mind has nothing to do with the spell.” Wander’s voice was harsh. “We can’t allow you to be killed, and you mustn’t think you can defeat Yalinka on your own.”

“But the Master Word . . .”

Wander sighed. “It has to be spoken in earshot of both Yalinka and the bulk of his army. He’ll not be as foolish to let you destroy his plans now. He’s been plotting this for two hundred years.”

“Do you think our plan will work?” Tania wrung her hands, anxiety stabbing at her heart.

Wander’s shoulders slumped. “How can I predict that, child? All we can do is hope. At least we can try.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s the only plan that has any chance of working. We have to make Yalinka believe you are trying to escape. He will advance then. You will be hiding in the ruined tower. When the time comes, it all rests on your shoulders. I’m not afraid for Captain Sebring. I’m afraid for you.”

“I love him,” she said, her voice fierce. “I won’t let Yalinka take him from me.” She stood straight, her hands clenched by her side.

Wander smiled sadly. “I never noticed until today how much like your mother you are. She would fly in the face of the tempest—never mind the danger—in order to save the ones she loved.” He shook his head. “But in all the months we hid, she said nothing. She never tried to dissuade us that your father was the Dark Lord. Why?”

“She wasn’t sure,” said Tania. “And it must have been a torture to wait, to wait to see who really hid behind the mask. She knew Daston had been apprenticed to Yalinka, and that he’d done terrible things while under his influence. She doubted him, and so she fled. She’s lucky she did, for Daston could not have protected her against Yalinka. When you and Shabaz helped her run away, you saved both of us.” Tania stared at the ring on her hand. The green stone sparkled. “She must have been very frightened, waiting in the tower, not sure who would come to get her, not sure who would win. Daston, the man she loved, or Daston, Yalinka’s puppet. In the end it was Yalinka, and she’d never guessed *he* was the evil one.”

Wander sighed deeply. “I must go. The sun is setting.”

Tania looked at him. “Will I ever see you again?” she asked, almost to herself.

Wander’s pointy ears were keen. “Of course. Don’t worry, child. Everything will go as planned.” He gave her a quick hug and left.

In the golden light of evening, Tania could almost believe that the world was back to normal. If the acrid smell of smoke wasn’t in the air—and if Melflouise and Addlenett didn’t bow and fawn before her.

Each time she crossed the path of one of the girls, they curtsied and asked her how she was doing, and if they could serve her. Melflouise told anyone who'd listen that Tania was like a sister to her, and Addlenett followed her like a shadow. Whenever Tania sat down, she'd pop out of nowhere and ask if she could get her something to eat or to drink. Not that they had anything here remotely worthy of her, Addlenett would say fervently.

It embarrassed Tania. She had expected to come back home. But instead, she felt as if she were a total stranger—a noble one at that. Furthermore, since Elorén found out about the Master Word, he'd insisted she have guards, so, besides Addlenett following her, she had two burly soldiers and an elvish archer at her side every minute. She would have liked to see more of Elorén, but he was busy with his troops. And when she did see him, she felt so overwhelmed by everything, so full of fear for him that it left her tongue-tied and awkward.

As for Renegal, he and Melflouise were inseparable. She would start to wail whenever she thought of him going off to battle, and he would beg her to dry her tears. He'd asked Lord Enguarand for her hand in marriage, and Lord Enguarand had agreed, as long as they won the war, of course. Lady Enguarand, still as nearsighted, stayed mostly in her quarters, planning for Melflouise's wedding. She seemed to be the only person certain that Yalinka would be defeated.

All these thoughts fluttered through Tania's mind as she made her way down the spiral stairs into the courtyard. When she arrived, she noticed the troops assembling in their regiments. The orcs were arming themselves, and the Gray elves were putting on their armor.

That was another thing. The orcs and the elves had proclaimed peace between their races. The Gray elves had been the first to accept them, and now the Wood elves and even a troop of elves from the far north, mingled with their former enemies. The contrasts between them

were even more apparent, and their conversations often still stilted and awkward, but Tania had been amused to see the orc children playing with the villagers' children. The young had no reservations, and soon the adults followed suit, shyly exchanging gifts and even recipes.

At the moment, in the courtyard, the children were hidden and the soldiers—men, orcs, and elves—strapped on armor. Even their wolves had armor. Flash saw Tania and he came to her, his tail wagging gently. He had on a thick collar to protect his throat, and over his back he wore finely woven chain mail. Tania knelt and hugged the wolf. “You take care of yourself,” she whispered. Flash whined and licked her hand.

Tania stood and scanned the teeming crowd. Now that the time had come, she felt no fear, only a strange coldness that gripped her belly.

The troops were preparing out of sight of the enemy, and to anyone watching from outside, it would look as if the castle were simply preparing for a siege. At the chosen time, a troop of elves would burst out of the castle and head for the woods. In their midst would be Tania—only it would really be Elorén—mounted on Shabaz. Tania, by that time, would be hiding in the ruined tower. If all went as planned, Yalinka would press forward to bar her apparent escape, and bring his troops with him.

When that happened and he was within earshot, Tania was to stand up from the ruins and scream the Master Word as loudly as she could. Any undead within hearing would be destroyed, and Yalinka would lose the power he had to create others.

Tania drifted to the far side of the courtyard where Elorén stood, his hand on Hex's withers.

“He wants you to ride him,” said Tania, stroking the horse's glossy neck.

Elorén gave a faint grin. “I look little enough like you as it is. Shabaz will make Yalinka think it's really you fleeing the castle. Gryp will ride Hex.”

Tania took off her cloak and pinned it around his shoulders with her Running Wolf clan brooch. “Raise the hood, and make sure your armor doesn’t show,” she said.

He caught her hands in his. “Don’t look so tragic,” he said, trying for a teasing tone of voice. “I’ll mistake you for Melflouise trying to convince Renegal his place is staying in the castle and protecting her.”

That made her smile. “At least I don’t wear jewelry and a tall hat,” she said. “Think how silly you’d feel.” Her hands trembled.

He drew her to him and wrapped his arms around her. “Ah, Lady Tania,” he said with a soft chuckle. “Who’d have guessed I’d fall in love with my stable hand? And yet, something about your eyes and your voice haunted me from the minute I saw you. I was starting to doubt my masculinity.”

Tania closed her eyes. She wanted to remember the feel of his arms around her shoulders and the sound of his warm voice. Everything about him, everything, struck a chord in her heart. She would never love anyone but him. He was her destiny, the one fate had chosen for her. She sent a prayer of thanks to fate and then, regretfully, pulled from his arms. “It’s almost time,” she said.

The sky darkened. The plan had to take place at nightfall. There would be no moon, and little enough light. But Tania knew that Shabaz’s coat would gleam like starlight and Yalinka would be duped.

Elorén took a gold chain out of his pocket and pressed it into her hand. “Speaking of jewelry,” he said, in a soft voice. “I want you to have this.”

Tania looked at it. The chain was fine, and on it hung a small blue globe. It shimmered faintly. “It’s lovely. What is it?” she asked, as she put it on. The globe nestled in the hollow of her throat.

“Sea-stone, from the Southern Isles.” He paused, and then touched her lightly on the cheek. “Smile for me, Lady Tania.”

She did, though it hurt her face. Then she patted Shabaz. "Take care," she said.

"I will, have no fear. And I will watch over Elorén." Shabaz nuzzled her shoulder fondly, his long white mane brushing her hands.

Elorén mounted, and Shabaz stood still a moment. Then the great horse dipped his head once, and trotted lightly toward the group of mounted archers.

Tania gave one last look at the castle courtyard, then pulled a dark cloak over her shoulders and head and slipped out of the trapdoor behind the stable. Outside the castle, in the dark, she stood a minute getting her bearings. The stable was behind her, and on her right was the fence surrounding the orchard. To the left, Wander's small vegetable patch lay, still covered with snow. It should have been ploughed by now. Spring was not forthcoming this year. It added to the horror.

The ruined tower was a few hundred yards away, lying between the woods and the orchard. It was important not to be seen, and Tania went alone. She knew the path by heart, and as a child she'd often hidden within the jumble of stones. There were places she could crouch where no one could see her, even if they were right on top of her.

Her leather-shod feet made no sound as she glided over the frozen ground. Once past the orchard fence, she ducked and peered around. She could sense Yalinka's presence. It made her hand throb with pain. She rubbed it as she scanned the darkness, but seeing nothing, she took a deep breath, crouched over, and darted into the open. She ran until she reached the stones, then, still bent over, she sought a hiding space.

It was soon done. Scrambling over three huge blocks of stone, she slipped down between them and found herself in an enclosed space. It was not big enough for her to stand up straight, but she could see almost all the way around her through jagged cracks. She shivered. Another cloak would have been welcome. Her feet were already frozen,

and her breath made white clouds in the air.

As she stood there, she heard a sound that raised the hair on the back of her neck. It was the sound of the castle gates opening. In a minute, she heard the thunder of hoofs as the horses swept out over the drawbridge, then turned sharply right, heading along the outside of the castle. The sound of hoof beats grew louder as they galloped down the narrow lane bordering the fields. Then they came into view, a compact group of archers in the lead. Tania recognized Farj and Gryp, riding with their cloaks streaming behind them, urging their mounts on as if demons pursued them.

The troop had hardly reached the orchard when eerie green lights shot out of the darkness from the woods on their right. Fire rained upon the group, and one elf, his cloak consumed by green flames, screamed and fell from his horse. The others managed to find refuge in the orchard, and pressed on toward the ruined tower at full gallop.

The horses swept toward her, but a sound made her turn her head. It was the sound of a thousand footsteps, coming from the woods. Tania saw a dark shadow in the trees, darker than the night, like the blackest ink seeping from the ground. The shadow grew, rose, and became an army. Out of the forest strode the Dark Lord and his army. They raised their black blades and screamed in terrible voices.

Tania staggered backwards, paralyzed by fear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE SECRET OF SHABAZ

The undead looked almost like the people they'd been before dying. They wore the same clothes and armor. They wore no plastrons made of bone, nor were their feet cloven. So why did they inspire so much terror? Tania tried to reason with herself, but the dread she felt was visceral and shot like a freezing arrow through her body. Perhaps it had to do with their jerky, awkward movements and their red, faintly glowing eyes, or perhaps their frozen expressions. Whatever the reason, the panic they inspired made Tania's eyes water in fear and her legs shook so hard she had to clutch at the stones to stay upright.

As they drew closer, a horrific stench assailed her, and she saw some had arrows in them; some were missing hands or parts of their faces. But still they walked, carrying weapons, their progress steady and unhurried. Mingled in the crowd were orcs, men, and elves, along with things she'd never seen before. Animals crawled with them, horses even, with undead riders carrying tattered pennants and dull, blood-stained swords. And as they approached, they screamed hoarsely.

Tania pressed her hands over her ears. Her whole body shuddered with tremors of terror. Then another thought iced her blood. How could she make herself heard over the din?

The elves had reached the fallen tower, and the horses slackened their pace slightly. Standing in their stirrups, the elves looked around as if suddenly realizing their predicament. The troop milled around the tower, apparently seized with indecision. In the midst of them, encircled and kept nearly hidden, was Elorén, wearing Tania's cloak. Starlight glinted on Shabaz's coat, and for an instant, it looked as if he shimmered in the night.

Another shout went up from the horde of undead, and Tania realized they'd spotted Shabaz. The elves wheeled about, turning their horses back toward the castle, seemingly abandoning the idea of flight. The horses snorted and tossed their heads, their eyes showing white all around in fear. Another volley of strange fire rained upon them, green infernos lighting up the night.

The fireballs struck the stones and the frozen ground and exploded in sheets of flame. Some elves were hit, but they wore armor and the flames were deflected. The green fire burned, though, and Tania saw Farj rip off his cloak and fling it to the ground.

The elves raised their shields to protect themselves, and urged their mounts toward the orchard, as if meaning to flee. All at once, the undead army lurched out of the sheltering forest and started toward them, walking across the field with uneven, but now rapid steps. They never changed pace, and never faltered. Some held bloodstained swords and pikes, and some carried nothing, but all advanced, their faces devoid of expression. And they were horrifying beyond belief.

Then, in the midst of the army, a huge horse appeared. This horse was tall, with sunken, red eyes that gleamed eerily in the dark. Its long mane was matted and tangled, and its dull skin seemed stretched too tightly over its bones. But still the black horse lifted its feet and carried its master forward.

Riding the horse, dressed in black armor, the Dark Lord seemed

to suck all the darkness out of the night around him and concentrate it into a single, deep well. The air around him trembled as the spells he wove incessantly kept his army alive.

Yalinka's head swung around as if sniffing his prey. His helmet hid his face, but his eyes were visible through the haulm—red and glowing like live coals.

Her mother's ring burned into her skin, the green stone flickering as if a spirit inhabited the ring and knew the Dark Lord approached. Tania gripped the stone in front of her, until her knuckles whitened, and held herself still. If the Dark Lord caught sight of her, if he bent his spells to her, he would crush her before she could utter a word. She had to hide and wait until he came within earshot. Already his army had spread out to the left and to the right, cutting off the elves' escape and moving toward them. The elf troop stayed in the orchard; the trees kept most of the fireballs off them and made it hard for the army to see them clearly. Only Shabaz sometimes stood out, his white coat catching a glint of starlight. It would be enough to draw the Dark Lord on, Tania hoped.

Once the elves regrouped in the orchard, they edged nervously toward the ruined tower. Now, Tania could see them; they had come close enough to recognize. She caught sight of Qural, Galad, Gryp, Llyr, their faces frozen in expressions of horror as they caught sight of the undead streaming toward them. In the front ranks of the army were undead archers. As they drew near, they nocked their arrows.

Then Farj let out a howl of anguish. He pointed, and Tania saw Kellori among the undead. At least, it had been Kellori. Now he was simply flesh and bones knit together by a terrible spell, mindless except for his master's orders. His eyes were empty wells of reddish light, and without expression, he strode swiftly toward the orchard.

Now Tania understood why the archers on the towers were blindfolded.

How could any of the elves shoot Kellori? He was so young! There were certainly others she knew, others whom the archers would recognize. She dared not look again, afraid she would see Kell among the undead as well.

Uttering a cry of despair, Farj wheeled his horse and made a dash for the ruined tower. Other elves followed, and it seemed the incentive for the whole of the Dark Lord's army to surge forward. As they drew closer, the undead archers let loose their arrows and they buzzed like hornets through the air. One struck an elf in the neck, and he tumbled from his horse. Almost as soon as he'd fallen, the spells weaving through the air pulled him disconnectedly to his feet. An arrow sticking from his neck, eyes glowing red, he pulled his sword from its scabbard and made a stab at his former companions.

The elves' horses were almost on top of the tower. The Dark Lord, sensing Tania's presence, but convinced she was on Shabaz, urged his troops on in a mad attack. Throwing all his forces toward the small group huddled around the frosty stones, Yalinka stood in his stirrups, his great sword flashing in the night.

Tania pressed her face to the crack in the stones and screamed the word, but he was still too far. Her voice hadn't carried. The elf with the arrow in his neck was closest to her. He stumbled but didn't stop moving. Tania choked back a sob. The Master Word only worked if Yalinka heard it. She would have to crawl from her hiding place and stand on the highest stone. As soon as he was within earshot, she would. Her hands clenched, she waited.

The fighting began in earnest. Arrows from Castle Storm rained down upon the undead army. Many fell, but there were hundreds more coming from the forest. Some headed for the castle, while others came toward the orchard. Keeping Shabaz behind them, the elves formed a line and engaged the undead, who were indifferent fighters. Since they

could not be killed, their arms had to be hacked off before they would stop fighting. And even then they walked forward, mindless but for their master's bidding.

Their swords cut deeply and their arrows flew. Sometimes their blows were telling, and more than one elf screamed as he was wounded. Holding their shields low, the elves hacked at the soldiers, grimly fighting for their lives.

Using the tower as shelter, the elves backed toward Tania's hiding place, luring the Dark Lord on. Tania could see Yalinka clearly. He saw the elves, pointed at Shabaz, and shouted something to his troops. Beneath him, the black steed caught Yalinka's impatience and pawed the ground and shook his massive head, chomping at the bit as if eager to be off.

Unexpectedly, a huge shadow lurched from the midst of the army. Tania felt her heart stop and skip a beat. A dragon! The beast was undead, with great, staring red eyes and smoke pouring from its gaping jaws. So that's what had been throwing fireballs. Even as Tania watched, it opened its immense maw and roared, green fire shooting from its throat. Not much fire remained, however. It sputtered and went out.

Yalinka uttered a scream of rage and pointed to the elves, shouting a spell at the dragon. It raised its head, then fixed its red eyes on the small troop huddled in the orchard. Bellowing, it sprang toward them. In its hurry to confront the elves, the huge beast trampled many undead beneath its clawed feet. Yalinka roared in fury at the dragon, but the beast didn't respond, caught up in a mindless rush forward.

The stench as it drew near choked Tania. Foul pus dripped from its many wounds, and its bronze colored scales were tarnished and chipped. Some were missing, baring rotting flesh. The dragon must have been dead for a long time before being brought back to life. Several teeth were missing. But that didn't lessen its deadly strength. Its sheer size made it dangerous, even without its fire.

Tania pounded on the stone in frustration. How could a handful of elves defeat a dragon? Yalinka reined his horse in, staying behind the massive beast, too far for her words to carry. He must have discovered she had the Master Word. Somehow, he knew.

The undead army had slowed and come to a stop. All of Yalinka's power had concentrated on the dragon. An eerie silence swept over the field of battle. The sound of swords clashing ceased. Only the angry buzz of arrows could be heard as archers from Castle Storm shot frantically at the dragon. But whether the arrows were deflected by the dragon's scales or lodged in its flesh made no difference to its lumbering approach. Eyes glowing in the darkness, a choking stench preceding it, the dragon advanced.

The elves had to get back to the safety of the castle. Tania screamed at them to retreat, but they ignored her. The dragon charged into the midst of the elves, scattering them with mighty blows of its swinging head and slashing at them with its clawed feet.

Gryp and Farj charged the dragon. With ease, the beast batted them off their horses. Farj landed in a tree, and Gryp rolled to safety, squeezing beneath a massive stone. Using its front legs, the dragon picked up the boulder and, with a bellow of triumph, turned and hurled it into the group of elves. They scattered, but one horse stumbled and the boulder caught him. Screaming in pain, the horse fell beneath the stone. He kicked once, and then was still. His rider stumbled to his feet and tried to run, but his leg was broken. Tania saw it was Llyr. The dragon spotted him, too, and lunged. At that moment, Elorén turned and cried out. Shabaz didn't hesitate. He vaulted toward the dragon.

Shabaz reared, his forelegs battering the dragon. The unicorn's strength was awesome. But the dragon was an undead, and blows that should have been mortal simply slowed him down. Shabaz battled the dragon, keeping him away from the elves. Elorén, still with Ta-

nia's cloak clutched over his head, fought with all his strength. Shabaz dodged and danced upon his hind legs, striking the dragon with iron-shod hoofs while Elorén stabbed at the beast with his sword. In the dark, all that could be seen were glints of Shabaz's white coat and flashes of silver from Elorén's sword.

Then Yalinka, sensing victory, gathered his force and shouted. The undead army started to move once more. An elf screamed and fell from his mount as a group of undead warriors surged into the orchard and engaged the elf troop. Arrows flew like a cloud of angry wasps, and swords clashed with the sound of ringing bells. The elves fought mightily, but all was lost. It was as if they were in the midst of a seething ocean. Wave upon wave of undead surged forward. The air seemed to grow thicker and the darkness even deeper. Jagged streaks of sinister, reddish lightning crackled overhead, and thunder boomed in the heavens.

The Dark Lord uttered a triumphant laugh. Kicking his horse forward, Yalinka flung his sword directly at Shabaz.

Tania screamed. Shabaz saw the sword and dodged it, and the dragon, with deadly precision, swung his mighty foreleg. It hit the white horse on the head. There was a terrible crack, and Shabaz fell, his body hitting the ground with a sickening sound.

Elorén was flung clear. He snatched up the Dark Lord's sword and plunged it into the dragon's body. The sword must have been poisoned, for the dragon howled in agonizing pain and stumbled backward, tail flailing as he tried to bite the sword out of his belly.

Turning, Elorén looked toward Tania's hiding place. "Now!" he cried. As he shouted, an arrow caught him in the side. He staggered and fell to his knees. He stared at Tania, his eyes pleading. Then another arrow hit him and he slammed to the ground.

Tania leapt out of her hiding place, heedless of danger. All she

could think about were Elorén and Shabaz. She clambered to the top of the stone pile and stood, balanced against the wind. Mad with grief, she shrieked into the night. “Everdark!” she screamed. “Everdark! Everdark! Everdark!”

Her voice carried over the pandemonium and abruptly the air shivered and was still. Yalinka’s troops hesitated, tottered on their feet, then simply dropped where they stood, falling like so many trees, the red light in their eyes dimming and fading away. The dragon wailed one last time and crashed to the ground. The undead soldiers folded up and fell. Even Yalinka’s horse unexpectedly collapsed, and Yalinka stood in the midst of the battlefield, his body shaking with fury. He raised his fist and shouted, but the spell was broken.

There were still troops that hadn’t been close enough and came onward to fight. But those waiting in the castle came to meet them. Orcs, men, and elves fought side by side against the undead, and in a short time all the Dark Lord’s soldiers were destroyed. When the last of the undead were defeated, Yalinka let loose a horrendous cry and seemed to shrink. His body wavered like a flame going out. His voice spiraled upward and grew fainter, until nothing but a pile of empty armor was left on the ground.

Then the wind started to whirl. All around, gusts bent the trees, and branches lashed as the wind howled like a live thing. Lightning flashed and thunder growled as warm air suddenly washed over the land. A deluge fell; warm rain pounded upon the ground; and the snow and frost washed away.

In the midst of the storm, Tania ran toward Shabaz and Elorén. They lay side by side on the battlefield. Elorén’s face was turned to the sky, his eyes open. Shabaz lay next to him, blood staining his white coat in scarlet patches. Rain battered them, drenching the ground, washing the blood from their wounds.

Hands pressed to her stomach, Tania stood between them, too stunned to cry. Around her gathered the elves: Farj, Gryp, Llyr, Galad, and Queral. The rest of the troop closed around her, and then Wander arrived, out of breath, his face a mask of sorrow.

He took off his helmet, laid his sword down, and knelt on the sodden ground. "Oh, no," he breathed.

Tania couldn't bear to look at Elorén. She'd caught sight of his face, and froze, stunned.

While someone held up a cloak to protect the bodies from the rain, Farj bent over Elorén and carefully worked the arrows out of his chest. Tears running down his cheeks, he smoothed Elorén's hair from his forehead. He looked at Tania. "I'm sorry," he managed to say. Then his face twisted, and he covered it in his hands.

Tania shivered violently and her legs gave out. She knelt by Shabaz and took his great head in her hands. It was cold and terribly heavy, but she held it on her lap and bent over the horse, her whole body aching in sorrow. "How could Elorén die? How could you die, Shabaz?" she whispered brokenly.

As she held him, a tear appeared in one eye. It sparkled like a star being born. Shabaz's words came back to her then. *A unicorn's tears can even dispel the kiss of death.* Slowly, her hand trembling, she reached out and cupped the tear in her palm, sheltering it from the rain. Its light grew, shimmering, casting a white glow upon all of them.

Wander touched her shoulder gently. "Give it to Elorén, child. A unicorn's tear is the kiss of life. He will be revived."

Cupped in her hands, the tear gave off a comforting warmth and bathed her with its light. She looked at Elorén, wondering if she should put the tear on his wounds or on his lips. "What do I do with it?" she asked her grandfather.

He frowned. "I think it must touch his mouth, like a kiss."

“A kiss.” She blinked, and the tears blurring her vision spilled down her cheeks. The battleground sprang into focus. Kell, Kellori, Shabaz, Elorén, and how many others, had perished? How could she give the tear to just one man?

“What about everyone else? Don’t they deserve to live again?” she asked, her breath catching in her throat. Her chest ached so that she thought she’d faint with the pain.

“The undead cannot be brought back to life,” said Llyr, as if reading her thoughts. “Give it to our captain. Go on, Tania.”

Grandfather Birchspring spoke up. “Tania, the tear is Shabaz’s last gift to you. Give it to the man you love. He’d want that.”

Tania shook her head, her chagrin making it hard to breathe. “Shabaz has given me enough gifts already,” she whispered, looking up at her grandfather. Before anyone could say anything else, she lowered her hand and let Shabaz’s tear fall upon his mouth. Almost at once, a hard jolt shook his body. Tania gasped and moved back.

The horse shivered, his legs thrashed. There came the sound of a thunderclap, and a blinding white light encompassed his body. As Tania watched, eyes wide, Shabaz rolled over and struggled to his feet. He stood, limbs shaking, head hanging, his mane trailing in the mud. Huge shudders wracked his body, and as Tania watched, his wounds vanished, leaving his milky coat unblemished and flawless. Slowly, he raised his head and let out a trumpeting neigh. The sound rose over the storm and over the wind. It seemed to split the night apart.

As soon as the echoes of Shabaz’s whinny faded, the rain stopped. Like a curtain pulled aside, the clouds parted and stars came out, glittering like icy diamonds in the heavens. Silvery light outlined everything, especially the unicorn standing in front of her. His coat shimmered pearly white, his dark eyes sparkled, and from his noble brow a horn rose in a slender spiral, growing until it came to a delicate point.

Tania had never seen a unicorn. The creature's beauty was such she had the strange impression to be caught in a dream. He seemed made of starlight and moonbeams. Ethereal and yet majestic, he raised his head and looked about, taking in the battleground, the soldiers, and the elves gathered around him. Then his gaze came to rest on Tania.

Her heart stopped. His eyes were as clear as rock crystal. There was no recognition in them. There was nothing in them but pure innocence and wonder.

"Shabaz," she whispered.

His ears twitched. "Is that my name? Yes. I recognize it now. I am Shabaz."

"I hear you." Tania looked at Wander, standing with his mouth hanging open. "Why do I hear him now?"

"He's a unicorn, not just a horse," said Wander. "You no longer need to be in contact with him to understand him."

The unicorn's nostrils fluttered as he tested the air. "What is that smell?" He blinked, and turned, taking in the battlefield. Hesitantly, he walked toward one of the bodies and pawed it delicately, then sniffed it. Ears pinned back, he shook his head. "I don't like this," he said. "What happened here? Why is it so still? Why don't these people move?"

"They are dead," Tania said softly.

"Dead?" Shabaz shivered, then swung his head around, looking now toward the castle, where the archers and soldiers had started to emerge. They held torches and shovels instead of bows and swords. "Who are they? What are they doing?" the unicorn asked.

"Orcs, elves, and humans, and they are . . ." Tania's voice cracked and she stopped, rubbing the tears from her eyes.

Wander spoke. His voice too shook with emotion. "They are coming to clear the battlefield. A great fight took place here this evening. Many died, but evil has been vanquished. Now you see humans,

orcs, and elves working side by side to bury their dead.”

“Many have been lost,” Tania murmured. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to look at Elorén. His face, in the moonlight, seemed carved from marble. Her heart seemed to stop. “Elorén.” The cry tore from her throat and fresh tears blinded her.

“Who is that?” Shabaz came to where she knelt and looked at Elorén.

“Don’t you know him?” Tania reached up and brushed him with her fingertips; hardly daring to rest her touch on his immaculate coat. Shabaz flinched backward, a spark of fear in his eyes. Tania gasped, hurt stabbing her chest. How could he back away from her like that? “It’s me. Tania!” she cried in despair, getting to her feet. “You have to remember me. You saved Wander and me. You can’t have forgotten losing your horn to save us. What about my mother? What about Amylee?”

“Amylee?” The night breeze lifted the silky strands of his mane, but otherwise the unicorn stood perfectly still. “Amylee, Wander, and Tania . . .”

Tania saw understanding fill his eyes. Her hands clenched in anguish for Shabaz as awareness replaced the childlike purity in his gaze. Sorrow clouded his eyes, and a violent shudder ran over his body.

The unicorn nodded slowly, starlight running up and down his horn like quicksilver. “I remember now. I know you, Wander.” He went to the elf and bowed his head. “We fought together once. And then we gave up what we held dearest to save a child.”

“The Child of the Prophecy.” It was Zoeth, the orc. He came in silence, like a shadow. Behind him stood a group of orcs and elves.

Zoeth walked into the circle formed by Tania, Wander, and the remainder of Elorén’s troop, and he bowed formally to Shabaz and Wander. “Our prophecy has come to pass. There is much to be accomplished now; but thanks to your sacrifice, the Child of the Prophecy has defeated the Dark Lord, and elf and orc have once again become a family.”

Zoeth turned to Tania. His eyes, usually so expressionless, glittered

with emotion. "Thanks to you, we have time to rebuild our world."

Tania nodded wordlessly. Zoeth's words gave her a small measure of comfort. And there was joy in her heart, for she still had Wander and Shabaz. Castle Storm and its inhabitants were safe. She could even hear Lysom, in his new-found role of organizer, shouting orders on the battlefield to start piling the bodies and digging the graves.

Graves. Her breath caught in her throat. She could not rejoice. Not just yet. "I can't bear it," she whispered.

Wander didn't need to ask what she meant. His face twisted in sorrow, and he patted her arm. "I'm so sorry," he said.

"I'll be all right." She felt everyone's gazes upon her, and she straightened her shoulders. She would mourn later. Now was the time to examine the losses and tend to the wounded.

Shabaz walked to Tania. For a minute he stood, staring at her. Then he laid his head on her shoulder. Warmth flowed from his soft coat, and his mane tickled her cheek. "There is sorrow in your joy."

"You're a unicorn again," she said. She put her arms around his neck. "You gave me the gift of your horn once before. Now you have it back."

"I still have one more gift to give you," he said softly. He pulled away from her and went to Elorén. Dipping his head, he pressed his horn against the man's wounds.

"Be healed!"

His voice rang through the night.

The holes, which the arrows had left, closed, and even his shirt mended as a web of magic surrounded him in a shimmering, silver veil. Elorén moaned, then coughed, dragging air into his lungs with a sharp cry. Tania dropped to her knees next to Elorén. She feared that he wouldn't recognize her either, but he stirred and his eyes opened.

"Tania?" He blinked, frowning unsteadily. He reached up and traced a line from her temple to her jaw, his thumb wiping away the

tears on her cheeks. “Why are you crying? Did we lose?”

“No, of course not. We won. We’re safe.” Tania felt ridiculously light and grabbed Elorén’s shoulders, half convinced she’d float away on the breeze.

“What happened? I remember the dragon, then shouting at you, then . . .” He looked around, and his eyes fell on Shabaz. “A unicorn,” he breathed. “Shabaz? Is that you?”

“Don’t you recognize me?” Shabaz spoke with a chuckle, and from beneath his feet sprang soft new grass. He looked at them, and a sort of wild elation shone from his eyes. He reared, and then reached down with his horn and pushed the tip into the earth. Where he touched the ground, flowers and grass emerged and then spread. Faster and faster appeared the signs of spring. In the darkness, people cried in amazement as the grass grew in faint showers of sparkles and leaves covered the trees, bursting out of buds with bright flashes of red and green light.

At that moment, dawn broke; first in a thin line of ruby light flaming against the hills, and then growing into an opalescent radiance that hurried to encompass the land. As the sky turned pink, birds began to sing.

Elorén sat up and put his arms around Tania. “It’s like the beginning of the world,” he said.

Tania looked at the Elorén, his face illuminated by the pale light, and her heart leapt for joy. “It will be a wonderful new world,” she whispered.

Then she turned to the west, where stars still shone in the lightening sky, and blew a kiss. “For you, Mother, and for you, Father,” she said. And like the magic that it was, she knew her gift would find its way through time and eternity.

The End



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